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On Persian Blues: Queer Bodies, Racial Affects

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor  
of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory and Criticism

by

Sara Mameni

Committee in charge:

Professor Grant Kester, Chair  
Professor W. Norman Bryson  
Professor Roshanak Kheshti  
Professor Babak Rahimi  
Professor Lesley Stern  
Professor Mariana R. Wardwell

2015

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

## DEDICATION

*Dedicated to Ali, Fahimeh, Morgan and Ena*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this dissertation to the humming noise of airplanes flying over my bunker-style office in the Mandeville building at the University of California, San Diego. The sound always filled the room like a thick cloud rolling against the vibrating walls. When the aircrafts went by overhead, the room became heavy. It often made me drop my thoughts and my words to allow the planes from the nearby Marine Corps Air Station go by. This buzzing companion, this drone, obliges me to acknowledge that I wrote this dissertation in the vicinity of a military base. I was not merely stationed in close proximity to an Air Station, but my office itself was built upon the grounds of Camp Matthews which, until as recently as 1964, was used as a rifle range for the United States Marines.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the noise has always reminded me that, despite myself, I have been based at the barracks occupying the very grounds that had trained soldiers for numerous wars overseas since the Camp's inception in 1918.

How did I land at this end of things? As a child, I was more accustomed to hearing low-flying aircrafts from make-shift bunkers in Tehran during the eight year Iran-Iraq war. My childhood was punctuated by air raids and the familiar sounds of sirens blasting from the local radio and television stations that urged us to take refuge at the nearest bunker. The siren would interrupt our most quotidian daily activities. It would blurt out in the middle of an after school cartoon episode on television. It would catch us off guard during dinner. It would give us a timely break during Math class. It would

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<sup>1</sup> Historical information and architectural drawings of Camp Matthews is available at Mandeville Special Collections Library.

throw the traffic into a frenzy while driving to a friend's birthday party. When the sirens blared, we would drop everything and run to the closest basement. Everyone had a theory about where was the safest place to be during an air raid. Some preferred the safety of pillars framing doorways. Others stood under staircases. Still others, such as my grandfather, expressed their masculine prowess by heading to the roof to defy fear and welcome fate. Regardless of where we stood, the sirens stopped us in our tracks and brought us to contemplate our own mortality as the airplanes went by overhead dropping the dreaded bombs somewhere nearby. Sometimes the shockwaves would break a window in the living room. Other times the piercing sound of the explosion would shatter all the plates in the kitchen cupboards.

Unlike the aircrafts from my childhood, the ones that flew over UC San Diego were never sent for me. Their maneuvers over the beautiful La Jolla homes never instilled in me the same fear and anxiety as did their 1980s replicas which were sold to Iraq and dropped over Iranian soil.<sup>2</sup> Yet, my conscious awareness that I was in no danger of being bombed every time an airplane went by did not prevent my older associations with these sounds from creeping in. No matter how old, resolved, or faraway that experience may be, it became conjured, unexpectedly, collapsing one place onto the other. The vibrating walls of my Mandeville office always defied temporal and spatial certainties making fully present an absent past, once again, in my physical being.

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<sup>2</sup> Under the United States embargo known as Operation Staunch, Iran was barred from the acquisition of US military equipment on the global market, while arms were sold to Iraq by US allies. See for instance Geoffrey Kemp, "US-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979" in H. Sokolski and P. Clawson's *Checking Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

It is such embodied experiences of histories that are at odds, or disaligned, with institutional memory that informed the formation of this project at every step. Occupying a space within the military-educational complex has been a difficult task and I am indebted to many for helping me find my voice within it. Most important among them is my dissertation committee comprised of Norman Bryson, Roshanak Kheshti, Babak Rahimi, Lesley Stern, Mariana Wardwell and chaired by Grant Kester. I thank you all for your unfading patience as I worked to merge the mundane and the imaginative, and for your endless support every time I reached for an idea that pushed the boundaries of the project into new, and at times unrecognizable, forms. Grant: My engagement with your work precedes my arrival at UCSD. Your *Conversation Pieces* sat beside my computer as I wrote my MA thesis at UBC and was joined by *The One and the Many* as I wrote my dissertation. Working with you has been an honor and a pleasure. Norman: Thank you for taking a leap of faith with me. Your love of kitsch and the absurd sustained me as I looked through so many of the art objects that went in and out of the dissertation over the years. Roshy: I am still in awe of my good fortune to have met you, let alone the privilege of having you on my committee. I have been inspired by your scholarship since the first time I sat in on one of your seminars and I know that this will not be the last time I cite you as an influential mentor and colleague. Your pedagogy has shaped every aspect of this project and I know that I would not have found my own voice without our long conversations about feminist and queer methodologies. This dissertation would not have been where it is today without your eager engagement and I see this as only the beginning

of exciting collaborations to come. Babak: Thank you for your enthusiasm, ongoing support and for seeing me through this process. I am grateful to have been included in your projects, such as *Performing Iran*, and look forward to being a part of your larger circle of Iranian Studies scholars. Lesley: Our early writing experiments continue to motivate how I think about art history and its various textual performances. It has been a pleasure to frequent your home and garden over the years and to always go away with a new thought (and even fresh fruits and vegetables!). Mariana: I felt so lucky when you joined the department as I was putting together my committee and I cannot imagine having worked on this dissertation without you. I have learned much from you about what it means to occupy the position of the native informant in academia and I am truly indebted to you for the scholar that I am today. The rigorous notes I took every time we met will inform my scholarship for years to come.

I learned about the daily task of writing a dissertation from my wonderful writing group which included Lauren Heintz, Rujeko Hockley, Ashvin Kini, Davorn Sisavath and Chris Perreira. Working within an interdisciplinary intellectual community has been extremely important to me and each one of you have contributed to my ability to breach disciplinary boundaries. Davorn: You set the bar so high and never let me get away with anything! I learned much from your discipline and commitment to research. Ash: I love talking theory with you and will miss being excited about the latest book we can all dissect together. I hope to stay in your QPOC family for good. Chris: You made the group complete! It has been so wonderful to develop this dissertation alongside yours. Ru: your

intelligence is contagious. Thank you for sharing my passion for the rare branch of postcolonial art history and for sticking by me in those difficult early days. I know that I'll have you in my life for years to come. Lauren: Is there a single word in this dissertation that you have not read (at least three times)? I cannot wait to write the manuscript to the sound of your keyboard clicking away beside me. I thank all of you for reading through multiple drafts, for sharing books, for sharing ideas and above all for sharing food and drinks! It has been a true privilege to have developed the concepts in this dissertation in your company. I also want to acknowledge Victor Betts, Christina Carney, Josen Diaz, Alborz Ghandehari, Allia Homayoun, Joo Ok Kim, Chien-Ting Lin, Pawan Singh, Kai Small, Maki Smith, Marilisa Navarro, Sarika Talve-Goodman and June Ting for forming my intellectual community at UC San Diego. You have made my thoughts matter.

The early formulation of this project owed a great deal to my cohort of artists and scholars who arrived at UC San Diego with me in 2009. Rayyane Tabet and Christopher Kardambikis: you are among those unique creatures who appeared in my life when I most needed you. I am grateful that nothing was ever too far-fetched or too silly to discuss with you. Thank you for navigating this strange landscape with me in those early days and for believing that there was a Baghdad, a Beirut and a Mount Parnassus just past El Cajon. Katrin Pesch: you are my rock. It's been a long stretch of cocktails, BBQs and hot springs! There is always a different flavor of California out there to discover with you. Sadie Barnette, Sascha Crasnow, Scott Lyne, Lesley Ma, Time Ridlen, Vanessa Roveto

and Artie Vierkant: I could not have asked for better friends and cohorts in the Visual Arts Department. Last but not least, thanks to Mariola Alvarez for having been a true friend and mentor since I first visited San Diego. I am lucky to have been able to draw on so much of your experiences.

There are many who have supported this project from afar. I am grateful to my wonderful family Ali Mameni, Fahimeh Akhavan, Morgan Mameni and Ena Mameni. Thank you for believing in me always and for your continuing encouragement, love and support. There is nothing I could ever reach for without each one of you. I also want to thank Abbas Akhavan, who turned my world upside down in the best way imaginable. You are family and you changed everything. My house in San Diego would not have been a home without Lauren, who is the kindest person I know. Thank you for standing by me when I lost hope and for being there still. You have made my life an adventure.

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- “Invasion of the Cybernetic Hand and Other Predicaments: Kristin Lucas at Or Gallery” *Fillip Review* 5 (2007): 15
- “Lenin of Fremont: Geographical Politics of Monumental Statues” *Acta Historiae Artium*, 49.1 (2008): 370-374
- “Take Two: On Denise Oleksijczuk” *Canadian Art* (Winter, 2009): pp. 70-73
- “Adventures in History: Isabelle Pauwels at the Henry Art Gallery” *Canadian Art* (Fall 2010): pp. 130-133
- “Foiled Islands: Abbas Akhavan at The Third Line Gallery” *Fuse Magazine* 34 (2010) 44-46
- “Snail Fever” curatorial essay, *Exhibition Catalogue*, The Third Line Gallery, Dubai (2011)
- “Tiger and Radishes” *Manual of Treason*, Sharjah Biennale 10 (2011) [text in Farsi and English]
- “The Subterranean Ice Pit,” *Exhibition Catalogue*, Galerie Mana, Istanbul (2013) [text in English with Turkish translation]
- “Car Flirting and Morality Cruising: Neurotic Gazes and Paranoid Glances in Contemporary Iranian Art” *AL-Raida Journal* 141, special issue on “Women and Photography in the Arab World,” (Spring/Summer 2013): pp. 27-38

## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

On Persian Blues: Queer Bodies, Racial Affects

by

Sara Mameni

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory and Criticism

Professor Grant Kester, Chair

This dissertation is a critical analysis of the blues, or melancholic aesthetics, that appears within visual cultural practices that traverse Iran's revolutionary period of 1960s to 1980s. I foreground melancholia in this study for two reasons: first to argue for the materiality of feelings, such as that of the blues, and their relevance for art historical analysis; and second to highlight melancholia's potential for enacting social change through aesthetic practices. My work contributes to current art historical studies of affect in contemporary art, by offering melancholia as a site of radical sociality. In my study, melancholia is not an individual state of the mind, but a public affect that incites collective action.

My study begins in Iran of the mid-1960s in the midst of modernizing efforts of the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi state. Through an analysis of visual cultural practices—such as fashion photography, advertisements and film—I show that modernism in this period emerged in opposition to a moribund Islamic culture. In the photographs of Firooz Zahedi, or the high modernist works of the New York painter Frank Stella who travelled to Iran in 1965 for instance, aesthetic signs of Islam not only contribute to a heightened sense of loss but a desire for its preservation and revival. I show that within these art and visual cultural spheres, Iran's Islamic heritage enacted fantasies of an exotic elsewhere for those who desired to escape the limits of their normative identities. My study follows the depressive blues that hung over the Iranian social body into its manic eruption culminating in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. I read the revolutionary period as an erotic scene of queer desire that brought artists and intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Kate Millett to Iran to witness its historic unfolding. The visual cultural practices that I bring together in this study allow me to theorize melancholia as a catalyst for artists who aim to transform their normative relationship to the world.

## Introduction. The Most Modern and the Most Insane

### I.

*After I left Iran, the question I was constantly asked was, of course, “is this revolution?” I did not answer, but I wanted to say that it is not a revolution, not in the literal sense of the term, not a way of standing up and straightening things out. It is the insurrection of men with bare hands who want to lift the fearful weight, the weight of the entire world order that bears down on each of us, but more specifically on them, these oils workers and peasants at the frontiers of empires. It is perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.<sup>3</sup>*

*Michel Foucault, 1978*

Michel Foucault did not use the term “revolution” to refer to what we now know as the Iranian Revolution of 1979. As the quote above suggests, he thought of the uprising in Iran as “the first great insurrection against global systems.” When asked if the events were a revolution, he remained silent. He did not consider the insurrection in terms of reform on the national level, or a “way of standing up and straightening things out,” but as a revolt against a global system at large that in his words, “bears down on each of us.” For Foucault, the significance of the insurrection in Iran was its assault against a global order that was dependent upon “these oil workers and peasants” that kept its wheels turning. It was a revolt at the very frontier of empires that imagined the

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt” *Corriere della serra*, November 26, 1978, translated and published in J.Afary and K.Anderson ed. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seduction of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

impossible task of lifting “the fearful weight of the entire world.” What was happening in Iran, was not merely a “revolution,” at the local level with its connotation of continuous repetition, rotation and return. Neither was it modeled after previous ones such as the French Revolution; Rather, Foucault saw the uprisings in Iran as “the first great insurrection” that aimed to break down the global order itself.

It is perhaps due to this utopian dream of lifting a “fearful weight” that pressed down on us all, that Foucault chose to refer to the events in Iran as “the most modern and the most insane.” The use of the term “insane” by the author of *Madness and Civilization* (*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*) is not a casual one. In its various English translations, the word is rendered either as “insane” or “mad” referring back to the revolt.<sup>4</sup> Why did Foucault describe the uprisings in terms of madness? What did he see in Iran that compelled him to place the insurrection within a genealogy of madness, which he had drawn up just over a decade prior to his arrival in Iran? As Foucault’s biographers have pointed out, his interest in the Iranian revolution was rather surprising. His two visits to Iran and the series of journalistic reports and analyses written for the Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, were the result of his involvement with the *Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons*, where he learned about the situation in Iran from exiled

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<sup>4</sup> In *Michel Foucault: Dits et écrits: 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) vol. III, the phrase has been translated as “It is perhaps the first major insurrection against planetary systems, the most modern and maddest form of revolt.”

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Craig Keating, “Reflections on the Revolution in Iran: Foucault on Resistance” *European Studies* xxvii (1997): 181-197, 2.

Iranian activists in France.<sup>5</sup> He made his first visit to Iran in the summer of 1978 in the midst of the uprisings and returned again in the winter of 1979.

Commentators have invariably read Foucault's use of the term "insane" to describe the Iranian Revolutionary movement as a symptom of his Orientalist perspective. Ian Almond for instance, argues that Foucault dubbed the revolution "insane" because he wrote within a discourse that had long seen Islam as a site of madness. "In linking madness with Islam," he writes, "Foucault effectively draws on an already extant store of motifs concerning Islam," which, according to Almond, would not have escaped the readers of the popular newspapers that carried Foucault's commentaries on Iran.<sup>6</sup> Almond admits however, that the charge of Orientalism might become softened if Foucault's usage is placed within the context of his academic works. "Of course," he writes, "in one sense the madness of Foucault's Iran has nothing to do with the kind of madness which has always been stereotypically attributed to mad mullahs and fanatical Mohammedans."<sup>7</sup> If we consider Foucault's study on madness in the historical context, Almond continues, we understand that the "*folie* he attributes to the Islamic Revolution" is "a *folie* of irrepressible energy, rather than mental derangement or delusions of grandeur."<sup>8</sup> Almond does not elaborate on the exact meaning of this "irrepressible

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Almond, "The Madness of Islam: Foucault's Occident and the Revolution in Iran" *Radical Philosophy* 128 (November/December 2004): 12-22, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

energy,” but offers it in passing as a more sophisticated interpretation that would have escaped the average readers of Foucault’s journalistic texts. Throughout his essay however, it becomes apparent that such definitions of madness are not Foucault’s at all. Indeed, Almond’s representations of “mad mullahs” overcome by “irrepressible energy” seem to be entirely his own and are nowhere operative within Foucault’s writings on Iran.

Other critics such as Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, have also taken Foucault to task for pointing to the “madness” of the Iranian Revolution. In the preface to their compilation and English translation of Foucault’s writings on Iran, Afary and Anderson argue that “Foucault celebrated the Islamist movement as a rejection of a European form of modernity.”<sup>9</sup> In their assessment, Foucault was attracted to the transgressive nature of this “madness” and its ability to move beyond Western rationality. “He hopes that what he called its ‘insane’ transgressive discourse,” they writes, “would fracture the boundaries of a ‘rational’ modernity.”<sup>10</sup> While I agree with Afary and Anderson’s assessment that Foucault wanted to see the Iranian uprising as a fissure in conceptions of rational modernity, I am struck by their blunt dichotomy between rational modernity on the one hand, and “Islamist movement” on the other. In their text, madness is portrayed as “transgressive” and what stands outside of “rational modernity.” With this move, not only do Afary and Anderson manage to place madness outside of modernity but with it the Iranian Revolution itself. In their study, Afary and Anderson consistently periodize Iranian modernity as stretching from Reza Shah’s policies for nationalism and secularism

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<sup>9</sup> Afary and Anderson, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

in 1919 to the Islamic Revolution. In this sense, the revolutionary movement repeatedly falls somewhere outside of modernity. As Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi has noted, Afary and Anderson regard Foucault's interest in the Iranian Revolution as a "naive romanticization of 'pre-modern' values and culture."<sup>11</sup> In their study madness is at best a transgression, if not an outright "rejection," of modernity itself.

A second look at Foucault's text quoted above however, reveals a distinct coupling of madness and modernity. The insurrection in Iran, Foucault argues, is a "form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane." This linking of madness and modernity, I want to suggest, is in keeping with Foucault's genealogy of madness in *Madness and Civilization*. As Alan Sheridan has noted, Foucault's study does not offer a distinct definition of madness.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he provides a picture of a constantly shifting concept that carves the edges of rationality within the Age of Reason. In the preface to his study, Foucault makes the stakes of his project clear. "In the serene world of mental illness," he writes, "modern man no longer communicates with the madman."<sup>13</sup> Here, Foucault places his study in opposition to that of psychiatry where madness has been classified, since the late 18th century, as a distinct category known as mental illness. "The language of psychiatry," he writes, "which is a monologue of reason *about* madness, has been

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<sup>11</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "In Defense of Foucault on the Iranian Revolution" *A Foucault for the 21st Century: Governmentality, Biopolitics and Discipline in the New Millennium*, eds Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 272.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (London: Tavistock Publication, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Madness in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), vi.

established only on the basis of such a silence.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, what our knowledge of mental illness offers us is not an engagement with madness but simply a discourse *about* madness.

What then does Foucault’s history of madness offer that moves beyond the language of psychiatry? In his preface Foucault writes, “I have not tried to write the history of that language, but rather the archaeology of that silence.”<sup>15</sup> His study of madness, he is suggesting here, is not the history of how psychiatry came to know madness, but of the various ways in which the classification, diagnosis and treatment of madness has separated it from reason. Despite all appearances, Foucault’s study is not a history of madness at all but is, as Sheridan notes, a “counter-history of that ‘other form of madness.’”<sup>16</sup> This “other form of madness” is reason itself, which provides the very language through which its own antithesis can emerge. “To observe madness,” Sheridan writes, “is to place oneself on the side of reason—one would be better employed observing reason.”<sup>17</sup> Foucault indeed takes this route, not so as to follow madness, but to track policies, knowledges, practices and institutions that have confined madness into its own exclusive category within modernity. What he finds in the historical debris of rationality is madness itself, folded within the very systems of modern thought. In Sheridan’s words, “look hard enough at reason, Foucault seems to be saying, and you will find madness.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>17</sup> Sheridan, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Foucault's project therefore, does not define madness in terms of anomalous behaviors. His study certainly does trace discursive practices that have found madness in persons with "delusions of grandeur" (as in the case of the three men "each of whom believed himself to be a king, and each of whom took the title of Louis XVI"),<sup>19</sup> or those who were chained and bound in straitjackets due to their "irrepressible energy," (as is the case of "Gregory with the physique of a Hercules" found in the documents of Philippe Pinel).<sup>20</sup> Yet, counter to Almond's suggestion, Foucault himself does not define madness in these terms. Furthermore, while Foucault's study shows how madness has been carved out of rational modernity, unlike Afary and Anderson's argument, Foucault himself does not subscribe to this definition of madness. It is unlikely therefore, that Foucault's use of the term "insane" to describe the events in Iran would be a diagnosis of "the madness of Islam" or a transgressive break with modernity.

Instead, Foucault's study urges us to see madness *within* the rational ideals of modernity. This is best exemplified in his analysis of a melancholic figure who believed himself to be made out of glass. "The man who imagines he is made of glass is not mad, for any sleeper can have this image in a dream," Foucault writes, "but he is mad if, believing he is made of glass, he thereby concludes that he is fragile, that he is in danger of breaking, that he must touch no object which might be too resistant, that he must in fact remain motionless, and so on."<sup>21</sup> What makes this figure mad, Foucault concludes, is

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault, 262.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 94.

precisely this chain of reasoning. It is not the conjuring of an image of a body built of glass that makes this figure mad. Nor is it the leap of his imagination that condemns him to the category of the insane. What confirms this man's madness is rather the rationalization of his imagination and the commitment to its logical enactment. "Such reasoning is those of a madman" Foucault writes, which are neither illogical nor absurd in themselves but "on the contrary, they apply correctly the most rigorous figures of logic."<sup>22</sup> Insanity is, in this sense, a loyal dedication to rationality.

How can we read Foucault's characterization of the revolt in Iran as "insane" in light of this definition? I want to suggest that for Foucault, the uprisings in Iran exemplified the madness of rational modernity itself. Here was an insurrection in the midst of one of the most rigorous modernization programs planned under the monarchical government of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Here was the madness of civilization itself at a time when the Pahlavi government had embarked upon social and economic modernization guided by the vision of a "Great Civilization."<sup>23</sup> It was this Great Civilization, tracing itself back to a 2,500 years of Persian Monarchy, that had become the frontier of empires, an oil-producing rentier state and a major U.S. military base in the last stages of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> What Foucault saw in Iran was the madness of the Great Civilization, which in one of his essays published in *Corriere*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>23</sup> For the Shah's vision of the "Great Civilization" see Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 175-179.

<sup>24</sup> See Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 133.

*della Sera*, he described as the “dead weight of modernity.”<sup>25</sup> In Foucault’s assessment, what brought the oil workers and the peasants out onto the streets was the heaviness of modernity’s “dead weight,” which they attempted to lift off with their bare hands.

The madness that Foucault found in Iran was neither a delusion of Islam nor a transgression against modernity. Instead it was an enactment of modernity’s logic akin to that of the melancholic. As with the melancholic who imagined himself to be built of glass and went on to act out its symptoms, the Iranian oil workers and the peasants saw the thinness, the transparency and the fragility of the empires they sustained. Yet, it was not this image alone that made them mad. Their madness did not consist of how they perceived the fragility of industrial modernity, but of their decision to shatter its illusions. Their madness consisted of seeing empires as made out of glass and proceeding to break down their delicate barriers. It is in this sense, I would argue, that Foucault described the revolt in Iran as “the most modern and the most insane.” The uprising was not insane simply because it erupted on the peripheries of modernity, but because the protestors were pointing out the very madness of the Great Civilization, and the tenuousness of its foundations.

Indeed, at the heart of Foucault’s fascination with the uprisings in Iran was the protestor’s flirtation with the void, or that point of fissure within the facade of empires. In his commentaries, Foucault was adamant to point out that the Iranians were not looking for yet another form of hierarchical state structure but that they consciously chose

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Shah is a Hundred Years Behind the Times” *Corriere della Sera*, October 1, 1978, published in Afary and Anderson, 194-198.

“mythical figures” as their leaders so as to prevent the usurpation of power by any one person. Foucault’s essays foreground figures such as Mahdi (the “invisible” Shi’ite Imam),<sup>26</sup> Ali Shariati (the Iranian intellectual whose ideas guided many revolutionary factions but whose death in 1977 prevented him from participating in the revolution’s outcomes),<sup>27</sup> and finally Ayatollah Khomeini (who Foucault hailed for three reasons: 1. “Khomeini is not there,” 2. “Khomeini says nothing,” and 3. “Khomeini is not a politician”).<sup>28</sup> With hindsight it is clear that Foucault did not foresee Khomeini’s return to Iran from his exile in Paris and his expropriation of the revolutionary momentum into an Islamic Republic. His commentaries therefore must be understood as an engagement with the insurrection itself rather than its outcome. What Foucault saw in the insurrection was an interest in shaking the foundations of the institutions of power rather than building new ones. As Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely have noted, Foucault was drawn to the uprisings because it was not “just fighting for another world, but for how to be a different subject in this one.”<sup>29</sup> This subject, I argue, inhabits the madness of modernity, one who identifies and acts out modernity’s limitations.

## II.

In this dissertation I ask what it would mean to allow modernity’s madness guide our way through visual cultural productions from Iran’s revolutionary period. This

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault, “Tehran: Faith against the Shah,” in Afary and Anderson, 201.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About?” in *ibid*, 207.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt” in *ibid*, 222.

<sup>29</sup> For an elaboration of a similar argument see Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely “There is Nothing Revolutionary About a Blowjob” *Social Text* 119: 32 (2014): 1-23, 10.

exploration provides a shift in how Iran is commonly lodged outside of the progressive time of modernity. Hamid Dabashi for instance, notes that “throughout the course of its encounter with colonial modernity, Iranians have experienced a sense of dislocation, assumed that their country has been dislodged from its rightful place, and thought that it has been geographically arrested in a place where it should not be.”<sup>30</sup> In Dabashi’s assessment, it is precisely modernity that produces this feeling of dislocation, this sense of being displaced from an imaginary place one never occupied. Modernity names this ever receding point that one will never reach, but which nonetheless remains the location of one’s collective destiny. This point is echoed by Ali Mirsepassi who writes, “the dilemma is how to reconcile the tension between modernity’s promise of openness and inclusive qualities (the Enlightenment moral promise and the modernist radical vision) and the blatant Eurocentric narrative of modernization that forecloses the possibility of real ‘local’ experience and of their contribution in the realization of modernity.”<sup>31</sup> History, within the Iranian context hence produces a sense of belatedness as it becomes a barometer for measuring Iran’s proximity to modernity. Time and again historiography becomes the practice of reckoning with what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has called “anticipatory modernity,” a condition that remains forever delayed, deferred or incomplete.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Dabashi, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Mohamad, Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

Thinking with Foucault's madness of modernity is a way of unsettling the progressive time of history that imagines large populations of peoples outside of time and estranged from their place. In the chapters that follow I foreground the melancholic as this mad subject of modernity who appears everywhere within cultural productions during Iran's revolutionary period, roughly stretching from 1960 to 1980. Chapter One finds this figure in Dariush Mehrjui's film *The Cow* (1969). Set in a remote Iranian village, *The Cow* is the story of a peasant who loses his cow and with it the main source of the village economy. Finding the death of his animal to be unbearable, the peasant turns into the cow himself before his eventual death at the end of the movie. Mehrjui's portrayal of this melancholic figure draws on the works of the eleventh century Persian physician Abu Ali Ibn-Sina (Avicenna). In his *Canon of Medicine*, which is regarded as one of the earliest medical diagnoses and classifications of melancholia informing later studies by Marsilio Ficino and Robert Burton,<sup>33</sup> Ibn-Sina presents the case of a melancholic Persian prince who thought himself to be a cow. After diagnosing the prince with melancholia, Ibn-Sina challenges the prince to prove his transformation into the bovine by eating large amounts of food so that his body can yield a stew for the court. The mad prince, faithful to the enactment of his vision, begins to eat the food offered by Ibn-Sina and is, in the process, cured.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Nancy Siraisi, *Avicenna, Renaissance Italy: The Canon and Medical Teaching in Italian Universities After 1500* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> This story is told in Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985); See also William E. Gohlman, *The Life of Ibn Sina: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1974).

Mehrjui's version of Ibn-Sina's story retains this central plot but finds no cure at the end. At the time of its production, it was clear that Mehrjui's film was a displacement of the madness of the Persian prince onto a peasant, which led to the film's censorship under the Shah. The film's thinly disguised critique of the madness of the Great Civilization, was here voiced by a villager who had found himself stripped of his main source of economic sustenance. This stab at the Shah's government was not lost to the censors who banned the film in Iran for its poor portrayal of the Shah's modernization efforts.

In the dissertation, I juxtapose this censored film with cultural productions that presented the Pahlavi government's desired image to the world. The second and third chapters map out the Iranian state's vision of modernity ratified through culture industries such as fashion, tourism and the arts. I show that this period saw a great rise in infrastructural support for the arts through the building of Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA), hosting of Tehran Biennial and the Shiraz Art Festival, all of which were overseen by the office of Shahbanu Farah Diba (The Shah's wife). Such events and facilities attracted many international artists to Iran, among them the U.S. artist Frank Stella, whose work was purchased for the Modern Art collection at TMOCA. Chapter Two follows Frank Stella's travel in Iran through his letters and photographs sent to his wife and art historian Barbara Rose. While Stella's paintings fulfill the task of rendering Iranian historical sites in modernist abstract designs, his letters tell a different story about the Iranians he meets. What emerges in Stella's letters are what he refers to as

the “catatonic” faces of Iranians who are unable to benefit from their natural resources. In one letter, Stella wonders why the Iranians have not developed a more refined taste for oil. As I show in the chapter, while Stella’s primary purpose for traveling to Iran was the extraction of aesthetic styles from Islamic architectural sites, his statement speaks to a larger construction of Iran as an oil producing economy that left the population in a melancholic state.

Melancholia as a structure of feeling fully emerges in Chapter Three, where I engage images of the Great Civilization appearing within fashion photography. This chapter follows Elizabeth Taylor’s visit to Iran accompanied by her personal photographer Firooz Zahedi, who was also a close relative of the Iranian ambassador to Washington in this period. Zahedi’s images of Taylor are one of a series of fashion shoots staged in Iran by various international magazines, such as *Vogue* and *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, that staged their models against the backdrops of Iran’s newly refurbished Islamic and pre-Islamic sites. These photographs, I argue, sold fantasies of an exotic elsewhere to consumers who desired to escape the limits of their normative identities. By focusing on images of Taylor in Muslim attire, I show that her photographs at once produced Iran as a locus of sexualized release to tourists, and as a promise of whiteness to a cadre of Iranian elites plugged into the global fashion industries. My particular focus in this chapter is the racializing processes that produced a white (Aryan) national ideal under the Pahlavi government, that the Iranian social body nonetheless failed to achieve within the global context. Following Anne Anlin Cheng, I call this formation racial

melancholia, a process I find enacted within photographs of racially white models in ethnically labelled clothing such as the Persian Blue clothing line.

While the first three chapters foreground the presence of a melancholic social body within the two decades prior to the Iranian Revolution, in the fourth and final chapter I turn to the revolutionary moment itself. As noted above, Foucault's notion of melancholic madness is not so much a description of a deviant figure who has spiraled outside of the frames of rational modernity, but one who brings modernity's ideals into question. Indeed scholars, such as Ranjana Khanna, have argued that melancholia has been the very impetus for post-colonial and post-imperial revolutionary movements. The Iranian revolution was arguably such an endeavor and Foucault's writings on Iran certainly attest to, and enable, such a reading. Yet, Foucault's narrative was itself heavily criticized by many in Iran, the most vocal amongst whom were Iranian feminists who had become disenfranchised by the newly formed Islamic government. In Chapter Four, I engage this scholarship as I look at the failed outcomes of the revolution for Iranian women who protested against the newly formed Islamic government shortly after its formation. My entry point into this discussion is the archives of the U.S. feminist Kate Millett who travels to Iran with her lover Sophie Kier to join the women's protests. Millett's archives present Iranian feminism as the inheritor of the melancholic social body, highlighting that Iran's patriarchal nationalist formation is built upon women's political denial. More importantly however, Millett and Kier's archives implicate U.S. feminism in the course of Iranian women's political suppression at the national level.

Upon arrival in Iran, Millett and Keir found themselves on the margins of feminist demonstrations and were expelled from Iran within ten days as representatives of U.S. imperial interests. This chapter is hence an account of the double bind of third world feminisms, which on the one hand are hailed by first world feminisms into the utopian cause of “global sisterhood,” and on the other hand are drawn into the fold of patriarchal nationalisms.

## Chapter 1. Transanimality in Dariush Mehrjui's "The Cow"

### I.

Flash forward. The next chapter will have a scent. It will be the smell of cows hovering over the interlocking ribs of a modernist painting that will prompt the structure of my argument. But smells are difficult to contain. They are mobile and cannot be constrained within the tight confines of one chapter. They have found their way here, before I begin, as I confront a cow in Dariush Mehrjui's 1969 film *The Cow*. This cow is not so different from the next one and lives on an Iranian farm town in the late 1960s. Like the cows I recall from my childhood, this one is loved by the villagers but is also on the verge of extinction. The cow in Mehrjui's film is the only one in the village and the sole source of the village economy. All the other farmers have lost their livestock to raids from the neighboring village. This cow, the film's protagonist, is the only remaining livestock and she dies shortly after the film's opening. Mehrjui's *The Cow* is an elegy for the animal.

The film establishes a tight bond between the cow and his owner Mash Hassan. An early scene in the film shows Mash Hassan washing his cow in the river. He cups water into his hands and pours it onto the cow's back. He brushes the cow's body and catches the trickling droplets of water on his face. He laughs and mumbles to himself as he looks into the cow's eyes and strokes her face. The cow swings her tail as Mash Hassan wets his own head sharing in the joys of the refreshing bath. Another scene shows Mash Hassan sleeping in the cowshed, sharing food with the cow and smiling at her

pregnant form. He brings his head close to her body and listens for the moving animal inside her womb. Mash Hassan mumbles under his breath as if trying to talk to the unborn calf floating in the uterus. His utterances cannot be recognized as words but are attempts at communicating with the cow and bridging the distance between them. They are gestures that signal his own enjoyment of being with, and caring for, his companion species.<sup>35</sup>

When Mash Hassan has to leave the village one morning, he leaves the cow in his wife's care. Shortly after, his wife finds the cow dead bleeding from the mouth. The villagers decide to protect Mash Hassan from the truth. They bury the cow in his absence and upon his return inform him that his cow has simply ran away. It will return in no time, they assure him. There is nothing to worry about. But Mash Hassan is even less prepared to face the animal's loss than the villagers had initially expected. Not only does he refuse to accept that his cow has run away, he proceeds to fill the cow's absent place by transforming into the animal himself. This is expressed in a scene half-way through the film when a group of villagers have come to see him. They call on him by name, "Mash Hassan!" He does not respond but continues to chew on the hay laid out in the shed. They call his name again. With spikes of hay hanging out of the corner of his mouth he turns to face his visitors and says, "I am not Mash Hassan. I am Mash Hassan's cow." This trans-animal metamorphosis preoccupies the village for the rest of the film. Failing

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<sup>35</sup> I am borrowing this term from Donna Haraway. See Dona Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

to convince their neighbor that he has not turned into a cow, the villagers eventually decide to lug him to the city for rehabilitation but s/he falls to his death on the way.

Mahmoud Hassan's metamorphosis into his cow displays the psychic traits of a classic melancholic character as defined by Sigmund Freud. In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud compared melancholia to mourning and as a reaction to the loss of a loved object. Yet unlike mourning where the subject accepts that "the loved-object no longer exists," in melancholia the subject resists the withdrawal of all attachments from the lost object.<sup>36</sup> The melancholic subject, according to Freud, "clings to the object" by incorporating it within the self and building an identification with it.<sup>37</sup> The melancholic subject, writes Freud, "wants to incorporate this object into itself, and in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to be devouring it."<sup>38</sup> Freud's reading of melancholia as an oral regression and a "cannibalistic phase" is an attempt at separating melancholia from the socially symbolic form of mourning. Not only do these references manage to convey melancholia as a pathology, they do so by building an equivalence between melancholia and psycho-sexual regression. As Diana Fuss has noted, Freud's theory of identification operates through "the cannibalistic, pregenital phase, in which sexual activity is still indistinguishable from

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<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 244.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

food ingestion,” whereby the prototype for melancholic identification becomes a form of “oral sadism.”<sup>39</sup>

The sexual regression and “oral sadism” of the melancholic character is given abundant play in Mehrjui’s film. Mash Hassan’s loving treatment of the cow is contrasted in the film to his disinterest in his wife. He is shown interacting with his wife through short and sharp words. The camera rests on the disappointed face of Mash Hassan’s wife, as he decides to leave their dinner spread to sleep in the cowshed. This lack of affection for his wife is opposed in the next scene to his intimate interactions with the cow. Not only do we see Mash Hassan laughing and caressing the cow, but we are given close-ups of them sharing food. In one scene, Mash Hassan sits across from the cow and begins to chew on stacks of hay. By tugging and pulling on the dried ends of the fodder, Mash Hassan engages the cow in a back and forth game of tug. This scene foreshadows Mash Hassan’s later performance of eating cow food after his metamorphosis and the villagers’ disbelief and repeated commentary about his stomach’s resilience. Yet this scene also foregrounds eating as a site of sexual pleasure. Here Mash Hassan’s “oral sadism” is not limited to his choice of food, but to the overlap between food and sexual desire that the scene affords.

After the animal’s death, Mash Hassan’s displayed desire for his beloved cow slips into melancholic identification. As noted above, Freud describes identification as a “devouring” of a lost object in accordance with the “oral phase” of sexual development.

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<sup>39</sup> Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 35.

He explains the libidinal logic of melancholic identifications as follows. When a sexual attachment to an object is shattered, the libido becomes free to find a substitute in another object. In melancholia however, the libido is not displaced onto another sexual object, but is instead “withdrawn into the ego.”<sup>40</sup> This retraction of the libido into the self is the first step of the melancholic’s oral action. It eats up and takes back all the libidinal investment it had previously placed onto the loved object. Once the melancholic incorporates the libidinal energy back into the ego, Freud goes on to explain, it puts it to work towards rebuilding the lost object within the self. As such, the melancholic ingests the sexual surplus that is leftover after the love object has disappeared, in order to built identification with the lost object.

Freud envisions this internal drama of melancholic identification, which ensues after the swallowing of the lost love object, in distinctly spatial terms. Once the libidinal energy is withdrawn into the ego, Freud writes,

The shadow of the object falls upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.<sup>41</sup>

In this short passage, Freud establishes a series of relationships between the ego and the lost object. First, in identification, “the shadow of the object falls upon the ego.” Here we have a spatial relationship between the ego and the lost loved object. The ghostly form of

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<sup>40</sup> Freud, 249.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the absent, lost object seems to hover somewhere adjacent to the ego casting its shadow upon it. This shadow has significant ramifications for how Freud imagines the ego. In his description, not only does the ego rest somewhere in the shadow of the lost object, but it has also given rise to a third element: “a special agency” by which it is henceforth “judged.” The shadow of the lost object has hence engendered a “special agency” that is now apart from the ego. Further, it is precisely this “special agency” that looks back upon itself and perceives itself as altered. The libidinal energy that is withdrawn into the ego therefore, works to split the ego into two: one that performs the “critical activity” of the special agency and which remains distinct from the rest of the ego.

Mehrjui’s film portrays this splitting and spatialization of the melancholic subject’s ego in a series of interconnected scenes that establish the process of Mash Hassan’s metamorphosis into his cow. The film first conveys Mash Hassan’s refusal to accept the death of his cow in a scene which shows him sitting on the roof of his cowshed. When asked by the villagers what he is doing up on the roof, he tells them that he is guarding his cow down below against raids from the neighboring village. In the next scene, Mash Hassan/Cow is found inside the cowshed. When the men in the village try to convince him of the truth of his cow’s death by asking him to follow them to the well where his dead cow lays buried, he runs towards an opening in the roof and calls on Mash Hassan (his split ego) to come down and save him. These two scenes depict the internal topography that organizes Mash Hassan’s split ego. The first shows him sitting on guard

on top of the roof, while the next scene introduces us to the trans-animal ego dwelling below in the cowshed “altered by identification” with the cow.

The most interesting aspect of this cinematic splitting of the character into two is that it makes the trans-animal perspective available to us. As noted above, when the villagers first encounter Mash Hassan/Cow below, they continue to address the character by the human name, “Mash Hassan!” At this initial stage, the camera takes on the perspective of the villagers who are unaware of the metamorphosis and who do not believe the truth of the character’s identity. But the camera announces the trans-animal perspective when Mash Hassan/Cow begins to speak. In an evocative moment, Mash Hassan/Cow runs to an opening in the ceiling that lets in the rays of sun from the roof. S/he looks up into the illuminated space of the roof calling out to his split ego sitting on guard above. His voice now cracks with pain, agony and desperation as s/he cries through the roof. This is the voice of the “special agency” that pleads with the split ego and “judges” it for abandonment and neglect. This is the voice of (self)denigration and (self)reproach. We might even argue that this voice is a further manifestation of the “oral sadism” with which the character takes in its food. Here that orality is extended to the verbal expression that punishes the split part of the ego with words.

This scene in the film is exceptional not only because it discloses the character’s melancholic speech, but because it does so by shifting the camera to the trans-animal gaze. Here the camera identifies with the character’s gaze by tilting up to look into the opening in the roof. This tilting of the camera announces the truth of the character’s

metamorphosis. While the character's body appears to be unchanged, the camera's angle presents the character's morphology through the direction of his look. This formal move prevents the scene from being solely organized around the skeptical gaze of the villagers. Instead, it provides access to the trans-animal perspective that makes the reality of the melancholic subject possible. The act of tilting the camera up into the bright light coming down through the roof allows the character the semantic agency to make meaning of his own transformation—one which counters the visual signification of his body.

The agency given to the trans-animal gaze of Mash Hassan/Cow in the film, brings to fore a tension that lies at the heart of Freud's definition of melancholia. On the one hand, Freud sees melancholia as a pathology caused by the "oral sadism" of a painful speech that diminishes the ego and leads it, eventually, to suicide. Freud hence theorizes melancholia as a self-consuming pathology, whereby the ego commits suicide by mimicking the fate of the lost love object through identification. On the other hand however, Freud attributes exceptional wisdom to the melancholic subject whose development of a "special agency" produces critical insights into the ego. According to Freud, the melancholic "has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic" and that the melancholic has come "pretty near to understanding himself."<sup>42</sup> "We only wonder" Freud writes, "why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Posed in this way, Freud's question alerts us to his desire to attribute something more to melancholia than a mere clinical diagnosis. As Juliana Schiesari has noted, in Freud's definition a "tacit but demonstrable admiration sets in for this neurosis."<sup>44</sup> When confronted by patients who describe themselves as "worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable," or those who believe themselves to be "petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence," Freud is quick to argue that while the individual may be giving "correct descriptions of his psychological situation," it may also be the case that "he is being more or less unfair to himself."<sup>45</sup> Freud even goes so far as to argue that when melancholic subjects speak of themselves as unworthy, they are actually speaking of someone else's negative traits. "The woman who loudly pities her husband for being tied to such an incapable wife as herself" he writes, "is really accusing her *husband* of being incapable."<sup>46</sup> Couched in this way, the melancholic's speech in Freud's text becomes a kind of truth-telling that illuminates broader social ills. "Their complaints" writes Freud, "are really 'plaints' in the old sense of the word. They [the patients] are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else."<sup>47</sup>

Freud's admiration for his patients' critical acumen curiously defies their affective and emotional display. The picture of the melancholic that appears in Freud's text is of an

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<sup>44</sup> Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Freud, 247.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

individual entirely consumed by loss. This is not a person who is attuned to the surrounding environment but one who turns inside shutting out the outside world. The melancholic is said to refuse food, sleep and even life itself by “overcoming the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life.”<sup>48</sup> If communicating with others at all, the melancholic in Freud’s text, is only capable of slander and self-denigration due to the diminution in self-regard. We witness much of these same characteristics in Mehrjui’s film. In one scene we confront Mash Hassan/Cow’s head hitting against the bricks that jut out from the cowshed’s wall. Another scene gets at the character’s despair by circling the camera around the cowshed following the blurred figure, with sunken and dilated eyes, who runs aimlessly around the room. These shots, which attempt to express the gravity of the character’s neurosis, are not rationalized or given explicit meanings in the film. If anything, Mash Hassan/Cow’s actions defy all comprehension leaving the villagers baffled throughout the whole narrative. On an affective level therefore, melancholics do not confer or experience the exceptional wisdom that Freud finds in them, and in the case of Mehrjui’s film, the character only perplexes the villagers. Freud’s argument hence not only exceeds the content of the melancholics’ speech but their affective and emotional display.

Why, then we might ask, does Freud attribute keen insights to a figure who he himself defines as pathological? Why is he enamored by a figure who he sees as exhibiting an “oral regression,” which as Diana Fuss has noted, is too reminiscent of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 246.

psychoanalytic theorization of the “savage” and the sexual “invert.” “Freud’s stories of oral incorporation are never just about eating” writes Fuss, rather “they offer up complex narrativizations of the colonialist construction of the Other as primitive, bestial and predatory.”<sup>49</sup> Why is Freud’s theorization of melancholia at once a clear case of a neurosis that exhibits signs of “regressive” narcissism and hysteria, as well as a portrait of a person blessed with acute judgment and perception of personal and social truths? The repetition of this trope of melancholia—a figure who is at once pathological and hallowed with a critical gaze—in Mehrjui’s film points to its discursive formation. This prompts the questions as to why there is this desire to attribute keen insights to the melancholic.

One way of answering this question is to argue that the wisdom that Freud attributes to the melancholic figure is not merely descriptive of the condition of the neurosis itself. Rather, Freud’s theory of melancholia equips the *analyst* with the ability to discern keen insights from the patient’s speech. In other words, melancholia allows for the emergence of the analyst as a critical subject in relation to the melancholic. The analyst is here a subject who can read the melancholic’s “plaints” against their grain and determine the direction of their slanderous address. In Freud’s observation above for instance, the woman’s declaration of her own failures is re-interpreted by the analyst as “really” directed at her husband. During the course of analysis, according to Freud, the analyst gives the patient the benefit of the doubt and nods in agreement upon hearing the “melancholic’s distressing self-denigration.”<sup>50</sup> “Indeed, we must at once confirm some of

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<sup>49</sup> Fuss, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 247.

his statements without reservation,” writes Freud, since “it would be fruitless from a scientific and therapeutic point of view to contradict a patient who brings these accusations against his ego.”<sup>51</sup> Yet, these affirmative gestures cover up the fact that the analyst’s diagnosis exceeds the contents of the melancholic’s pronouncements. During the analytic process, it is the analyst who is produced as the author of the “real” meanings of the melancholic’s expressions.

This is not to say that melancholia is the only instance in which the analyst emerges as subject. Psychoanalysis, as a science, is based on the analyst’s ability to decipher symptoms that are often either unknown to the patient or are deliberately hidden during the analytic process. As Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok have noted for instance, “for us, as analysts, it is this very masking and denial [of reality] which, more than anything else, attests to the presence of that which has the status of reality for our patients—a reality needless to say to be avoided.”<sup>52</sup> In this sense, the psychoanalytic process as a whole is driven by the desire of the analyst who works to excavate and interpret what the patient hopes to avoid or keep hidden through digression and derailment. Yet what remains unique about melancholia is that the analyst’s critical agency is projected and displaced onto the patient. This is not a mere case of an analyst diagnosing a patient, but of attributing analytic insights to the melancholic. What emerges in melancholia is a certain resemblance between the analyst and the patient, an unusual

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 157.

circumstance of a neurosis that takes on the characteristics of the analyst. Melancholia is an instance, where the patient's symptoms reveal the methods of the analytic process itself.

In fact if we consider the term "analysis," it begins to resemble the condition of melancholia as Freud defined it. The word analysis comes from the Greek root *analyzein*, which means to break up. The word is a compound of *ana* + *lyein* meaning to loosen, or to lose. The verb *lyein* refers to a "failure to keep together," to losing and the condition of loss. With loss at its origin, analysis already has an intimate affinity with melancholia. It means to detach and to loosen one's grip onto things. It refers to the slipperiness of attachments and the breaking up of the glue that holds things together. This sense of loss is reminiscent of Freud's definition of melancholia where the subject is overcome by the breaking up of a bond and the feelings of loss that ensue. This breaking up is also the model for how Freud analyzes—or breaks down—the structure of melancholia itself. He splits the ego and loosens it into its spatial components. He dissolves the ego into its constituent parts describing the relationships between them. Analysis here mirrors melancholia by becoming a method of loosening and separating bonds, but never letting go of any of these parts. Analysis, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, is "an examination of a complex, its elements, and their relations." In this sense, analysis is not a letting go (as mourning would be), but a holding on to the fragments that make up a complex entity. As with melancholia, analysis is a preoccupation with holding on to loss even as the cement that hold things together is loosened or lost.

The resemblance between the method of analysis and the condition of melancholia, is one way of understanding Freud's "admiration" for the melancholic. This is a subject whose split ego urges a turning back and reflection onto its splintered components, thus mimicking the analyst's craft and the process of breaking down and describing loosened attachments and relationships. Freud's attribution of analytic insight to the melancholic hence signals Freud's own identification with the melancholic and it points to the desire to have the melancholic speak in the analyst's language. Historically, this desire to attribute critical insights to melancholia is not limited to Freud's understanding of the neurosis. Many scholars have elaborated upon the long tradition of "artistic creativity, or heightened sensitivity" ascribed to the melancholic temperament.<sup>53</sup> This discursive practice of imbuing melancholia with critical insight persists today. In their introduction to the anthology *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* for instance, the editors David Eng and David Kazanjian argue that Freud did not definitively categorize melancholia as a pathology but that the implication of his study was that, "if one were to understand melancholia better," then "one would no longer insist on its pathological nature."<sup>54</sup> Following this cue, Eng and Kazanjian write, "we suggest that a better understanding of melancholic attachments to loss might depathologize those attachments, making visible not only their social bases but also their creative, unpredictable, political

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<sup>53</sup> See for instance Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains" *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

aspects.”<sup>55</sup> This call for the creative potential and political thrust of melancholia is echoed by Ranjana Khanna, who writes, “if Freud would eventually transfer the critical agency found in melancholia into the normalizing function of the superego, I would salvage it, putting the melancholic’s manic critical agency into the uncorking of conformity, and into the critique of the status quo.”<sup>56</sup>

In the next section, I turn to a more detailed discussion of what drives this desire for melancholic critical agency. But I want to conclude this section with a brief overview of how the melancholic figure in Mehrjui’s *The Cow* has also spawned claims for analytic agency in the film’s viewers. As noted above, the visual splitting of the melancholic figure’s ego into two allows for the emergence of a critical gaze on the part of the trans-animal living in the cowshed. This is further reinforced by the trans-animal’s melancholic (com)plaint as s/he yells up at “Mash Hassan” (the split ego) to come down and save hir from the villagers who want to rob and cut up hir body. This plea from one part of the ego to the other is a blatant (self) accusation for letting the cow die in the first place. Here, one part of the ego is set against the other punishing it for negligence and injury. While this affective performance of perturbed suffering is not explicitly understood by the villagers as an accusation heaped onto *them* for letting the cow die in Mash Hassan’s absence, the film’s viewers have found a pointed critique in Mash Hassan’s melancholic performance. At the time of the film’s release in 1969, the film’s affective rendition

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

assumed the weighty task of exposing the dire conditions of village life in Iran and the disappearance of domestic economies under the Pahlavi government. The film's depiction of the despair and impoverishment of remote Iranian villages was so poignant at the time of its first screening, that the film was immediately banned under the auspices of a censorship code that "prohibited representations of 'backwardness' which would 'damage the state's national prestige'."<sup>57</sup> When the film was smuggled to film festivals abroad—such as the Film Festival at Venice and the International Film Festival in Chicago—and was met with critical acclaim and commercial success, the censorship board in Iran allowed the film to be re-released domestically by adding a disclaimer at the film's opening which stated that the events depicted were "set before the Shah's modernization campaign."<sup>58</sup>

Early reviews found the film's critical insights in its formal and affective structure. The critic Parviz Noori writing in 1969 for instance, spoke of the "broken faces of the villagers" and noted that the "director was very sensitive when portraying the film's environment and inhabitants" in his uniquely "abstract" aesthetic language.<sup>59</sup> Tom Milne writing in *The Observer* in 1971 was struck by Mehrjui's ability to convey a "sense of impending tragedy," which for him was exemplified by the scene of Mash Hassan's

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<sup>57</sup> Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema" *British Society for Middle-Eastern Studies* 34: 3 (2007): 375-398, 377.

<sup>58</sup> Jamsheed Akrami, "Sustaining a Wave for Thirty Years: The Cinema of Dariush Mehrjui" in *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema* ed Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 130.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Shahla Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 54. The quote appears in *Majaleh Ferdowsi* 950, 1969, 15.

metamorphosis where, “the hero of the film sits on the roof of the stable in mourning, and looks at the night’s sky and stares at it until he comes down and becomes the cow.”<sup>60</sup> Milne’s reading of the film as formally “dark” and affectively “so frightening” leads him to interpret the character’s metamorphosis as a “satanic possession.”<sup>61</sup> Other reviews showcase a more overt conflation between the film’s formal structure and its critical message. Watching *The Cow* at the Middle-East Film Festival in New York in 1978, L. Jayyusi for example described it as a “chilling film” that was “symbolic of Iran’s independence” with “an extremely strong and incisive political statement.”<sup>62</sup> For Jayyusi, the film’s “political statement” directly “emerges through the narrative, images and organization of music.”<sup>63</sup>

This critical labor of the film’s formal and affective registers continues to shape its current reception. Hailed as one of the most iconic films of the Iranian New Wave genre, scholars such as Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad have classified *The Cow* as amongst those pre-revolutionary films that “were socially conscious in their subtle critique of the predicaments of the country under the Pahlavis.”<sup>64</sup> Scholars who agree with the film’s “subtle critique” tend to base their conclusions on the film’s affect. For Hamid Reza Sadr, “The Cow is saturated throughout by a suffocating sense of fear: the villagers’ fear of

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<sup>60</sup> Tom Milne “Postscript on Venice.” *The Observer* 12 (Sept, 1971), 27: Cited in Mirbakhtyar, 54, 55.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> L. Jayyusi, “The Middle East Film Festival” *MERIP Reports* 69 (Jul-Aug, 1978): 21-23, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Zeydabadi-Nejad, 377.

cross-border raids by rival tribes, and invisible potential menace forever lurking beyond the boundaries.”<sup>65</sup> In this initial observation, Sadr does not locate a definitive source for this feeling of fear permeating the film. It is ascribed to an absent and “invisible” entity “forever lurking beyond the boundaries.” But as the discussion goes on Sadr narrows down the source of this fear in order to ascribe a critical meaning to the film as a whole. Arguing that *The Cow* was a critique of Iran’s “over-dependen[ce] on only one salable commodity,”<sup>66</sup> Sadr notes that “the fear of a future without oil permeated all discussion [during the Pahlavi era], just as the fear of losing the cow taxed the villagers’ faith.”<sup>67</sup> The fear of losing the cow is here identified with the fear of a future without oil.

Sadr’s linking of the film’s frightening affect with its social critique is further echoed in Shahla Mirbakhtyar’s analysis. In her assessment, the film creates an “atmosphere of fear” through the “sound of bells” and “showing the mud houses and the villagers, who seem, through the manner of photography used, as if their faces have been engraved on the walls of mud. From the beginning, each image tells a story of fear and dreadful anticipation.”<sup>68</sup> This sense of fear leads Mirbakhtyar to build a similar analogy to Sadr’s and to argue that the film is a critique of the “dependency of man on his tools [which] determine his existence.”<sup>69</sup> Echoing Sadre and Milne’s arguments above, Mirbakhtyar finds Mash Hassan’s melancholic preoccupation with his lost cow as

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<sup>65</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, (London: I.B. Tauris), 132.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Mirbakhtyar, 54.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

affectively frightening and hence a critique of Iran's economic and political "dependency." Even scholars who have not read *The Cow* as a depiction of social fears, have found an implicit warning in the film's narrative. Eldad Pardo for instance, has interpreted the lost cow haunting Mehrjui's film as a representation of a utopian past. "The good represented by the cow" he writes, "is the absolute good of a lost paradise of a mythological past."<sup>70</sup> The lost cow here stands in for a "lost paradise" whose recuperation can lead to the same fatal end as Mash Hassan's. For Pardo, the film "warns that surrendering to an insatiable desire for an illusory primordial utopia could lead to collective suicide."<sup>71</sup>

These reviews and analyses of the film demonstrate a close link between the bleak affects of melancholia and its social critique. Throughout the texts discussed above, there is a tacit agreement that the frightening and tragic form of melancholia can issue a warning against social ills. This raises a question about the structure of melancholic affect as defined by Freud. As noted above, the critical voice activated within the melancholic subject is on the one hand responsible for crushing the subject under guilt and self-reproach; but on the other hand it attracts others to identify with the subject in socially and politically meaningful ways. What I want to turn to in the next section is this tension within the Freudian concept of melancholia. What prompts the transformation of this affect as it moves from one body to another? What is the desire that converts the punitive

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<sup>70</sup> Eldad J. Pardo, "Iranian Cinema, 1968-1978: Female Characters and Social Dilemmas on the Eve of the Revolution" *Middle Eastern Studies* 40: 3, (May, 2004): 29-54, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

voice operative within the melancholic ego into its opposite: a vocalization of unspoken truths? Why, in other words, is there a tradition of ambivalent attachments towards this debased and denigrated figure?

## II.

In order to tackle the questions posed above, I want to contrast the representation of melancholia in *The Cow* with its scenes of mourning that appear in the film. The cow's death is first announced in the film through the lamenting wails of Mash Hassan's wife, who remains unnamed in the film. She beats her chest and cries as the villagers gather around her to find out what has happened. This scene is followed up by the cow's burial and a night of public mourning in the village before Mash Hassan's return the next day. The film presents mourning as a distinctly gendered activity. Elder women clad in long black chadors are in charge of hauling out ritual objects—which include flags and metallic *alams* in the shape of hands—and holding processions throughout the night. While it is the men in the village who carry out the physical task of moving the cow's dead body and resting it in a well, it is the women who perform the cow's symbolic passing. Their elaborate prayers and processions imagine the village's collective form of symbolizing and commemorating death.

The exact content of these rituals and ceremonies are not elaborated upon in the film. An elderly woman for instance, carries what seems to be incense amongst a crowd of villagers while whispering under her breath. A seated figure wrapped in a chador rocks back and forth against a wall. Sounds of wailing and ululation fill the screen as the

camera scans across the grieving faces of the villagers. These sounds and gestures do not explicitly narrate, in words, every participants' entanglements with the lost cow. Yet, the film suggests that each sob, nod or physical contortion has a communicative dimension and is meaningful to others present at the event. Mourning in the film is represented as an expressive and social act. From the very first cries of Mash Hassan's wife heard by the villagers, the mourners' sounds perform the task of symbolizing the cow's death. In the initial scene, Mash Hassan's wife is not crying behind closed doors but is seated outside, intentionally gathering a crowd around her. Here, the circular motions of her body, the upward throw of her arms and even her rapid breaths, which cut off the flow of oxygen to her head causing her to faint, are presented as coherent forms of address fully comprehended by the villagers.

As noted at the outset, Freud's definition of melancholia is dependent on its distinction from mourning. The choice of the term "mourning," notes James Strachey, is an apt translation for *Trauer* because, "like the English 'mourning,' [it] can mean both the affect of grief and its outward manifestation."<sup>72</sup> The important difference between mourning and melancholia in Freud's text pivots precisely along this outward bent of grief's manifestation. While mourning, through its symbolic expression and collectively performed rituals, provides a distinct outlet for the affect of grief, melancholia names the retention and accumulation of affect within the subject. As Charles Shepherdson has explained it, "in contrast to the mourner who feels grief in connection with others who

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<sup>72</sup> Strachey, 243.

likewise grieve,” the melancholic experiences a “symbolic rupture that leaves the subject vulnerable to the intrusion of a voice that forces the subject to expend his hatred on himself and to remain absent and withdrawn from the process of mourning (and all the sociality it entails).”<sup>73</sup> While mourners share their grief through the outward agitation of their bodies and the outpouring of tears, melancholics experience a “symbolic rupture” that leads them to preserve their grief inside cutting them off from social symbolization.

It is curious therefore that it is melancholia, and not mourning, that prompts the desire for enacting social critique. If melancholia, in essence, blocks affect and prevents its outward manifestation, why is it that it also becomes the site of political realization? We may recall that Freud described the melancholic’s retention of grief as the swallowing of the libido associated with the lost object. Freud’s definition of mourning involves the detachment of libido from the lost love object and its re-placement onto another object. In melancholia on the other hand, the libido does not find a place in another object but becomes ingested leading to an accumulated tension within the subject. What is noteworthy in Shepherdson’s quote above is the suggestion that the melancholic’s retention of the affect of grief is linked to the development of an intrusive “voice.” Put in this way, the appearance of the critical voice becomes distinctly sexualized. This is not only because ingestion for Freud refers to a “pregenital phase, in which sexual activity is still indistinguishable from food ingestion,”<sup>74</sup> as Fuss suggests, but also because the

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Shepherdson, “Emotion, Affect, Drive” in *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan*, ed. Alice Jardine, Shannon Lundeen and Kelly Oliver (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 59.

<sup>74</sup> Fuss, 35.

critical voice of the melancholic is produced through the expenditure of libidinal energy. This is the “oral sadism” with which the melancholic ingests the excess libido.

The term “oral sadism” should alert us to an entanglement of pain and pleasure in the activities of the critical voice. If its castigations cause severe pain in the subject’s ego, this suffering is enacted through the expenditure of libidinal energy signaling the subject’s pleasure in its own humiliation. As Shepherdson has argued, “the melancholic’s relationship to the voice is not a symbolic phenomenon” but “is a matter of jouissance.”<sup>75</sup> The accumulated tension resulting from the internalization of libido finds an outlet in a voice that turns on the subject in pleasurable rebuke. There is a qualitative difference therefore, between the critical voice of the melancholic and that of the mourner. Unlike the mourners’ utterances which signify loss within the context of the social, the melancholic’s critical voice is an expression of the libido and remains outside the symbolic system of language. In this sense, melancholia can properly be described as an affect, a non linguistic “charge of energy.”<sup>76</sup>

Mehrjui’s film is remarkable for drawing this distinction between the sounds of mourning and the melancholic voice. Mourning in the film is portrayed as a collective event, where each person’s wails is echoed in another’s, and where every sob, regardless of how brief, operates on a symbolic register. The melancholic’s performance on the other hand, is distinctly solitary and escapes signification, even when the character is

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<sup>75</sup> Shepherdson, 59.

<sup>76</sup> See Shepherdson for his discussion of the distinction between affect and emotion as related to mourning and melancholia.

surrounded by a group of inquisitive neighbors. As noted in the last section, the critical voice emerges in the film with the cinematic split that spatially organizes the character onto two different planes. This allows the character to take his own split ego as his interlocutor, thus visualizing the character's internal topography. Despite the presence of the villagers in the cowshed, the trans-animal's critical voice is not directed at them but is distinctly engaged in an internal dialogue. Even though the villagers hear the words uttered by Mash Hassan/Cow, they do not fully understand their meaning or implications. His words do not impart a sense of shared grief but leaves the villagers baffled and confused.

The villagers' confusion points to more than just the opacity of Mash Hassan/Cow's words. It also highlights the libidinal nature of the critical voice that comes through the character's markedly physical performance. The film visualizes the character's psychic transformation through his body. His mouth, neck and tilted spine all participate in portraying the body's indulgence in its own transformation. The camera looks on as the trans-animal enjoys the hay spread across the floor of the cowshed. The metamorphosis here occurs at the level of the flesh as the character takes in the dry hay that travels through the intestines bringing the body in line with the psychic image. These physical cues perform the labor of preserving an image of the cow in the present and across the figure's own flesh. The character's body here becomes a fleshy memory that prevents the complete dissolution of the lost object but keeps it alive and present. The physical construction of this image requires work and it is the libido that expends its

energy on its continuous construction. In the film, this libidinal labor of corporeal identification points to the character's jouissance in its own transformation. This is best captured when the character is shown leaning against the brick wall hitting his head against its protruding edges. These repeated motions that mutilate his body highlight his sadistic pleasure drawn from the physicality of his body in pain. It is these series of spasmodic movements that lead up to the disclosure of the critical voice with which the character calls out to the split ego judging it for negligence and abandonment.

The jouissance involved in the expenditure of internalized libido brings us to a response to the question of why Freud allocated critical agency to the pathologized figure of the melancholic. Simply put, if the ego is able to take pleasure in the midst of intense suffering, then it might also be said that the ego has an inherent capacity for subverting the abusive force of the critical voice. Melancholia introduces the presence of a judgmental voice within the ego alongside an ability to transgress its cruelty. The desire for melancholic agency is the desire to see the ego resist against the punitive power of the critical voice. I would argue that the reason why melancholia persists as a critical figure, across its numerous historical iterations, is that it gratifies the desire to hear the voice of the subjugated split ego that falls under the shadow of the lost object. This is because melancholia, as a concept, has the ability to maintain the uneasy relationship and conflicting forces dwelling within the internal landscape of the ego. The jouissance of melancholia enables a loosening (or shall we say analysis) of the conflicting relations of power operating within the ego.

Freud revised his theory of the melancholic voice in his 1923 text *The Ego and the Id*. In the latter text, critical agency becomes fully developed into Freud's concept of the superego "which hammers at the ego."<sup>77</sup> As many scholars have noted, the superego "is that psychic entity equivalent to the introjected figure of the father," according to which the subject conforms to the norms, ideals, laws and structures of the social.<sup>78</sup> The development of the superego out of melancholic critical agency highlights the power dynamic that is already apparent in the melancholic subject's split-ego. The internalized libido that splits the ego brings one part of the ego in relation to the other allowing one part to derive pleasure from the other's agony. According to Shepherdson "when Freud notes that the ego is distinctly split in melancholia, he observes not only that the ego feels guilt...but also that some other agency takes satisfaction in punishing the ego."<sup>79</sup> With this split, Freud creates uneven relations of power within the ego, one that is explicitly imagined in terms of dominance and subservience.

Yet, prior to the complete subsumption of melancholic critical agency into the regulative function of the superego, Freud's theory of melancholia opened up the potential for transgression within the domain of the repressive voice. Melancholia is a formative instance of the simultaneous production of power and pleasure. In the melancholic performance, the critical voice is eroticized and becomes the vehicle through

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<sup>77</sup> See Teresa Brennan's discussion of the spatial relationship between the ego and the superego in Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1992), 20.

<sup>78</sup> Schiesari, 14.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

which the subject manages its relationship to its own suffering. The appearance of the critical voice is intertwined with the production of pleasure, where rebellion and subjugation go hand in hand. Freud's theory of melancholia provides the possibility for social critique because it holds the promise for subverting its own punitive effects. This is because the mechanism of melancholic production (i.e. the accumulation of libido), is the same as those of the production of pleasure. In melancholia, the subject's self-reproach becomes (con)fused with its satisfaction engendering the possibility for the conversion of suffering into erotic display, hence changing the roles of dominance and domination. In this sense, the critical voice is continuously diverted from its abusive aims and rerouted into a source of enjoyment.

This potential for the infinite transformability of punishment into pleasure exhibited by the melancholic, dissolves the rigidity of the power dynamic within the structure of the ego. Scholars have highlighted the gendered and racialized organization that this internal psychic mapping alludes to. Schiesari for instance, has argued that when the melancholic voice turns back on itself and takes one part of the ego as its object, then "my feminist suspicion is that this object, at once vilified, desired, and judged by a 'superior, moral' instance," she writes, "is situated in the same way as woman in classic phallocentrism (that is, as a devalued object, as abject and at fault)."<sup>80</sup> For Schiesari, melancholia is a case of an overdeveloped superego: a heightened display of the paternalist voice that takes the (feminized) ego as its object, judging it based on

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 9.

regulative moral standards. She hence presents melancholia as a strictly masculine neurosis, which not only plays out the social dramas of gendered submission, but also appropriates the feminized domain of mourning. By appropriation, she writes, “I mean that the (cultural) expression of women’s losses is not given the same, let us say, representational *value* as those of men.”<sup>81</sup> In her analysis mourning is historically attributed to women’s loss and is perceived as “the ‘everyday’ plight of the common (wo)man, a quotidian event whose collective force does not seem to bear the same weight of ‘seriousness’ as a man’s grief.”<sup>82</sup> Melancholia on the other hand, names the “uncommon or unparalleled expression” of men’s grief, which is “transcoded as privileged suffering.”<sup>83</sup> Melancholia thus appropriates mourning through the uneven distribution of value accorded to suffering along gender lines.

My own feminist inklings urge me to acknowledge Schiesari’s suspicions, particularly when I see the gender dynamics of mourning and melancholia thoroughly played out in *The Cow*. Mourning is performed by groups of unnamed women, while melancholia is a decidedly gendered event portrayed as the unique plight of one man. The entire plot that revolves around his loss exceptionalizes his suffering as above and beyond what is experienced by the women who also mourn. Yet, the film also provides another reading that I believe extends Schiesari’s feminist insights further. As I have implicitly suggested thus far, Mash Hassan’s transformation is not only from a human to a non-

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

human animal, but also importantly from male to female. It was a pregnant cow that was the object of his affection and with whom he built a corporeal identification after her death. If we accept that melancholia appropriates the site of mourning, then melancholia implies multiple forms of feminization that cannot be entirely reduced to a masculine formation.

This feminization of melancholia is in keeping with Freud's overall understanding of neurosis as a feminine condition. According to Teresa Brennan, Freud understood femininity as a state of accumulated affect. "Freud insisted that femininity, like masculinity, occurs in both sexes," she writes, and is marked by a build up of energy within the subject.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Brennan argues that the "riddle of femininity" for Freud was his inability to explain why it occurred in some men. Why was it, Freud asked, that some men did not direct their libidinal drive outward but, as in femininity, repressed that energy by turning it inwards and back on themselves. This formulation of femininity as an inward turn of the libido, we may recall, parallels Freud's theory of melancholia. In melancholia, the ego recoils and twists back on itself in punitive self-reproach. For Brennan, this accumulation of libidinal energy at the site of femininity points to an uneven distribution of affect within the social sphere. Taking Freud's "hydraulic" illustration of libidinal movement as her starting point, she argues that the masculine position is socially achieved through the direction of "emotions they would rather do without towards another."<sup>85</sup> Femininity, thus becomes "the depository for the other's

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<sup>84</sup> Brennan, 6.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 219.

unwanted affects and inertia.”<sup>86</sup> In femininity, Brennan writes, “one is on the receiving end” of unwanted projections that inundate the subject.<sup>87</sup> In this sense, femininity refers to a gendered position produced through the libidinal accumulation around some bodies more than others thus linking femininity to processes of racialization, classed labor, and other socially debilitating subject formations.

Viewed from this angle, melancholia is a manner of becoming feminine not only in the sense of being the object of reproach by an internalized critical voice, as Schiesari suggests, but by becoming a “depository,” or the site of libidinal accrual within the social context. As suggested above, it is precisely this libidinal charge—this affective accumulation—that produces the desire for the melancholic’s analytic voice. In other words, if femininity involves a “turning inward” then it also names a self reflexivity that Freud admired as having “a keener eye for the truth.” It is indeed this inward turn that has the potential for transforming subjection into subjectivity.<sup>88</sup> The desire for melancholia therefore, is a desire for a transgressive voice that can turn grief into grievance, or as Anne Anlin Cheng puts it, “a turn from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury.”<sup>89</sup> Freud’s admiration for melancholia was perhaps due to his recognition that it names a complex process of negotiation with social dispossession and hence a public feeling—if not a publicly acknowledged form of suffering.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> This point is elaborated upon in Judith Butler, *Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>89</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 3.

We can conclude that the uneven distribution of affect within the social sphere ultimately closes the gap between mourning and melancholia. If we take the case of Mehrjui's film as an example, it becomes apparent that women's labor of mourning is a demonstration of affective accumulations. While their public performance of grief, through ritual ceremonies, brings loss into the symbolic realm of language, it does so because women's bodies are the "depositories" for such unwanted affects. As a gendered expression, mourning points to the accumulation of collective grief around women's bodies, who become their surrogates and responsible for their outward expressions. I would argue that Mash Hassan's metamorphosis is a further articulation of affective accumulation, a becoming feminine foregrounded by his transgendered, and trans-animal, identification. From this perspective, mourning and melancholia are no longer in opposition to one another because mourning is not simply an outward expression of grief but a gendered site of grief's accumulation. Mash Hassan's melancholia is an instance of this affective buildup of undesirable affects. My reading of melancholia therefore, does not aim to "depathologize" the neurosis, as Eng would have it, but to contend with the fact that it is this accumulation of affect that enables the self-reflexivity of the melancholic disposition.

## Chapter 2. The Odorous City: Frank Stella in Iran

### I.

The Getty Research Institute houses a small archive of letters and photographs belonging to the American painter Frank Stella. Amongst these boxes is a folder titled "Stella in Iran, 1964-1965" containing 23 color photographs and a few letters written by Stella to his wife and art critic Barbara Rose from Iran. Most of these images are close-ups of walls and ceilings that depict details of brick and mosaic works that weave and interlace to form complex patterns. On the back of each photograph is a hand-written note naming the city or the architectural site where Stella took each image. I found myself at the Getty rummaging through Stella's archive because I had come across a few scattered mentions of Stella's trip to Iran in some of the scholarship around his work. Not much has been written on the subject, just a few words noting the "influence of Islamic art" on his series of paintings known as the *Protractor Series* composed between 1967 and 1971 right after his return from Iran.<sup>90</sup> Amongst this series is a painting titled *Firuzabad*, whose interlocking lines recall the architectural photographs Stella took during his trip to Iran.

As strange as it may sound, I have an olfactory relationship to Firuzabad, the name Stella gave to his painting. I say Firuzabad and I smell it. In the space of my memory this small village on the outskirts of Tehran is aromatic. I think Firuzabad and I am transported into the backseat of my parents' car with the windows rolled down. The

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<sup>90</sup> See for instance Mark Thistlethwaite's "Frank Stella" in *Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth: 110*, Ed. Michael Auping, (Dallas and Fort Worth, 2006), 301.

wind is blowing through the car and I can always tell if we are approaching Firuzabad because I can smell the cows. That particular, pungent smell of dung and fodder. That acidic odor that overpowers the senses every time a cow emits a sound from the depths of its bowels. Approaching Firuzabad meant confronting my nose in a way that did not suit me. I would squirm and fidget in the back seat trying to cover my nose in my hands as tightly as I could so that no sip of air would enter my nostrils. But some air would always escape, making me reach for a part of my shirt to wrap around my face. My brother, who was as equally overcome by the smell of Firuzabad, would suggest breathing through the mouth. He would press his two palms tightly across his nose, open his mouth wide and audibly suck the air in. It would not be long before his face would turn red and my mother would have to turn around and tell us to stop acting up and breathe normally.

We never stayed in Firuzabad long enough for the smell to disappear. The cows never moved into the background of my consciousness. They never became familiar. Their tails swinging from side to side and their large jaws chewing on long strands of hay remained an event throughout our stay. Our visits to Firuzabad were always unexpected. We would never call in advance to let my father's aunt, Khaleh Maheen, who lived on the farm know that we were coming. We would just show up on a Friday afternoon, maybe once or twice a year, for a visit. She would always be shocked at how fast my brother and I grew up and was often amused by our sensitivity to the smell of the farm. Shouldn't our nasal tracts have been coated with a thick layer of gasoline from the Tehran smog to protect us against such situations, she would laugh? That would make me wonder if her

nose would also flare up if she came to Tehran. Would she find it hard to breath and have to cover up her nose if her car was squeezed between two buses, a cab and a motorcycle? I never had the chance to find out because she never came to visit.

How I want to continue this odorous adventure into the past! But I look back at Stella's painting and I know that my Firuzabad cannot be the same as Stella's. As far as Stella's records show, he was never near this small farm town in the outskirts of Tehran. He did not stop at Khaleh Maheen's house for tea. He was not confronted by her cows flicking their tails at flies and mosquitoes. Stella's photographs from his 1964 trip locate him in Soltanieh in the province of Zanzan near the Caspian Sea, then moving south to Isfahan, Yazd, Kerman, Mahan and the desert of Dasht-e Lut. His letters sent to Barbara Rose tell of his impressions of the people he encounters, the streets he roams, the sights he sees, the fabrics he buys at the Bazaar in Yazd and the marvelous architecture he photographs. His letters tell of his ailments, his boredom and his hallucinations. They tell of the lethargic state of Iranians who do not know what to do with their oil. The itinerary that I have drawn up for Stella, based on these letters and the photographs he took in Iran, do not locate him in the small farm town of Firuzabad in the outskirts of Tehran. This does not surprise me. Why would Stella go to Firuzabad anyway? What would draw him there? The town is not a historical site. There have been no archeological expeditions, no museological preservations, no ceremonial consecrations. Khaleh Maheen's Firuzabad serves no cultural function in the Iranian national imaginary. It is not a tourist town flaunted at local and international sightseers. It is not venerated as a holy site pitched at

devout pilgrims. Firuzabad merely exists for the farmers who live there, the friends and families who sometimes visit, the merchants who benefit from its products and the occasional lost travelers who take the wrong turn on their way to the large cemetery on the Western edges of the town.<sup>91</sup>

Such facts urge me to adjust my affective relationship with Stella's painting. Affect signals our sensory connections to our surroundings. The term "affect" refers to our body's immersion into the spaces we inhabit and the objects that are around us. Affect is often described as a preconscious way of knowing the world, ways that are prior to our body's conscious processing of the forces that act upon us. In Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Greg's words, affect refers to what lays "beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing."<sup>92</sup> Affect is something like the odor that rose between me and Stella's painting. This odor is not a sensation that originated entirely in me, but a force that came *between* me and the painting. It is that sensate memory that bound me to Stella's painting.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Art historians have classified Stella's *Firuzabad* as one in a series of paintings called the *Protractor Series* and have noted that each painting in this series was named after a circular city in Asia Minor. It is likely therefore, that the reference for the painting under discussion here is the round city of Firuzabad located near Shiraz in the south of Iran which fascinated archeologists such as Roman Grishman, W. B. Henning and Ernst Herzfeld, and whose images were first circulated amongst European archeologists through the drawings of Eugène Flandin and Pascal Coste. The round foundation of this other Firuzabad has been traced by historians and archeologists to the Sassanian king Ardashir, who built it as his imperial capital in the 3rd century, and whose urban plan became the model for other round cities such as Medinat al-Salam and Ctesiphon in Asia Minor (each of which name a painting in Stella's *Protractor Series*).

<sup>92</sup> Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Greg "An Inventory of Shimmers," *Affect theory Reader*, Eds. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Greg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>93</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between memory and smells see Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), in particular the book's 5th chapter.

Writers agree that affects are emotive. They act upon us. They motivate and “drive us towards movement.”<sup>94</sup> Some scholars, such as Brian Massumi, have emphasized the distinction between affect and emotion. While affect moves us towards feelings, they are not emotions in themselves. Affect is held to be the “precondition that leads to emotion,” but is not an emotion in itself.<sup>95</sup> Emotions come after affect. They surface when we consciously recognize our sensual experience and begin to process and communicate them. While Massumi has emphasized the distinctions between affect and emotion, other writers such as Sianne Ngai and Ann Cvetkovich, have highlighted their entanglements.<sup>96</sup> Affective experiences are no less social than emotions but in Cvetkovich’s words, “provide the basis for new cultures.”<sup>97</sup> Emotions are our body’s response to our relational being in the world and our recognition of where and how we find ourselves. Keeping emotions mired in affect can help to emphasize the social and material negotiations between our bodies and our surroundings.

My affective response to Stella’s painting has been emotional from the start. I have struggled to process this affect and have not always been certain that I should communicate it. I have repeatedly asked myself, what am I doing here at Khaleh Maheen’s Firuzabad? Why have I allowed it to derail me? I seem to have read the title of

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. See also Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>95</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>96</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>97</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, Duke University Press 2003), 7.

Stella's painting and drifted straight to my nose. I have projected my impressions of an intimate place, the smell of Khaleh Maheen's farm, onto this painting. I have tried to confront the consequences of my preoccupation with the title of this painting. I have wondered if I should suppress my pleasure of seeing Stella dislodged from his "proper" art historical place and enter into the realm of my memory, where he suffers a nasal shock in Firuzabad. I have wondered if I should conceal my mental lapse in front of this painting; Or if I should cover up the fact that it was this misinterpretation that brought me to write about this painting in the first place. I have attempted to brush away the aromatic memories that the title of this painting has enabled for me and have reminded myself that it is perhaps only me, who is intrigued by my recognition of the title of this painting. Perhaps it is only me who is amused by the entanglements of my history with that of Frank Stella's and the possibility that a little known village like Firuzabad can live alongside a revered art object at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it is currently on display. Perhaps it is only me who is moved by a desire to see places from my past enter into official narratives of high art and be venerated in public spaces of the museum. How should I communicate my attachment to the title of this painting to those who do not recognize it?

"Recognition" as Norman Bryson has written, is "the invasion of the present by the past."<sup>98</sup> When we recognize something, it is because it corresponds to our past encounters with it. Recognition works through recollection. It is the "activity of referral"

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<sup>98</sup> Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*, (London: University of Cambridge, 1984), 24.

to the past as it bears onto the present. Recognition however, is never a private affair. In Bryson's assessment, recognition does not occur as an inward experience in the solitary recesses of our mind. Instead, recognition "involves always more than one observer" and takes place across individuals and "between those who recognize" something as common.<sup>99</sup> Recognition is hence a communal act because it is the process of matching our affective responses with social systems that have given them meaning.

It is this communal nature of recognition that has created such anxiety for me, or more precisely, what has made me "feel brown and down" to borrow a term from José Esteban Muñoz.<sup>100</sup> How can my familiarity with this painting's title raise the same interest in others who do not recognize it? "Feeling brown," as Muñoz describes it, is how "minoritarian affect is always partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects."<sup>101</sup> The literature around Stella's work circulates amongst an audience who has had no affective ties to the geographies that the title of this painting points to and who have not read the title of this painting as anything other than an exotic referent. In this sense, Firuzabad has been a word without meaning and Stella's work has been mired deeply within nationalist frameworks of American Minimalist histories, within which Stella's trip to Iran is simply a minor footnote. Narrating my own ties to Stella's work hence runs the risk of marginalizing my position within a community of observers who do not share my history and recollections. The

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 22 and 23.

<sup>100</sup> José Esteban Muñoz "Feeling Brown Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position" *Signs* 31:3 (Spring, 2006), 675-688: 679.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

trouble is not that minority histories cannot be written, or that they do not have an audience, but that they repeatedly fall into categories of the “personal,” the “private,” and the “individual.” My narration thus runs the risk of laying dormant in the peripheries of a collective history written by a community of observers for whom a word such as Firuzabad has no material reality.

The possibility for this failed recognition is what has made me emotional. My point is not to advocate a politics of recognition, whose pitfalls have become apparent within the rhetorics of multiculturalism.<sup>102</sup> It is merely to argue that emotions are social and can only be put to work within a collective context. I have searched for names that others have given to conditions of failed recognitions and have found an instance of it in the works of Eve Sedgwick. Sedgwick has called this condition shame. Shame, in Sedgwick’s writings, “represents the failure or absence of the smile....(and) feedback from others, indicating social isolation and signaling the need for relief from that condition.”<sup>103</sup> Our cheeks glow when our pleasures are not met by others, bringing us to bow our heads and lower our eyelids to “reduce further exploration or self-exposure.”<sup>104</sup> Such curbed pleasures, stunted dialogues and hampered reminiscences due to divergent histories, “this inability” in Sedgwick’s words, “to arouse the other person’s positive

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<sup>102</sup> See for instance, Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>103</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 36.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

reaction to one's communication" is also the kind of emotion I have seen expressed by other writers who have found themselves feeling brown.

I find this feeling, for instance, in the work of Ranajit Guha in his notes on migration. For Guha, switching communities can be unsettling because of the interruption in our temporal flow. When we move, we are lunged into the "immediacy of the present" because the new community does not recognize our past and those we have left behind may not share or recognize our future.<sup>105</sup> Migration is a break with temporal continuity, which in Guha's words, "creates a whirlpool for the strangeness of the arrival to turn round and round as a moment of absolute uncertainty, a present without a before or an after, hence beyond understanding."<sup>106</sup> Such moments of "uncertainty" and missed "understandings" in Guha's text are similar to Sedgwick's discussion of shame. They express failed acknowledgments. Migrant arrivals are hence disorienting, an apt feeling following unsteady hours spent on boats, ships, cars, trains and airplanes. We feel this temporal disjuncture in our guts and it makes us nauseous. We feel queasy. When we move, our temporality "intersects" with the places we arrive at, but our past and future do not "coincide" leaving us temporally disoriented and disaligned.<sup>107</sup>

Despite our spatial interruption however, our bodies preserve a sense of temporal continuity. When we move, the people, objects, names and places from our past do not move with us, but they do not cease to exist. They at times fall into our paths,

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<sup>105</sup> Ranajit Guha, "Migrant's Time" *Postcolonial Studies* 1: 2 (1998): 155-160, 157.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, 158.

unknowingly, reminding us of their resilient persistence. The places we leave may no longer share our present time but they have a way of materializing unexpectedly during our daily routines, overlaid onto other things. A face from the past can suddenly resurface on the features of a person standing across from us at a grocery line up prompting us to take a step backwards. A combination of sounds outside our window on a quiet afternoon might transport us to a place we may or may not wish to return to. The heat, weight and movement of bodies on a crowded dance floor might animate us with gestures we have consciously left behind raising a few eyebrows. A smell from a farm house we used to know might furtively pique our senses, as it did for me, when I saw its name appear as the title of Stella's painting. These unexpected appearances of one place into another can be pleasurable, but our inability to share that pleasure, or in Sedgwick's words "to arouse the other person's positive reaction to (our) communication" can leave us feeling shamed for our untimely recollections. Such emotional responses to the appearances of our past can hence become a recurrent reminder of our misalignment and of the shapes of our bodies out of place.

It is this disorientation of migrant bodies that makes us recognizable in queer ways. As Sara Ahmed has written, queer begins with the specificity of a body that "stands out or stands apart."<sup>108</sup> Our presence "has an eccentric effect" in spaces that may not recognize us.<sup>109</sup> In Ahmed's work, queer is a spatial metaphor. It refers to bodies that find

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<sup>108</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

themselves at odds within social and spatial arrangements. Queer, in her work, is a physical and material disalignment within social spaces that block our paths, or at best, do not extend our reach. In such spaces, queer bodies are apparent, they “stand out,” because they approach things in queer ways. Queer approaches are “eccentric.” They are disorienting and confuse the senses. They might switch the nose for the eyes. Queer affect begins with a wonky and disoriented viewer who has arrived at things the wrong way and whose experiential understanding of objects do not align with those objects’ recorded histories.

I insist however, that queer migrant affects are far from disabling. For Sedgwick for instance, shame is not “toxic” to an individual, but is “instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed.”<sup>110</sup> Muñoz is working within a similar framework when he proposes that “brown politics” is “not invested in the narrative of a whole and well-adjusted subject.”<sup>111</sup> For Muñoz, the ethics of feeling “brown and down” is to place our psychic feelings at the “service of understanding the social.”<sup>112</sup> It is for this reason that I have given such weight to my affective misalignment with “shared” historical narratives. If recognition, as Bryson has it, is “the invasion of the present by the past,” and occurs across several bodies, queer affect allows for misrecognitions amongst mismatched bodies with temporalities that are simultaneous but that do not coincide. By acknowledging dizzying moments of uncertainly and inhibited pleasures queer affect

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<sup>110</sup> Sedgwick, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Muñoz, 680.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 682.

enables misreadings and misinterpretations. It is for this reason that I have allowed the nasal path of my arrival at Stella's *Firuzabad*—my, oblique, migrant, queer approach—to direct my entry into this discussion.

Smells are perhaps the least appropriate place to begin when writing about a painting, particularly when discussing a Modernist painting from the 1960s that aimed to keep our eyes protracted on its surface. As Caroline Jones has noted, within art history, the sense of smell has been the most denigrated of all senses. “Because ephemeral,” Jones writes, “smell cannot simulate considered thought,” which is apparent in “the poverty of descriptive language for smells.”<sup>113</sup> Beginning with a disorienting smell is hence my contentious entry into art historical discourses that are often more concerned with taste than with smells. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted, aesthetic taste is based upon the direct refusal of “the taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat,”<sup>114</sup> and with it the undesirable accompanying smells that connect the oral to the anal and food to excrement.

In what follows, I account for the materiality of affects by contextualizing my sensate response to Stella's *Firuzabad* within a social history of this painting. The next section offers a closer look at Stella's *Protractor Series* in relation to how it was received by art critics at the time of its production. By reading passages from Michael Fried's writings on Stella's work, I argue that my oblique entry into this painting is not the first time that its abstract lines have been read in queer and embodied ways. Instead, I show

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<sup>113</sup> Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 391.

<sup>114</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 486.

that arousing the viewer's senses is consistent with the work's discursive lineage. I conclude the chapter with a brief sketch of the socio-economic entanglements between art and oil that enabled Stella's trip to Iran. I show that the state-subsidized art economy that supported Stella's trip to Iran in the 1960s was buttressed by an oil economy that demolished villages such as that of Firuzabad. I argue that it is this historical linkage between the disappearance of small farm towns in Iran and Stella's painting that evokes a deep melancholic affect in me today. It is precisely this history of displacement and migration that activates my senses when I cast my gaze across Stella's painting. Feeling blue, as Muñoz would have it, has something to do with feeling brown and it is the social history of such colored affects that concern me here.

## II.

Within art historical discourse, *The Protractor Series* occupies a point of contestation as it marks a "paradigm shift" in the history of Modernist art.<sup>115</sup> Within the New York art scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Stella's new paintings were not only greeted as an artistic break from his earlier paintings but were received by critics as indicative of an aesthetic shift that effected the flow of history itself. As Caroline Jones has noted, Stella's work was central for defining what the narrative of Modernism was going to be. "It is during this precise historical span, during the decade from 1960 to 1969, that the concept of Modernist art (as distinct from "the modern" or "modern art" or

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<sup>115</sup> Caroline Jones uses the term paradigm shift cautiously in her essay "Modernism Paradigm," *Critical Inquiry* 26:3 (Spring, 2000), 488-528. She argues that Stella's work marks a shift to Postmodernism, which is nonetheless structurally linked to Modernism. Postmodernism, in her essay, is the name given to the moment when Modernism as a paradigm is itself being named and formulated.

“the avant-garde”) became the subject of particular anxiety and heated debate.”<sup>116</sup> Stella’s new series of paintings (which comprised of his *Irregular Polygon* and the *Protractor Series*) became the central axis in this debate and was dramatized by one of the artist’s great advocates, Michael Fried, as a fight over Stella’s soul. “In a sense,” wrote Fried, “Carl Andre and I were fighting for (Stella’s) soul, and Andre and I represented very different things.”<sup>117</sup> Why did Stella’s paintings become such a site of contestation to have his very soul hanging on the line?

As James Meyer has suggested, “in this Faustian trial for Stella’s soul, Fried is the redemptive angel of Modernist painting,” while Andre is the “avatar of transgressive literalism.”<sup>118</sup> Here, I briefly sketch this “Faustian trial” to spell out what it was that had Stella’s soul in its grips. For Carl Andre—or the “avatar of transgressive literalism”—Stella’s work was about the act of painting itself. His new paintings, Andre argued, foregrounded the very materials of his art: paint, brush, canvas and support. “There is nothing else in his painting” Andre wrote emphatically, “Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessities of painting.”<sup>119</sup> As far as Andre was concerned, in Stella’s paintings what you see, is what you see. Pure materiality. “Stella’s stripes are the path of brush on canvas,” he argued, “these paths lead

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 489.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>118</sup> James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 127.

<sup>119</sup> Carl Andre’s essay in *Sixteen Americans* Ed. Dorothy Miller (New York: Distributed by Doubleday, Garden City, 1959), 76

only into painting.”<sup>120</sup> Andre hence represented the “literalist” (also known as Minimalist)<sup>121</sup> position that refused a transcendental reading of the work. What you see, is what you see. A tasteful man at work.

Michael Fried—that “redemptive angel of Modernist painting”—on the other hand, wanted Stella’s work to perform the role of Modernist self-reflexivity and to demarcate a particular Modernist tradition. Fried met Andre halfway. He concurred that Stella’s painted surfaces were flat, recording the path of a brush on canvas as Andre had noted, and avoided illusions of depth. Fried’s definition however, had a major caveat. He objected that a Modernist painting cannot become so self-reflexive as to become pure materiality. Of the literalist camp he wrote, “their pieces cannot be said to acknowledge literalness; they simply *are literal*.”<sup>122</sup> For a work to count as a Modernist work of art, it had to *acknowledge* its own materiality, but it could not become reduced to pure matter and fall into what Fried called “objecthood.” Fried argued that Stella’s new paintings retained this subtle (yet crucial) distinction from “objecthood” because his shaped canvases—such as the two circles bound together in *Firuzabad*—undulated between flatness and the illusion of depth. Stella’s paintings, he wrote, “represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgement of literal shape in the history of Modernism.”<sup>123</sup> For Fried, Stella’s shaped canvases kept flatness and illusion in tension

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Caroline A. Jones “Anxiety and Elation: Response to Michael Fried” *Critical Inquiry* 27:4 (Summer, 2001): 706-715.

<sup>122</sup> Fried, 88.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

and hence managed to escape mere “objecthood.” Stella’s work thus stood at the very forefront of the historical progression of Modernism.

What was at stake in the Faustian trial over Stella’s soul, was whether or not “American painting” could become the inheritor of the European aesthetic tradition spearheading its world historical progress. In Fried’s view, for an artwork to count as art at all, it had to solve the problems posed by the European Modernist tradition. “To choose the modern tradition,” Jones writes in relation to Fried’s position, “is to choose Art itself, as against that which might never prove to be Art.”<sup>124</sup> Fried understood literalist “objecthood” as skirting the line of Modernism and hence at the risk of fissuring the lineage that connected the US to the European cultural heritage. The 1960s, in the words of William Rubin, was “when American painting was imposing itself as a world force,” and “it was widely agreed that the surest way to define one’s artistic personality and open a path to success,” was to have “one eye locked to art history.”<sup>125</sup> A tight latch could help propel an artist into the rush of the art historical current and ensure the continuity of its onward flow as a “world force.”

If Stella’s soul was being weighed in this Faustian trial for the Modernist cause of making the US aesthetic desires global, what were the perils to which his soul was susceptible? “Andre sent me a note,” writes Fried, “gently chiding me for suggesting that Frank’s soul had been put at risk between us.”<sup>126</sup> What could have been put at risk here

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<sup>124</sup> Jones, 513.

<sup>125</sup> William Rubin, *Frank Stella* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 8.

<sup>126</sup> Fried, 71.

and what was Stella's soul being protected from? While neither Fried nor Andre directly answer this question, I pose it here because it seems that the risk to Stella's soul was its undesirable possession by an object. Stella's soul was at risk of becoming haunted by an art object and hence deviate from the path of European Modernism for which it was destined. Reading through Fried's "Art and Objecthood," it becomes apparent that his central objection to conceiving Stella's paintings as literalist was not so much that literalist works "simply *are literal*," as he put it, but on the contrary, that they almost possessed their own soul. Fried's understanding of literalism goes far beyond what Andre had in mind. These objects were not simply what they seemed, the trace of a self-assured artist's work. Rather, in Fried's work there appears a radical rethinking of the very notion of a bounded object, albeit as an alarming concept expelled and displaced onto literalist practices.

Within Fried's analysis, the literal object is so palpable that it is haunted by an imperceptible force. Fried's anxiety about literalist objects begins with their size and the fact that they tended to feel like encountering another person in the room. "The experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example in a somewhat darkened room—," writes Fried, "can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting."<sup>127</sup> The darkened room is a place where vision is not paramount and other forces can take over the senses producing that eerie, "disquieting" feeling. Fried likens encountering a minimalist art object in a room to being "crowded by the silent presence of another

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 155.

person.”<sup>128</sup> These objects are like silent apparitions protruding into our space and making their presence known. Reading through Fried’s text, his description of the literalist art object becomes increasingly anthropomorphic. Literalist objects, or shall we call them fetish objects, are likened to statues with “inner secrets and inner lives.”<sup>129</sup> For Fried, these fetish objects stank of “direct and primitive” experience.<sup>130</sup> “I am suggesting” he writes, “that there is a latent naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, that lies at the core of the literalist theory and practice. The concept of presence all but says as much.”<sup>131</sup> Modernism was here at the risk of being engulfed by the haunting presence of a “primitive” fetish object.

The “direct and primitive” experience enticed by fetish objects troubled Fried because it proposed a fluid space between the object, the beholder and the “situation” in which perception occurred. Literalism, Fried objected, “is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work.”<sup>132</sup> While the Modernist tradition, that had long excised the fetish, belonged to artworks that are bounded, framed and self-referential, “the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.”<sup>133</sup> For an artwork to include the beholder meant, not only the proliferation of the meaning of an art object by opening it up to

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

diverse experiences, but also the loosening of the very borders of art to include the perceiver within space. As such, the literalist art object was itself difficult to pin down as it was not a bounded entity but a *situation* within which a perception happened. “Everything counts,” Fried protested, “not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.”<sup>134</sup>

The situational event was disconcerting for Fried because it proposed a phenomenological experience of an artwork, whereby our bodies and the conditions of our perceptions were entangled with the perceived objects. For Fried, the situational event deviated from Modernist aesthetics by denying the primacy of the eye for enabling the necessary distance between the perceiver and the perceived, a perception based on “eyesight alone.”<sup>135</sup> The appeal of eyesight within the Modernist tradition, was its ability to perceive an enclosed object held at a distance. This in turn ensured the fantasy of a bounded subject, who was severed from but in control of her surrounding environment. Fred Moten has described the imagined Modernist observer as follows: “The Friedian beholder, even in his fascination, never moves out of himself, never achieves or is submitted to a kind of ecstasy.”<sup>136</sup> This beholder, Moten writes, “is never estranged, never lost or even dark to himself.”<sup>137</sup> For Fried, an art object submitted to “eyesight alone”

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*.

<sup>136</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 237.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 237.

could facilitate this subjective formation, whose assured self-possession was at the risk of becoming possessed by the literalist art object.

Fried's separation of the art object from the fetish is consistent within a tradition that has buckled the Modernist body into a tight frame, while queering instances where this fantasy does not hold. Fried's evocation of the "primitive" to describe the experiential nature of the literalist object is one such invention, where the power of the fetish is queered and projected onto an other in order to contain its "irruptive" disturbances. Fried's neat separation of the experiential, situational and haptic fetish from the Modernist art object however, does not entirely hold when he begins to write about Stella's paintings himself. Within a space of a few lines, the anthropomorphism from which Fried was attempting to save Stella's soul, returns with a vengeance and creeps into his own language. It almost seems that the very text that is meant to draw firm boundaries between art and objecthood, and with it between the historical flow of Modernism and the "primitive" presence of the fetish, spins against itself giving us a text that vibrates with animism.

Fried's experience of Stella's shaped canvases—such as *Firuzabad*—are so embodied and dynamic that they are described in the most touchingly haptic ways. When describing Stella's work, Fried insists that it is the "viability of shape" in his canvases that separates them from mere objecthood.<sup>138</sup> How might a shape become *vi-able*, we might ask, without a *vie* (a life or a soul) that enables it? "By viability of shape" he

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<sup>138</sup> Fried, 77.

writes, “I mean its power to hold, to stamp itself out, and in—as verisimilitude and narrative symbolism used to impress themselves—compelling conviction.”<sup>139</sup> Shape here is anything but inert and has the power to *hold* the beholder and to *impress* him by *pressing* itself upon his senses. There is an intimacy in Fried’s language between the viewer and Stella’s shaped canvases which *compel* (*com* “together” + *peller* “drive”), drive together and bind the viewer to the art object. Writing about one of Stella’s shaped canvases, Fried is fixated by a shape that prompts “an astonishing vertical acceleration, soaring, or release.”<sup>140</sup> This description is not of a beholder contained in eyesight alone, but of a body that perceives “soaring,” “acceleration” and “release” in another object. This is a beholder who is held, pressed upon and aroused by a “vertical acceleration” in a painting.

Evident in Fried’s descriptions is the ultimate erotic act: the loss of a subject into an object of desire. While Fried dismissed the literalist object for creating a situation in which the spectator’s body became part of the work, his own description of Stella’s canvases implies a sensual encounter with another body. It is indeed this erotic relationality between the critic and the painting that animates the art object. Jones acknowledges Fried’s magnetic draw towards Stella’s paintings when she writes, “Fried strikes a frankly spiritual tone as he describes the transcendence offered by the Modernist art object.”<sup>141</sup> Fried’s climactic, we might even say orgasmic language, suggests an

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>141</sup> Jones, 518.

ecstatic—not static—experience. Responding to Jones’ recent criticism of his work, Fried objects to Jones’ use of the term “anxiety” to describe his experience of Stella’s paintings. Instead, Fried argues that there was a “palpable sense of elation” in his text that Jones had overlooked.<sup>142</sup> “Elation” is of course an ecstatic feeling of being lifted or erected out of one’s body, to which Fried’s texts on Stella thoroughly attest.

In highlighting Fried’s embodied response to Stella’s canvases, I do not mean to undermine the eye’s capacity for being an erotogenous organ. Indeed it is the movement of Fried’s eyes and the caress of his gaze across Stella’s canvases that build the erotic play he so well describes. Instead, what I am arguing here is that the Modernist goal of building a self-contained subject through “eyesight alone” fails even in Fried. While I agree with Moten therefore, that Fried’s text strives towards a “self-possessed” beholder, my aim has been to suggest that this ideal is never fully achieved, leaving a possessed individual in its place. Even though Fried’s understanding of fetishism is that of “primitive” regression, to which he condemned the literalist artist, his own relationship to Stella’s painting is thoroughly fetishistic. Fetishes, after all, are those erotic objects that seize viewers in their intensity. What we find in Fried’s text is a Modernist subject whose identity is built upon queering an ‘other’ he cannot thoroughly avoid or dispel. In the end, it seems that the fight over Stella’s soul did not manage to exorcise the spirits of “primitivism” haunting his Modernist canvases. If anything, it shows that the Modernist art object is the charged site of this contradiction: embodying the queered “primitive” that

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<sup>142</sup> Michael Fried, “Response To Caroline Jones,” *Critical Inquiry* 27:4 (Summer, 2001), 703-705: 705.

it wishes to expel. From this perspective, Modernism is not a fight for rational, secular or even optical self-possession but is distinctly (and perhaps despite itself) ecstatically embodied.

By discussing Michael Fried's writings on Stella's work, I have attempted to show that my affective draw to Stella's *Firuzabad* through the oblique route of my nose is not the first time this painting has aroused a queer response. Instead, arousing the viewer's senses is consistent with its historical reception. Remembering an old smell in front of this painting, I would further add, is not so much a "backward" glance but a sensuous dwelling and occupation of the present. I would even go so far as to say that it is our present itself that shapes what we remember of the past. History, after all, is never a simple and indiscriminate movement of the past into the present as a "chunk of frozen time," but is more precisely, as Antonio Viegó has noted, driven by "how fresh impressions sometimes compel revisions of past events or how new impressions may actually compel something ostensibly from the past to suddenly *count* as an event."<sup>143</sup> When a smell from the past becomes an "event," it is not a simple recuperation of the past but a rethinking of the shape of the present. Experience, we might note, is from the Latin *experiri*, which means to try. In this sense, experience is at once an experiment with the past that can be tried out in the present and even put the present on trial. In the next section I turn to Stella's own sensate response to geometric abstraction.

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<sup>143</sup> Antonio Viegó, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*, Durham: Duke, 2007, 173.

### III.

Here I want to return to Stella's trip to Iran and the "primitive" sites that inspired his Modernist canvases. According to Guy Hubbard, "Stella first began to move away from darkly painted canvases when he made a trip to Iran. This experience had a powerful effect on his work and led to numbers of highly colored geometric paintings, often called 'protractor' paintings."<sup>144</sup> While in Iran, Stella found himself drawn towards geometric abstractions in Islamic architectural sites. His photographs are tightly cropped images that zoom onto patterned bricks and tile works. A site that appears repeatedly in Stella's photographs is the Soltanieh Mausoleum built during the Ilkhanid period in the years of 1304-1314<sub>AD</sub> (703-713<sub>AH</sub>). His photographs focus on the light brown bricks on the main walls of the building, which feature "design of intersecting polygons and pentapetalous stars that have been decorated with tiles and plasters."<sup>145</sup>

What becomes most evident when looking at Stella's photographs is how his framing of the geometric patterns he finds on the walls and ceilings of the Soltanieh Mausoleum anticipates his later shaped canvases. Each photograph seems to be composed to highlight strong geometric borders that frame the interlacing patterns within. This is most apparent in photographs where Stella's camera uses the negative shapes around the architectural elements to emphasize the geometric lines that border the brick works. In one of his letters to Rose, Stella notes his interest in the interaction between the

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<sup>144</sup> Guy Hubbard, "Clip & Save Art Notes" *Arts and Activities* (Vol.135:1, 2004), 28.

<sup>145</sup> For details of the building see R. Faghfoori, H.B Ghehi and G.Soltani "Theosophical Principles of Light and Colour in the Architecture and Decorations of Soltaniyeh Dome," *International Journal of Arts* (4:1, 2014): 8-16, 11.

abstract designs and the architectural support in the buildings he visited. “The best that happens is that you are stunned by the size & complexity of the tile work & are finally really convinced by the interior spatial organization of the architecture. This added to some high moments of decorative invention” he continued, “[and] makes for some visual beauty that the West will never see.”<sup>146</sup> As this statement indicates, Stella’s interest lay in moments when the design and the architectural support came together creating a spatial relationship to abstract designs. His photographs highlight the position of the interlacing patterns in space and their interaction with the architectural support.

It is my contention here that Stella’s work from this period presents a haptic relationship to geometric shapes which he found in the Islamic architectural sites he photographed. Abstract designs, as I have argued above, manage to tug at the spectators’ various senses. “There’s all that interlacing, or interweaving in Barabrian decoration” Stella has noted, “things double back onto themselves, like snakes swallowing their tails.”<sup>147</sup> Such works do not offer static lines fixed across flat planes but fold, bend and “double back onto themselves.” These geometric lines are animated, they are indeed animal, growing tails that are “swallowed” back into their gaping jaws in circular motions. Stella’s own canvases offer a similar experience. A painting such as *Firuzabad* for instance, confronts us with semi-circles that interlace and interweave into each other. These shapes swirl, move and lock into one another. They also manage to pull us, as spectators, into their inspirited compositions.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Thistlethwaite, 301.

In her reading of geometric patterns in Persian art, Laura Marks points to the erotics of such abstract lines. “The mis-en-abîme patterns of Persian carpets” she writes, “have an engendered eroticism, the experience of desire as a pulling ever closer to the desired and feared union with another.”<sup>148</sup> For Marks, interweaving abstract lines are not analogies for interlaced bodies but “indeed actualize a look of increasing intimacy.”<sup>149</sup> In this sense, these geometric lines cannot be read as strictly visual but manage to fuse, and at times confuse, our senses by displacing our eyes into our bodies. Within such haptic viewing experiences, Marks writes, “form does not hold still but rather dissolves and flows—confronting the viewer with a dissolution of her perceptual control and by extension, her mental integrity.”<sup>150</sup> Unlike the Modernist viewer prescribed by Fried, geometric abstraction found in Persian art invites a spectator who is not bound to her perceptual integrity. Instead, geometric abstraction invites us to occupy “a subject position that is porous, phenomenological, contemplative [and] nomadic.”<sup>151</sup> Their ambulatory lines invite us to follow them, as if with our feet. Stella’s photographs of geometric abstractions taken in Iran attest to just such haptic viewing. His pictures are mostly composed as closeups that zoom onto patterned designs leaving little room between us and the images he photographed. This creates a tight visual space that pulls us

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<sup>148</sup> Marks, Laura *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 104.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 72.

close enough to touch the interwoven lines, and to string along and get lost in their complex paths.

At the time of Stella's visit to Iran in the 1960s, many of the local artists were rethinking abstraction in relation to aesthetic traditions within the region. As Susan Babai has noted, Iranian artists working in this period were moving towards "a modernity that resonated with an identity grounded in local popular idiom."<sup>152</sup> We can see this engagement with popular aesthetics in the paintings of Faramarz Pilaram from this period. In his 1962-1963 works on paper, Pilaram presents mosque architecture in abstract forms. His images build their spatial compositions through the overlap of irregular geometric shapes. In *Mosques of Isfahan (A)*, a large orange circle, recalling a mosque's dome, provides the ground for vertical and semicircular shapes that float to the surface of the paper and stand where minarets would have appeared within a mosque's design. While entirely consisting of abstract shapes, this image nonetheless retains its reference to Shi'ite designs by including five "hands" within its composition. Two on the bottom and three crowning the top edge of the image, these hands recall procession objects used in Muslim mourning rituals during the month of Muharram in Iran. By citing the hands crowning Shi'ite ritual objects—such as the *alam*—Pilaram not only keeps his abstraction embedded within local aesthetic signs, but provides an affective context for his image. Read in relation to such processions, the gold and silver hues recall metalworks carried by participants in such events and the sounds of chants, cries and

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<sup>152</sup> Sussan Babaie, "Voices of Authority: Locating the 'Modern' in 'Islamic' Arts" *Getty Research Journal* 3 (2011): 133-149, 138.

prayers that reverberate through them. The shiny surfaces of Pilaram's images, that are created through the use of silver and gold leaves, can also bring us face to face with our own reflections. In this sense his compositions draw us into their architectural spaces where we can walk along their geometric paths and (re)-enact the procession.

This conceptualization of Modernist abstraction in phenomenological terms within Pilaram's images is further echoed in the works of Monir Farmanfarmaian. In her untitled work from 1970, she builds an abstract pattern on a flat surface through the application of mirror strips, stainless steel and plaster on wood. This artwork is one of the early iterations of her large series of mirror works that she has built throughout her career. As with Pilaram, Farmanfarmaian's practice draws on Muslim architectural elements for her aesthetic vocabulary. Unlike Pilaram however, who directly incorporates Shi'ite motifs into his images, Farmanfarmaian engages local signs through her use of mirrors.

In a recent interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Farmanfarmaian discusses her use of mirrors as follows:

In my travels all over Iran, I saw a lot of old palaces and shrines with mirror-work on the ceiling and on the walls, and paintings behind glass on plaster architecture. In Shiraz and Isfahan it was really magnificent. In 1966, I went with Robert [Morris] and Marcia [Hafif] to the 14th Shrine of Shah Cheragh, "The King of Light." It has high ceilings, domes and mirror mosaics with fantastic reflections. We sat there for half an hour, and it was like a living theater: people came in all their different outfits and wailed and begged to the shrine, and all the crying was reflected all

over the ceiling and everywhere, and I cried too because of all the beautiful reflections.<sup>153</sup>

I quote Farmanfarmaian at length here because she frames her aesthetic experience in purely phenomenological terms. Referring to her presence at the shrine as a “living theater,” Farmanfarmaian incorporates her own and her companions’ bodies into the aesthetic experience. Here we might recall Fried’s objection to the literalist art object for orchestrating a “situation” that “includes the beholder.” Farmanfarmaian’s recounting of the event is precisely such an inclusion of the beholder into the geometric patterns that cover the buildings’ interior. In her description, it is not the complexity of the bevelled mirrors that intrigue her, but the bodies that were “reflected all over the ceiling and everywhere.” What compels the artist is the inclusion of the spectators’ bodies into the building and their transference into their object of contemplation.

Farmanfarmaian’s description of the dispersed bodies of the spectators provides an apt reading of her untitled piece. In this image the interconnected cubes are built through thin strips of mirror which catch the spectators’ reflection. As with Pilaram’s works, this piece cannot be experienced as a static whole because our own bodies enter the space of art and are reflected back to us. While mirrors offer us an imaginary space

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<sup>153</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist and Karen Marta eds. *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry*, (Bologna: Damiani, 2011) - According to Farmanfarmaian, the US artists Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif were also present at this occasion. The phenomenological approach that I argue for in this chapter can be glimpsed in Morris’s own writings. In one of his essays titled “The Present Tense of Space,” Morris reproduces a photograph of Shah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran. This photograph is attributed to Morris’ own collection of images and is presumably taken on the same trip to Isfahan described by Farmanfarmaian. This is one of a series of architectural sites that allows Morris to develop his thesis on the relationship between space, time and subjectivity. His essay also provides an analysis of the use of mirrors in sculptural works of the 1970s by artists such as Robert Smithson.

that cannot be physically entered, they do add a spatial dimension to these work that are not contained within the limits of their frame. In this sense, these works exceed the boundaries of their frames and occupy indeterminate spaces that are subject to change based on where they are displayed and who is looking. This confusion of our spatial footing when we encounter these works further contributes to a sense of temporal disorientation. While each work was made at a specific historical time, each is also eternally contemporary because of what they reflect in the present—and presence—of new spectators. In this way, their reflective surfaces cause multiple temporalities to coincide within the space of the image. Not only do these images perform a nod to historical pasts—whose aesthetic traditions in the form of Islamic architectural elements are quoted within—they also open up a space for indeterminate futures to come.

As I have indicated above, the existence of multiple temporalities in one place tends to arouse a melancholic affect on us. This is because we become aware of our lost past, which in such instances, manage to persist in the present. Indeed, it is the phenomenological experience of our bodies in space that adds to this melancholic feeling because it brings us face-to-face with the brevity and impermanence of the present. It is not a coincidence therefore, that Farmanfarmaian's description of her visit to the shrine is narrated through the bodies of a group of "wailing" visitors. The multiplication of the visitors' tears across the mirrored walls and ceilings heightens the affective experience she so well describes. As with Pilaram's images, Farmanfarmaian's turn to Islamic architecture is imbued with an affective sense of loss. In Pilaram's images, the abstract

shapes quote ritual objects carried by Muharram mourners, whose processions commemorate the loss of Shi'ite imams. Likewise, Farmanfarmaian's citation of fractal mirrors is an attempt at capturing the heightened and cathartic despair of wailing visitors who frequent these shrines to appeal to their saints. These works' preoccupation with mourners, I would argue, convey the artists' desire to connect with their own loss through their aesthetic vocabulary. This is not to say that all losses are the same or that they arouse the same affective response. Rather, what I am proposing here is that these artists' use of geometric abstraction found in Iran's historic sites speak to a melancholic relationship to the past. This is a past that cannot be renounced but which continues to resonate in the present. These artists' works do not merely borrow from Iran's aesthetic traditions but attempt to materialize that past in the present time of the spectator.

I noted at the beginning of this chapter that art historians have pointed to the "influence of Islamic art" on Stella's *Protractor Series*. In this chapter I have risked taking the term "influence" literally and conceived of it as a direct in-flow of geometric lines that engulfed Stella's senses, and which manifested as the stylistic vocabulary in the paintings he produced after his return from Iran. I have imagined influence as a contagion, or a flu, that moved amongst bodies, objects and environments leaving us with artworks that retain these affects. As with Pilaram and Farmanfarmaian's works, Stella's canvases remain entrapped with the sites that inspired them. In the concluding section of this chapter, I provide a brief history of the economic base for Stella's trip to Iran. I show that Iran's rapid industrialization and shifting position as a major oil producer in this

period, had an impact on the disappearance of historical sites, including mosques and shrines that preoccupied the artists discussed above. It is due to this entanglement of Stella's paintings with Iran's historical sites that they continue to resonate a melancholic affect in observers, like me, today.

#### IV.

Stella's letters from Iran are highly visceral. Reading them, I am struck by his anxious relationship to the heat in Iran and the sun which shines down on him with a vengeance dehydrating his body and upsetting his stomach. The sun in Kerman from where he sent one of his letters to Barbara Rose, dries up and decomposes everything. "Everything here is dry and dead" he wrote, "and the only hope for life is the water which dries up very quickly."<sup>154</sup> Here the sun is said to deplete the land necessitating water for the survival of the living, which the sun then takes away with the same gesture. Based on this vicious cycle, Stella concludes that, "nature is inadequate here and everyone else seems to draw the same conclusion. The only alternative that nature provides is oil," he continues, "the 20th century West has made do handsomely with it, but the Iranians still find it inedible. Unless they can learn to develop a taste for oil rather than water they are doomed."<sup>155</sup> Struck by the "inadequacy" of "nature" in one of Iran's desert regions, Stella provides this provocative solution. Since nature is "inadequate" why not "develop" the digestive system in such a way that they can become nourished through oil? If the sun does not allow for water to stay on the land making it not only infertile for agriculture but

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<sup>154</sup> Letter from Frank Stella to Barbara Rose, Getty Research Institute: Barbara Rose Papers.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

also difficult for human habitation, why don't the Iranians link their taps to their petroleum pipelines? Since "nature" has provided this "alternative" to water in this region, since rivers of oil seem to be flowing deep under this dry land, oozing daily into transnational oil tankers to be shipped westwards, why indeed don't the Iranians stop by the oil fountains at drilling sites and, in time, "learn to develop" the same sophisticated taste for oil that the "20th century West" has done so "handsomely" with?

Had Stella proposed this solution a decade earlier when the Iranian oil industry was nationalized for a brief period under the prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, we might have read his suggestion in rhetorical jest. Had Stella been in Iran in the early 1950s, his statement would have echoed Mosaddeq's supporters who were posing a similar question: why indeed don't the Iranians sip from their petroleum fountains, nationalize the oil industry and become the consumers of their own oil, which if viewed from the vantage point of the West, was gushing right under their very feet?<sup>156</sup> Given the US-British coup in 1953 however, which overthrew Mosaddeq's government by claiming that "Iran—like Haiti—was 'immature' and therefore needed to remain under a firm foreign hand for at least another two decades," and proceeding to install Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to the throne,<sup>157</sup> Stella's statement made in 1964 had a very different ring to it. Iran's relationship to oil in the early 1960s seemed to resemble the viscous cycle

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<sup>156</sup> Ervand, Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 114; and Nikki R. Keddie, "The Midas Touch: Black Gold, Economics and Politics in Iran Today" *Iranian Studies* X: 4 (Autumn 1977) 243-266.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 120. Quoted in Abrahamian as exchange between the British and the American ambassadors to Iran.

described by Stella himself, whereby the “taste” for oil was “developed” by the same gesture that took it away.

Stella’s trip to Iran in 1964 coincided with the launch of the Shah’s “White Revolution” designed “as a bloodless revolution from above” and intent on rapid industrialization and agrarian reform that anticipated but hoped to prevent “the danger of a bloody revolution from below.”<sup>158</sup> As the second largest exporter of oil at this time, Iran’s government became what has been called a “rentier state.” Rentier state is a term given to economies whose “income is derived from the gift of nature.”<sup>159</sup> Applied to emerging oil states in the Middle East in the 1970s, rentier economies pivoted around a small fraction of the government who received oil revenues from external sources and who were in charge of its distribution.<sup>160</sup> Similar to other petroleum based economies, Iran’s rentier state was so highly centralized that it “appeared suspended above society,” and whose petroleum funds “were privately appropriated and exported.”<sup>161</sup> As Afsaneh Najmabadi has noted, the emergence of the Pahlavi government as a rentier state not only meant that power was concentrated in the hands of a few but that the state became autonomous from civil society alienating the traditional classes—the clergy, the merchants

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<sup>158</sup> Ali Ansari, “The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, ‘Modernization’ and the Consolidation of Power” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol, 37, No. 3 (Jul, 2001): 1-24.

<sup>159</sup> Hazem Beblawi “The Rentier State in the Arab World” *The Rentier State: Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World*, Beblaw, H and Luciani, G eds, (London: Routledge, 1987), 85. See also, Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Depoliticization of a Rentier State: The Case of Pahlavi Iran,” in the same volume.

<sup>160</sup> El-Beblawi, 87.

<sup>161</sup> Michael Watts, “Oil as Money: The Devil’s Excrement and the Spectacle of Black Gold” *Reading Economic Geography*, T.J. Barnes, J.Peck, E.Sheppard, and A.Tickell eds. Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 205-220

and the small landlords—who lost their role in the Iranian economy and with it their political voice.<sup>162</sup> One of the effects of this socio-economic transformation was massive urban migration with no employment to sustain it, resulting in an increased population of urban poor inhabiting “giant slums” around the cities.<sup>163</sup>

It is within the context of this civil tension produced by Iran’s rentier state economy, that we might dwell a bit further on what it might have meant for Iranians to “learn to develop a taste for oil” as Stella put it. What digestive, and aesthetic, alterations were necessary in order to facilitate such a “development”? Speaking of oil in digestive terms was not unusual in relation to the emerging petroleum states in this period. OPEC’s founder, Juan Perez Alfonso, is known to have referred to oil as the “Third World’s black gold” that like the “devil’s excrement” contaminated the “national metabolism.”<sup>164</sup> For Perez, “the digestion of petroleum gave birth to a weak and corrupt society, decadent and degenerate under the accumulated weight of waste and excrement.”<sup>165</sup> In the context of Iran, Nikki Keddie compared the Shah’s “White Revolution” to the rule of King Midas, who “was the first Near Eastern ruler to cherish the belief that untold mineral wealth would enable him to realize all his dreams and ambitions.”<sup>166</sup> But “just because all he touched turned into gold,” Keddie continued, “he soon discovered he could no longer

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<sup>162</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Iran’s Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order” *The Middle East Journal* 41: 2 (Spring, 1987), 213

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Watts, 205.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>166</sup> Keddie, 243.

eat.”<sup>167</sup> Iran’s oil economy thus had “Midas’ touch” in that it was actively diminishing non-oil sectors, in particular farmlands and agriculture, for the benefit of black gold.<sup>168</sup> As I have noted above, it was due to the rapid rise of the oil industry that farmlands such as Aunt Maheen’s Firuzabad became sites of obsolete economies. The problem therefore, was not one of finding oil “edible” through a developed “taste” as Stella put it, but that black gold was ingested on a global scale in such a way that the carrier arteries which circulated oil transnationally were nourishing the Global North, but returning back to their pumping sites with only excrement running through their veins, drowning the “weak and corrupt” oil exporting nations under its “accumulated weight.”

The large wealth gap within rentier state economies that I have outlined here, has historically led to social unrest in oil producing countries. In response to widespread social discontent, rentier states tend to spend considerable sums of money towards the “purchase of political consent.”<sup>169</sup> The Shah’s “White Revolution” in Iran, was conceived with this end in mind. It was devised as a “revolution” from above, in order to rally popular support for its survival. Its aims were hence debated not merely in terms of economics, but “of psychology and public relations.”<sup>170</sup> As a result, the government allocated a portion of its revenue to the support of the arts.<sup>171</sup> Administered through the

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> This is known as the “dutch-disease” see Watts.

<sup>169</sup> See Watts.

<sup>170</sup> Ansari, 5.

<sup>171</sup> See interview with Farah Diba in Saeed Kamali Dehghan “Former Queen of Iran on Assembling Tehran’s Art Collection,” *The Guardian* (Wed, August 1, 2012), See also Laila Diba’s interview at Center for Iranian Studies Oral Culture.

office of the Empress Farah Diba, spending on the arts received a major boost in this period, manifesting itself in the construction of large museums such as Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art and the School of Decorative Arts, and the organization of international art fairs like the Tehran Biennial (1958-1968) and the Shiraz Art Festival (1967-1977). The funds to support these institutions were funneled through the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) creating a social link between art and oil within the national psyche. Apart from building the infrastructure in Iran for the display and support of local artists, the office of the Empress Farah Diba also poured a great portion of its oil revenue into the international art circuit, which brought many transnational artists to Iran to participate in biennials, festivals and residencies.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art purchased a large collection of modern and contemporary artworks—which included a painting by Frank Stella—to secure its ties with the global art scene.

This is certainly not to say that all participating artists in the Iranian art scene in the 1960s and 1970s were supporters of the Shah's government. There were indeed numerous artist-led local protests and international boycotts surrounding much of these events that aimed to critique the economic link between art, royal patronage and the oil economy.<sup>173</sup> As Shiva Balaghi has noted, Iranian artists in this period actively scrutinized the place of art under capitalism and Western imperialist interests in Iran. "In the cultural

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art collected works by many US artists including Frank Stella. These works remain part of the Museum's collection.

<sup>173</sup> Merce Cunningham and Xenakis for instance boycotted the Shiraz Art Festival and refused to participate. The US-based "Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran" was also an active critic of the Shah's policies and censorship.

lexicon of Iran,” according to Balaghi, “the ‘West’ did not simply represent a higher civilizational model to be emulated, but an imposing presence on its national autonomy.”<sup>174</sup> Being a modern artist in this context, did not mean “developing a taste” according to the values of the West, as Stella would have it, but resisting the interests of the rentier economy. Royal patronage of the arts was hence actively disparaged by its critics as ostentatious display of rentier wealth, who saw the sites erected for the support of local and international artists as the work of black gold. Many argued that a taste for oil had indeed a direct relationship to claims for aesthetic taste since it was the very consumers of oil and its beneficiaries who seemed to revel in state-sponsored artistic production.<sup>175</sup>

Yet it was precisely the rentier wealth that allowed Iranian art to flourish in this period and which brought transnational artists to Iran. What I am highlighting here is the economic paradox of artistic production which, in the words of Clement Greenberg, “cannot develop without a source of stable income,” and while it “assumes itself to be cut off” from the “ruling class,” it “has always remained attached to it by an umbilical cord of gold.”<sup>176</sup> In Iran of this period, this “umbilical cord of gold” was pumping with viscous black gold, a substance that was at once the source of income for artists working within

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<sup>174</sup> Shiva Balaghi, “Iranian Visual arts in ‘the century of machinery, speed, and the atom’: Rethinking Modernity” in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 24.

<sup>175</sup> Here I am referring to criticisms directed at events such as the Shiraz Art Festival. The criticisms revolve around monetary allocations in the city of Shiraz and the silencing of local demands for expenditure towards irrigation and the building of hospitals. See, Nasser Assar, Interview for Foundation for Iranian Studies, pg. 47.

<sup>176</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 3-21.

the transnational art circuit and an economic curse and site of artistic critique. Developing a taste for oil, as Stella put it, was the precondition for developing aesthetic taste.

What I have attempted to argue in this concluding section is that there is a historical connection between the art circuit and the oil industry in Iran of the 1960s, both of which were implicated in the disappearance of farmlands and agricultural economies such as the one at Aunt Maheen's Firuzabad. This triangulated history between art, oil and my childhood habitat has had a bearing on my paths of movement and migration and resonates as affect in me when I encounter Stella's *Firuzabad*. As Michael Ann Holly has aptly argued, art objects confront us with a "loss without a lost object."<sup>177</sup> When we come into the space of an artwork, we know that it belongs to a time and place that is lost to us, but which lingers here still because of its material existence. For Holly, art objects have a melancholic effect on us because they occupy our present space but do not synchronize with our present time. "The object," she writes, "is both held onto and gone astray simultaneously."<sup>178</sup> My reading of Stella's work extends Holly's thesis further by arguing for the melancholic affect of artworks that are not mere reminders of times gone by, but of difficult histories that are suppressed or disavowed within dominant and normative historiography. Feeling blue, I have echoed Muñoz, has something to do with feeling brown.

History, in my assessment, is not an accumulation of facts but consists of embodied experiences that resonate in our bodies as affect. Haunted by our specific pasts

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<sup>177</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

and our current positionalities, we turn to objects that materialize their unresolved tensions for us. Artworks, I would hence argue, do not have objective histories. Instead, they compel us to tell our emotive intersections with the social through them. As I have shown above, history is never an arbitrary flow of the past into the present but always an account of how we are compelled by the pasts that we narrate. My queer migrant arrival at Stella's *Firuzabad* is in this sense a digression from the straight path of historiography. Yet, this misalignment is not disabling. Our acknowledgement of our memories and experiences according to Guha, "is not a process of recovery. There is nothing in it of a desperate effort at finding what has been lost," he continues, "but only an ongoing current in which the past is integral to the present."<sup>179</sup> Our bodies remember our past and use these memories to orient us in the present. It is precisely this experiential memory that finds our past overlaid onto present objects connecting spaces that may be far apart.

My aim in this chapter has been to tackle a number of interconnected questions fundamental to writing "Non-Western" art history within a queer feminist framework. What I wish to have made apparent in my treatment of the Iranian art scene in the 1960s and 1970s, is the interconnectedness of the so-called East and West. The "Non-West" in this context is hardly a self-contained entity, but a category whose meaning increasingly wanes in the face of the transnational art circuit supported by the global market economy. This premise has allowed me to ask what it would mean to drag an established work of "Western" art into the coeval time of the "Non-West." This is not only a question about

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

the integrity of the artwork itself and its social and historical positioning. More importantly, it is a question about deep seated ideological presumptions that historiography can help to unravel and disrupt. Writing art history in a queer feminist mode also raises questions about the specificity of the speaking subject, requiring that we implicate our own bodies into our narratives. Such a methodology asks that we suspend our faith in historical objectivity and to be attentive to the desires, experiences and affects that shape our perspectives. Approaching an artwork in this way would not be a mere “subjective” analysis, but an exploration of how our subjectivities are shaped by these encounters.

As Jennifer Doyle has aptly noted in her study of affect in contemporary art, “emotions can make our experience of art harder.”<sup>180</sup> This is not only because the work itself might be trying to arouse a difficult feeling in us, but because as Doyle notes, “an artwork may provoke contradictory feelings, and it may provoke in the viewer feelings that are at odds with the affective culture of its context.”<sup>181</sup> In my reading I have attempted to bring my own oblique entry, which has certainly been at odds with the cultural affect of this painting, into its official discourse. After all, wouldn’t cutting out my detours, have removed me and my desires for my object of study? Would it not have masked the basis of my inclination towards this painting and why I have been drawn to it? Would it not have hidden how this painting has worked on me before I began to work

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<sup>180</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

on *it* within the space of this text? Would it not have proposed that the “personal” falls somewhere outside the “shared” space of the political and hence marginalize my disoriented arrival at this object through my nose? And finally, wouldn’t a straight historiography have merely placed an unwarranted faith in the final disappearance of such inhibited pleasures without the possibility of their uncanny return in indirect ways?

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I want to thank the Getty Research Institute for providing access to their collection.

### Chapter 3. In Persian Blue: Fashion Photography and Tourism in Pahlavi Iran

#### I.

In February 2011 Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) mounted an exhibition titled “Elizabeth Taylor in Iran: Photographs by Firooz Zahedi.” This exhibition included a collection of photographs by the Iranian-American fashion photographer Firooz Zahedi, who traveled to Iran with Elizabeth Taylor in 1976. The exhibition at LACMA printed Zahedi’s old photographs from this trip in large format,<sup>182</sup> showing Taylor posed in front of Iranian mosques, teahouses and various architectural sites favored by tourists visiting Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The centerpiece of the exhibition titled *Dressed as an Odalisque* shows Taylor in an elaborate outfit of glittered fabric fitted with jewels and sequins. This photograph, shot and titled to recall 18th and 19th century Orientalist paintings,<sup>183</sup> is amongst many in the show that harken back to exotically eroticized representations of a remote and fantastical Orient.

LACMA’s press release accompanying the exhibition further stressed the sexualized narrative of Zahedi’s photographs. Drawing particular attention to Taylor’s

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<sup>182</sup> According to Zahedi the negatives for the images reproduced in the exhibition were destroyed years ago in transit leaving only a few color transparencies and a handful of 35 mm proof sheets. The photos in the exhibition were enlargements from those proof sheets. See “Elizabeth Taylor in Iran 1976: An Exhibition by Firooz Zahedi” Laila Heller Gallery’s Catalogue, 2011.

<sup>183</sup> Here I am referring to Orientalist paintings in the tradition of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme, amongst others. For a fruitful discussion of the role of gender and sexuality in Orientalist genre paintings see Linda Nochlin’s “The Imaginary Orient” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1989).

reclining pose as an Odalisque, the press release applauded it for being “an especially suitable persona for one who was herself a male fantasy.”<sup>184</sup> Not only did LACMA’s own literature subscribe to this racially eroticized presentation of Taylor’s images in Iran, its rhetoric was reiterated in a preview article appearing in *Vanity Fair* a week prior to the exhibition’s opening that praised the show for its “captivating, exotically colorful pictures.”<sup>185</sup> Noting that at the time of her travel to Iran Taylor was at the height of her fame, the *Vanity Fair* article pointed out that, “there once was a thrilling –albeit short– period when this Academy Award winning actress was freed from the attention of Hollywood gossip columnists and the shutters of the paparazzi–ironically, in a country where most personal freedoms are now stifled.”<sup>186</sup> As with LACMA’s press release, the *Vanity Fair*’s writer Susan Michals, recounted Taylor’s trip to Iran as a “thrilling” experience to an “exotic” and “colorful” country, that offered the actress temporary relief from media harassment.

What I find intriguing about Michals’ brief summation of Taylor’s trip to Iran quoted above, is the writer’s swift transition from one set of narrative associations with Iran in the U.S. to another. As though shocked at her own interpretation of Iran as a “thrilling” vacation getaway, Michals is quick to adjust her perception according to the dominant narrative surrounding Iran today. In the space of a few lines, Michals moves

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<sup>184</sup> See LACMA’s press release for the exhibition.

<sup>185</sup> Susan Michals “Photos: Elizabeth Taylor in Iran” *Vanity Fair*, February 18, 2011 (Web Exclusive). Accessed January 26, 2013: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2011/02/zahedi-lacma-slide-show-201102#intro>.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

from a description of Iran as an “exotic” place that “freed” a woman like Taylor from her daily struggles of being a famous actress, to one “where most personal freedoms are now stifled.” By highlighting the “irony” of her own reading of Zahedi’s images, Michals not only manages to express her exasperated disbelief in seeing a country like Iran being associated with anything close to “freedom,” as it had been in the 1970s when these pictures were taken, but to also show the incongruity between today’s dominant images of “stifled” Iranians filling the U.S. mediascape and those she confronted in Zahedi’s images at LACMA.

Despite Michals’ surprise at her own capacity to find erotic intrigue where she is meant to feel “stifled,” the two narratives are not as separate as her choice of the term “irony” might suggest. If anything, her ability to shift so effortlessly from one set of associations to another is indicative of their compatibility and interdependence rather than blunt opposition. It is worth ruminating on these few lines written by Michals in *Vanity Fair* a little longer, in order to understand how the concept of “freedom,” and indeed its suffocation, operates sexually in her text. Upon re-reading the passage quoted above, it becomes apparent that Michals understands Taylor’s fame, described as the incessant “attention of the Hollywood gossip columnists and the shutters of the paparazzi,” as the source of the actress’ curbed personal liberties at home. Taylor’s trip to Iran, according to Michals, was a rare opportunity because it “freed” her from the gaze of the camera and the desiring public who are never satiated with her image and yearn longingly for intimate details of her life. It is therefore, the camera’s obsession with

Taylor's image and the media's continuous offering of the actress as a "male fantasy" to the public that is initially presented by Michals as the cause of Taylor's restrained liberties. As such, it is rather surprising that Michals would see Taylor as "freed" from the gaze of the lens in Iran, since it is precisely the shutter of the camera operated by her personal photographer Zahedi, that has made the most mundane details of her trip such as sight-seeing, shopping, sipping tea and applying make-up, available for our public viewing experience. Not only was Taylor not "freed" from the eye of the camera in Iran, but rather she was followed by a Hollywood photographer who would continue to photograph her for publications such as *Vanity Fair* until her death in March 2011, a month after the exhibition's opening.<sup>187</sup>

What then, one might ask, is the nature of this "freedom" that Michals seems to have found in Taylor's images in Iran? I want to suggest here that, "freedom" in Michals' text is produced through the rhetorical transference of Taylor's unfreedom—caused by her sexualized subjugation to the camera—onto the imaginary collective body of "stifled" Iranians. In other words, this short quote from *Vanity Fair* lays bare the very technique through which American women (if not U.S. citizens at large) are constructed as "free" by being pitched against a "stifled" Iranian social body. "Freedom" in such statements

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<sup>187</sup> see for instance *Vanity Fair*'s cover from November 1992 issue taken by Zahedi.

need not even have a material reality.<sup>188</sup> In Michals' statement for instance, it is brought about through the projection of the writer's anxiety about Taylor's gendered media consumption, in which she herself participates, onto an abstract site of racialized Iranians. As I show through the course of this essay, Zahedi's photographs of Taylor in various Persophilic costumes performed a similar cultural work in the late 1970s for U.S. consumers and Iranian women alike. In his images, Taylor embodies liberated femininity by toying with sartorial performances of a "stifled" Muslim woman, such as long veils and floral fabrics mimicking folk designs. In his photographs, markers of Muslim femininity are aestheticized and made available for commodification and appropriation by consumers aspiring to be similarly "free."

This gendered performance of "freedom" within the geographical domains of Muslim countries is by no means new but was rather a familiar trope replayed by Hollywood stars in the cold war period. As Melanie McAlister has shown, Hollywood produced a series of epic films in the 1940s and 1950s that were set in various locations in West Asia and North Africa, and which used gender to stage the desire for liberation from the impending threat of Soviet power in the region.<sup>189</sup> Similar to Taylor's

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<sup>188</sup> This is not to say that this ritualistic expulsion of undesired emotions onto the site of the Other has no material effect. Indeed, the "irony" I see in Michals' passage is less the difference between the Iran of the 1970s and contemporary Iran, but more accurately Michals' easy disregard for U.S. involvement in contemporary Iran's "stifled" condition. This is certainly ironic since there was no sudden loss of "personal freedoms" encountered by Iranians at the time of Michals' article, but rather an experience of undergoing another round of heavy U.S. backed economic sanctions against Iran's economy which one news report after another described as "stifling" embargo against Iran. What I am pointing to here, is the material costs of "freedom" that tend to accompany customary projections of suffocation onto the site of the Other exercised in articles such as the one from *Vanity Fair*.

<sup>189</sup> Melanie McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

performance in *Cleopatra* that was produced a decade prior to her trip to Iran, these films featured lead, independent women in “orientalized” regalia, who expressed their resistance to imperial bondage by freely choosing their nationalist loyalties and sexual subordination in marriage.<sup>190</sup> Within these films, as McAlister has argued, “the operative terms were the American refusal of empire, the right of ‘free people’ to choose their destinies, and the consensual partnership between U.S. power and a subordinated third world nationalism.”<sup>191</sup> In this sense, these films feminized countries such as Iran, that lay just south of the border from Soviet Union, in order to offer voluntary servitude (to capitalist West) as the most desirable option to cold war politics. Within the logic of these Hollywood films, the drama of acquiring “freedom” is dependent upon first positing the threat of bondage in sexual and political terms, before resolving its tension by proposing voluntary subordination as its solution.

In my reading, fashion plays a distinct role in conveying these gendered relationships of bondage and freedom. As mentioned earlier, the discursive production of liberation through displacement performed in Michals’ text, is most vividly apparent in Zahedi’s photographs exhibited at LACMA. It is in images such as *Dressed as an Odalisque*, that one finds this tension between bondage and freedom presented visually through the mythical figure of the enslaved Odalisque. Shot in Tehran’s Hilton Hotel, this photograph shows Taylor stretched out onto a bed covered with embroidered pieces of

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 82.

fabric she found while shopping in Tehran.<sup>192</sup> As the photograph's title reminds us, in this photograph, Taylor appears in the pose of an Odalisque, a figure which in the words of Mohja Kahf, has long stood as "the model of the helpless, inferior Muslim woman in the Western imagination."<sup>193</sup> In this sartorial display, not only is an everyday room at the Hilton transformed into a fantastical "oda" (meaning room in Turkish) fit for an Odalisque (a woman bound to a room), but Taylor herself is momentarily morphed into an imaginary concubine under the eye of the camera. Zahedi's lens heightens the Odalisque's bondage by cropping the image close to Taylor's body, and by adjusting the angle of the camera so as to reduce the perspectival depth of the photograph. The result is a narrow space within the image, filled with layers upon layers of flowing fabric within which Taylor's body is almost completely lost. Yet, as Michals' response to these photographs reminds us, Taylor's role-play here is not meant to encumber her with the imagined burdens of the mythical concubine. Instead, and perhaps paradoxically, her makeshift attire grants her the very "freedom" from bondage that Michals locates in these images. As though by magic, the costume belonging to a racialized and fantastical Other, allows Taylor and Zahedi to at once dramatize bondage and resolve it through Taylor's voluntary subjugation to the camera as a "male fantasy" desired by Hollywood.

It seems therefore, that LACMA's salvage of Zahedi's old photographs has contributed to the revival of such gendered discussions of liberation. Yet, to leave the

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<sup>192</sup> See Zahedi's interview at LACMA.

<sup>193</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 8.

discussion at the level of Taylor's subjective "freedoms" gained through her trip to Iran is to overlook the crucial fact that Taylor's trip was planned and financed by Zahedi's close relative, Ardeshir Zahedi, who was in the 1970s Iran's ambassador to Washington D.C.<sup>194</sup> The trip to Iran, as I propose in the course of this essay, was hence part of a political and economic effort by the pre-revolutionary Iranian state to align itself with advanced industrial nations. Interpreting these images in relation to Taylor alone is to ignore the social and monetary capital that the circulation of such images produced for the pre-revolutionary Iranian elite, and indeed, the impact that their revival continue to have for diasporic Iranians living in the U.S. today. A fixed focus on Taylor's exceptionality, evident not only in articles such as the one in *Vanity Fair* discussed here but also in Farsi speaking news,<sup>195</sup> keeps the subjectivity of the liberated U.S. subject at the forefront of the discussion. To do so is to forget the continued benefit the revival of these photographs represent for diasporic artists such as Zahedi, who enable and affirm curatorial and collecting practices of institutions like LACMA.

My aim for the remainder of this essay is thus to shift our attention from Taylor's sensational persona to the value of such photographs for pre-revolutionary Iranian ruling classes who produced them. As Rey Chow has acutely observed, Orientalism like other discourses that create racial stereotypes, tends to "insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none."<sup>196</sup> One such boundary is to imagine racializing

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<sup>194</sup> LACMA's video interview with Zahedi

<sup>195</sup> See interview with Ardeshir Zahedi for BBC Persian.

<sup>196</sup> Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 59.

systems of knowledge as solely Western means of access to social and political power. Such an East/West divide overlooks how discourses such as Orientalism can become lucrative, legitimizing narratives within postcolonial nationalist agendas. This essay hence diverges from current literature surrounding Zahedi's exhibition at LACMA by focusing on Iran's global self-representation in the pre-revolutionary period. In the next section, I contextualize Zahedi's images in relation to other fashion shoots staged in Iran by magazines such as *Vogue* and *Gentleman's Quarterly* in the late 1960s in order to contextualize Zahedi's photographs as one set in a series of overlapping sites that visualized Iran's economic and political relationship with the U.S. in gendered and racialized terms. I argue that fashion shoots staged in Iran in this period were one way of representing Iran as an exotic locale and purveyor of social and economic value for Western travelers. In doing so, these images expressed Iran's voluntary subordination to the rules of the "free" market economy.

## II.

Firooz Zahedi and Elizabeth Taylor's short trip to Iran in 1976 was organized by the photographer's relative Ardeshir Zahedi, described by *Newsweek* as Iran's "glamorous ambassador" to Washington, who in 1976 was rumored to be in "caviar heaven" over Taylor as the actress's sixth marriage to Richard Burton was ending.<sup>197</sup> Feeding into gossip media hype that updated the public about the couple's daily activities, Taylor's trip was also meant to promote air travel to Iran aboard the national cargo Iran Air, whose

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<sup>197</sup> "Gossipmania" *Newsweek* (May 24, 1976).

advertisements had appeared in fashion magazines since the 1960s.<sup>198</sup> Taylor's trip to Iran with the young Firooz Zahedi, who at the time was an aspiring fashion photographer living in New York, was amongst efforts to boost Iran's tourist economy that sold opulent life styles to high society fashionistas. It is my contention in this essay that Iran's global self-representation as a desirable tourist destination fit for the ranks of Elizabeth Taylor, and as the supplier of lavish commodities such as the Persophilic designer line sold under the title of Persian Blue in *Vogue*, was aimed at constructing the image of a modern Iranian elite under the pre-revolutionary state of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The modernity of this ruling class was dependent upon the portrayal of Iran as a "Great Civilization" with an ancient pre-Islamic history that was compatible with the global pace of prosperous industrial nations.<sup>199</sup> As I show in this section, fashion and tourism played a crucial role for the transnational circulation of Iran's image as a modern "Great Civilization" and as an object of consumption for advanced industrialized nations.

Zahedi's show at LACMA, was a glimpse back into those decades prior to the Islamic Revolution when the Pahlavi state was refashioning Iran's image globally. Modernization under the Pahlavi state was orchestrated as an economic shift from rural agriculture to urban industrialization and was a U.S. backed promise of middle class prosperity defined as access to Western consumer goods. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Pahlavi state invested in new technologies for large industries and supported privatization

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<sup>198</sup> See *Vogue's* November 1969 issue.

<sup>199</sup> Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in the Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 148. See also, Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 131.

through tax breaks, bank loans and foreign investment.<sup>200</sup> By launching promotional campaigns directed at foreign investors, the Pahlavi state attempted to strengthen its international economic ties. Advertisements began to appear in journals such as the *New York Times* in this period that sold the “renaissance of modern Iran” to potential investors promising great profit returns for investments made in Iranian industries.<sup>201</sup> By 1975, the U.S. became Iran’s primary trading partner supporting bilateral trade between the two countries with the added benefit of replacing the British army in the Persian Gulf and guarding against Soviet expansion within the region.<sup>202</sup>

Along with industrial expansion, Iranian’s urban centers in this period were also revamped to provide a suitable stage for the newly invigorated consumer culture and to promote the facade of a “Great Civilization” to tourists. Governmental programs poured money into urban infrastructures and completed many architectural projects that had begun earlier in the century.<sup>203</sup> In the span of a few decades, urban centers in Iran were endowed with funds for refurbishing old heritage sites and building new monumental structures that linked a number of Iranian cities to the lucrative, transnational tourist industry.

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<sup>200</sup> Regina Lee Blaszczyk, “Synthetics for the Shah: DuPont and the Challenges to Multinationals in 1970s Iran” *Enterprise & Society* (9:4, 2008) 670-723: 683-684.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 687.

<sup>203</sup> Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (New York: Periscope Publishing 2009).

How might we understand the tourist industry's use of historical sites towards the opposite end of promoting Iran as a modern nation? Basing modernity on the legitimacy of an ancient "Great Civilization" is not unique to the Iranian elite of this period. Rather, it is repeatedly seen within the rhetorics of postcolonial nationalisms. The concept of a "Great Civilization" within nationalist rhetoric, as Rey Chow has argued, relies upon locating a historical "primitive" that can act as the source of value for a culture that views itself as stagnant, lagging behind global progress and in dire need of modernization.<sup>204</sup> Iran's Pahlavi state capitalized on this *value* of the "primitive" for pitching its glorious ancient culture as the very source of Western advancement itself. This labor of excavating an ancient culture that could serve as the source of national "worth" had begun in Iran in the late 19th century, but gained an exceptional momentum in the early 20th century with the modernization project of the first Pahlavi monarch (1925-1941). Utilizing archeological evidence dug up by German Orientalists that revealed an Aryan Empire in central Persia, the Pahlavi state employed the transnational appeal of the Aryan discourse to propose a stark break with a Muslim Persia dating back to the 7th century Arab settlement in the region.<sup>205</sup> The official change of the country's name from Persia to Iran in 1934 (alluding to the Land of Aryans), signaled the inauguration of a modern, secular, and independent nation that was held to be racially and culturally equal to, and hence free

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<sup>204</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>205</sup> Talinn Grigor, "'Orient der Rom?' Qajar 'Aryan' Architecture and Strzygowski's Art History" *The Art Bulletin* (89:3, 2007) 562-590.

of, Western imperial domination.<sup>206</sup> Within the nationalist discourse of the Pahlavi state, the Aryan Empire served as the uncorrupted source of nationalist sentiment claiming an originary relation to Western racial and cultural superiority. Within this rhetoric, Islam was placed at the root of all cultural and political malaise, providing the site of a pejorative “primitive” that was to be exorcised if Iran was to claim its Aryan cultural heritage and with it a place within modernity.

While the pre-Islamic Aryan revival under the first Pahlavi monarch meant a complete eradication of all signs of Muslim Iranian cultural practices, modernization under the second Pahlavi monarch (1941-1979) was a process of foregrounding safely institutionalized versions of folk and religious cultural practices alongside the Aryan national identity.<sup>207</sup> Unlike the first Pahlavi monarch who had barred Islamic practices from Iranian society, expressed publicly through forced de-veiling of women and adoption of Western clothing for men, the second Pahlavi state of the post-WWII period, co-opted Muslim signs and brought them under its bureaucratic patronage.<sup>208</sup> “Secularized Islamic aesthetics,” as Talinn Grigor has written, became “integral to modern national identity” of middle class Iranians in this period.<sup>209</sup> Although the Pahlavi state in this period continued to maintain a vehemently anti-Arab stance by actively demoting Muslim life-styles and practices, it nonetheless capitalized on the aesthetic

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Grigor, *Building Iran*, 139.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

signs of Islam, and those of other diverse ethnicities in Iran. A crucial aspect of urban modernization project for instance, was to plan and resurrect secular monuments alongside religious pilgrimage sites so as to utilize the existing network of Shiite pilgrimage routes for civil tourist destinations.<sup>210</sup> By 1968, Grigor notes, over half of the mosques and religious schools in the country ceased to be operational and were instead registered as historical landmarks and became tourist hot spots for local and international travelers.<sup>211</sup> Islam was hence aestheticized and co-opted into the tourist industry. The value of the “primitive” to discourses of middle class modernity meant that Muslim and folk aesthetics began to appear in urban rejuvenation and architectural projects and made their impact within the fashion industry.

In Zahedi’s photographs, Taylor appears against some of these refurbished urban structures that were promoted as key heritage sites by the tourist industry. Several of the photographs in LACMA’s exhibit were shot in the city of Shiraz showing Taylor standing against the patterned tiles of the Tomb of the poet Sa’adi (fig.2), smiling under the high dome of the Tomb of the poet Hafez, posing in front of the Shah Cheragh Shrine clad in a chador, and aiming her own camera at the ruins of Persepolis. The appearance of these famous Shiraz tourist attractions within Zahedi’s images is not surprising. After all, these landmarks were meant to attract the attention of local and international travelers. In fact, Zahedi’s photographs are intriguing precisely because they are tourist pictures and as such gain their meaning and value in circulation. Far from being true “documents of the

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 145.

people and places of Iran” as LACMA’s press release has claimed,<sup>212</sup> these photographs are caught within a repertoire of images from this period which had attempted to sell Iran as a land of opportunity to foreigners, a 2,500 year old “Great Civilization” replete with luxury goods and resources hidden in the wells of its ancient Aryan culture. Zahedi’s photographs highlight this link between fashion and tourism in the crafting of Iranian cultural identity as an object of consumption in this period.

Looking at Zahedi’s images, one is struck by the extent to which tourist architecture seems to shape what his camera sees. The buildings that appear in his photographs are not mere backgrounds for Taylor but are repeatedly quoted across her body. In the image titled *Tomb of Sa’adi, Shiraz* for instance, Taylor stands at the entrance to the poet’s tomb and is almost absorbed into its structure. The camera zooms onto a floral niche creating a patterned film across the whole surface of the image that frames Taylor’s upper body. In this photograph, Taylor wears a white blouse lined with pink, blue, green and beige cross-stitched stripes which echo the color scheme of the Tomb’s floral niche. This color coordination, extending to Taylor’s pink lips, the blue shadows of her eyes and the golden disks that hang from her ear lobes, clips select elements from Taylor’s surroundings granting fashionable, aesthetic value to their displaced forms. For the split second that it takes the camera’s shutter to complete its cycle of allowing the light to memorialize Taylor’s image on film, her body has picked up the valuable elements from her surrounding architectural setting. As I show further below, this act of

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<sup>212</sup> LACMA’s press release.

architectural citation across Taylor's body and clothing forges the building's aesthetic value into fashion's consumptive economy, that are sold through gendered and racialized bodies.

In order to contextualize Zahedi's work within a broader archive of images, it is useful to view them alongside a few popular magazines whose photographers were sent to Iran to stage their fashion shoots against the country's historic sites and monuments. Both *Vogue* and *GQ* for instance, did large fashion spreads on Iran in 1969 showing models posed against famous Iranian heritage sites clad in designer outfits. *Vogue* promoted its Persian Blue clothing line by drawing on the "fantastic blues of tilework done by craftsmen who knew, long ago, that nothing under the sun is prettier than blue."<sup>213</sup> Zahedi's process of lifting select motifs for fashionable display, is further evident in photographs from *Vogue* and *GQ*. Similar to Zahedi's images, the fashion spreads in both magazines show models dressed in colors and patterns that closely resemble the architectural environments in which they are placed, often mimicking their surroundings to such an extent that they seem to dissolve into the patterns and ridges of the buildings. In each image, the fashion photographer's lens seems to have roamed the landscape and settled upon those fragments that could have left a trace on the model's clothing. An image from *Vogue* for instance, shows a model standing under the scalloped columns of the Tomb of Hafez, the same mausoleum framing Taylor's figure in one of Zahedi's photographs. Here, the model in *Vogue* wears flowing blue trousers printed with

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<sup>213</sup> *Vogue*, November 1969.

large floral patterns resembling the dome that rises above her figure. Another *Vogue* image zooms onto a model standing in the alcove of another famous structure in Shiraz, holding a bowl of pears. Her pink dress echoes the pink robe worn by the figure painted into the mosaic behind her while she duplicates his gesture and the bowl of fruits in his hands. This same building appears on the cover of *GQ*'s October issue, showing the same pear-carrying figure adjacent to a model, this time dressed in a plaid overcoat and a hat recalling the figure within the mosaic structure.

The remarkable aspect of these fashion shoots (including Zahedi's photographs) is how architectural elements are employed by the fashion designers and photographers to connote value. As I have argued above, Persophilic clothing lines exploit the same signs of the "primitive" that appear in tourist architecture erected under the patronage of the Pahlavi state. As Arjun Appadurai has noted, ordinary items can become luxury items through their course of distribution. With a process he calls "diversion," Appadurai points to an aesthetic and economic form of augmenting value for an object by displacing it onto a new path of circulation.<sup>214</sup> This process is evident in the fashion spreads discussed above, and certainly within Zahedi's photographs, where the designers and photographers employ aesthetics of diversion to reroute the "primitive" within Iranian architectural designs into their styles in order to mark them as uniquely fashionable and enhance their value. By quoting architectural elements into their designer apparels, they at once endow

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<sup>214</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 26.

value onto select architectural fragments and capitalize on them by incorporating them into their designs.

Aesthetics of diversion hence highlights the interdependence between Iran's tourist industry in this period and the transnational fashion industry. In the fashion spreads discussed above, the diversion of architectural fragments into Iran-inspired clothing lines are enabled by Iran's tourist industry, which initially diverted these monuments and planted them into the paths of local and international travelers. As discussed earlier, the Pahlavi state rerouted Muslim pilgrimage sites into the tracks of local and international travelers who were encouraged to visit these sites as disinterested tourists rather than devout Muslims and appreciate them alongside the palatial ruins of the ancient Persian Empire. The altered secular value accorded to these sites were in turn retrieved by the fashion market and diverted again into the designer labels advertised in magazines such as *Vogue* and *GQ*. In doing so, the fashion and the tourist industry both participated in circulating signs of Iranian national worth within the transnational market for the benefit of its vendors and the investors in its image.

### III.

Thus far I have argued that Zahedi's images cannot be viewed as mere documents of Taylor's trip to Iran, and that they must be contextualized in relation to other images from this period that promoted Iran as a land of opportunity for foreign investment. I have shown that focusing on Taylor's exceptionality ignores the crucial fact that her trip was funded for the benefit of the Iranian tourist industry and that far from being

randomly selected, the architectural setting against which Taylor is photographed, are famous Iranian landmarks built to convey a modern Iranian national identity that was in voluntary subordination to the rules of the “free” market economy. In this last section, I want to zoom closer onto the bodies that occupy the photographs discussed thus far. Moving from the architectural backdrops to the bodies that inhabit these images allows me to make a few necessary distinctions between Taylor and the anonymous models who appear in these photo shoots.

Clothes advertised in fashion magazines are often worn by nameless models, where the featured items are pitched at viewers with a price tag. Fashion spreads, as Appadurai has noted, connote “the illusion of total access and high convertibility, the assumption of a democracy of consumers and of objects of consumption.”<sup>215</sup> In fashion magazines, unnamed models purport to occupy the viewer’s place within the image wearing luxury designer items that lay claim to accessibility for aspiring middle classes. Yet, the viewers hailed and greeted by the fashion industry, are not only economically marked but they are also racially specific. The fashion industry’s racial hierarchies are evident in the examples discussed thus far, where the photo spreads that promoted Persophilic clothing lines never included Iranian models. The fair skin and blond hair of the women appearing in these photographs, instead flag racially white subjects as the consumers of their displayed attires. In the words of Nirmal Puwar, in fashion “white

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 32.

female bodies occupy the universal empty point which remain racially unmarked.”<sup>216</sup> It is precisely due to this “unmarked” position, Puwar writes, that “white female bodies can play with the assigned particularity of ethnicized female bodies” without suffering “the violence of revulsion.”<sup>217</sup> As Puwar adeptly explores, the racial logic of fashion is such that the very same items that are disparaged as markers of “tradition” on brown bodies, are given aesthetic worth and legitimacy when appropriated and sported on white bodies. In doing so, the fashion industry grants whiteness the power and privilege to occupy the “unmarked” and universal “empty point” of race.

Extending this rationale further, I want to argue that “whiteness” is not a racial essence that is already possessed by “white female” bodies, as Puwar seems to suggest. Rather, the fashion industry, is one cultural site amongst many, that participates in mobilizing and defining what whiteness means and who can attain its privileges. In my reading here, the bodies of models in the fashion magazines discussed here are not “unmarked” but are *constructed* as racially white through the logic of appropriation. By lifting and rerouting fabrics, patterns, cuts and colors from one set of bodies onto another, the fashion industry actively constructs whiteness through the resignification of aesthetic elements. In other words, the very movement of select architectural motifs from the tiled dome of a mosque onto the designer clothing sported by a model photographed in front of it for instance, colors the model’s consumptive powers as racially white while coloring

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<sup>216</sup> Nirmal Puwar, “Multicultural Fashion... Stirrings of Another Sense of Aesthetics and Memory,” *Feminist Review* 71 (2002), 63-87, 76.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

the dispossessed mosque as a racially ethnicized site. In this way, the blue tiles of mosque's dome are semantically transformed by the fashion industry into luxury items that link racial whiteness to class and economic distinction.

The racial logic of Iran's "Great Civilization," as I have argued throughout this essay, was to mobilize Iran as the "originary" site of Aryanism. This allowed the Iranian elite and upper-middle classes to ascribe the roots of Iran's impeded and delayed arrival into modernity to Iran's ethnically diverse groups. As mentioned above, the Pahlavi state aspired towards whiteness by targeting Muslims in particular. The Iranian ruling classes, the heirs of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire, employed the Aryan discourse to shield their bodies against other forms of racialization and linked whiteness with consumption and class mobility. According to Parvin Paidar, "the lifestyle of the royal family was presented as the example to be aspired to by ordinary people and imitated by the newly rising, luxury seeking, consumerist, upper and middle classes."<sup>218</sup> In accordance with the lifestyles of the royal family, which was routinely publicized through local media outlets,<sup>219</sup> "it became fashionable for well-to-do Iranians to shop extravagantly in Western department stores and take seasonal holidays in Western ski and beach resorts."<sup>220</sup> As such, the Pahlavi state provided a route towards whiteness through economic means.

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<sup>218</sup> Paidar, 148.

<sup>219</sup> See Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>220</sup> Paidar, 148.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the crowned king and queen of the Pahlavi state make an appearance in both *Vogue* and *GQ* fashion spreads as exemplary, modern and fashionable rulers. Picturing the couple walking along the ruins of Persepolis, *GQ* described the Shah of Iran as a “strikingly handsome and charming man,” who “cuts a dashing figure in a business suit, official regalia, or when indulging in sports.”<sup>221</sup> The writer for *Vogue*, similarly praised Empress Farah for being “beautiful, thoughtful, aware, wanting in hubris but not in humor or courage,” who “was photographed for *Vogue* wearing antique gold Persian jewelry and a dress like those worn by women in the south of Persia.”<sup>222</sup> This representation of Iran’s king and queen is in direct contrast to how average Iranians are described within the pages of these magazines. *Vogue*’s travel writer James Morris for instance, chose to describe his encounter with Iranians in the following words,

They are dark, slight, hook-nosed, handsome lot. They have been given a dingy look by their adoption of Western clothes, generally of drab textile and obsolete cut, but they still have Assyrian, bas-relief profiles, and their black eyes glint with an evasive humor, as though they wished to make you laugh but had no intention of explaining the joke.<sup>223</sup>

Despite their “adoption of Western clothes,” the Iranians in this passage are racialized as “dark” recalling Homi Bhabha’s “not quite/not white” to describe the mimetic inauthenticity of the colonized populations in the eyes of the colonized.<sup>224</sup> Unlike the

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<sup>221</sup> *GQ*, October 1969, 95.

<sup>222</sup> *Vogue*, November 1969.

<sup>223</sup> *Vogue*, November 1969, 212.

<sup>224</sup> Here I am drawing on Homi Bhabha’s notion of the mimetic in postcolonial settings. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994).

“dingy look” of ordinary Iranians however, the king and queen are capable of diverting aesthetic signs of the “primitive” onto their bodies. The Shah sports his “business suit” alongside the “official regalia” of the “Great Civilization” and the Empress is here adorned with her inherited “antique gold Persian jewelry” and a “dress *like* those worn by women in the south.” As such, the couple is exempt from the “dark” racialization with which regular Iranians are burdened. Instead, much like the white bodies of the models discussed above, the queen can own the styles of “southern women” and dress “like” them, thereby mobilizing her own whiteness through the consumption of the “primitive.”

It is important to note here that the upper and middle class Iranians in this period, taking their cue from elite classes, saw fashion as integral to their modern, white racial mobility and followed the latest local and international trends. As a result, they would likely defy any description of their styles as “drab,” “dingy,” or “obsolete” as is presented by *Vogue’s* travel writer. Not only were Iranians not ignorant about the latest fashions in this period, the leading journal *Zan-e Ruz* (translated to ‘Today’s Women’) seems to have offered a few fashion tips to Taylor herself on her visit to Iran. According to *People* magazine, which reported on Taylor’s trip to Iran in 1976, “local tastemakers” were unimpressed with Taylor’s style upon meeting her and “clucked when Taylor showed up for a tea party meeting with Empress Farah Diba wearing a funereal unstylish black dress.”<sup>225</sup> Further, upon meeting Taylor, *Zan-e Ruz* described her as a “fattish, short, big-busted woman with poor makeup and totally out of fashion,” and recommended that she

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<sup>225</sup> Clare Crawford and Parviz Raein “The Charming Zahedi Ponders: Can Liz Taylor Be a Diplomatic Incident?” *People Magazine* 5: 23, June 14, 1976.

goes on a diet.<sup>226</sup> Despite their absence from the pages of *Vogue* and *GQ* and their representation within these magazines as outmoded simpletons, Iranian trendsetters were actively involved within the fashion industry at this time. In fact, Iranian textile and garment manufacturers were some of the main industries that benefited from the Shah's industrial expansion, attracting U.S. companies such as DuPont in the 1970s for joint venture investments in synthetic fabrics and cotton-rayon blends, "which consumers appreciated for their high colors, silk-like feel."<sup>227</sup> My point here is not to commend the fashion industry in pre-revolutionary Iran, but to stress the paradoxical nature of racial mobility through fashion for middle-class Iranians. While consuming fashion was promoted by the Pahlavi state as a route towards whiteness, *Vogue's* travel spread only presented a "dark" and "dingy" population in "obsolete" clothes.<sup>228</sup> Fashion discourse thus hinges upon racializing "dark" those whose aesthetics are appropriated and diverted into trendy adornments for the construction of exceptional white subjects.

The fashion industry's participation in constructing whiteness as exceptional is not only evident in the pages of *Vogue* and *GQ*, which managed to carve out Iran's royal family from the homogeneous "dark" masses, it is also echoed in Zahedi's images. The exceptional quality of whiteness is indeed the central emphasis of LACMA's press release, where Taylor is portrayed as so outstanding that "even wrapped in a chador and photographed in black and white, [she] is never anonymous because of her iconic glance

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> See Blaszczyk.

<sup>228</sup> Bhabha, 122.

and recognizable eyes.”<sup>229</sup> This comment refers to one of Zahedi’s photographs where Taylor stands in front of the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz wearing a chador—a garment worn by women entering these sites. Yet LACMA’s commentator seems to neglect the crucial fact that in none of Zahedi’s images Taylor is ever at the risk of becoming “anonymous.” Not only is Taylor’s identity never destabilized within any of Zahedi’s images, she owes her very “recognizable eyes” and “iconic glance” to such photographs and the broader discourse of fashion that promotes and mobilizes racial and class exceptionality. Within this particular image, the other women dimmed into the corners of the photograph are not granted the same privilege. They are not imagined by the photographer to have an identity, individuality or capacity for fashion as Taylor does. These women are merely what they wear and are captured in this image as replacements for architectural features and as documentary citations for Taylor’s chosen garment. Even though it is likely that these women also borrowed their chadors, along with Taylor, at the entrance to the shrine as is customary at such sites, Zahedi’s lens does not adjust to capture the looks in any of these women’s eyes. Instead Taylor’s gaze is the focal point while the other women blend into the recesses of the camera’s depth of field. Zahedi’s camera hence contributes to representing the women in the background as the “dark” masses against whom Taylor’s exceptionality is marked and marketed.

As I explored in the introduction to this essay, fashion can often be the site where personal freedoms are gauged. Fashion, in the words of Minh-Ha T. Pham, is “an emblem

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

and practice of multiple neoliberal freedoms including the freedom to accumulate consumerist choices and connected to that the freedom of self-expression and self-determination.”<sup>230</sup> The classed nature of such “freedoms,” I have argued, operates along the lines of race and gender. Fashion, is an aesthetic and discursive practice that diverts the signs of a racialized “primitive” into consumable commodities. This practice assumes a white subject and is the site of interpellation and assimilation into whiteness, while denying its privileges to those whose cultures are appropriated. Furthermore, by placing Zahedi’s photographs of Taylor within the Iranian state’s broader social and political stakes in industrial modernity, I have aimed to highlight the gendered dimensions of “freedom” within the cold war period. As discussed in my introduction, entrance into the capitalist economy in this period meant a political alignment with the U.S., which was represented within pop cultural media as an escape from the bondage of Soviet communism and a “freely” chosen political subordination. In this context, Taylor’s images in Iran where she takes on the chador or when she is stretched out as an Odalisque in Tehran’s Hilton hotel, are visual expressions of the social dramas of bondage and freedom brought into the “private” space of the Hollywood actress. In these images, Taylor’s role-play as a mythical Odalisque confined to a room, or a Muslim woman wrapped in a chador, dramatizes her ability to be “free” from such constraints, regardless of her ultimate (voluntary) submission to the gaze of the camera.

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<sup>230</sup> Minh-Ha T. Pham, “Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Digital Raced Body,” *Camera Obscura* 76, 26:1 (2011): 2-37, 14.

It is important to keep in mind however, that while Iran performed the role of the “primitive” in the 1960s and 1970s, and indeed continues to fulfill this position in a modified form today in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and exhibitions such as the one at LACMA, its culture is not of a mythical past but functions within the transnational distribution of economic and political power. Understanding cultures as linked, and operative within a connected social field, is to acknowledge, as Chow has noted, “the co-temporality of power structures that mutually support and reinforce the exploitation of the underprivileged social groups.”<sup>231</sup> In other words, it is important to keep in mind that structures of domination and hierarchy are actively formed through transnational alignments that reproduce power relations within specific geographical settings. Hence, one of my intentions in this essay has been to highlight the Iranian elite’s participation within an Orientalist revival of a “Great Civilization,” which was seen as the most effective strategy for mobilizing the Aryan discourse and hence entering modernity through racial and class mobility. As Meyda Yegenoglu has written, Orientalism cannot simply be understood as a “construction” whose operation can simply end when the fallacy of its representational strategies have been uncovered and a “true” Orient is revealed.<sup>232</sup> Rather, Orientalism is best understood as a “process of materialization” whereby the very existence of the notion of the Orient is entangled with its representation.<sup>233</sup> Orientalism is thus a representational strategy for the expression and

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<sup>231</sup> Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 196.

<sup>232</sup> Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

maintenance of economic and power inequality pitched in the language of radical cultural difference. LACMA's revival of Zahedi's old photographs raises questions about the function of such exhibitions today when aggressive sanctions against Iran wielded through Islamophobic rhetorics, have superseded older representations of Iran in the U.S. media. As explored throughout this essay, while there seems to be a radical aesthetic shift in representations of contemporary Iran when compared to those of the 1960s and 1970s, their effect in maintaining unequal distributions of power remains unchanged.

## Chapter 4. The Frame of the Mouth: US Feminism and the Iranian Revolution

### I.

Kate Millett and her lover, the Canadian photo journalist Sophie Kier, produced a series of audio tapes and photographs during their trip to Iran in 1979. These sounds and images, which form the basis of Millett's published book titled *Going to Iran*, place us in the midst of women's demonstrations against the newly formed Islamic Republic. Recorded in a short, two-week span, from March 5th (when they arrived in Tehran) to March 19th (when they were expelled from the country), these tapes lead us through numerous demonstrations on Tehran's streets, press conferences held for local and international press, sit-ins and protests at Tehran University and the Ministry of Justice, as well as indoor gatherings where women discussed their political philosophies. There are numerous voices that appear in Millett's tapes, many of which belong to members of an Iranian diasporic collective based in the United States known as the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran (CAIFI), who returned to Iran after the revolution to partake in the formation of the new state. According to Millett, it was CAIFI members, with whom she had worked in the US for seven years, who invited her to Iran to speak at the International Women's Day. "Kate, your sisters need you in Iran," writes Millett in her book quoting Khalil, a member of New York CAIFI, to whom she responds excitedly, "it does sound a bit melodramatic. But it also sounds grand!"<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Kate Millett, *Going to Iran* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982), 25.

Despite the fragmentary nature of Millett's archive, it is nonetheless rich with quotidian, daily experiences of protest. Kier's photographs are mainly close-up portraits of the feminists with whom Millett and Kier stayed and who organized the events they participated in. There are also photographs of marches on the streets, showing posters and banners held up by protestors, as well as scenes depicting confrontations between women and the military police or other oppositional groups. Millett's cassette tapes, compiled as hours of unedited material, follow women through thick Tehran traffic, where they are stopped and searched numerous times by the newly formed Komiteh (street police). They capture slogans chanted during long marches from Tehran University to Azadi square as protestors pass around water and sweets to marching women. They record voices of random pedestrians, some of whom approach Millett to challenge, or at times approve, of her presence in Iran and her involvement in women's demonstrations.

Looking at Kier's photographs alongside Millett's audio cassettes is fascinating for the different approaches each take to documenting the events. Kier's photographs are meticulously composed images, many of which capture anonymous protestors she encountered on the streets and others that are closely cropped portraits. Unlike Kier's carefully composed photographs, Millett's tapes seem less selective about what they record. During her stay in Tehran, Millett carried her tape-recorder around her neck throughout the day, picking up ambient sounds, meaningless noises and quotidian conversations alongside more momentous events that caught the attention of Kier's camera.

Amongst the many hours of audio recordings, I found myself drawn to a particular moment in these tapes. After a chaotic day at Tehran's Ministry of Justice, where the women's gathering was interrupted by the Komiteh and violently dispersed, the women who stayed behind lingered for a while to plan their events for the following day. The microphone is attached to Millett's body, somewhere close to her mouth and her voice is the route of my entrance into this scene. *Problem-solving nuts, she says.* The women are passing around handfuls of nuts, some of which make their way to Millett. *Problem-solving nuts?* Millett puzzles over this phrase. Yes, *ajeel moshkel gosha*, in English it translates to *problem-solving nuts*, echoes a voice I recognize as that of Kateh Vafadari, a CAIFI member. Crunching them in her mouth as she speaks into the microphone, Millett explains that one is meant to make a wish while eating these nuts. *These nuts are magic. Make a wish and it might just come true.* Millett is silent and after a long pause, she wonders what it is that the Iranian women are wishing for.

*I wonder what the Iranian women are wishing for.*

In this essay, I offer this quotidian moment of offering—this event of passing around *ajeel moshkel gosha* at the end of a particularly violent day of protest at Tehran's Ministry of Justice—as a performance. This act of passing around nuts captured on tape, is certainly a performance in the sense that it presents us with a folk ritual. Handing out *ajeel moshkel gosha* is a common practice for people who have vowed to seal their personal prayers through communal offerings. As such, passing around mixed nuts is a socialization of one's wish through a prescribed, performative and culturally legible form.

It follows the particular conventions of sharing one's longings and aspirations with others through food. Eating another's offering is here an ingestion of their wishes into the body and hence securing one's involvement with another's desires. This moment of offering caught on Millett's tape, is also represented to us through words. It is captured as sounds and narrated into speech. I hear Millett's question, *I wonder what the Iranian women are wishing for*, as an echo of another text, namely Michel Foucault's article from the previous year (October 1978), emphatically titled "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?"<sup>235</sup> This question forms the basis of my discussion in this essay. It presents us with a wish: A desire to know another's desire.

*What are the Iranians dreaming about?*

Since Millett's audio recordings are my entry point into this scene of women sharing food, I want to first consider Millett's desire uttered in this moment of wish making. As she takes a handful of mixed nuts into her mouth, Millett voices her own wish into the microphone: *I wonder what the Iranian women are wishing for*. This casual remark gets at the heart of Millett's experience in Iran. It indicates Millett's continued frustrations with acting on the sidelines of the events organized by CAIFI members. Her wish is to know what *they* are wishing and to become incorporated into their movement. Her utterance into the microphone is a statement of her problem expressed as a wish to know *their* wish. Not only was Millett not received with the kind of enthusiasm she had expected, upon arrival in Iran she sensed a feeling of detachment from the people who

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<sup>235</sup> Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

had invited her. This feeling was inflamed when CAIFI members opted to put her and Kier up in a hotel rather than hosting them at their homes. It was further exacerbated when the organizers of International Women's Day suggested that Millett does not introduce herself as an American during her speech for the detrimental effect this national affiliation might have on the event's political reputation. This all amounted to a perceived failure on Millett's part to build the kind of global alliance she had imagined. As Millett stated in a press conference she held soon after her arrival in Tehran, she thought of Iranian women as vanguards of global feminism. "Women in Iran," she asserted, "are now the center of our struggle in the world. The eyes of the world should be turned upon them."<sup>236</sup> What is happening in Iran, she continued, "may herald the rise of women throughout Islam and the Near and Middle East. So that we will not only have an international women's movement but a global one."<sup>237</sup> She further held her own presence in Iran as "inevitable" since Iranian women were not merely involved in a national uprising, but were spearheading a global feminist movement at whose forefront Millett imagined herself. In this light, Millett's casual remark about what it might be that the Iranian women were wishing for, can be read as a desirous incorporation of her body into their world and a longing for intimacy, political alliance and "global sisterhood." Her words uttered into the microphone is an expression of her problem, namely, her inability to transform "their" protest into "our" global feminist revolution, a cause into which a handful of wish-granting nuts, the *ajeel moshkel gosha*, were called upon to intervene.

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 164.

Kier's close-up photographs, I want to argue, are further manifestations of this desire for intimacy, incorporation and political alliance. Her images zoom in close to frame the women's faces, cropping them at the shoulder and the neckline. This tight framing ingests Kier's own body into the scene and in close proximity to the women she photographs. She appears to be standing right there, face to face, shoulder to shoulder, with the protestors. In an image such as portrait of Nasrin, Kier's own body is amongst the many women marching forward to Azadi square. She seems to have merely called out Nasrin's name to catch a glimpse of her smile. This jutting out, or projection of her body into the image however, is also tempered by an intimate lingering on the surface of the photograph, that in my reading is heightened by the black and white color of the pictures. The high contrast produces irregular shapes that flatten the image prompting us to oscillate between recognizing form and discerning texture. In a photograph like Taraneh's portrait for instance, the tight zoom almost has the reverse effect of hiding her from vision because the coarse surface created by the black and white grain of the photograph appeals more to the fine senses in the pads of our fingers. Our look, here dissolves into touch, as we slide from the visual to the haptic, and from the remoteness of optical mastery to the intimacy of tactile discernment. This sensuality of Kier's photographs further alerts us to the corporeal identification of her body with the women she photographed and her desire for incorporation and "global sisterhood."

In this sense both Millett's words and Kier's photographs partake in an ingestive ritual of social identification. Not only do their recording devices incorporate these

women's likeness into sounds and images, they also built material identifications with them. So, if Millett and Kier's recordings tell us about their incorporative desires, what can we make of the women's collective act of ingesting their problems in their performative gesture of passing around food as caught on Millett's tape? Further, how can we understand the politics of photographs that place the circle of the mouth at the center of their composition?

Eating, I want to suggest here, is one of multiple kinds of mouth-work. The space of the mouth is not only the route of ingestion but also of the externalization of speech. Our mouths bring together the physical act of taking in and the symbolic act of speaking out.<sup>238</sup> Eating has a direct relationship to speaking and when speech is regulated, eating can become its displaced site. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok have argued that, eating comes to replace speech when one's ability to speak is placed under pressure. "We may conclude," they write, that "in the face of both the urgency and the impossibility of performing one type of mouth-work—speaking to someone about what we have lost—another type of mouth-work is utilized, one that is imaginary and equipped to deny the very existence of the entire problem."<sup>239</sup> As I noted earlier, this gathering of woman that I have been analyzing here, took place at the end of a particularly violent day at Tehran University where the women's meeting was disrupted and dispersed by the newly formed revolutionary police. For these women, eating *ajeel moshkel gosha* is, in this sense, the

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<sup>238</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between eating and articulation see Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: Food Sex Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>239</sup> Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 129.

incorporation of what they were denied in the form of political speech. Passing around the “problem-solving nuts” here becomes a re-enactment by other means of what was interrupted. The problem being ingested here, is the loss of political agency and the loss of speech; It is the women’s inability to voice their vexation with the newly instituted laws that aimed to further inhibit women’s involvement in social and political life.

Close-up photographs of course tend to foreground the mouth by default. Yet, in some of Kier’s photographs, the frame of the photograph becomes doubled in the circle of the mouth that frames the speaking subject. The mouth, as Jacques Derrida has shown us, is not an entrance into a subject’s interiority, but what folds the subject out into the space of the social through her tongue and through her speech.<sup>240</sup> Images such as this one bring attention to the muteness of photographs. They underscore the photograph’s inability to access voice, and to only offer renditions of swallowed speech. At demonstrations such as the one in Tehran, photographers zoom in onto signs and banners that carry written slogans. Kier’s photographs follow this convention. In one image for instance, a woman holds up a sign to her face. The slogan written on her sign is one of many popular chants that were sang at the protests and roughly translates to “at the dawn of freedom, the women’s rights are missing.” In a telling gesture, this woman’s sign covers her mouth, displacing her voice onto her written text. Yet her message only works to reiterate her stance by pointing to her absent voice from the process of social formation.

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<sup>240</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” *Diacritics* 11:2 (Summer 1981): 2-25; For an analysis of Derrida’s text see D.N. Rodowick “Impure Mimesis, or the Ends of Aesthetics” in *The Art of Art History* ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

What does it mean therefore to ingest and embody this collective loss of speech? I want to propose that by eating *ajeel moshkel gosha*, these women were incorporating and carrying their political loss within their bodies. By eating their problems, the women were ingesting a particular form of political subjectivity at the level of the flesh, creating an embodied archive of their political desires. Through eating, and within the space of Millett's archive, these women have become living and breathing monuments to their political aspirations. They are corporeal witnesses to their loss, which they carry within them and hand down generationally. I use the term "witness" pointedly here. We may recall that the Islamic Republic was itself built upon witnessing, since witnessing is the root concept for martyrdom.<sup>241</sup> Yet, within the rhetoric of the revolutionary state, witnessing is reserved for the bodies of male martyrs whose flesh are ingested into the nation and whose blood fertilize its soils.<sup>242</sup> In this patriarchal culture of martyrdom, a man's physical loss can be re-ingested and re-absorbed back into the nation. In this sense a male martyr is never truly "lost" but is always retained within the national body and is generative of its political direction. Women, on the other hand, cannot bear witness to patriarchal state formation. As Minoo Moallem has noted, women can give their blood, but their "blood does not symbolize women's contribution" to the nation.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> The Farsi terms *Shaheed* (martyr) and *Shahid* (witness) retain the close association between the two words.

<sup>242</sup> There are many revolutionary slogans that link the blood of the martyr to the body of the nation. Amongst them "*Az Khoon-e Javanan-e Vatan Laleh Damide*" which translates to "Tulips Grow from the Blood of Martyrs."

<sup>243</sup> Minoo Moallem, "Transnationalism, Feminism and Fundamentalism" *Between Women and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, eds Caren Kaplan, Minoo Moallem and Norma Alarcón (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999): 331.

In this sense, we may argue that women are lost at the roots of the nation but this is a loss that cannot be acknowledged *as* loss. One of the main criticisms that the women received at Tehran University on the particular day under discussion here (and something that I heard repeatedly throughout Millett's tapes) was that the Iranian revolution was won by men and women together and that fractioning off into a "women's" protest was in fact counter-revolutionary. Arguments arose around whether feminism was itself a political position at all and if it wasn't indeed better for women to express their grievances through established political parties.<sup>244</sup> Although it was women who were specifically targeted through various legislations, their gendered solidarity was denounced as causing an unnecessary fraction within the social body. The protest at which Millett and Kier were present for instance, was against the removal of female judges, the demotion of women on television and the right to abortion, yet the "feminist" label was rejected by many present at the event as counter-revolutionary or bereft of political content.<sup>245</sup> What I am emphasizing here is not so much the severity of women's political suppression by the revolutionary state, but that in order for the revolution to have become a coherent national uprising, it was imperative that women did not voice their opposition. In other words, women were asked to swallow their losses for the sake of a collective cause that did not acknowledge their grievances.

Iran's nationalist formation, we may then argue, operates through the paradoxical inclusion of its excluded gendered subjects. As Anne Anlin Cheng has adeptly argued in

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<sup>244</sup> Millett, 166.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 174.

relation to racialized subjects within the United States, nationalism is often sustained through the assimilation, or “uneasy digestion,” of excluded populations.<sup>246</sup> The national body, in Cheng’s assessment, operates melancholically because it is a “system based on physical and social consumption-and-denial.”<sup>247</sup> Following Cheng, we may interpret Iranian revolutionary state’s uneasy retention of women within its national body, as a melancholic political formation. Unlike the bodies of male martyrs who get ingested and become generative of the nationalist discourse, women’s loss remain unacknowledged within the nation’s history and political direction.

Abraham and Torok have further provided us with the terminology to analyze the gendered status of “lost” subjects within the Iranian social body. In their study, Abraham and Torok distinguish between two different forms of consumption and absorption of loss. The first, which they call “introjection,” is a process through which loss finds a legible place within social structures by being publicly acknowledged and mourned.<sup>248</sup> Resembling the treatment of male martyrs, whose portraits adorn Iran’s public sphere, introjection (or mourning) guards against loss by transforming it into the historical narrative of the nation. As Ranjana Khanna has explained it, “introjection refers to the *full* psychological assimilation of a lost object or abstraction.”<sup>249</sup> Within the context of nationalist

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<sup>246</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>248</sup> Abraham and Torok., 128.

<sup>249</sup> Emphasis mine, see Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

projects, introjection means a full acknowledgement and mourning of all subjects who were lost in the path of nation building.

Yet it is apparent that not all subjects are ever easily assimilated and absorbed into the cause of the nation. As Cheng's argument above indicates, nationalist projects are plagued with the "uneasy digestion" of populations who are excluded-but-retained within the nation's fold. This impossibility for complete introjection, and indeed the likelihood of its failure, is what Abraham and Torok refer to as "incorporation." In their assessment, "incorporation results from the losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as loss."<sup>250</sup> In such cases, the impossibility (or refusal) to mourn, results in a melancholic state whereby, "the words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss."<sup>251</sup> To continue the oral overtones of these terms, incorporation (or melancholia) is a loss swallowed whole that instead of breaking down remains unabsorbed within the national psyche.

While I find Abraham and Torok's distinction between introjection and incorporation useful for theorizing the gendered dimension of loss within the Iranian national body, it should be noted that within their work introjection occupies a privileged place because it refers to the curative process of dealing with loss. In their texts, introjection is described as a form of social growth, a "process of broadening the ego," and a way of defeating melancholia.<sup>252</sup> This privileging of introjection in their writings,

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<sup>250</sup> Abraham and Torok, 130.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 127.

as a number of scholars have noted, has led to the disparagement of melancholia as a pathological condition that needs to be overcome.<sup>253</sup> Yet if melancholia refers to the psychosocial condition of being lost or becoming marginalized within the space of the social, then it cannot be easily dismissed as a pathology. In fact, to do so would be to deny the validity of marginalized groups' response to social exclusion. Cheng highlights this point when she notes that melancholia "has always existed for raced subjects both as a sign for rejection and as a psychic strategy in response to that rejection."<sup>254</sup> In other words, engaging melancholia is important because it is the cognitive response of marginalized subjects to their position within the social. Khanna has further echoed this point by arguing for the "critical agency" of melancholia. In her work, melancholia is not simply interpreted as the inability to assimilate into nationalist discourse but a *refusal* to be absorbed into its norms and ideals. For Khanna, denying the critical agency of melancholia would be an "unethical assimilation of otherness, a denial of loss and of an engagement with the damage brought about by that loss."<sup>255</sup> Melancholia has thus been theorized in recent scholarship as the loss of an ideal (of citizenship, legal rights or

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<sup>253</sup> For a critique of the sharp distinction drawn between the two terms see Jacques Derrida's foreword to Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and Christopher Lane, "The Testament of the Other: Abraham and Torok's Failed Expiation of Ghosts," *Diacritics* 27.4 (1998) 3-29.

<sup>254</sup> Cheng, 20.

<sup>255</sup> Khanna, 24.

subjecthood), and is thus placed at the heart of postcolonial, nationalist and revolutionary movements.<sup>256</sup>

Extending this reading of melancholia to the case at hand, we can argue that Iran's revolutionary movement was itself brought about through a refusal to assimilate into the imperial codes operative within the pre-revolutionary state. The overthrow of the Pahlavi regime was fueled by the loss of national and economic autonomy and a melancholic attachment to cultural sites—such as Shi'ite religious, legal and aesthetic residues—that escaped hegemonic “Westoxification.” As the case of the women's protests show however, the melancholic critical agency that brought about Iran's post-imperial revolutionary state, lost its own “critical” edge for the disenfranchised sectors of society. Women—and many others who were prosecuted for ethnic, religious and political affiliations—were thus caught in the midst of various forms of power struggles with whom they formed uneasy alliances. The arrival of Millett and Kier in Iran was one such expression of strategic and ambivalent political coalition. As one journalist put it during a direct confrontation with Millett, “given the fact that the revolution was to overthrow the Shah, it was also to repel foreign interests and influences, including American influences and interests: given the *delicate* state of affairs here—do you feel it proper for you to involve yourself in an Iranian issue?”<sup>257</sup> Within the space of Millett's archives, “global feminism” appears as an ambivalent and uneasy response to this “*delicate* state of

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<sup>256</sup> See also Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) and D. Eng and D. Kazanjian ed. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For a critique see Margarita Palacios, *Radical Sociality: On Disobedience, Violence and Belonging* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>257</sup> Millett, 172.

affairs.” It expresses CAIFI’s desire to resist the nascent patriarchal state formation in Iran by building a risky alliance with feminists from the US and France, while at once keeping a critical distance from the long history and legacy of imperial interests in the region.<sup>258</sup>

The detrimental effects of Western feminist alliance with the protestors have been treated by a number of scholars, most notably Nima Naghibi’s work on the history of feminism in modern Iran.<sup>259</sup> My concern in the next section is to shift our attention from the politics of Millett and Kier’s presence in Iran in 1979, to the critical potential of their archives for feminist historiography today. This shift is necessary for at least two reasons. First, While Millett and Kier’s archives display what Naghibi has called “benevolent maternalism” and are often naive about the specificity of the political struggles they witness, they cannot be altogether dismissed as a “Western” view of Iranian affairs. To do so would be, as Naghibi has argued, to repeat the “Western (imperial) versus Iranian (national) binary,” which proved so productive for the conservative clerics who managed to pitch feminism as a “Western” ideology hence defusing the radical potential of the protests.<sup>260</sup> Second, Millett and Kier’s archives contain fortuitous and unexpected fragments that may not have been legible to the producers themselves. The performative episode of passing around *ajeel moshkel gosha* for instance, does not appear in Millett’s

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<sup>258</sup> It should also be noted that feminism was not only perceived as a “western” project at this time but also conjured the legacy of indigenous Pahlavi feminism, which was begin expelled from the country during the revolution.

<sup>259</sup> Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>260</sup> Naghibi, 100.

own transcription of her tapes in her book *Going to Iran*. Yet, it has provided me (as a particular reader of her archive), the capacity for critical thought. The significance of returning to archives, is indeed due to the impossibility of any final or fixed meaning for such messy and nebulous productions. It is my contention therefore, that archives incorporate unassimilable residues that cannot be fully absorbed (or introjected) into historical narratives. Instead, there is always an excess of meaning that provides new readers the capacity for critical reinterpretations and which we may acknowledge as the ethical imperative of engaging (neo-)imperial archives.

## II.

### *What are the Iranians dreaming about?*

Let us build on the desire of this question by considering a scene in Millett's book. Shortly after her arrival in Tehran, Millett held a press conference in order to, in her words, "introduce the women's movement" to the international press. "From the coverage I have read," she announced, "you have not yet met the Iranian women's movement, you have not interviewed them, you have only observed them from a distance and in the streets."<sup>261</sup> The conference began with opening remarks made by two women from France representing the feminist magazine *Femmes en Movement*, followed by a statement made by Millett asserting her long-standing alliance with CAIFI, the organization through which she fought against the Shah and contributed to the success of the revolution, and finally turned to Vafadari, who addressed the press as a representative of Iranian women's

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<sup>261</sup> Millett, 162.

protest and an organizer of the International Women's Day's events. To their dismay however, the conference was not well received by the journalists in attendance. As one woman directly stated, "you are representing us with no political ideology whatsoever . . . yours is a purely feminist perspective, there are women in Iran who are socialists . . . there are many women who are communists, many women who are left . . . it seems to me you staged a press non-event, you have no very real connection with actual Iranian women."<sup>262</sup> These comments were echoed by another woman who inquired about the panel's political affiliations. "I'd like to know what women's group you are representing now," she asked, "I would also like to challenge your statements that the women's movement is emerging only now. We have been fighting since the time of our constitution . . . that would be 1906."<sup>263</sup>

As these statements indicate, CAIFI was pressed on its proper connections with "actual" Iranian women and its claims to represent the women's protests. The panel was rightly questioned on its boastful attempts to inherit an "Iranian women's movement," which had been around "since 1906" and to at once deny any alliance with recognizable parties (such as Fadaeen Khalgh or Tudeh parties active at the time). The panel's repeated assertions that they were formed "spontaneously," that they were "beyond organization," and that their marches and protests "simply occur" as "spontaneous phenomenon," was received as further indication of their lack of "political ideology" and "real" connection

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 166.

with “actual” Iranian women.<sup>264</sup> The group’s case was further exacerbated when Vafadari responded to these charges of inauthenticity with the following explanation: “there are lots of other Iranian sisters who were supposed to come here today, but unfortunately they have not arrived . . . they got lost.”<sup>265</sup> As far as the journalists were concerned, not only spontaneous feminism had no legitimate role in the midst of a nationalist uprising against imperial presence in Iran, but that the “lost” Iranian women summed up the panel’s tenuous claim to represent the Iranian women’s movement.

This palpable frustration of the international press with the involvement of feminists from France and the US in the Iranian women’s protests has been echoed in current academic treatment of Millett’s presence in Iran.<sup>266</sup> My intention is to shift our attention to the journalists’ irritation with the absence of “actual” Iranian women with whom the panel was accused of having no “real” connection. Instead of pitching the journalist’s demand for “actual” Iranian women *against* the panel however, I want to draw out the ideological similarities between these positions. Despite the apparent antagonism between the women on the panel and the international press, I see the journalists’ demand for “actual” Iranian women to be not so unlike the panel’s claims to represent them. I argue that both positions stem from the desire to materialize an “actual” Iranian woman and to know what she is wishing for. Regardless of the hostility sounded in the voice of one journalist who asked, “you say that they got lost, but there are lots of

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 167-169.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>266</sup> See for instance Naghibi,

them, we are expecting a million women on the streets tomorrow. Where are they? Why aren't they here?," this woman's desire for the appearance of the "lost" Iranian women resonates with Millett's wish uttered into her microphone. It is a demand for representation.

*Where is the actual Iranian woman, the one who got lost and never arrived? What are Iranian women dreaming about?*

This desire for the materiality of the other—the wish for her appearance in the flesh—I am suggesting here, is not unlike Millett's wish to know the other's wish. It is a desire for the desire of the other. For Lacan, desire is by its very definition the desire of the other. As Elizabeth Grosz has explained, "Desire desires the desire of an other. Desire is thus a movement, an energy that is always transpersonal, directed to others."<sup>267</sup> This transpersonal movement is an orientation towards the other, yet it does not have a definitive object. Desire directs itself to the other but the object of its fascination is always missing necessitating a movement from one site to another. "Desire," Grosz continues, "exhibits the structure of the wish: it is based on the absence or privation of its object."<sup>268</sup> While desire is directed to the other for its satisfaction, it is confronted by a missing object that cannot satisfy its wish. As Grosz further explains, "desire is a fundamental lack, a whole in being that can be satisfied only by one 'thing'—another('s) desire."<sup>269</sup> It is in this sense, that I understand the demand for the presence of an "actual"

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<sup>267</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 65.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

Iranian woman. It is a demand for the other, but an other who can never arrive. As an object of desire, the “actual” Iranian woman is always lost, never arrived or ever arriving. She is a wish that can never be satisfied. Why wish for something that cannot come true?

This wish is compelling because in its ever receding condition, the other’s desire forms the basis of the self. Her wish is thus the cause of fixation and fascination. As Gayatri Spivak has noted, “subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite,” because “it is always the desire for/of (the power of the Other) that produces an image of the self.”<sup>270</sup> What Spivak calls “subaltern consciousness” is here the dreams of Iranian women and, we may further argue, that the “elite self” is the subject of “global sisterhood.” It is the dreams of the Iranian woman that is subject to the cathexis of the global sister. It is towards her dreams that the global sister directs her desires. The “actual” Iranian woman hence orients the global sister. Her wishes become the global sister’s wishes and the material basis of her subjectivity. Global sisters want to know what Iranian women are dreaming about because that dream directs their own dreams.

Millett’s wish uttered into the microphone as she took in a handful of wish-granting nuts exemplifies this incorporation of the other’s absent desire. With her ingestive ritual of eating the wish of the other, she ingests that wish into her body harnessing its power for archival and historical introjection. But as Millett’s utterance into the microphone so poignantly expresses, the dream of the other can never be known.

*I wonder what the Iranian women are wishing for.* Her wish remains a wonder and a

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<sup>270</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies Historiography” In *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11.

mystery that drives her towards the other. The desire of the Iranian woman remains an inaccessible and ever receding dream that at once orients the movement of the global sister. As Spivak elaborates, subaltern consciousness “is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced, even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive.”<sup>271</sup> Yet, while the “the subaltern's view, will, presence, can be no more than a theoretical fiction,”<sup>272</sup> it enables and drives the subjectivity of the “elite” in whose archives it appears. The appearance of subaltern consciousness in the archive of the “elite”—which indeed is the *only* place it ever appears—is the sign of its incorporation and materialization into the discourse of the self. The wish of the Iranian woman can never be thought outside of Millett’s voice. It has no material reality than the utterance captured by the microphone. Millett’s voice is enabled by the desire of the other, while the recording device materializes that vanishing wish into a sound bite. By chewing on the wish-granting nuts that produce her refrain, Millett’s ingestive ritual absorbs the absent desire of the other into the discourse of the self, which speaks through the materiality of the archive.

*I wonder what the Iranian women are wishing for.*

It is the tape recorder attached to Millett’s body throughout her stay in Iran—even capturing her drowsy voice whispering to Kier as they fall asleep at nights—that transforms the desire of the other into the discursive effect of the self. The tape recorder is itself a device with the desire to preserve a soon-to-be lost and absent event. Like other

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

recording technologies, such as that of the camera, the tape recorder is based on the wish to capture the vanishing other. As Roland Barthes has said of the camera, it “establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there.”<sup>273</sup> The recording device is in the business of making things past. It does not aim to capture the present of a “thing” but by conserving its past, it makes us aware that it once was. To record is to produce an event as lost or in its “having-been-there.” Millett’s recording of the wish of the other is thus not an ingestion of the “being-there” of the wish, to use Barthes terminology, but rather a recognition of its absent place.

In order to further explore Millett’s recording practice in Iran, I want to turn to a photograph taken by Kier that has been preserved in Millett’s documents. This photograph archives an archival event. As Millett’s caption, meticulously posted on the top left hand corner of the image notes, the center of this photograph is occupied by Michele from the French feminist journal *Des Femmes en Movement*. Her face, entirely engulfed into the camera, protrudes forward through her recording machine. The extended lens of the camera projects her eyes out onto a crowd who remain invisible to us. Instead, the eyes of the camera’s reels turn toward us mimicking the direction of the marching crowd while winding the hidden film that wheels through its binocular cavity. The back of Michele’s shoulders lean against a man, whose face remains in a dark shadow. He is looking down onto a notepad and taking notes. Above him stands another

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<sup>273</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 44.

man with a pair of glasses supported on the ridge of his nose speaking into the round head of a microphone. This tight grouping of film-makers, note-takers and narrators is in turn captured by the lens of Kier's own camera, which stands off-screen, but whose lens frames the image. Millett's note attached to the printed photograph further archives this archiving of an archival event. It reads, "Michel film the march for des femmes en mouvement 'so the world will know'."

In this photograph, subaltern consciousness appears as the drive of the archive itself: the ingestive drive to capture the desire, wish and dreams of the other. While attempting to record the "actual" subaltern woman marching across Tehran's streets, this photograph instead captures the production of the subaltern dream. Kier's lens turns to the sidelines of the march to depict the orientation of the archive itself. It is the dream of the subaltern woman that drives the archive and it is her desires that make up its material production. The photographic record here fixes the fixation of the global sisters. Lodged in the photographic emulsion is the compulsion of the global sisters to capture the desires of marching Iranian women. For Freud, drives are known only through their fixations. As Grosz explains, fixations are "signs by means of which the drive is delegated a place in the unconscious."<sup>274</sup> In this sense, a fixation is an image or a representative sign that locates a drive. We may think of photographs as such fixations that situate the drive. Photographs catch the drive in their sticky surfaces. By picturing the archival event,

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<sup>274</sup> Grosz, 82.

Kier's photograph captures the archival cathexis. Rather than showing the marching women, this photograph locates the fixation itself: the drive to capture the other's desire.

What this photograph discloses therefore, is that the dream of the Iranian woman has no referent outside of the materiality of its recording. As Spivak has noted, it is only "elite documentation that give us the news of the subaltern consciousness."<sup>275</sup> This is not to simply say that "elite documentation" are mere constructions of subaltern consciousness which in itself has no "actual" reality. Rather, it is to suggest that subaltern consciousness is the very foundation of elite consciousness, in whose fixations it is located. As I have been arguing, it is the dream of the Iranian women (however absent, elusive and never arriving it may be) that orients the global sister and her archival drive. The global sister's records therefore, are not mere imaginary constructions but the site of her fixations that track her compulsion towards the other's desire. Kier's camera, like the tape recorder attached to Millett's body throughout her stay in Iran, is driven by this wish to capture the wish of the other because it is in that wish that the global sister is herself located.

*Where is the actual Iranian woman? Why has she not arrived?*

Here I want to return to the interrogation of the panel by the journalists present at the press conference in order to address the role of the record in the construction of feminism as an artistic and intellectual endeavor. As mentioned above, one of the main criticisms addressed to the panel participants was their lack of any "real" connection with

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<sup>275</sup> Spivak, 12.

“actual” Iranian women. Rather than attesting their affiliation with existing political parties, the panel insisted that their “movement” was “beyond organization” and that it occurred spontaneously. Millett writes,

Kateh [Vafadari] eschews this sort of quarreling and concentrates on the size and spontaneity of the demonstration yesterday at the Hall of Justice. Because indeed this is the point of that demonstration—its spontaneity—just as with the first one through the snowy streets the morning of March 8: no ‘group’ has *precipitated* these uprisings of women. Feminists and leftists attend them as well as the masses of women workers and students—but no one, certainly no group trying to incite or regiment, appoints them.<sup>276</sup>

As this quote suggests, while the journalists were demanding evidence of the panel’s “real” involvement with “actual” Iranian women in the form of party representation, Vafadari’s appeal to spontaneity was a way of offering subaltern consciousness by other means. In Millett’s words, spontaneity is “the point of that demonstration.” Rather than adhering to a “group” that would “incite or regiment,” Millett points to the impulsive and unplanned nature of the events. When asked “is there a central committee?” or confronted with baffled statements such as, “someone must be organizing this, someone should be, there should be somebody,”<sup>277</sup> the panel simply offered the title, The Ad Hoc Committee, to represent themselves.<sup>278</sup>

What I want to examine is how global feminism is here produced through the claim to spontaneity on the one hand, and the accumulation of recorded archives on the other. What is the relationship between this claim to the “real,” in the form of unplanned

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<sup>276</sup> Millett, 167.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 166.

and spontaneous action, and the Ad Hoc Committee's archival drive as depicted in Kier's photograph showing feminists from *Des Femmes en Movement* at its center? Do assertions to spontaneity, further elucidate the drive to capture the subaltern consciousness that I have been tracking thus far? In other words, how is the panel's insistence that they are "beyond organization," that the events they partake in "simply occur" as "spontaneous phenomena," linked with the desire to document and record these same events? My contention here is that spontaneity is at once the claim of the record. It is the accidental detail in a photograph, the scratch or omission in an audio recording, or the fortuitous appearance in a documentary footage, that correlates to the spontaneity to which the global feminists here lay claim. Accidents, omissions, fortuity and unintentionality are prerogatives of the record. They are also, as I explain below, the locus of subaltern consciousness towards whom the global feminist is oriented.

Within Gramscian terminology, the subaltern are those who are not "conjoined by class consciousness" but who only become visible if they "potentially erupt into incidents of spontaneous insurgency on the margins of civil society."<sup>279</sup> The subaltern figure cannot be known outside of such spontaneous eruptions and is, by definition, erratic and unpredictable. Since spontaneous insurgency is the event through which the subaltern announces itself *as* consciousness, spontaneity can come to stand in for the subaltern consciousness itself. It is this confusion between the spontaneous event on the one hand and subaltern consciousness on the other, I suggest, that drives the need to record such

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<sup>279</sup> See Khanna, 19.

events. If spontaneous insurgency is the only site where subaltern consciousness can be glimpsed, the material record holds the promise of disclosing the subaltern desire itself. This collapsing of the event with the will of its attendants is apparent in Millett's words cited above. "Spontaneity," she writes, was the very "point of that demonstration." With this comment, Millett accords spontaneity with consciousness and semantic value. The party affiliations, or ranks of the protestors, such as "students," "women workers," "leftists" and "feminists", are incidental to the meaning of the event. They are offered as extraneous information that further confirm the unplanned, and unorganized nature of the demonstration. Raising spontaneity to the status of the event's "point," highlights the nature of the event as a subaltern uprising that is neither adhered to, nor directed by a group.

It is this significance accorded to the spontaneity of the demonstration, that makes it worth recording. Recording devices such as the camera and the tape recorder are so amenable to capturing such events because they themselves operate fortuitously. As Walter Benjamin has said of the photograph, "no matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject."<sup>280</sup> It is through this "tiny spark of contingency" that the captured event is sealed onto the recording device, announcing the "reality" of its "Here and Now." It is this contingent "spark" in the record that holds access to the singularity of

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<sup>280</sup> Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, Translated by Henry Bond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 243.

the event. As with spontaneous insurgency, which promises to deliver the will of the subaltern in its erratic form, the record commits to divulging the particularity of the subject “seared” onto its magnetic surface. The collapsing of subaltern consciousness onto the spontaneity of the event is here reproduced once again as the record feigns to capture the unplanned demonstration. It is the contingency of the record that underpins its claim to the “having-been-there” of the subject, to recall Barthes phrase once again, and which in turn proffers the “having-been-there” of subaltern consciousness within the spontaneous event. This incidental correspondence between the recording device and the recorded event amplifies the record’s claim to stubbornly re-present the absent or lost referent.

Both Barthes and Benjamin have maintained that the photograph’s contingency, or what Barthes has called its *punctum*, establish its distinct relationship with its referent upholding the photograph’s claim to re-presentation. For Barthes, it is the “stubbornness of the Referent,”<sup>281</sup> that clings onto the record and fascinates the viewer. In Benjamin’s words quoted above, the beholder “feels an irresistible urge” to scour each image for that “tiny spark of contingency” because this detail sutures the photograph to its referent. The photograph, Barthes writes, “is literally an emanation of the referent.”<sup>282</sup> It proffers to present its subject because “every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent,” making it difficult to “deny that the thing has been there.”<sup>283</sup> This contingent “spark” of

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<sup>281</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6.

<sup>282</sup> Barthes, 80.

<sup>283</sup> Barthes, 76.

the record however, can only be found retrospectively. It is the beholder, in Benjamin's statement, who searches the photograph, after it has been taken, for the "reality" that seared the subject onto the image. Benjamin makes this retrograde time of the photograph more explicit when he writes of the beholder's urge "to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may discover it."<sup>284</sup> This temporal disorientation of the photograph, which pulls into the future just as it drags our present into the past, hangs on the edge of that "inconspicuous spot" that affirms the reality of the recorded event. What the *punctum* announces is the "having-been-there" of the subject, which anticipates our future discovery. As Barthes writes, the subject "has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred."<sup>285</sup> The photograph eternally defers its re-presentation of the referent for a future offering.

This deferral of the subject to its future discovery, is yet another way in which the record corresponds with spontaneous uprisings, whose "stubborn Referent" is subaltern consciousness. As Khanna has explained, "the subaltern has no class consciousness, is not part of a group that defines itself *as group*, and is defined as such only retrospectively."<sup>286</sup> Not only is subaltern consciousness tied to the contingency of the erratic and unplanned demonstration, it can only be grasped retrospectively within the records and narrations of the event. This formulation of the subaltern as a "retrospective

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<sup>284</sup> Benjamin, 243.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 247.

figure” who at once promises a future discovery, is evident in much of Millett and Kier’s records. In Kier’s photograph discussed above for instance, the caption appended to its upper edge reads, “Michel film the march for des femmes en mouvement ‘so the world will know’.” This sentence announces the implicit promise of the archival event: “so the world will know.” With this statement, the photograph pledges to divulge its secret (the ever receding dream of the spontaneous subaltern insurgency) to a future beholder. The record hence offers to re-present an “actual” Iranian woman, swallowed whole into the space of the record, to a future recipient.

The ingestive drive of the record, I am suggesting here, satisfies the desire for the materiality of the “actual” Iranian woman and the demand for her appearance in the flesh. As noted above, introjection promises to fulfill the failures of representative systems. The global sister’s archival drive, so stubbornly fixed onto the surface of Kier’s photograph, commits to satisfy by other means the journalist’s demand to present the “actual” Iranian woman. The panel’s failure to politically represent the “Iranian women’s movement,” their inability as one journalist said to “represent a political ideology” in the form of partisanship, is appeased in their records created as pictorial representations “so the world will know.” This future-oriented aim of the record however, as Barthes’ notion of the “stubborn Referent” suggests, is also paradoxically immobile as it continuously addresses itself to the immediacy of the present. In the contingent “spark” of the viewer’s present, the spectral “has been there” of the past is perpetually deferred into the future. In this

sense, the record's *representation* is the stubborn and recurrent materialization of the lost referent.

The record's association with the materiality of the lost (Iranian woman's) flesh is evident in Barthes' reading of the skin of the photograph as attached to his own. "A sort of umbilical cord," he writes, "links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."<sup>287</sup> No only is this "umbilical cord" of light the "carnal" tube that stretches the surface of the photograph to wrap itself around the viewer's face, but it penetrates the depths of the image to connect with the flesh of the photographed. In this statement, the "stubborn Referent" is no longer a lost apparition but materialized in the flesh drawing the viewer to inhabit its corporeal body. Barthes' naming of this carnal connection to the referent as an umbilical cord implicitly feminizes the referent. The photographed event becomes the (lost) mother, whose connection to the beholder is secured through the "umbilical cord" of light. The maternal referent is not simply a desire for the past but continues to be reproductive. Endowing Barthes with a new skin, the referent bears forth a new child, whose body is securely corded to the photograph through the carnal light of the gaze.

Barthes makes his equation of the referent with the figure of the mother more explicit when he turns to a photograph taken by Charles Clifford in 1854 titled *The Alhambra (Grenada)* reproduced in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes describes the photograph as

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<sup>287</sup> Barthes, 81.

follows: “an old house, a shadowy porch, tiles, a crumbling Arab decoration, a man sitting against the wall, a deserted street, A mediterranean tree.”<sup>288</sup> Captioning the image, “I want to live there,” Barthes informs us that his “longing to inhabit” the image is due to its ability to “bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself.”<sup>289</sup> This shuttling back and forth in time, Barthes notes, is due to the photograph’s uncanny effect of “awakening in me the Mother.”<sup>290</sup> Quoting Freud, he continues, “there is no other place [than the maternal body] of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there.”<sup>291</sup> Here, the photograph’s “stubborn referent”—those “crumbling Arab decoration”—is reincarnated as the architectural space of the Mother. The (lost) mother here returns, via the umbilical cord, as a “longing to inhabit” the image. The word architecture, like archive, derives from the Greek *arkheion* designating “a house or a domicile.”<sup>292</sup> The archived architecture seared onto the photograph re-presents the mother’s womb, reproducing the Barthes/child in the dilapidated walls of the Alhambra.

For Barthes, the contingency of the photograph, or its *punctum*, is hence the spark that opens the cavity of the mother’s womb. With every gaze the beholder desires to dwell in the hollow space of the feminized, “crumbling” (m)other. Barthes reiterates the

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<sup>288</sup> Barthes, 38.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

*archaic* time of the archival/architectural womb by stating: “what the chemical action develops [in a photograph] is undeveloped, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of instance (of the insistent gaze).”<sup>293</sup> The womb/wound is not only “undeveloped” but beyond development. It is what “cannot be transformed” doomed to the perpetual repetition of the same. Barthes’ projection of immobility unto the feminized (m)other is the displacement of the loss produced through systems of representation. As I have been arguing, the impossibility for complete introjection—the failure of representative systems—produce a loss that marks the site of desire. Barthes covers over this desire by materializing that loss. He finds it re-presented (in the flesh) in the dilapidated walls of the Alhambra imbricated with the fantasy of a lost (m)other. Barthes finds himself dwelling in this gap of desire. His “insistent gaze” does not move unidirectionally from himself to the image, but is bent back upon him delivering him from the depths of the photograph’s womb/wound. The “essence (of the wound)” is here the cut slit into the space of the representation from whose maternal depths the subject is delivered whole.

It is not by accident that the word dwelling is itself pregnant with two meanings. One of living or inhabiting and the other of lingering over something. The desire to dwell in/on the wound is at once the melancholic insistence or attachment to loss. It is such that Abraham and Torok find a similar wound in Freud’s text on melancholia. “After a careful rereading of Freud’s beautiful and difficult essay,” they write, “we are struck by the recurrent image of an open wound that is said to attract the whole of the counter-

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<sup>293</sup> Barthes, 49.

cathecting libido.”<sup>294</sup> This “open wound,” that struck Abraham and Torok with the same force that Barthes was struck with the *punctum*, is the incorporated loss that preoccupies the melancholic. Yet while this “open wound” found in Freud’s text bears a resemblance to Barthes *punctum* in that they both imply a persistent dwelling on the loss implied by systems of representation (such as the photograph), Freud’s “open wound” is not the feminized (m)other who bears a *subject*. Rather, the “open wound” in Freud’s text is said to re-orient, or counter-cathect desire towards the lack at the center of the self. For Freud, the gap opened up by the entrance of the subject into language is the “open wound,” or the cut that splits the subject in language. Unlike Barthes, who finds the image as the site of perpetual regeneration and connection with the archaic (m)other, Freudian melancholia is an orientation towards the loss of the self in language.

As Julia Kristeva has noted, “belief in the mother is rooted in our fascinated fear with the impoverishment of language. If language is powerless to situate me for, or speak me to, the other, then I presume—I yearn to believe—that someone somewhere will make up for that impoverishment.”<sup>295</sup> It is this “impoverishment of language” that leads Barthes to materialize the loss produced in the act of introjection onto an archaic (m)other, the “someone somewhere” who not only “makes up” for the impoverishment but stands in— in the flesh— for the loss of the self in language. This conversion of word into flesh, as Abraham and Torok have noted, is the most characteristic symptom of

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<sup>294</sup> Abraham and Torok, 135.

<sup>295</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater” in *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

melancholia. Melancholia, they write, is the “active destruction of representation.”<sup>296</sup> Representation is destroyed, when the referent is no longer lost but is made *present*, actualized in the flesh. The figure of the Mother in Barthes, who offers itself as skin stretched out into a life-bearing tube that nourishes a subject, is precisely this “stubborn Referent” manifested into flesh. As Jacqueline Rose has written, “We try to limit the damage, we protect ourselves from the felt danger, by fleshing out our anxiety, giving that zone of anguish a name: femininity, nonlanguage, body. But the name we give it before all other, the one we really hold answerable for it, is the mother.”<sup>297</sup>

While Barthes melancholic *presenting* of language in the flesh, is the reification of the name of the (m)other, the simultaneity of word and referent resonates differently in the work of Benjamin who understood it as a spatial and temporal relationship. For Benjamin, melancholia implies “the collapse of sequence into simultaneity.”<sup>298</sup> It is a disregard for sequential relations, progressive time or causal directionality. Bringing Benjamin’s melancholic aesthetics into the space of the archive means an alteration of our historical understanding of records. Not only does it involve a disregard for narrative succession, or historical cause and effect, but it necessitates the very questioning of the notion of the “past” itself. To think of archives as melancholic is to shift our attention from the retrieval of the past to an interrogation of our desires that the record promises to

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<sup>296</sup> Abraham and Torok, 132.

<sup>297</sup> Jacqueline Rose, “Of Knowledge and Mothers: On the Work of Christopher Bollas” in *The Vitality of Objects: Exploring the Work of Christopher Bollas* Joseph Scalia eds. (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

<sup>298</sup> This is elaborated by Judith Butler’s Afterword to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

satisfy. What drives us towards losses in the archive? I have argued in this chapter that it is not the past that we find hidden in the fissures and gaps of the archive but the promise to satisfy our longings for the open wound through introjection. Introjection is the production of a speaking (and scribing) subject who, as Spivak has written, is in “active transaction between past and future.”<sup>299</sup> To write in the archive is to inhabit its present and to be implicated in the act of its temporal transmission.

### III.

December 2013

David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library,

Duke University

I start at the beginning. “Cassette no.1: Kate Millett on the phone with her mother.” The sound is scratchy. It takes a while for it to adjust. Millett’s voice comes in and goes out. She is trying to hook up the microphone to the phone so she can record her conversation with her mother. I imagine her on a couch in a spacious and bright living room. I imagine the room surrounded with glass windows looking out onto a yard. I can hear Kier’s voice. She is in the room with Millett. I imagine her walking around, fiddling with the equipment, helping Millett set up. The tape is already testing my patience. Millett has a piercing laugh. She drags her words for too long. Her voice irritates me. Her accent annoys me. She tends to repeat the same phrases over and over again. For instance, she seems to love the phrase “mother’s perfect worrier.” It sums up her

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<sup>299</sup> Spivak, 5.

relationship with her mother. She is the best at making her mother worry. I tune in. She is justifying her reasons for going to Iran. She is explaining her plans to document everything. Starting now. Her mother and her older sister Sally disapprove of her trip. “I’m not a damned idiot!” she yells back. “We’ll be protected. We’ll live in their houses. They’ll provide us with bodyguards.” She is warned about the food and the bugs in the water. “There won’t be bugs in the water in a nice part of Tehran!” she protests. She is told to watch out for Salmonella. She writes down the names of drugs she’ll need in case she gets poisoned then changes the subject. She asks if her sister knew people in Iran when she lived in Afghanistan. For a moment she worries about being associated with her brother-in-law’s post in the air force but decides not to stress, “but isn’t it exciting?” she says, “it’s like I’m getting to see history! I’ll be careful. I know it’s dangerous. Wish me luck.” Millett is her mother’s perfect worrier. I remember this phrase from her book. I recall her delight at receiving a telegram in Tehran after the news of her expulsion reached her friends and supporters in the US. The telegram arriving from Florida reads: “Congratulations, you are scaring your mother even more than usual.”<sup>300</sup> Millett loves this. “I lean back laughing,” she writes, “fighting the sting in my eyes.”<sup>301</sup> Millett is her mother’s perfect worrier. It’s a refrain.

I don’t much care about Millett’s relationship with her mother, although I enjoyed reading her book *Mother Millett* on my way to the archives. I am more excited when the tapes finally take me to Tehran. Now I am really paying attention. I pour over every

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<sup>300</sup> Millett, 260.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 261.

detail. What did that guy say in the background? Where is she walking to right now? Should I note down that they are listening to Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* in the car as they drive to Nasrin's house? There doesn't seem to be enough hours in the day. I spend weeks listening and taking notes. I sit in the far corner of the library's air-conditioned room feeling the padded headphones weighing down on my ears. Every hour or so I lift the foamy rubber rings, rest them on the desk and walk over to the front desk to sharpen my archival pencil. On my short route to the desk I pass the same man sitting in his usual spot hunched over the yellowed leaves of his manuscript. I tacitly register his presence and applaud his dedication with a polite nod.

Back at my desk I once again seal out the silence of the room to listen to the noise registered on my cassette tapes. Even though I sit motionless in one corner for hours, I go through waves of emotions. Halfway through one of the tapes, I begin sobbing quietly at my station. Millett has been marching amongst a group of women chanting loud slogans. But the rallying calls begin to subside as the women march past a hospital. Millett narrates the scene. "We are quieting down now to respect the patients at the hospital. The nurses are all on the balconies waving. They have such great style. Neat capes and hats. The nurses are all waving at us. They are blowing kisses. Aren't they great? Nursing is the chosen profession of first wave feminists." Once they pass the hospitals the women hail the nurses with the chant: *Dorood Bar Parastar!* I have stopped taking notes to wipe my cheeks and retain my composure. I see my mother on the balcony. Waving and blowing kisses. I see her in profile like the one photograph I have of her wearing her

nurse's uniform. I see her hair flaring under her white hat and around her face. She is not wearing her cape but sports a white robe. Her firm and serious eyes gaze to one side past the edges of the frame. Kate has moved on. She is complaining about a group of men. Are they at the Ministry of Justice? She is talking to a few women and eating some nuts. What are they called? Problem-solving nuts?

I am exhausted. I leave and call my mother in Vancouver. "Do you believe that she walked past the nurses?" I say, "You must have been there too waving at the protestors." My mother is not amused. "I am glad you are enjoying your time at Duke." she says unenthusiastically. "These women you are talking about . . ." she hesitates, "for sure I was *not* among them." But how can she be so sure? I wonder. She feels the weight of my silent response and feels like she needs to say more. "I couldn't have been one of those nurses on the balcony because I either had the day off or if I was at work I was inside." I remain silent. "There are many hospitals in Tehran anyway," she continues, "how do you know the one on the tape is the one I worked at?" I have the urge to say, "but isn't it exciting?" Instead I say nothing.

*I wonder what the Iranian women are wishing for.*

My mother's refusal to accede to my desire for finding her in Millett's archives, tells of her own resistance to being reduced to my object of study. She will not perform the voice of the native informant, anymore than she will identify with an archive I have described to her as a queer archive. Her narrative trajectory, unlike mine, does not land her in the midst of a lesbian feminist movement gone awry. Looking back at this episode

in Millett's archives, I realize that it is the stickiness of the record that caused my affective response to it. It was the faithful reproduction of the sounds of the women's salut to the nurses that prompted my corporeal identification with an imaginary presence on the tape. The chants caught on tape, took me in, incorporating my whole body into the scene. The sounds exceeded the singularity of my aural register, and elicited a visual image of my mother's photograph in her nurse's attire. I saw her there on that balcony. This multi-censorial response brought my body into alignment with a point of loss within that image, which made me melancholic. My mother's sobering retort however, points to our divergent versions of the story, which ultimately anchors me at the nexus of multiple forms of identifications. Her response teaches me that after all melancholia is an ambivalent structure of feeling that is brought about by conflict and contradictions. As Jose Munoz has noted, "to perform queerness" is to be melancholic. It is to "constantly disidentify, and to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly line up."<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 78.

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