Circling around the really Real in Iran

Ethnography of Muharram laments among Shi'i volunteer militants in the Middle East

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Abstract: Iranian Shi'i believers claim that capturing sorrow and lamentation in their fullest sense falls beyond language and reason. They constantly refer to their inability to articulate in order to explain martyrdom and highlight a form of unsaid that explains all that appears impalpable for them. I undertake a journey among Iranian Shi'i youth to trace the unarticulated and the sense of wonder generated via religious experiences. By way of an ethnography of Muharram lamentation ceremonies, this article highlights how the unarticulated and the unsaid are socially and politically used in service of Shi'i militancy. I explore those uncharted terrains in the darkness of the Lacanian Real and in terms of how the Real is authenticated in order to address how realities are crafted and religious subjectivities are enacted in the realm of militancy.

Keywords: Iran, Karbala paradigm, Lacanian Real, martyrdom, Muharram, Shia militancy

I felt overwhelmed by a surge of indescribable feelings that were unknown to me. It was as if I were emptied out: I had no heartbeat, no bones in my legs, no eyes to see with. Instead, I had a knot in my throat. It was as if I had lost all my faculties to sense, think, reason, or speak. I was there to observe, participate. Anthropology as usual! I was among the black-clad Iranian volunteer militants who had gathered to mourn and commemorate the martyrdom of their holy imam. I had seen lamentation and mourning ceremonies many times, but this was my first among young Shia militia who would be deployed to Syria in few days. They gathered

like most Shias to mourn the loss of their holy imams, but that night was different for all us: I felt different, and they were in pre-deployment excitement.

The lamentation singer's voice was blaring from loudspeakers that amplified his howls. He simultaneously hit the microphone to create a beat and cried: "Listen! Are you listening? This is the sound of the drums of war. They are coming . . . they are coming to take the three-year-old daughter of the imam."¹ The crowd of mourners let out screams and cries. The mosque was pitch black, and I had only moonlight to see what was happening around me. A group of

young and middle-aged men circled the lamentation singer. They were crying, beating their chests, howling, and wailing as he retold the tale of the slaughter and bloodshed of the Battle of Karbala. He spoke of the seventh-century battle as if it had happened yesterday. His tears and short, broken breaths intensified in the echo of the speakers, evoking sorrow and grief among the mourners. Women wailed and screamed with anguish behind a curtain separating them from the male mourners. A boy stood crying, slapping his face, and shouting at the singer: "That's enough, don't tell us. We cannot take it anymore." The boy fainted on the ground like a candle melting by the heat of its own fire. The singer carried on crying and telling the tale of the imam's frightened little girl who was taken into captivity.

There was a chaos in my head. I remembered the last letter of Amin Hussaini, who had been killed in Syria. Amin, an Afghan Shia militant who fought along Iranians against ISIS, wrote to his family:

Nowadays, people scorn me and ask who I am fighting for. They are ignorant of the fact that we don't go by our own volition but *we go as if there is something that calls on us*, our heart pushes our feet to step ahead. . . . Hussain and his little girl have marked our names for martyrdom. I have no explanation other than that our blood is not much more colorful than the blood of children of Hussain. (Komial Baqer, personal communication, 2015)

Something, he said. He did not say God, paradise, heavenly virgins, or that the chosen one called him. I was lost in the chaos within my head; sorrow, anguish, wailing, howling, tears, and cries all fused together in the darkness and prevailed over me.

Some mourners shed clothing and began beating their bare chests to the rhythm of the poem that filled the air. The intermingling of a symphony of hands beating chests, the suffering narrated in the epic, the darkness of the mosque,

the continuous tears and cries of mourners, the muffled cries of women, the constant drums in the background, and mourners moving in unison around the singer—all combined to overcome my reasoning mind. I felt a surge of sorrow in my heart and a nagging fear of my own feelings, a fear that made me question myself: Whom am I feeling sad for? Haven't I seen this theater a hundred times before? I heard in the chaos of my mind, "This is not *real*!" And the rhythm of beating on bare chests suddenly got faster and faster. I counted eight beats per six seconds with two-second gaps and laughed at myself. I could not shake the habit of observing despite this strange something that had taken over me. Someone was repeating, "Hussain, Hussain, Hussain," in a hushed tone in the background.

I had never been overwhelmed like that before. What happened to me? In this article, I journey and trace the "something" that touched me and Amir Hussaini. I will speak of unarticulated notions and uncharted terrains of subjectivity that have become a silent consensus justifying joining the ranks of fighters and embracing martyrdom as a way of salvation. First, I explain how following the trace of this something brought me to mourning and lamentation ceremonies, where I realized that participants were enchanted by the allure of the unarticulated. Second, I describe those ceremonies with regard to the performance that shapes them. Third, I introduce the Lacanian Real to explain the unarticulated through an ethnography of mourning and lamentation. I use the Lacanian Real together with Shi'i mysticism to ground and localize Lacanian registers of subjectivity according to cultural and religious configurations and necessities. I emphasize how the Lacanian Real could be called for in non-European traditions. Last, the ethnography, field notes, and participant observations reveal how Iranian Shi'i youth encounter the Real, how the Real is forged, and finally how the Real is authenticated. In conclusion, I expose the notion of networks of reality across which the Real is distributed and how people choose to encoun-

ter the different faces of horror, terror, and the Real to enjoy their symptoms (Žižek 1989) as they craft lives to live in.

Believing the tears of believers

The account of my encounter with the divine left me perplexed but my story is not the story of inabilities of a native ethnographer with situated knowledge. It is rather an example that invites you to my pursuit of Lacanian Real while sharing my “own emotional entanglement with . . . [the] topic or subject of investigation” (Hollan 2016: 518) during the mourning ceremony. I was amazed within the maze that Michael Fischer called “the Karbala paradigm.” Fischer traced the practices, fables, and discourses around the martyrdom of Hussain, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, to convey modes and models of living among Iranian Shi’ies. He attempted to distinguish mourning and lamenting for Hussain by introducing it as “a mnemonic [model] for thinking about how to live” (1980: 21).

Fighting like lions and crying like men

The Iranian state has supported various resistance movements across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Many young volunteers have been sent to fight alongside Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hashd ul Sha’abi in Iraq, and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. My inquiry here focuses on those young people between 18 and 30 years old in Isfahan province, where one of the most important combat training centers is located. The youth receive basic training in rifle handling and ideological orientation from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps during the summer holidays. After training hours and outside the center, these youth tend to gather in certain mosques and *hey’ats*, religious collectives that organize ceremonies and religious festivals.

I traveled with these young men and lived alongside them in training centers in Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq. To get closer to them, I changed my judo practice to places where they practiced. My research officially ended in 2012, but my life has been entangled with the lives of these young men since 2007. Eventually, my conversations with them brought me to the mosques and *hey’ats*. Every time I asked about their motivations or tried to understand—without conjecture or speculation—their desires for martyrdom, I would hear about Hussain and the Battle of Karbala. Without exception, all stated they were answering the call of Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who was slaughtered in the seventh-century Battle of Karbala. They expressed clarity about whom they were following, but when I asked them to describe that call, everything turned poetic, vague, silent, and unarticulated. When I asked a senior trainer how one determines that embracing martyrdom is the correct answer to the call of Hussain, how one realizes that lamenting and commemorating Hussain is the path that purifies and prepares one for martyrdom, instead of answering me, he invited me to a private mourning ceremony during the month of Muharram at which Hussain was commemorated and lamented. These ceremonies were the occasion of socialization into a circle in which militia recruitment was *not* a deliberate effort by Iranian state and the revolutionary guard. The circle brought about a mystical indulgence that produced a perplexity and awe for the unknown and martyrdom that could be attained by joining the rank of militants.

I realized that during the ceremonies, the Iranian Shi’i youth whom I followed encounter a “puzzling knowability” (Saramifar 2018), a form of knowing that perplexes them rather than offering any sense of comprehension about what martyrdom is and why sacrificing and embracing it in answer to Hussain’s call is the way to salvation and grace. In speaking with them, I sensed what Birgit Meyer—inspired by Hans Kippenberg—calls “wow effects and a sense of wonder . . . in the conjuring of ‘sacred surplus’”

(2015: 8). However, the young Shia men whom I encountered did not treat the sacred surplus in form of a gentle sense of wonder or the *mysterium tremendum* that pervades “the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship” (Otto 1958). However, their reaction was an intense, painful, horror-like experience of sorrow and lamentation that appeared like the Lacanian Real.

I intend to explore their specific forms of mourning and how lamentation generates an unarticulated *wow* factor in service of militancy and martyrdom. I limit myself to processes before deployment and experiencing combat and battlefields to substantiate how religiosity is not necessarily meaningful but sometimes remains an empty shell and silent, which is not expressed but only *felt*. I portray an ethnography of the ceremonies in Isfahan while drawing on the Real and the Symbolic order, as Lacanian registers of subjectivity, to explain the unarticulated and uncharted terrain of lamentation. I address the perplexity, the *wow* and wonder, mourners encounter through lamentation, when their social imaginaries of death are unsettled through the commemoration of martyrdom and stories of Karbala. I then link their perplexity to the Lacanian Real while explaining Lacanian registers of subjectivity (Symbolic and Real), to highlight the texture of mourners’ experience. My broader intention is to show that the Real and Symbolic are not discrete, separate registers; they are *co-constitutive* of each other in the everyday realities of ceremony participants and lamentation singers whose role is forging the Real. Finally, I explain how mourners and lamentation singers authenticate the Lacanian Real within their networks of reality through the Symbolic order by turning the Real into what Mattijs van de Port (2005) calls the “really real.”

Circles of tears and landscapes of cries

For Iranian Shi’is, Muharram, the first month of the lunar calendar, is the occasion for their most poignant rituals and moment of religious

expression. While most (Sunni) Muslims celebrate Muharram as the beginning of a New Year, Shi’i communities wear black and prepare for mourning. They grieve the death of Hussain and his companions who were martyred in the desert of Karbala, in present-day Iraq. Hussain refused to pledge allegiance to the ruling caliph, and he and his companions were surrounded by the caliph’s troops, who demanded his submission. Hussain’s refusal resulted in the carnage that is still commemorated today by Shi’i communities across Iran and around the world. After the Islamic Revolution, the story of Karbala became the master narrative of martyrdom, sacrifice, and oppression (Ram 1996). However, this master narrative does not only produce resistance, martyrdom, and militancy. Mary Hegland (1983) shows in her ethnography of mourning ceremonies in Iran that some mourners choose to see Hussain as an intercessor and adopt to the ruling power rather than revolting by offering blood.

The volunteers I encountered gathered in certain mosques and moved in defined circles. There are a few mosques and private mourning ceremonies in Isfahan where those who train along Hezbollah militants or travel to fight in Iraq, Lebanon, or Syria gather for Muharram and mourn. During Muharram, I moved in these circles through established friendships with militants whom I met initially in Isfahan and later in Lebanon. It is in their affective responses in lamentation that I seek to apply the Lacanian notion. These affective responses emerge from the Karbala paradigm and tales of Hussain’s suffering that are told and retold every year in Muharram sermons on why Hussain traveled unarmed and how he called on Allah to witness his sacrifice. The clergy unravel the effect of the martyrdom of Hussain and explain that the Shi’i traditions of Islam could have vanished had he not offered his blood. Every year, tears are shed and emotions induced. Usually, a lamentation singer expands on the clergy’s interpretations of the Battle of Karbala and emotionally prepares the people for *azadari* (mourning) at the conclusion of his sermon.

Lamentation singers recite ballads in praise of Hussain and narrate details of the battle. They evoke metaphors and captivate the crowd with poetry and their voices. A lamentation singer's performance supplements what clergy are unable to express in the realm of language. Traditionally, a lamentation singer has a slow pace during recitation, avoiding excessive emotional expression beyond the sober shedding of tears. An old lamentation singer told me: "We shed tears like men, patient under the burden of sorrow. We shed tears in silence while beating our chests to remember the pain Hussain suffered."

Nowadays, mourners are not attracted to a *majlis* (ceremony, pl. *majalis*) by the presence of a well-known clergy; rather, they seek out the *majlis* where a well-known lamentation singer is performing. Some mourners skip the sermons altogether and arrive when *azadari* begins. The poetries of *azadari* are melodically recited in minor scale (soprano) to entice mourners to lament without inhibition and wail as their cries fade in the echoes of the singer's sorrowful strains. The poems are accounts of sufferings of Hussain and his companions, occasionally interrupted when the singer stops and shouts rhetorically: "Do you understand what is happening?" He utters the graphic details of bloodshed to animate mourners' emotions. It is common for some mourners to lose themselves in the narrated suffering. They beat themselves or continuously slap their faces in agitation until someone else subdues them. This stage of the lamentation is known as *rowzah*, an Arabic word that means "heavenly garden" but colloquially is assumed as "shrine."

After *rowzah*, people begin *sine-zani*, beating their chests to the rhythm and tempo while the lamentation singer stresses the last part of the descending major scale (*fa mi re do*). The crowd circles around the singer and changes tempo as the singer continues with epic poetry about the Battle of Karbala. The poetry begins with a slow tempo, usually four beats on the chest per second, with a two-second gap before the next set of beats. The tempo is gradually increased and can sometimes get as fast as eight beats every six

seconds, with a two-second gap. The mourners keep up with the quickening pace and beat their chests; pain or a bruised chest does not slow or stop anyone. The lamentation singer encourages the crowd to keep up with *sine-zani* until the last stage, known as *shour*, which means "mayhem" or "passion." *Shour* continues at the maddening tempo of nine beats every eight seconds with no gaps, depending on a singer's skill and the stamina of his audience. Mourners continue crying and beating their chests as the songs describe bloodshed and slaughter in the most graphic ways that language and religious etiquette permit. Songs often convey Shi'i mystical ideas and political meanings during the *shour*. They imply that the mourners have fallen madly in love with Hussain (or his legend) and have become enchanted by his sacrifice to the point that they are ready for anything, even offering their lives to ensure the survival of his message.

This form of mourning has been inspired by and learned from Iranian Azaries of Northern West of Iran,² who mourn Hussain's martyrdom with a legendary passion, zest, and avidity that has made them the masters of *azadari*. They express their passion through what seasoned lamentation singers call *harvaleb* (mayhem or havoc). They passionately listen to poems without holding back their tears or grief. Azaries gather around and mourn while a lamentation singer entices them, or his apprentice encourages the crowd, by crying and lamenting louder and louder. This style of *azadari* appeals to the younger generation, who appreciate actively participating in lamenting through their tears and bodily performance rather than remaining a passive audience. Such desire for a certain form of *azadari* has made lamentation singers the cornerstone of every *majlis*.

I asked many elders about the origins of this style, and they gave me judgments rather explanations. Then, though, I met Haj Musa, a 90-year-old caretaker of an important mosque under the administration of the Supreme Leader's representative in Isfahan. Haj Musa never appeared at *azadari* because he had seen them all and believed Hussain is forgotten in mourn-

ing ceremonies: “It has become something to do, as if they want to forget something; they are hiding behind pain, bruises, and tears to deny the story of Karbala rather than actually listen to the story,” he insisted. My questions about this new style seemed to agitate him, but he eventually relaxed and said: “It was a dream, I don’t remember whose dream, but it became famous. A man of God dreamed that Fatimah [the daughter of Prophet Muhammad and mother of Hussain] stood by a group of Azari mourners, then turned to him, and said, ‘Tell my followers to lament for my son and his companions as they do [pointing at the Azari mourners].’” Haj Musa’s laughter echoed across the empty prayer hall. “That’s it—a dream. And now we have a whole new generation of mourners who are dedicated to howling and wailing to prove their sorrow for the martyrdom of Hussain.”

While others (see Fischer 1980) note mourners’ affective agency and emotional indulgence in collective rituals, I step beyond it to question why lamenting for the martyrs of Karbala and mourning for Hussain are expressed as wailing, howling, crying, and beating one’s chest until bruised among specific group of mourners. What are the textures of the mourners’ experience? What forms of social-cultural tensions interact with the psychic mechanism that moves across the affective domain? What is it that *really* overwhelms the mourners—what even disarmed me as I tried to preserve the distance of an observant gaze? To address these questions, I call for a Lacanian intervention to sketch the texture of the lamentation of this subset of Iranians who are committed to the Islamic Revolution and shed tears for Hussain and his companions in search of martyrdom, while attempting to glimpse the state of grace as the first step toward sacred transcendence.

I emphasize that the Lacanian Real is what mourners find elusive and unarticulated in the Karbala paradigm, and that the authentication of the Real, suggested by Van de Port (2005), occurs in the moments that highlight how people appropriate the unarticulated and uncharted terrain of lamentation. However, my empha-

sis leads to a broadening of the Lacanian Real within the anthropology of Islam and Shi’i rituals by addressing how the Real becomes a realm that is called on, referred to, and navigated by mourners through the traditions and ways of imagining that Shi’ism offers them. Therefore, mourners enable themselves to explain notions such as sacrifice, obedience, and indulgences like finding pleasure in pain and acts of mourning, refusing to account for these in any manner other than unspoken and unarticulated. It is noteworthy that the mourners protect themselves from the terror that they encounter in the revelation of the Real. They situate the Real within a familiar, tangible, reoccurring, and authentic narrative, such as miracles and unusual coincidences, which they see as sublime and divine interventions. Following this framework, I seek an alternative anthropological approach to the intricacies embedded in the Karbala paradigm, an approach that pursues the production of a production to expose how those committed to a Shi’i doctrine of lamentation and commemoration in the Middle East craft subjectivities, even as the precarious realities of war, violence, and bloodshed inscribe pain and suffering for them.

Unarticulated tears and the lamented real in Isfahan

The conversations and interviews about these mechanisms of the *unarticulated and unsaid* kept coming back to the same elusive “I don’t know” answer. One mourner even mocked my attempt to define the “don’t know”: and said, “Let it go; this is an act of *ishq* (love), and *‘aql* (reason) has no business here.” He tried to convince me that this is not a realm one can question; rather, one experiences beyond reason. There was something between the realm of reason and love that resisted articulation in the experiences of Muharram. The Karbala paradigm helps reveal how the Symbolic order interacts and co-constitutes the Real, the other register of subjectivity. The event of Karbala, which com-

prises the death, slaughter, and displacement of the second generation of Muhammad, is a troubling story of cruelty and brutality that can unsettle anyone of any creed.

However, the coalescence of sacrality, history, and religiosity has transformed the Karbala paradigm into the Real, which becomes a trauma for the Shi'i individuals who encounter it. It is not the martyrdom and suffering of Hussain and his companions that turn the Karbala paradigm into the Real; rather, it is the impossibility and incapability of Shi'i communities to accept how Hussain and his companions suffered that turn it into the Real. The Real is the surplus that is not accessed and resists any symbolization but subjectivities sense its resistance via failure of the Symbolic order. The Karbala paradigm highlights the workings of Jacques Lacan's three registers of subjectivity of Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders among Shi'i believers. The subjectivity here is well beyond the limitation of an individual but emerges between individuals through the interplay of the three registers in everyday life. The Symbolic order demarcates the universe of our everyday life. The Symbolic order dominates life as language and the archive of vocabulary, according to Lacanian notions. These orders indicate the chain of signification that guides us through meanings and shapes our subjectivity. Lacan (1968: 161) explains that "the symbolic is the primary order, since it represents and structures both of the others [for subjects]; moreover, since it is ultimately only language . . . that [projects] synonyms, ambiguities, and interpretations."

For instance, the lamentation singer who called Hussain the blood of Allah turned the martyrdom of Hussain into the deepest grief through the Symbolic order available to him. He articulated the chain of signification given to him by a famous prayer called *Ziyarat Ashura* (Homage to the tenth day) that salutes Hussain as the blood of Allah whose suffering is mourned as the greatest suffering in what has and is yet to come. The prayer provides the Symbolic order and chain of signification that influence how Shi'i individuals navigate the domains of their

community's faith. *Ziyarat Ashura* informs the trauma, the horror, the ineffability, and the Real of the Karbala paradigm. In sermons or poetry on the events of Karbala, I often come across the same question: "How is it possible that such suffering befell an infallible without shaking the foundations of the sky and the earth?" The ineffability, or how-is-it-possible-ness (the Real), is a rainbow that one chases because of the desire to find a lost state of wholeness, a search for wholeness to snap one out of perplexing knowability and render oneself aware and knowing. However, the chase brings about unexpected emotional turmoil, terror, and intense affective responses. Therefore, encounters with the Real and intrusions of the Real are always associated with terror, fear, and trauma (Sass 2014; Žižek 1989). It is from this threshold that I draw on Lacanian thinkers to say that the "Real is generally not beyond enough" (Leader 2015: 367). This is the pivotal point at which I broaden Lacanian registers of subjectivity in my approach with reference to the mystical language of the unspoken that emerged from Shi'i traditions.

According to Lacan, the Real is the unspoken and unarticulated surplus that cannot be situated or referred to and 'resists representation and thereby lies beyond the symbolic' (Mikkelsen 2016: 449). However, mystical Shi'i traditions suggest ways of seeing, sensing, and articulating that defy this specific feature the Real but still sustain its kernel that resists symbolization. Michael Sells notes that discourses of transcendence begin with the unresolved dilemma of their ineffability that implies that they and their state of transcendence are beyond naming. However, Sells (1994: 2) refers to Ibn Arabi—the most prominent Muslim mystic—who in discussing the attributes of Allah argued that "to claim that the transcendent, the unspoken, is beyond names . . . *I must give it a name*" (emphasis added). Mourners refer to the Real, to their refusal to accept the story of Karbala, to the elusive qualities of the Karbala paradigm via the Symbolic order that merely acknowledges the Real without articulating its fabric or construction. The name is given to the Real without

actually articulating the Real and what constitutes the Real.

I met Majid, a civil engineer in his late twenties from an educated, upper-middle-class family, whose face was bruised because he continuously slapped himself while screaming the story of Karbala is the “greatest sorrows” from *Ziyarat Ashura* during the mourning ceremony. After the ceremony, I asked him why it was a greater sorrow than the tales of other Shi’i Imams martyred by other tyrants. He simply smiled and said: “There is *something* that touches you when you hear his name; it is a dream that you don’t see; it is an utterance that you know but cannot pronounce. It is like Allah who is *Jabar* [compeller] but does not compel you or determine your fate.” Majid was referring to the Islamic tradition of the absentee attributes of Allah, a tradition that names Allah for what Allah is not but what he can also become, an attribute that He can unleash on His creation. For instance, names such as *Qahhar* (subduer) and *Jabar* (compeller) are used to describe Allah, although those qualities never are manifested through Allah. Islamic traditions use these attributes to refer to what cannot be articulated. An entire Symbolic order is arranged around the Real to deter it from fulfilling and encountering the manifestations of these attributes. Similarly, the story of Karbala brings about the Real that is felt, sensed, and experienced through unarticulated and unspoken perplexities that Shi’i traditions of mourning acknowledge in their Symbolic order. The application of the Lacanian Real requires such adjustments to explain how, in non-Euro-American traditions, the ineffable is hinted at and how the terror of the Real is encountered and dealt with. Therefore, we need to trace how Symbolic order and the Real co-construct and co-create each other in order to understand the subjectivities that emerge in the complexities of the Karbala paradigm.

The tale of the slaughter of an infallible, the murder of his six-month-old infant, the capture of his three-year-old daughter, and many other details cannot be fully translated into language that adherent Shi’i individuals would accept,

since such cruelty befell their imam and Allah allowed the earth and humanity to continue to exist. Therefore, a set of practices such as *azadari* and *sine-zani* has been devised to form “a society [in] which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary” (Žižek 1989: 126). These practices do not function merely to keep a society intact; they also sustain the mechanisms of faith and religiosity within individuals’ everyday life. The Karbala paradigm is a living model of deterring the intrusion of the Real (the fact that the slaughter of an infallible happened and the world did not end—a truth that attests to humans’ capability of murdering innocents) into socio-religio-cultural reality. Individual Shi’is come together in a community that deploys the Karbala paradigm as a means of preventing the collapse of the chain of signification drawn around their existence.

Lamenting the Real and mourning through the Symbolic

Traditionally, *azadari* (mourning ceremonies) comprised *sine-zani* (beating of the chest), *qameh-zani* (self-flagellation with swords), *zanjir-zani* (self-flagellation with chains), *Taziyah* (passion plays or folk performances), and finally *dasteh* or *mazlukeshi* (processions) on the day of Hussain’s martyrdom. The Karbala paradigm has undergone transformations similar to any other socio-religio-cultural phenomena. For example, lamentation singers have become religious celebrities who narrate the tale of Karbala to evoke tears and sorrow to the extent that young committed seek the star dust of the lamentation singer and seek introduction to them. Suleiman insisted that I introduce him to Alimi, a celebrated lamentation singer whom I had met frequently during my research. I met Suleiman during the survival training and went with him to buy Alimi’s recent CDs. Suleiman explained that Alimi is able to take him to places where he can experience things he “should not experience” or at least things he doesn’t “deserve” to experience. I talked to

him to find out what those places and experiences are and why he doesn't deserve them. He snapped, "I *don't know*, or at least I cannot explain it." He fell silent for a moment: "I am not even able to imagine what Hussain suffered. Are you able to accept the fact that he was slaughtered in such a brutal manner? I feel someone reaches into my chest and twists my heart every time I think about it." Tears ran down his face, and I stared shamelessly while wondering how to write about the toughest young man in the survival training crying in the street. Suleiman veiled the knowability that moved him behind a bodily metaphor and stretched his imaginaries through poetic expressions to hint at the Real that was lurking and never it was beyond enough (Leader 2015).

Real makers and seeking really Real

The conversation with Suleiman and his interest in meeting Alimi not only implied the Real but also brought me to question how the Real is forged. Does only the Real emerge during the formation of religious subjectivity, or are there hands that interfere with the Real and make its existence possible? Lamentation singers contribute to the emergence of the Real. The singers, cornerstones of every *azadari*, are known as *maddah* (panegyric), or traditionally as *rowze-khan* or *nouhe-khan*. They have become celebrities of the Karbala paradigm, so much so that clergy have begun to despise them. Fisher (1980) highlights this tension differently. He suggested the senior clergy frowned on emotionally induced religiosity and stressed orations and sermons. However, the situation has changed, and nowadays clergy use the emotional encouragement of *rowzeh*, which has created rivalry between them and lamentation singers. Until a decade ago, people would seek a *majlis* where the most eloquent, articulate, and famous clergy would offer his sermons. Nowadays, the name of a *maddah* is printed in large font on flyers and banners. Most people would say that they attend a *majlis* of this or that well-

known *maddah* whenever I asked about their Muharram plans. I rarely heard anyone mention the name of a clergy as the reason they attend a *majlis*. A *maddah* initiates the covenant of sorrow and translates the tale of Karbala into language and performance. Language and performance come together to conjure the platform for the ineffable experience.

I met most celebrated *maddahs* who appeared in the *majalis* of the militia volunteers. My questions were known to them before I asked, and they became exasperated at meeting me again and again. Ithna Ashari, a lamentation singer who performs only in *hey'ats* with strong right-wing conservative ties, scorned my quest and sent word through my friend: "Your simpleminded friend [me] does not know that it is the voice of the master that flows in us. We are *blind* and *deaf*, but his attention enables us to reveal the truth. We reveal and chaos begins. It is chaos; it is mayhem that surges through hands and brings them to chests. It is something that cannot be grasped, yet it is felt." He is certainly right about the chaos being impossible to grasp. He would make Lacan proud by attesting to being blind to the Real and the "something that cannot be grasped." Lamentation singers fabricate and forge the Real that mourners seek but are unable to grasp. Meanwhile, *maddahs* flirt with the borders of the Real, which they address through the fantasy of a master who blesses them and gives them voice.

There is always something beyond for both mourners and *maddahs*. And that something beyond becomes a self-referential circular logic, much like other mystical traditions that influence Iranian Shi'is, especially those committed to the Karbala paradigm. This is what Sells stresses as the accepted mystery of the Real, the unarticulated that "reveals to (it)self through it(self)" (1994: 73). There are two manners of the Real at work here: the Real that a lamentation singer forges and indicates for mourners, who encounter the terror of its revelation during the ceremony; and the second Real, which is a sense of the Real at work for the lamentation singers that falls alongside but is separate from

the Real pursued by mourners. Bani Fatemeh spoke of his own Real, which stands apart from the Real of those who circle around him and bruise themselves, beat their chests, and cry until their eyes run dry.

Ali Meshkini, an Azari *nohe-khan* who has been master to many lamentation singers, answered my questions with more nuance and instead of repeating the line about *ishq* and *aql* when I asked what evokes tears. Meshkini explained the other side of beyond for me: “The other side is what we see. The veil falls. The curtains are removed when we sing. They show us something which burns our breath and the warmth our voice revives the madness in the faithful.” I interrupted: “Who are they?” He replied, “The hand of truth, the truth that reveals itself.” He spoke as if trying to explain, and still I remained baffled by his hidden meanings. I was silent until he finished his cup of tea. He picked up the empty cup and asked me to look through it. I could read the brand etched into the glass. He said: “You only get to see the bottom when the cup becomes empty. It only becomes transparent and possible when you experience the tea. You need to experience sorrow that burns you empty. Lamenting the loss brings us closer to that experience; then *we become empty to be filled with the beyond*.” The imaginaries and fabrications of love, chaos, and mayhem stand for all that is not known. They stand in opposition to the articulated and spoken norms of religions and religiosity. The love, chaos, and mayhem imply a passion in the heart of the faithful striving to reach something beyond.

Meshkini prepares the foundation of his imaginaries by using his voice to hinder the intrusion of the Real. The Real is the very something that remains present through its absence, and Meshkini speaks of the Real that he pursues while his audience chases the Real he reproduces during a *majlis*. Mourners use their bodies, tears, and senses to craft fantasies and address the Real that streams toward them from the lamentation singer. Therefore, the Karbala paradigm and simultaneous Reals are distributed across social realities to expose how “fan-

tasy is not the object of desire, but its setting” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1986: 26). The Real is kept at bay through the power of fantasy. People craft fantasies to mask the absence and nothingness that constitute the Real. They configure models of living and practices to handle the ineffable, and they distance themselves from the end of the rainbow. The chasing of the rainbow and the very existence of the rainbow are fantasies and fantasy making. For instance, the Muharram rituals that concentrate on lamentation and mourning are performances of fantasies, and the fantasies that these performances point at cannot be translated thoroughly into comprehensible language for the Shi’i individuals engaged in the Karbala paradigm.

Living with the Real and making the really Real

Here, I turn toward the mechanisms that Shi’i individuals authenticate in communal experiences of the Real and fantasy making. Van de Port highlights dreams, visions, revelations, and healing as modes “in which the inexplicable helps to convince people [of] the authenticity of their particular convictions” (2005: 164). He shares examples to portray how some of his interviewees authenticated ineffable experiences while following the Bahian Candomblé in Brazil and how the cult maintains a sense of authenticity. Similarly, in my inquiry, mourners and lamentation singers evoke various modes to generate some resemblance of authenticity in the midst of unknowable, beyond-the-grasp perplexity, chaos, and passion for the transcendent. The Real is inexplicable, and its terror leads to fantasies forged and lived within the Karbala paradigm. However, how do mourners convince themselves that they are involved in something real? How do they maintain their faith in something that none of them knew? Or, to quote Van de Port (2005: 159), “how do they keep ‘the rest of what is’ at bay?”

I had encountered the way mourners evoke visions, dreams, and miracles, and even impose

meaning on banal objects, to bring a sense of the authenticity to what they considered the beyond. They extended the mourning rituals through practices and tales that confirm that their rituals and the terror they felt are “true” in encounters with the Real. They strived for authenticity. Through practices that seemed capable of endorsing the implication, the mourners assured themselves and others, such as me, that they hold a correct view and don’t worship false gods like other religions do. This authentication and attaching some form of tangibility to the Real and unsaid appeared usually in simplest forms and not necessarily as miracles. Such sociocultural processes could simply be seen through their subtext that attempts to authenticate the fantasies generated within the Karbala paradigm. However, these authenticating practices and stories highlight the Real that lurks in the narrative structure of the Karbala paradigm rather than masking it as fantasy, as supposed to do according to Lacan. I share one story that stood among all the stories that I collected during my journey.

The healing hand of the martyr with no hands

Most *hey’ats* and households that commemorate Karbala distribute food to mourners after the Ashoura procession. However, there are those who offer food on Tasuâ (ninth day of Muharram), the day when ‘Abbas, Hussain’s half-brother, is commemorated. It has been said ‘Abbas was a brave warrior who risked his life several times to bring water to Hussain’s thirsty children. The enemy amputated his hands and killed him before he could make his last delivery. The legend of ‘Abbas is narrated with emphasis on his bravery, scarifies, and warriorhood. He is described as the champion of Hussain, and the food distributed in his name is thought to bring his protection to mourners and donors.

A friend whose food distribution is known across the posh neighborhoods of Isfahan called me. He insisted something would interest me

during the food distribution. My friend pointed out a woman with a large bowl standing in the food line. He pointed at the cross hanging from the rosary in her hand and said: “It has been our family tradition to distribute food on Tasuâ for the last decade. She has been coming and collecting food for the last five years. Apparently, she has a story and has seen some signs.” The elderly lady in black garb was an Armenian who lived nearby. It took some coaxing for her to agree to share her story. The first time her family received some of this food, several years earlier, her son had collected the food from my friend’s house and taken it home. Her husband, who is a truck driver, ate a few bites and drove away to deliver his cargo. He got into an accident and spent a month in a coma. He refused to talk to anyone when he woke up from the coma, fully healed and recovered, and he demanded to speak to a priest. The priest who came left the room angry and agitated only a few minutes after he arrived.

The story was that the man saw Jesus while he was unconscious. Jesus had come to help him during his transition to the afterlife. However, a man with no hands and dressed in armor abruptly walked into the room and told Jesus, “This man’s flesh is blessed; he has tasted our food.” The Armenian man awoke after this dream. The family did not convert to Islam, but the man’s wife came every year after that to collect the food distributed in the name of ‘Abbas. I asked why she requests such a large quantity of food rather than one or two plates like everyone else. She explained that she freezes the food and mixes small portions of it with the food that her husband packs for his travels throughout the year. The healing power of the food authenticated my friend’s Real and generated the “really Real” (Van de Port 2005). The story of ‘Abbas’s intervention in the affairs of someone who is not of the Shi’i faith is the affirming seal of the Real. The ineffable experience that remained inexplicable turned into *something* really Real. The healing of the Armenian man, who gained no advantage from faking his story, brought authenticity to my friend’s practice.

Reals and networks of reality

I have encountered three different responses from Iranian Shi'is, specifically those who pursue a militancy saturated with mysticism and spirituality. They indulge in a perplexing knowability to uphold the Real that lurks within the Karbala paradigm. First, some refuse to accept that such pain could be inflicted on an infallible "chosen one" while simultaneously accepting that the Battle of Karbala is a historical event that actually happened. Second, there are those who chase the rainbow of inexplicability within the Karbala paradigm and suggest their pain is the mystical bridge that delivers the rainbow to them. Third, there are the words of lamentation singers that display the simultaneity of Reals: the Real forged by lamentation singers as mourners respond to its intrusion by way of affectively charged practices, even as the Real that hovers over the lives of lamentation singers tries to intrude into and impact their subjectivity. Furthermore, these Reals are authenticated through various "modes of ineffable" (Van de Port 2005), such as dreams, visions, and what people presume are blessings, to arrive at the really Real and confirm their perplexities.

These Reals are distributed across networks of realities and people, flitting back and forth among and between them. These tenuous yo-yo movements occur because their Symbolic orders are distributed across networks of realities and are not merely based on language and the archive of its vocabulary. However, the Karbala paradigm shows that mourners incorporate their bodies, and sensations like pain, gestures, and sound, into the Symbolic order, which in turn calls for a much broader understanding of Symbolic order and language. We can trace the parameters of the "I don't know" that people talk about if the Symbolic order includes more than the archive of vocabulary. By doing so, fantasies can be seen not as masks over the inexplicable but as indicators of it. Tracing these indicators and exploring how the Real that lurks within the Karbala paradigm exposes the model of thinking and networks of reality that depend

on a certain historicism to justify some form of religiosity.

It is the Real and the inexplicable something that generate a model of thinking and living within the Karbala paradigm, a model that is justified through the shortcomings of language, a model that strives to speak of the texture of Shi'is experiences while lamenting and mourning. Encountering the Real and tales of the really Real are the occasions when some people try to bridge the gap between their commitment to religiosity and questions that challenge religious violence and meanings of martyrdom. They bridge that gap via the inexplicability of the Karbala paradigm and experience an absence that is at the center of all significations by naming the unarticulated without explaining it through the Symbolic order offered by Shi'i mystical notions and cultural practices of lamenting. We need to trace these occasions via the inexplicable to find out how people consolidate their notions of othering while simultaneously regenerating "the other" through moments and practices that are based on something that no one, themselves included, is capable of describing in language.

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Notes

1. There is no direct translation of these performers' titles; I am using lamentation singer(s) to encapsulate both the functional and performative. They are known as *rowze-khan* or *nouhe-khan* and sing lamentations mourning about past tragedies, deaths, and battles. This tradition returns to rituals and folk tradition in ancient Persia. Nowadays, the Battle of Karbala and

martyrdoms of Shi'i Imam s are the focal point of lamentation singers' performance.

2. Azaries are people of the northwestern province of Iranian Azerbaijan, where Iran borders the country of Azerbaijan.

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