

Arbaʿīn and Bakhshū's Lament: African Slavery in the Persian Gulf and the Violence of Cultural Form

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Abstract

Arbaʿīn names the Shiʿa elegiac ritual commemorating the fortieth day of ʿĀshūrā – the 7th century murder of Husayn at the Battle of Karbala. In South Iranian provinces like Būshahr *Arbaʿīn* expresses a distinctly black character marked by animation and drumming virtuosity. Iranian filmmaker Nāsir Taqvāʾi's experimental ethnographic documentary *Arbaʿīn* (1970) chronicles the regional peculiarities of this ritual, reflecting in both its form and content fragile testament to a haphazardly recorded history of African slavery absorbed into oblivion. Drawing upon historiographical, musicological, ethnographic sources and black studies, this article takes Taqvāʾi's filmic mediation as an occasion to demonstrate the way so-called syncretized forms reveal historical information about slavery in nontransparent ways.

Keywords: Blackness, Slavery, Experimental ethnography, Muharram, Persian Gulf

Introduction

Every day is ʿĀshūrā, every land is Karbālā
-Shiʿi saying

Pink light scattered on water reflects the diminished red of a sun melting into the Gulf's horizon. The placement of this moment feels abrupt, at once violent and grounding, absorbing and projecting the memory of blood condensed through the film's restless narrative. Slaves on dhows traveling from Africa's Eastern coast once landed ashore Persian Gulf sunsets such as the one the camera frames. If colors conjure memory, the landscape's crimson doubtless recalls those bobbing lateens no less than it does Husayn's perennial slaughter at Karbala. The disappearance of the light signals the onset of drawn, rhythmic clapping; the movement of time kept by the measured pounds of palms on chests is not, however, orienting, nor does it signal

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temporal passage. Nāsir Taqvāʾī's experimental documentaries abound with such strangely placed but meaningful images. *Arbaʿīn* (1970), in particular, dispenses memory and knowledge whose facticity both transcends and fails the hubris of historical fact, confronting instead the dense impurity at the heart of historicity.

Arabic for “forty”, *Arbaʿīn* names a component of the resilient Shiʿa elegiac ritual commemorating the murder of Imam Husayn at the infamous 7th century Battle of Karbala, and solidifying a story of origins for the Twelver sect of Islam.¹ Spectacular and controversial in that *Arbaʿīn* and the Muharram rituals to which it belongs can involve, beyond a vital component called *sīnah-zanī* (chest-striking; also called *mātam* in Urdu, or *latm* in Arabic), self-flagellation, chain-swinging, and knife-, razor-, or sword-driven blood-letting, variations of *Arbaʿīn* prevail throughout modern-day Iran, home to a majority of Shiʿa Muslims. In Southern provinces like Būshīhr, *Arbaʿīn* acquires a distinctly black character on account of the scattered African diaspora dispersed along the Gulf for hundreds (or thousands) of years. Descriptive accounts of the ritual stress a qualitative difference in affect and style characterizing regional specificity; in the Iranian South, animation and speed impassion the sobriety more or less familiar to mourning occasions in the Islamic Middle East, resonating emphatically with North Indian and Caribbean iterations of ʿAshūrā, and, to a less obvious extent, funerary practices in the African world, and thus offering testament to a haphazardly recorded history of movement more or less absorbed in the oblivions of denial, indifference, and time².

1 The Muharram celebrations, of which *Arbaʿīn* forms an important if underrepresented part in scholarship, mark the scission between Sunni and Shiʿa Muslims. This scission is epitomized by the events symbolized by the month of Muharram in 680 AD. Sunnis espoused succession of the caliphate by election, while the Shiʿa championed succession of the caliphate through blood-relation to the Prophet Muhammad (Shiʿat Ali, or partisans of Ali—Muhammad’s cousin). The murder of Muhammad’s grandson, Husayn, marks a foundational event, or story of origins, for Shiʿa self-conception—one rooted in notions of sacrifice, redemption, and tragedy. The authenticity of this story of origins is, however, inlaid with historical homologies. For example, there are parallels between the narrative of the martyrdom of Husayn and Siyavush in pre-Islamic Iranian legend, and the Muharram celebrations find parallel in the ancient Mesopotamian ritual of Adonis-Tamuz (Chelkowski, 1979, p. 3). I will elaborate upon the relevance of such parallelisms further below.

2 Frank Korom offers a vivid comparative account of ʿAshūrā practices in Iran, North India and Trinidad, arguing that the emphasis on external display expressed in North Indian iterations of ʿAshūrā bear impressions from Hindu ceremonial culture, as well as Sunni reaction. It is generally well known that drum and dance formations are components integral to various African funerary cultures. See for example, Nketia (1954, pp. 35) and Anku (2009, pp. 38-64); de Witte (2003, pp. 531-559); Geschiere (2005, pp. 49). In contrast, scholars suggest that Shiʿism traditionally encourages “the replacement of joy with pain,” during the Muharram period; in literature dating back to the recommendations of the imams, weeping in particular is considered morally valuable (Nakash 1993, p. 165). Mod-

Taqvā'ī's film exhibits this exorbitance primarily through musical energy. A rather remarkable example from his oeuvre of amateur ethnographic documentaries, Taqvā'ī's *Arba'in* delivers visual and auditory information about South Iranian iterations of the enigmatic mourning ritual which clarifies the singularity of their regional distinction – a distinction that conjures a palpating history bereft of sharp testimony and concern for fact. If the theatrical Ta'ziyeh receives ample attention in scholarship on Muharram, Taqvā'ī's choice to focalize its underthought *Arba'in* hints at a kind of subtle recursivity that thematically dominates his treatment of the ritual, further devitalizing this solicitude.³ The film visually describes with Taqvā'ī's characteristically coy temporal musings, first, the unique rhythmic *sinj va damām* musical call a group of primarily black male musicians perform in an alleyway – a call to town dwellers to gather in a shared experience of conflated feeling. Then, shifting to a void, the Muharram narrative takes visual expression through flashes of stained glass against a pitched black, metonymizing the mosque where the film takes place: images illustrate floating decapitated arms shedding drops of blood, a faceless Husayn alights on his white horseback, a dizzying swish pan collecting light and color against black space actualizes a question about spatio-temporal coordinates. Following this interruption, the film shows day preparations for the Muharram ritual: men carry construction instruments and hang banners. The actual *Arba'in* procession proceeds, the exclusively male gathering for the enactment of *nūhab-khūnī* (dirge-singing) and *sīnah-zanī* (chest striking) in the dimmed mosque where an enclosed black singer, the famous Jahānbakhsh Kurdīzādah, more popularly recognized by the nickname Bakhshū, receives gifts of colored sashes strewn upon his chest as he trills tragedy into the microphone, his audience motioning responses to his bellows with powerful body thumps

ern-day 'Ashūrā commemorations in Iran can be traced back to the Safavid politicization of Shi'ism. Thus one of the most important sources for Karbala elaborations from Turkey to the Deccan, Husayn Vā'iz Kāshifī's 15th century record of narratives from his time period, *Rawzat al-shuhadā* (*The Garden of the Martyrs*) inspires grief and encourages ritual crying (Haider, 2014, pp. 200; Hyder, 2006, pp. 220).

3 Perhaps due to its resonances with the Christian Passion play, Western scholars found in Ta'ziyeh an object of dramatic scholarly curiosity, abandoning other culturally significant aspects of the Muharram rituals, and inflating Ta'ziyeh's significance for Muslims. In his study of the historical evolution of the rituals, Ali J. Hussain recovers a curious chronology of the rituals' development, where *Arba'in* in fact forms the ground for what are thought to be more central elements of the Muharram rituals, like the Ta'ziyeh. Early Islamic sources document a detour back to Karbala forty days after Husayn's murder, where the freed members of Husayn's camp were surprised to find a group already gathered in his memory. Husayn's sister Zaynab delivered a eulogy, marking the prehistory of the *majalis* (gatherings in Husayn's memory). See Hussain (2005, p. 80).

while stepping the circle left.⁴ Like a distracted onlooker, the camera cuts away from this neat chronology to seemingly irrelevant elsewhere. This distraction from the collectivity of the religious fervor magnifies through an interest in lostness expressed by intercut scenes of a veiled black figure ambling down dark corridors of the desolate port city. Spatial devastation and ghost-like vacuity mirror temporal confusion and recurs in Taqvā'i's work, and in artifacts of Indian Ocean world port cities more generally (Wick 2016, p. 45; Meloy 2010).

Known in Iran for popularizing the Būshihri variant of *Arba'in* throughout the country, Taqvā'i's experimental quasi-ethnographic documentary provides more to its viewer than mere visual and auditory description about the fortieth day commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom.⁵ Apart from the plausible haptic benefits afforded by filmic witnessing, Taqvā'i's documentation of *Arba'in* merits focus for the way in which its form and content crystallizes historical inquiry about the blackness of *Arba'in*'s elegiac form as practiced and performed around the borders of the Persian Gulf. In my characterization of a pivotal sunset scene in the introduction, I tried to portray the nebulosity of such inquiry and the precarity in recognizing the transitive character of its satisfaction. In this paper, I suggest that a fuller, replete historiographical account may not remedy whatever shortcomings one tends to associate with historical opacity and paucity, but that such opacity is itself constitutive of the philosophical problem of historicity; moreover, that the conceptual problem that global blackness poses as an embodied history of violence heightens the ethical stakes of scholarship's engagement with that opacity, in particular, as it pertains to cultural form.⁶ Engaging the cosmic dimensions of translation and transmission between experience and historicity I argue through *Arba'in* that this putatively Shi'a ritual can bear the past of African slavery in the Persian Gulf only recursively: through a kind of peeling away, tearing and tarrying, rather than a simple gathering or accumulation of layers of fact.

The film taps into a model of historical desire whose non-normativity occurs on at least three imbricated registers: on the question of delimiting the conceptual, and not merely geographical boundaries of Africanness and

4 It is believed that after the Battle of Karbala, Husayn's family was robbed of their belongings; thus, observers throughout Iran also donate cloth to the *Shaddeh*, the uppermost pole extending from a large wooden lattice called *Nakhl*. On the tenth of 'Āshūrā at noon carriers ambulate the *Nakhl* as a reminder of ongoing tyranny and oppression (Korom 2003, p. 48).

5 According to Sharīfīyān's (2004, p. 179) account the screening of Taqvā'i's *Arba'in* was pivotal for the history of nūhah-khūni; for Sharīfīyān, Bakhshu was himself largely responsible for attracting Iranians' attention.

6 For my understanding of blackness as an "embodied history of violence," refer to Hortense J. Spillers' "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (1987, p. 67).

blackness;⁷ engaging with the temporalization of such delimitations, which shift along an uneven and infinitely sliding scale that magnifies the ambiguity of distinction between the physiological, ideational, and discursive; and endeavoring to lift the notion of syncretism (transmutation, fusion, melting, etc.) out from under a stifling oppositional presumption of purity (order, authenticity, originality, etc.). In the last part of this paper, I show how, read together, the study of African diaspora in the Persian Gulf and Muharram rituals' narratological parallels with Persian antiquity demonstrate the privation and infinite withdrawal at the core of historicity, and the futile but inescapable labor of recourse to it.

Blackness and Iranian Filmic Modernity

As a medium entirely conditioned by technological means developed in the early 20th century, film's essence is temporally modern. In the 1960s the global thrust of New Wave cinema sought to elevate film's content to the level of a formalized and politicized modernism, delivering cinematic techniques and narrative strategies subservient to the reproduction of the status quo to the creation of art cinema.⁸ Taqvā'i, a forerunner of the Iranian *Mūj-i Nū*, or Iranian New Wave (1969-1979) participated simultaneously in the anthropological impulse that I argue elsewhere was constitutive to the consolidation of Iranian filmic and literary modernity, and by extension, Iranians' consciousness of being-modern (Vaziri 2018). Though lacking the rigor of an institutionalized anthropology, several developments supported the unfurling of ethnographic filmmaking by Iranian filmmakers in the 1950s and 60s. This in turn stimulated the impulse toward independent cinema simultaneously developing out of dissatisfaction with what critics understood as a vulgar cinematic culture.⁹

7 Through such a formulation, I do not suggest geography is not always already conceptual, only that that the mundane understanding of geography tends to occlude this fact. For a milestone intervention that interrogates the ideological underpinnings of geography see Lewis and Wigen, 1997.

8 It goes without saying that the history of New Wave cinema is more complex than the account I am able to provide here. For more comprehensive studies, one can refer to Richard Neupert, (2002), *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press; James Tweedie, (2013), *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*, New York, Oxford University Press; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, (2008), *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s*, New York, Continuum; Jim Hillier, ed., (1992), *Cahiers du cinéma: 1960-1968*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

9 Documentary filmmaking in Iran more generally was fueled by both foreign interest (the American, British and Russian governments each had interests in using audiovisual means to distribute political propaganda), and domestic patronage. American involvement in making educational films and training Iranian filmmakers overlapped with the Iranian

Relinquishing an initial interest in prose writing, documentary filmmaking enticed Taqvā'i; between 1969 and 1971, he made over a dozen documentary films, some independently produced, and others, including *Arba'in* commissioned by the National Iranian Radio and Television network.¹⁰ Focus on Southern Iranian culture-fruits of his upbringing in and affection for the South-distinguished Taqvā'i's work from contemporaneous filmmakers¹¹ and refracted black communal culture.¹² Taqvā'i's oeuvre thus generates a specific vantage point from which blackness articulates a proximity between ethnography and the development of avant-garde film, cohering distinctions between subject positionalities while withdrawing from full view.

Senses of Syncretism

In interviews, Taqvā'i claims documentary provided the best means for him to archive his experience of South Iranian culture¹³. Thus, although any intention to represent black community is subsumed into this more general desire to preserve and communicate Southern culture, *Arba'in's* filmic strategies solicit blackness, drawing attention to it and its subliminal relation to the problem of historical origin. One of the film's opening high shots beckons with discreetly ethnomusicological strategies for tracking cultural diffusion. As if filming from the top of a wall, the camera shows a gathered group of men in an alleyway immersed in a steady beat of *sinj* (cymbals), *damām* (drums), and *būq* (horns). (Ethnomusicology has long relied upon features of musical instruments as criterion for resemblance and diffusion).¹⁴ The

Ministry of Culture and Arts's patronage of filmmakers and demand for ethnographic films (Issari, pp. 189). For critical disparagement of Iranian film culture in the 1950s and 60s see Mu'azzizi niyā (1999) and Partovi (2017).

10 Among these are *Tāxi Mitr* (*Taxi Meter*, 1967); *Nān Khūr Hāy-i Bisavādi* (*Profiteers of Illiteracy*, 1967); *Bād-i Jin* (*Wind of Jin*, 1969); *Nakhl* (*Date Palm*, 1969); *Panjshambah bāzār Mīnāb* (*Minab's Thursday Bazar*; 1970); *Mashhad Qālī* (*Mashhad Carpet* 1971); *Mūsīqī Jūnūb: Zār* (*Music of the South: Zar*; 1971.)

11 Not only did Taqvā'i write a compilation of short stories that takes place in the South, but many of his ethnographic and feature films take place near Southern ports such as Bandar Līngīh, Bandar Abbas, and Qīshm. In interviews, Taqvā'i often expresses a need to preserve the South and its community cultures through documentary: "Without atmosphere, art is meaningless; every reality occurs in an atmosphere; each generation lives in an atmosphere which the following generation may not. Without geography there is no history; history can only take place in the vastness of geography. The South for me is a very far-reaching geography." (Hāydarī, p. 37).

12 In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison famously calls for a methodology of reading that recognizes blackness as constitutive of cultural production, rather than a merely ornamental accident.

13 Haydari, p. 202.

14 See Merriam (1964).

camera zooms in on one of the *damām*, drawing attention to its intricate features: tanned goat hide stretched across two ends of its *pīp*, or body, suspended by braided bands. Mounted with straps over an old black man's shoulders, the camera zooms in steadily upon his face bobbing to and fro adjacent to the drum, while the music steadily accelerates. For a moment the frame holds this adjacency between the musician's face and his drum; in addition to corroborating both historical information about the participation of black musicians in south Iranian ceremonial culture, and more recent ethnographic data shoring up its continuity, this holding evokes the instrument's affirmation of the ambiguously syncretic connection pursued by Iranian ethnomusicologists. The close up of the *damām* gestures toward Būshihri's recognition of the foreign origins of this membranophonic instrument taking center during *Arbāʾin* and other Shi'a ceremonies in the South, and the specific style of rhythm bellowing forth from its body-heavily marked by isochronous pulsing and polyrhythms evocative of African musical cultures, and the myriad realms of expression the "metonymic fallacy" African carries¹⁵.

Unlike the *sinj* and *būq*, long staples of traditional Iranian music inscribed in the earliest Persian texts of antiquity, the *damām* asserts a singular significance within the context of the documentary's unfolding: the question of its "foreignness," its Africanness (thus relation to the long history of the African migration and slave trade), but also, its tremulous universalism and primitivity which destabilizes the first two of these evocations¹⁶. "Richly catachrestic," the drum cannot help but recall the very emergence of music (Mowitz 2002, p. 6), if not the emergence of language¹⁷, the human being, and of the pulsation that is the border between violence and repetition undergirding the concept of life more generally.

While the African background of the inhabitants of the southern provinces of Iran has only recently come to the fairly sustained critical interest of scholars, the festive distinctness of southern Iranian music has long been intuited by ethnomusicologists, opening onto the microcosm of musical historiography that the black poet and theorist Amiri Baraka and a 20th century anthropological tradition invested in theories of diffusion once identified as the privileged medium for reading African transmutations into blackness¹⁸. Drumming virtuosity, specifically, distinguishes Būshihri and

15 Muhsin Sharīfīyān believes these instruments were brought to Būshihri mainly by African slaves, eventually acquiring a sanctified character (*Ahl-i Mātām*, p. 100).

16 In depth descriptions of *sinj* and *damām*, important elements of *sinj* va *damām* discussed below, can be found in Rāhgāni (1998).

17 Roland Barthes: "Without rhythm, no language is possible: the sign is based on an oscillation" (1985, p. 249).

18 For recent scholarship on the African origins of the inhabitants of South Iran which recapitulates older understandings of this "demographic," see Mirzai (2002, pp. 229-

other forms of *jūnūbī* (southern) music and infuses the celebratory aura of South Iranian *Arbaʿīn* in a peculiar form of the broader practice of *nūhab-khūni* – seeping into the deepest strata of the, often politicized, cultures of mourning so integral to Islamic, and specifically Shiʿa ethic and being (Pinault 1993; Ruffle 2011). Taqvāʾī’s film engages Būshihri musical virtuosity by inviting the rhythm of *sinj va damām* to guide both the soundtrack and narrative of his film. The film contains no direct information – no language or subtitles – other than that of this rhythm, first of *sinj va damām*; then of Bakhshū reliving the tragedy of Karbala for the participants in his Gulf-accented Persian, and the participants self-hitting in response. (Taqvāī reveals that although he had written a script for the film, his supervisors at the National Iranian Radio and Television had insisted on no voiceover)¹⁹.

Iterations of *Arbaʿīn* and the Muharram rituals obtain significantly divergent molds shaped by time and regional thresholds.²⁰ Muhsin Sharīfiyān, who has extensively studied south Iranian culture, writes that more than any other tradition Būshihri *Arbaʿīn* has influenced the collective mourning culture of Iran; near identical rituals prevail in two other southern provinces: Khūzistān and Hurmuzgān (Sharīfiyān, p. 14). More specifically, the percussive tradition of *sinj va damām* distinguishes Būshihri mourning culture, collecting excitement, significance, meaning and perennially attracting the largest number of participants and spectators in Būshihri.²¹ For this reason, and like other aspects of the Muharram rituals like self-flagellation which have become the center of controversy amongst the religious elite, the ritual has been as equally demonized and condemned as it is traditionally revered.²² The excitement elicited by the subtle rhythmic accelerandos and hallucinatory states its entranced and entrancing performers display contradicts the staidness and gravity traditionally expected of lamentation traditions, much as manifestations of ʿĀshūrā in the Indian subcontinent attract reprobation from pious Muslims for their spectacular pageantry (Korom, p. 58). (The resonances between Būshihri and Indian forms of ʿĀshūrā pressure

46). In general, previous generations of Iranian historians make note of the African character of Southern inhabitants in passing when defining other geographical and anthropological characters of south Iranian provinces like Khūzistān and Būshihri.

19 Haydarī, p. 77.

20 Common to most Muharram cultures in regions with a palpable Shiʿa presence (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon) are the following: memorial services, the visitation of Husayn’s tomb in Karbala particularly on the tenth day of ʿĀshūrā and the fortieth day after the battle, the public mourning processions, the theatrical representation of the battle, and various forms of flagellation. Nakash (1993, p. 163).

21 Ibid., 123. Korom (2003, p. 101) notes the magnetism of drumming in drawing religiously diverse participants in the Hosay processions in Trinidad.

22 On the interesting history of the condemnation of ʿĀshūrā blood-letting in Lebanon, where the Shiʿi population comprise a minority, see Deeb (2005, p. 86), Nakash (1993, p. 163).

the conceptual emphasis I place on *Arba'in*'s "blackness"; yet, rather negating South Iranian singularity, I would suggest that this resemblance encourages consideration of the influence of the Sidi, or Afro-Indian peoples on the shaping of Indian 'Āshūrā, a possibility marginalized in the sparse body of work on syncretic religious rituals in India, which tend to stress instead Sunni and Hindu influences).

Taqvā'i's film harps upon the perversity of sobriety's contamination with rhythm, exalting animation through editing strategies: quick cuts, unwarranted camera movements, and senseless images. If holding resilient among the many useful, if ideologically conflicting theories of montage in film theory strains a certain intuition of montage's capacity to break into the invisibility of social relations (Suhr, Rane 2013, p. 2), one might recognize in Taqvā'i's seemingly irrelevant juxtapositions a nascent ideation of Būshihri society whose genre of historical information overflows clear cognition. Editing prowess evokes the legacy of African slavery in the Persian Gulf in a way which also lets resound its global horizon. The term "African" folds back upon itself on any anthropological register – especially one attempting to define a syncretism – thus evincing paralysis, diasporic affect flushed with dissonance and dysphoria, resisting syncretism's insistence on cohesion and coherence.²³ While building upon an incipient Iranian experimental documentary tradition whose "museum aesthetics" depends upon the juxtaposition of object shards and image fragments to construct action, Taqvā'i's *Arba'in* reflects in its montage intensity a "nonhistory" wherein "shock, contradiction, painful negation, and explosive forces"²⁴ compose a radioactive narrative whose orientation and center escape through the splice, refusing regard²⁵.

Studies meticulously detail syncretized black spiritual and musical forms abounding throughout the Americas. From blues and jazz, to Santería or regla ocha and Condomblé, black musicology, theology, and theory more broadly form distinct but connected, internally differentiated fields. Less material, even at the level of bare information, and thus generally excluded from these rich interconnections, circulates about Eastern instantiations of black articulations surviving in the areas covered by what was once a part of the sprawling 4,000-year-old Indian Ocean trade networks. Dearth of scholarly interest in the Persian Gulf as an object of theoretical inquiry has

23 Aisha Khan's (2015) readings of Stuart Hall's and Brent Edwards' articulations of "diasporic identity" problematizes the ability of language to represent what is at stake in the meaning of diaspora.

24 For Edouard Glissant's understanding of black diaspora as a nonhistory structured by fragmentation, see "The Quarrel With History," in *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), p. 62).

25 For "museum aesthetics" in films by Taqvā'i's, Ibrahim Gulistān (with whom he worked), Parvīz Kimiāvi, and Firaydūn Rāhnamā, see Honarpisheh, 2016, p. 119.

a familiar history, one which approximates the history of low regard anthropologists once held for the Caribbean. Like the now outdated assumption that Caribbean peoples “lacked culture” (Mintz 1996, pp. 303), Persian and Arab historians have long designated the Persian Gulf as a primitive cosmos, unworthy of study (Fuccaro 2014). Yet the conditions which obstruct the region’s incorporation into African diaspora studies and black studies are singular: a sheer absence of data about ancestral vestiges; the precarity of perceiving such vestiges, and further, singling out and specifying as black, and, for that matter, African; linguistic barriers compounded by uneven distribution of scholarly resources and labor.

We already know that the contested and even maligned anthropological term syncretism, like “creole” and its various declensions, bears incorrigible flaws (Stewart, 1999; Palmié 1995, 2013); these are uniquely magnified when applied to any form of black cultural forms or speculations about them, as the critical work of such thinkers as Paulin Hountondji, Valentin Mudimbe, and students of their work, suggests. Yet, heuristically, syncretism can allow at the very least for the appearance of otherwise opaque and submerged ways of being and inhabitation. These latter can bear no doubt historical and anthropological value, but also theoretical value, so long as the anthropological strategies at play risk energization by imaginative query and philosophical concern, while remaining responsive and reflective of methodological criticisms, even and especially where these result in impasse or near destruction of inquiry.

Like the content he documents, Taqvā’ī’s vision affirms the suitability of moving sound-images to the ambiguity of historical knowing about African diasporic history and its futures; it does so by reproducing the discomfort caused by such ambiguity. Amongst the plethora of densely placed cuts intervening and complementing the serialization of musical rituals a shot of two bloated and listless silver fish washed ashore interposes the Dehdashti bur, or tradition of *sīnah-zanī* encircling. The ring is significant, distinguishing Būshihri *Arba’īn* from its expression in other regions of Iran, where columns, rather than circles, are the norm (Hāydarī, p. 73, Daryābandarī p. 28). The concentric circles enclosing Bakhshū recalls the ancestral meaning of the ubiquitous African diasporic tradition of encircling.²⁶ The syncopated booms of chest pounding overlaying this image of death fertilizes the metonymic powers of water and maritimity for the black tradition (Sharpe 2016). If the sea bears a particular resonance in the black filmic imagination, one strongly associated with the history of forced migration of African peoples through the Atlantic world, Taqvā’ī’s catatonic fish distills

26 In *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and Foundations of Black America*, Sterling Stuckey points out that ceremonial ring shuffling is a kind of ancestral honoring (2013, p. 11).

lesser known histories of such migrations, as it simultaneously reorients the nation-based ideology of historiography and contemporary Gulf nationalist emphases on Bedouin and desert heritage, in favor of a more conflicted perception of boundary that remains paradoxically more faithful to the Gulf past's configuration in the Indian Ocean.²⁷

Considered by some to be one of the most physically and emotionally painful of occupations (Harban 1996), pearling embodies, especially in the modern period, one image of African slave labor in the Gulf, which heightened with the mid-19th century peak in industry (Hopper 2013, p. 226)²⁸. Prior to the discovery of oil and its metonymization of the Persian Gulf, the majority of Gulf inhabitants professed subsistence through some form of connection to the sea, laboring as fishermen, pearl-divers, sailors, and shipbuilders. Pearl fishing in particular shines amongst the marine activities fabricating the Persian Gulf's archetype, featuring in regional descriptions over the past 6,000 years and thought to constitute the substrate of early civilization in the region (Bowen Jr., 1951, p. 161; Lawler 2012, p. 46). Taqvā's fish thus coalesces this iconicity, recalling the infamous "parcel of fish eyes" from Dilmun (modern-day Bahrain), coloring the film with an elusory diachronicity.²⁹

While the collapse of the pearl industry in the Gulf since the Japanese discovery of its artificial reproduction have all but obliterated the memory of this once thriving industry (Hopper 2013, p. 227), the connection be-

27 Nation-driven historiography's denigration of the hydrographic received substantive clarification in French historian Ferdinand Braudel's watershed *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, an illumination of the sea's place in world history which inspired the first generation of significant Indian Ocean World studies, like K.N. Chaudhuri's *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. But while the work of this Braudel-inspired coterie paid homage primarily to economic history (often covering such technical minutiae as boat construction, sailing techniques and climatological details regarding monsoon winds), slavery, and more specifically African servitude figured rarely into their analyses of labor. Chaudhuri's two volumes cover primarily four major moments in the history of the Indian Ocean World: first, the rise of Islam in the seventh century to rise of European colonialism in 18th; second, the massive presence of Chinese civilization; third, periodic migration of people from central Asia; and fourth the growth of European maritime power. In a more recent contribution to Indian Ocean World studies, Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (2010, p. 16) note Chaudhuri's "scandalous disregard" for any mention of Southern and Eastern Africa in the role of exchange. Ralph Callebert (2016, p. 117) similarly notices this elision.

28 With Bahrain at its center of industry, pearling in the Gulf peaked in the early 20th century, producing nearly half of the world's pearl supply (Hopper 2014, p. 226). In the mid-19th century, African divers in the Gulf numbered around 30,000, or approximately one-third of divers (Sheriff 1987, p. 37).

29 Scholars of Arabian and Mesopotamian antiquity interpret references to "fish eyes" in ancient artifacts to mean pearls. The "parcel of fish eyes" refers to the cuneiform tablet discovered at Ur of the Chaldees and dated to 2,000 B.C. See Bowen Jr. (1951, p. 161).

tween enslavement and sea labor remains “recorded” in the Gulf’s richest folk music traditions: *feri* in Bahrain, *yazlah* in the south of Iran³⁰. Sharing roots with *sinj va damām*, the central and sanctified musical component of Būshihri *Arbaʿin*, *yazlah* names the musical energy traditionally associated with strenuous boat labor in the Gulf. Modern-day ship workers sailing from Zanzibar and Malabar to Būshihri continue to play *sinj va damām*, supplementing the instrumentals with singing while unloading cargo, maintaining the triangulation between *yazlah*, *sinj va damām*, and a nebulous past of labor (Sharīfiyān 1383, p. 102), letting to resound the history of African slavery inside the Iranian Muharram tradition *Arbaʿin* without any assurance of this resonance’s credibility. This is because Būshihri’s own contradictory understandings of *sinj va damām* corroborate only the weakness, rather than the veracity of connections, at once attesting to a realization of the African origins of local musical styles while simultaneously claiming their original Persianness and development from Būshihri antiquity. Anthropological studies bear out this contest over musical and ritualistic origins: a distinction between indigenous and foreign whose force grows and abates confounds relevance. In *Arbaʿin*, the filmic strategy of the cut thus substitutes gaps and fissures for the constancy of a would-be, wieldable knowledge.

Tautology of the Zang

Contemporary sound studies inquire into how the physiological dimension of music-making, specifically drumming, embodies or activates histories of violence. For example, in his book detailing the intimacy between embodiment and musical performance, John Mowitt energetically navigates a plethora of disciplinary genres to poeticize the magnificence and violence of musical physicality and “materiality” (Mowitt 2002). Though Mowitt’s text focuses in particular on the history of the trap set, of the relationship between black history and various musical genres, Būshihri Muharram’s *sinj va damām* and *sinah-zanī* practices connect with a certain possibility of violence materialized by music itself, the acts that constitute its making, and the specificity such crystallization evokes in the context of African diasporic music in a region bereft of its facticity³¹. Enclosing the *nūbah-khūn* – the

30 Played to energize and also to synchronize boat workers during physically grueling tasks, Būshihri attribute *yazlah* to African slaves. According to the British Persian Gulf resident John Lorrimer, most slaves had been absorbed into the pearl fisheries by the early 20th century.

31 More closely related, Richard Wolf’s (2000, pp. 81-116) research on drumming in the North Indian Muharram rituals asks how Muharram rhythms opens windows into the diverse array of emotions experienced by participants.

primary singer, Bakhshū – in bur, with achingly precise and predetermined rhythm, mourners strike their chests in unison, recreating the sound of a large, collective drum in the violence of self-striking, transmuting African gesture to Shi'a expression, while confounding the direction of that transmutation or transformation³². The *būq's* role in *sinj va damām* strengthens violence's evocation; assuming its own voice, this horn demands so capacious a lung capacity that it usually takes more than one individual to play, one person unable to perform for more than a minute at a time. In descriptions of horn performance, protruding neck muscles relay a physical pain that surfaces on the body³³. Like the drum, the *būq's* blare thus ferments layers of meaning: the cavernous lung capacity it requires recalls not only the incredible might demanded by pearling labor, but the deep emotional and physical costs exacted by the occupation itself – on its practitioners and their families, who endured the peak season months in anxiety and fear of death (Al-Tae 2005, p. 21).

In *Arba'in*, the obsessively precise rhythm of slaps consistently overwhelms content: if *sinah zani's* predetermined meter and highly organized hitting belies its seeming organicity, spontaneity and primitivity, its association with *sinj va damām* evokes *yazlah's* connection to instrumentality, to the water labor conjured by Taqvā'i's out-of-place dead fish. This synesthetic absorption of the visual by the aural interrogates the salutatory image of “work” that commentators have generally assumed images and scenes like this to evoke. Hamid Naficy writes that the ubiquitous images of sailboats and freight ships indicate the identity of the laborers in the South and the participants of *Arba'in* as represented in the film's chronicle of the ritual: “shots of farmers working in fields and fishermen going about their business...both integrates the ceremony into daily lives and demonstrates that these passionate, artistic people are the same ones who ordinarily farm and fish.” (Naficy 2011, p. 104). Another plausible interpretation would highlight the notorious details of unfree labor for which Būshihhr served as a significant portal for centuries. The physiological harshness of drum music – which I return to below – overlaying the image of a dead fish revives this connection with or without the assurance of Taqvā'i's own intentions.

Scholarship on the origins of blues and jazz figures the past of African slave labor as a primordial recursive echo resounding in the repetition of performance.³⁴ Baraka's *Blues People* remains one of the most insightful and

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

33 Ibid., p.34.

34 Fred Moten (2003). For one critical interpretation of Moten's improvisatory poetics see Vaziri (2016a).

original studies of this kind detailing the complex and rich history of black music, its transfigurations of contrapuntality, ellipsis, obliquity, antiphonality, and the contradictions of jovial black sound. Even when apparently shorn of the shackles of this history of coerced labor, jazz music bears the inscription of work – an inscription that follows from African melodic phrases, war beats and polyrhythmic layering, to the very first slave work songs, through to contemporary hip-hop and rap music³⁵.

Though over the past few decades “new musicology”’s insistence on thematizing sociality through music obliterates the innocence with which people once referred to music’s nonreferentiality and escape from interpretation, the intransigence of this age-old perception remains a specter hovering over mainstream and commonsense understandings of (especially Western classical) music. The specter of musical autonomy fits strangely comfortably with self-proclaimed materialist analyses of commercial music that position it as a cultural industry pawn. Black studies’ sophisticated strategies for theorizing black music transcend this ossified bind of academic musicology through recourse to notions of profligacy, excess and exorbitance that denote active inhabitation of the limits of being and the moral economy of the subject, rather than docile assumption of economically predetermined motive.³⁶ Plastic, excess invites signification while resisting meaning’s closure – a metaphor for the dominant strategies of black music Baraka memorably outlines (Baraka 1963, pp. 23-4). This excess marks the nonreduction of slavery to labor, and the nonreduction of labor to itself, designating a realm of interiority – or more specifically, a rejection of the circumstances resulting in the opposition of interiority and exteriority – circumscribed by the recognized if contested foundations of American blues and jazz: the work song.³⁷

In musical notation, the term articulation refers to the technical treatment of a particular sound – its terseness, softness, depth, or volume, for example – as well as the overall clarity of distinction between the sounds internal to melody and harmony and constituting the textures between them. In his famous ethnomusicological treatise and memoir, John Chernoff offers up foundational hazards of theorizing with the language of specifically African music, of elevating it to the status of theoretical departure. Crucial differences create obstacles for an interpretation and appreciation of African music, in particular, the meaning of the ubiquity and primacy of melody

35 Some classic studies include Tricia Rose (1994), David Toop (1984), Havelock Nelson and Michael A. Gonzales (1991).

36 For just a few examples of this type of strategy, see Barrett (2009), Fleetwood (2011, chapters three and four), Judy (1994, pp. 211-30).

37 If this recognition is nearly ubiquitous, a few studies deny the retention of specifically African elements in blues. For an example of this rare position, Schlesinger (1991).

and harmony in Western classical music, and the relative subordination or privation of these in African-derived music. African and African-derived music is concerned – at least it is almost unanimously, if controversially believed³⁸ – with the complexity and interplay of rhythms that emphasize tensions, rather than simultaneity, modularity or linearity in time. This divergence in musical investments tempts the imagination of philosophers and thinkers in various directions; philosophy has long equated and valorized the sophistication of melody and harmony of classical music with occidental rationality³⁹. In the wider field of musicology, the denigration of African-derived music and its kinetic relationship to the body resounds a broader scholarly repudiation or wariness of centralizing the body in the theorization of music.

The specifically Persian views of black musical form depart from these broader musicological frameworks sketched above, harking back to a tropology of pollution which Taqvāʾī's documentary techniques seem to unravel. *Arbāʾin* returns Bakhshū's body to his voice, restoring blackness to thought. As Beeta Baghoolizadeh argues, media technologies like insert-less cassettes that preserved and disseminated Bakhshū's vocal significance throughout Iran in the late 70s tended to absolve his blackness; the appropriation of Bakhshū's elegy for national and military agitation during the Iran-Iraq war epitomizes this tendency toward dissolution⁴⁰. In contrast, *Arbāʾin* centralizes corporal density, without ensuring its significance or meaning; renders blackness visible without explication or assumption of a pure translation between the sensible and the knowable.

The physical, always already theoretical figure of the “Afro-Iranian”⁴¹ poses a limit case to the fraught study of Afro-Asian syncretism and black diaspora more generally⁴². Language articulates one of its clearest difficulties. A common Persian synonym for black (*siyāh*), the term “Zang” or “Zangi” appears superficially to indicate the East African, Zanzibari, or alternative-

38 See for example, Agawu (2003) who takes the extreme position that “African rhythm’, in short, is an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie” (p. 61).

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

40 Baghoolizadeh, (2016), *The Silencing of Race and Religion: the Life and Afterlife of Jahanbakhsh Kurdzadizad's Musical Output*, MESA. (I received an advanced copy of this paper from the author first presented at MESA in 2016 and currently under review for publication.)

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

42 For a helpful summary of some of the problems associated with the study of “Afro-Asian” diasporas, see Khan (2015).

ly “Habashi” (Abyssinian) origins⁴³ of African peoples who, as merchants or commodities, traveled or were forcibly transported by ship, along with gold, tortoiseshell, mangrove, ivory and teakwood to the Persian Gulf since the earliest period of the Persian empire, supporting the economic growth of the Sasanian dynasty (Harris 1993, pp. 325; Lombard 1975, p. 167; Watson 1983, p. 26). The Sasanians (A.D. 224-651) take credit for integrating the first maritime trading system in the Persian Gulf (Bhacker 2009, pp. 169), and recorded evidence of slaves in the Persian Empire dates back to at least the 3rd century, during which time the Persian Gulf began to dominate the Western Indian Ocean trade.⁴⁴ Trudged through harsh desert climes by caravan and on foot by way of the Western frontier, captives were boarded onto dhows tracing water routes to three major port Persian entrepôts throughout the premodern and modern histories of the Indian Ocean trade: the ancient city of Siraf in the province of Būshihir during the 9th and 10th centuries, to the island of Kish during the 12th through 14th centuries, to Hormuz in the 14th through 16th centuries, Būshihir again vying for domination of caravan routes to Iran’s interior during the 18th and 19th centuries (Ricks 1970, p. 357). In addition to the fact that at least nine or ten points of departure comprised the entire known system of East African slave export to the Muslim world, the slaves sailing from the East African coast were not necessarily natives of the region (Lovejoy 2000, p. 25). Assumptions about tracing linear movements mislead, as scholars note in the context of tracking slave origins across the transatlantic slave trade (Jamieson 1995, p. 44). Slavers commonly seized victims from the African mainland interior, a violent theft that in particular fueled East African slave trade to the Persian Gulf in the 18th and 19th centuries (Cooper 1977, p. 32). Every single raid and kidnapping could not possibly possess a material correlate; perpetrators would not have been interested in cataloguing their crimes, and victims were immediately encouraged, by way of sorcery and other forms of psychological violence, to forget their pasts – a phenomenon Saidiya Hartman poignantly describes in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007).

An archival void thus replaces expectations for genealogical precision. But the understandable ensuing assumption that the majority of Iranian African slave descendants are East African descended (Zangi, Habashi) generates a perplexing loop – what I’ve been calling in various contexts “recursivity.” It purls through a cryptic story of origins familiar to scholars of East Afri-

43 Likewise, this methodological obstacle runs through medieval Arab historiography. For example, Pouwels notes that Arab historians use the term “Zang” loosely and without geographical specificity (2002, p. 395).

44 See Ricks (2001, pp. 407-18), Pouwels (2002, p. 391). The Sasanids extended economic activities as far as Aden, which they occupied in the sixth century and dominated trade with Sri Lanka in the East (Hourani 1995, pp. 140-1).

can history. This “Shirazi hypothesis” fabricates Persian ancestry for Swahili residents in coastal Tanzania (Kilwa), modern day Kenya (Mombasa) and Somalia (Mogadishu). Swahili traditions collectively memorialize late first millennium contact between Persian immigrants and African indigenes as the primal scene of Swahili being. The tradition recalls the Persian Ali B. Hasan who immigrated from Shiraz under insult by his brethren because his mother was an Abyssinian slave. (A version of this tradition claims Hasan outfoxed Muli or Mrimba, the African King, by surrounding Kilwa with cloth, inhibiting the King’s return access to the island)⁴⁵. Oral traditions in Kilwa and Mogadishu similarly vary the details of recount (Sheriff 2001, p. 26). Early and mid-twentieth century historiography took for granted these somewhat apocryphal East African claims to descent by Persian nobles like Hasan – alleged founders of Swahili settlements in the premodern period, later superseded by Arab rulers. In contrast, the past few decades has witnessed a revisionary perspective on the Shirazi-Swahili connection. Critical of the subtle ideological interplays between history-telling and writing; the social constitution, purpose, and meanings of legend; and racialized attitudes toward the African mainland which might fuel the desire for non-African origin, historians of East Africa continue to doubt the literalness of the Shirazi origins of the Swahili. Nevertheless, while citing problems such as insufficient architectural, archeological and linguistic data and scant evidence for premodern Persian settlement, historians recognize the affective potency that the Shirazi myth holds for the Swahili themselves – a social significance which delivers historical significance where conventional means for historiographical truth remain irrecoverable.

The Shirazi-Swahili mire thus further complicates, even hyperbolizes, speculations and pretense to knowledge about the lineage of African descended inhabitants of the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, hyperbolizing the fiction of origins optimistically destroys the tendency for typology, which can reproduce and reify racial difference, even when difference is fetted. Sharīfīyān’s observation that Būshihīr protracts against its imagined geographical boundaries echoes the blithe celebratory recitations of indigenous cosmopolitanisms that sustain certain postcolonial nostalgic tone amongst Indian Ocean world scholars⁴⁶. Despite the reality of fluctuating migration habits amongst port inhabitants across the Gulf regions to East Africa in times of economic as well as climactic precarity, the observation of Būshihīr’s cosmopolitanism warrants serious pause. The fact that Africans were imported to Southwest Asia for sexual and entertainment purposes – as concubines, singers, and entertainers, in addition to domestic workers and land

45 Pouwels, 2002 p. 404.

46 In their introduction to *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean*, Simpson and Kresse (2008) address this overstated optimism.

and sea laborers – compounds the necessity for a deeply critical perspective on black performance, one contemplative of the dark conditions of possibility for the celebration of diasporic culture, specifically, musical culture, even, perhaps particularly musical mourning culture (Lewis 1976, p. 43).

If the Shirazi-Swahili narrative mocks “zang”’s nonspecificity, neither does an intensification of classification seem to offer remedy. Earlier historians’ approach to indigenous ethnic tribes in Būshihir, on ethnicity and race more generally, crystallizes in the equivocal Persian term *nijād*, tentatively translatable as race but lacking the same structural history of development as a philosophical and scientific concept⁴⁷. Prominent historians of Iranian geography like Iraj Afshar and Hasan Pirniya (1983) splinter the province’s demographic into elaborate taxonomy of *nijād*: Mediterranean peoples, Dravidians, blacks, Semitic peoples, Elamites, Sumerians, Nordics, Arabs, Lors, Behbehans, etc. Exorbitance of differentiation misunderstands the wound left by a failure of differentiation in naming (*sīyāh*, *zangi*, *habashi*). The tension between indistinction and compensatory or exaggerated taxonomy thus revives the spectral problem of the concept of culture, as it is connected to the problem of race, and by extension, the meaning of the human. Marked by an indifference to the starkly distinct historico-cosmological realities of voluntary and coerced migration, this tension pressures the ethical stakes of a difference otherwise tamed by champions of fluidity and hybridity – the now outdated terms scholars of diaspora sometimes still wield.

The standard Middle Eastern gesture of narration writes the history of settled African peoples in Southwest Asia primarily in terms of commerce flows and merchant migration. Without refusing these terms’ validity, and the agency with which they appear to offer historical subjects, one must insist that they perpetuate a form of politesse that elides the very real and, to modern day readers, theoretically serious distinction between force and assent—a distinction which exceeds the historical register because of its diachronic consequences. The stubborn simultaneity of force and assent dissolves the enormous violence that was the reality of Indian Ocean slavery. This dissolution itself produces violence, a violence which resembles the ambiguity of a historical *knowing* about African presence, origins, and being, an ambiguity that is magnified by the Shirazi-Swahili legacy. For if Afro-Iranians are East African descended, as popular consciousness speculates with the fragmented and fallible recensions it has available, and if East Africans claim Shirazi, or Persian descent, Afro-Iranians are, so to speak, redundant: Irani-Afro-Iranians.

⁴⁷ Though, I resist overstating the terms’ non-alignment. For the modern concept of race, too, developed historically out of ideas that were also bound to lineage (Boullé 2003, p.12).

The presence of blackness bemuses tautology; it also, and thereby, coheres notions of cultural purity. Without the fantasy cushion of a region bordering, enclosing, and sealing off the Iranian mainland there would be nothing to contrast the staidness of Iranian identity supposedly left unadulterated, as its southern provinces absorb pollution and “creolize” from the outside in. The witticism and impossibility that is Irani-Afro-Iranian approximates the conceit undertaken more generally by the “creole” signifier. It is a conceit that relegates creolization to penetrable geographies, expels it from ubiquity. Aquatic, diluted, the attenuation creolization implies invigorates and purifies the original force and plenitude of culture (Khan, 2001, p. 272). This circularity is violent because inescapable; blackness remembers our enclosedness within it.

Zuljinah's Births

The drifting stained glass images glowing in motion prior to the start of *nūhab-khūnī's* preparations in Taqvā'ī's film evoke 'Āshūrā's arcane lineage and burial in deep history. For just as South Iranian *Arbā'in* encrypts African ways of being for Būshihri inhabitants, all the while recursively constituting what counts as African, the entire constellation of Iranian Muharram rituals retroactively ciphers pre-Islamic mythology, pulling attention to the inaccessibility of its core truth and framing an inquiry about historical objectivity in relation to myth and theology. Geometrical shapes flash neon between suspended images of Zuljinah, Husayn's white horse, recalling Husayn's mythic archetype, Siavush, the tragic hero of Iranian national epic⁴⁸. In Firdūsi's 10th century *Shāhnāmah*, or the *Book of Kings*, the story of Sīyāvash relates the hero's liminal position as a wrongfully exiled Iranian prince who ultimately fails to assimilate to his diasporic refuge; to illuminate Sīyāvash's transcendental purity, his betrayal recurs transpatially—in his divinely native Iran, where he is ousted by his king father (Kay Khusraw), and in Turan, Iran's geographical archetype-adversary, where the leader Afrāsīyāb first embraces, then ultimately murders him after new lies about the tragic hero spread. Seduced by his wily step-mother Sūdabih, betrayed by his father Kay Khusraw, and again betrayed by his father-in-law Afrāsīyāb, like Husayn, the figure of Sīyāvash irradiates mythological purity, but without the self-conscious dress of historical realism.

Just as Husayn is wrongly tricked by his clan members in Karbala who falsely declare its safety for his arrival, Sīyāvash is beheaded at the hands of a false friend in Turan. Recalling the profound Shi'i investment in familial relation, epitomized by the dissident configuration of the imamate, Sīyāvash's

48 Siavush's name means literally “the one with a black horse.”

murder at the hands of Afrāsīyāb's brother creates a structural parallel between the significance of bloodline and of spatial sovereignty (Hayes 2015, pp. 369-393). As indicated by its adherence to a marginalized version of the religion, Iran's relationship to Islam bears marks of alienation and assertion of difference. Resisting, unlike most of its geographical neighbors, Arabization and assimilation to the linguistic substance of Islam, the hermeneutic and textual experience of Islam in Iran is mediated to a large degree by affective strategies such as theater, storytelling and painting, in which both the *Shāhnāmāh* epic and the tragedy of Karbala are transmitted through performance and figuration (Moallem 2014).

Scholars have generally stopped at the mere fact of the symbolic resonances between the pre- and post-Islamic narratives of Sīyāvash and Husayn, drawing little relevance from this parallelism. The translation of narratological elements from the pre-Islamic myth of Sīyāvash into the tragedy of Karbala implies the nonoriginality, or the always already suspended historical origin of Shi'ism. Indeed, the Muharram constellation of embodied ritual embeds Karbala's memory – in the coffee-house paintings, performances, and story-telling reliving Sīyāvash's death, a staple of Iranian popular culture prior to the post-IR dissolution of the practice. This arrangement remarks a kind of historicity that is both processual and communal. Neither culturally specific nor a quaint simulation of true historicity, performative historicity is the profound enactment of historicity as a philosophical problem, one caught between the imagined polarities of expression and truth.

Countering Iranian ethnomusicologists and historians' denigration of its blackness as a kind of dilution and adulteration, Būshihri Arba'in's Shi'ism revokes the privilege of the manifest, reviving hidden violences whose truth evades the borders of fact, and the intelligibility of language⁴⁹. Būshihri *Arba'in* infuses Muharram's historicity with black history. In its invitation of jubilation and prioritization of rhythm Būshihri communities, like their Indian and Caribbean counterparts, exaggerate and hyperbolize Muharram, centralizing its improvised character. They blur distinctions between chronology, circularity, and stillness. (Saiyid [1981] suggests that the temporal elongation of festivals like Āshūrā in small Muslim villages shows that it fulfills a sense of psychological stability in the wake of precarious living conditions). If the possibility of historical experience demands a form of reception irreducible to the intransigent mold of the elusive but omnitemporal present – what any commonsense understanding of temporal movement requires – then historicity itself is ultimately impossible without expressions that detoxify the self-coherence of origins (Derrida 2016, p. 142).

⁴⁹ A phenomenon one witnesses in zar ceremonies in the Persian Gulf (Vaziri, 2016b).

Uncontroversially, blackness poses crises for conservative perspectives on cultural geography, like the typical assumption that “the influences and changes instigated [by African slaves] not only did not result in the strengthening of the host culture, but sometimes weakened and disintegrated it” (Sharīfīyān, 2004, p. 30). Sharīfīyān’s analogy between the African musical influences effected by slave presence and the Arab invasion of Rayshahr which brought an end to Persian dynastic early modern history illustrates the extent to which, in the same breath, pride of cosmopolitanism decays into aversion, revealing the guiling displacements at constant play in the representation of Afro-hyphenation. The emergence of this hyphenation in the Iranian South functions, according to ethnomusicologists, as a kind of unyielding amnesic pause; literally, African musical influence is thought to have extinguished “historical memory” (Sharīfīyān, p. 30)

But blackness does more than precipitate crisis; it magnetizes. No wonder that the last decade alone has witnessed a spate of new scholarship on Afro-Asian diasporas in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, of which novel interest in Afro-Iranians forms just one variety⁵⁰. Like any form of subsumption, academic engagement with blackness must proceed cautiously. Uncritical allure, like proclamations of crisis, can reestablish and nourish – though bear some potential to disrupt – traditional perspectives on cultures as self-contained ontogenic and historically guaranteed entities. Oddly enough, this homology between attraction and repulsion, fetishism and racism is especially strong when black syncretic forms fail to arrest; when they mundanely index, rather than spectacularize, difference (as in the case of Caribbean cultural festivities, whose “creolité” has long gone uninterrogated as a problem for thought, and treated rather as a self-evident state of affairs available to perception)⁵¹. *Arba'in*’s disruptive preservation and amplification of syncopated, suffering sound and intersubjective pounding exact a rethinking of the moment or event of historical coalescence and the concept of culture(s) that this coalescence makes possible. Taqvā’ī’s artifact heightens, through its self-consciously mediated form, historicity as such a performance: the unyielding repetition of a memory whose referent loses and gains itself in the flashes between what is there to be sensed.

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

51 Khan 2001, pp. 271-302.

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