

STORYBOARD P. IN *DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR JAJA, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



Windridden: Historical Oblivion and the Nonvalue of Non- identification

PARISA VAZIRI

In the early 1960s, the Iranian psychiatrist Ghulām-Husayn Sā'idī, recognized primarily for his work as a modernist author and dramatist, traveled to a remote harbor in southern Iran to learn about zar. Zar names a pan-Afroasiatic belief in malignant winds circulating through hives inhumed under the earth and which infest human intestines and penetrate the skeletal frame. Practiced and communicated primarily amongst African slave descendants in the Middle East, zar encompasses both the conviction in this metaphysical substance and the rhythm and dance-oriented rituals wielded to heal its bodily and psychic afflictions. Lacking documents attesting to the origins of its belief, zar tests the limits of historicization and brushes against the realm of myth buried in deep history, extending past geographical precision and temporal specificity. The phenomenology of zar refracts

the fragility of historiographical material explicating its lineage; unveiling relations to history that are ineffable rather than binding, impenetrable rather than normative, and disruptive of the traditional alignment between interiority and historicity upon which the concept of race articulates itself.

Melancholic individuals turn to zar when other traditional or modern medical practices prove inefficient in mitigating psychosomatic ailments associated with withdrawal from the social world. Scholars like I. M. Lewis and Janice Boddy have long noticed the gendered character of zar in Sudan, Somalia, and the Southeast region of the Arabian peninsula where winds affect women disproportionately, and where zar constitutes the feminine domain of social ritual. In other regions, however, zar

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appears not to discriminate along such apparent lines.¹

In *Ahle-Havā* (1966), the short monograph resulting from his fieldwork and styled in the genre of amateur ethnography, Sā'idī observed zar's ubiquity across forms of identity. He describes an enigmatic scene in the initial moments of the zar ceremony where the mama or baba zar (the zar expert in charge of treating the wind—almost always, he notes in passing, a black female) induces her patient to speak.² She

lays the windridden individual upon a mat on the ground and lights incense under his or her nose, then smokes a concoction of malodorous ingredients such as goat's hair, animal excrement, and noxious plants. Unwittingly, the afflicted may begin uttering words in Swahili, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, or another language without any conscious comprehension of these murmurings, sometimes bordering on inscrutable sounds or flaring howls.³ The test allows the mama or baba zar to

detect the origin of the wind in order to find the proper path for placation.

The illustration of the ethnographic scene illuminates a recoiling from self-coherence grounded in the experience of Indian Ocean world slavery and which contributes to deconstructing our modern-day understanding of race. This understanding, Denise Ferreira da Silva has recently shown, and as I will interpret below, is predicated upon a philosophical alignment between interiority and historicity



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that braces the self-possessed subject.⁴ At the same time, zar's connection to slavery limits possibilities for the appraisal of its disruption to this alignment shoring up the subject. Distinct from any philosophical understanding of race, blackness defies the containment or relegation of slavery to history, as it questions slavery's restriction to spatio-temporal categories more generally. Under such conditions,

alignment appears too measured a configuration to account for the ways slavery exceeds expectations for historical return and memory.

Sā'idī was a self-avowed amateur ethnographer. Not only was he untrained in the standardized protocols of anthropology—an institution that barely existed in Iran as a disciplinary formation in the first place—but his vibrant career as a fiction writer renders even further

spurious the truth-value of his text. I am not particularly invested in that truth-value; rather, I am interested in this particular moment of strange vocal eruption as a tool for the imagination, one which renders blackness as a kind of ambivalent displacement from place and time to be figured neither negatively nor positively, if it can be figured at all. Katherine McKittrick writes about the complex connection between racial

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captivity and geography, implying blackness always connotes a form of displacement—a spatial disjuncture that “surprises” geographical expectation and fact.⁵ Writing of the relation between blackness and temporality, Hortense Spillers poignantly articulates the historical stillness of racial captivity—a ruptured stagnancy sundering blackness from the empty temporal flow of the human, ceaselessly sucking it back toward the violent placidity of the past.⁶ This moment

of wind identification speaks to an alternative relation to space and time conditioned by the power and enigma of sensory perception: a kind of torpor of memory whose meaning remains difficult to fully absorb, and whose judgment sits suspended.

The diffusion of zar from continental Africa into the lands of the Middle East and Mediterranean is more or less unanimously assumed to be linked to the Indian Ocean slave trade, even while the narrative fabric of this history remains lined with

irreparable holes and frayed at each layer of fact.⁷ A lack of historical evidence for the existence of the zar ritual in the Middle East prior to the mid-nineteenth century is usually cited as primary justification for belief in its connection to African slavery (which thrived during that century), as is the fact that the practice is often contained within cult-like environments, unlike the more public-oriented characteristics of spirit rituals in many African territories. For Ehud Toledano, the degree to

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FIGURE 1



which former slaves in the Ottoman empire were able to maintain such traditions despite contempt and forceful prohibition by Ottoman officials and the interdictions of Islam problematizes the popular “good treatment” thesis of Islamic slavery. Toledano argues, rather, that the refusal to integrate evidences the hostility of an environment from which slaves sought respite through traditional healing and community-building techniques.⁸

FIGURE 2



Anthropological artifacts like the zar ritual, then, remain significant for Indian Ocean world slavery scholars, who lack the robust and meticulously cataloged documentation so crucial to compiling the vast knowledge we currently have about Atlantic world slavery. This notorious paucity of information, however, is itself a critical question *to* history, rather than a poor answer to questions *from* history. Zar and its barely legible relationship to the history of African slavery infuses the lack

FIGURE 3



FROM L-R: (1) BOATS ANCHORED IN THE HARBOR OF BANDAR LINGIH, IRAN. (2) BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH OF ZAR. (3) CEREMONIAL SCENE FROM AN EXPERIMENTAL ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARY ABOUT ZAR. BAD-I JIN (DIRECTED BY NASER TAQVAI, 1969, NATIONAL IRANIAN RADIO AND TELEVISION), FRAME GRAB.

with courage to dream outside the demands of normative historical fact. Historical fact, even and perhaps when plentiful, as Spillers reminds students of Atlantic history, is predetermined by the assumptions that are capable of thinking questions into existence in the first instance.⁹

Precisely how Indian Ocean world slavery fits into the history of blackness remains unresolved. W. E. B. Dubois characterized continental Africa as a bridge between the Atlantic and Indian

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Ocean worlds, not only in geographical but also economic and philosophical terms, indexing black thought's early engagement with this parallel space and antecedent chronology.¹⁰ Prior to the radical break Atlantic slavery introduced into Africa's history, the virtually singular external influence on the cultural and political economy of this continent came from the Islamic world in the Middle East.¹¹ That transatlantic slavery could not have flourished without its exposure to the

use, cultivation, and manufacture of sugar in Syria and Palestine during the Crusades is often unwittingly redacted from the popular history of African slavery, rendering contestable the depiction of a “break” introduced by the European reorientation of the trade, in contrast, for example, to the characterization of continuity.¹² The millenia-long trade in African slaves throughout the Indian Ocean only reinforces black studies' highly complex engagement with the concepts of temporality and

duration. By introducing horizonless depth in time, this extension intervenes in the exhausting quest for origin's retrieval.¹³

If our conception of racial blackness is cultivated within and throughout the nexus of Atlantic slavery and modernity's material and epistemological manifestations, including the philosophical enshrinement of historicity as the human's “privileged ontological context,” a counterintuitive thought arises: the black experience of

forgetting, or nonidentification with history in the Indian Ocean world, destabilizes the narrative of the racialization of blackness as it destabilizes our concept of the human more generally.¹⁴ But if the possibilities for such nonidentification are circumscribed by that which is disclaimed, can there be value in focusing on this quasi-fictional moment of destabilization? From

what ground would it be possible to determine such value?

The Persian Gulf, and the south of Iran in particular, teems with various histories channeled through ethnic identification: Ethiopian, Arab, Hindi, Baluchi, Kurdish, Persian, Zanzibari, Somalian, etc. Having “‘long since forgotten to what tribes their ancestors belonged,’ a factor no longer of any consequence,” claims Abdul Sheriff, most of

these populations have intermixed to prismatic degrees.¹⁵ Were one to ignore its non-linguistic manifestations, then on a purely empirical level, one could thus reduce the instance of zar “glossolalia” to mere assimilation, or unconscious absorption, particularly considering the various linguistic ingredients constituting the patois dialects spoken in the Khalij. Idealizing such forms of assimilation would

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be a disingenuous perpetuation of the notion of “Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism” that unwittingly succeeds in enshrouding perception of historical violence in the “postcolonial” world—violence that is not in every instance derivative of colonialism as postcolonial theory has historically understood it.¹⁶ Aware of the threat of idealization my curiosity poses, I highlight this micro-moment of unpredictable sound and quasi-speech embedded in zar as a kind of organic, ephemeral

historical trace presumably unfiltered through intention. It is a moment in which history—perhaps someone else’s history of displacement—erupts through unpossessed speech, and is left there, shared in a moment of surrender. Finally, I am interested less in the persistence of that historical trace, or of its “deeper” nuances, than in the possible meanings of nonidentification or nonrelation to it.

Nonidentification and disavowal of roots—specifically of African roots—is a cause for unease amongst Indian

Ocean world scholars, particularly those concerned with the parochial question of “diaspora.” African slave descendants’ reluctance to associate with their African roots is indeed documented throughout the countries of the Middle East and has been interpreted variously. Consensus assumes that because slaves were encouraged to assimilate into Middle Eastern and Eurasian societies much more assiduously than was the case in the Americas, these individuals gradually forfeited

direct connection with their familial and regional ties.¹⁷ The so-called “ascending miscegenation” thesis, argue scholars of slavery in Southeast Asia, for example, is one of the greatest causes of cultural amnesia of slavery in India.¹⁸ Providing a more discerning interpretation, Anie Montigny views the situation in Oman as a result of negative images of Africa in the media and in general society.¹⁹ And, adding to this view, Mathew Hopper notes nothing is “gained” by highlighting one’s servile past in Eastern Arabia; thus, African ancestry is very often intentionally and strategically obscured.²⁰

The desire to disassociate or distance oneself from blackness is a dominant and familiar theme for black studies.²¹ While intentional dissociation is a valid and possibly sound interpretation of the rampant denegation, I would like to tap into a different course of thought

not conditioned by the notion of rejection, which already presupposes the naturalization of an unmediated intimacy between interiority, on the one hand, and historicity, on the other. This tranquil bond is the condition of possibility for a certain conceptualization of identity, perhaps the most prominent and widespread of modern civilization: a self or subject with a history that, from a sociopolitical standpoint, is first and foremost linked to geography, or in the case of black people, of a displacement that is, of course, first conditioned by expectation for placement. The question I want to ask, instead, is why we must begin with this expectation and assumption in the first place.

In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva brilliantly shows how a direct line connects the history of this assumption of alignment between interiority and

historicity to the development of the concept of race. In her readings of canonical Western philosophical texts from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, da Silva excavates a series of denigrations and disavowals of exteriority and connects them to the racialization of exteriority. Her narration of how the post-Enlightenment transcendental subject achieves its status as a full, feeling, knowing “I” emphasizes the necessary distancing and reduction of things and bodies in extension to validate or center the burden of understanding onto the individual mind in interiority. Focusing in particular on Hegel’s reconciliation of exteriority and interiority through the narrative of engulfment—the privileging of self-consciousness as the only force endowed with the capacity to recognize its own position as an object in space, simultaneously interior and exterior—Silva names the conflation of history

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and self-consciousness as one of the most violent moments in the history of philosophy. When history, now substitutable for interiority, is endowed with the meaning of Freedom and self-consciousness, history is racialized. History is racialized because, according to the philosophical narrative, there is only one particular kind of self-consciousness capable of moving history in accord with the practice of Freedom: (white) self-consciousness.

By showing how our modern understanding of the subject relies upon an epistemological context privileging, binding, subjectivity to historicity, da Silva challenges the ethics of this binding. Challenging the ethics of the relationship between being and time by describing its intimacy with the production of race threatens our everyday notion of what the human, even what the self, is. Da Silva calls it “risky,” and implies the risk has been too enormous for critical race scholars to take,

leaving them (often unwittingly) bound up in the more obvious and comprehensible but consistently unsatisfying “logic of exclusion.”²² As the erasure and manipulation of history is a constant threat particularly for populations who have had to struggle to inscribe history, doubting the value of history might seem careless.²³ However, it is quite difficult to discern whether the legitimacy of this concern in fact derives from a previous

ideology undergirding our modern understanding of the human.

Da Silva's critique of the human relation to history prompts me to rethink forms of racialization explicitly borne from this unavoidable connection; however, it is the concept of blackness, not race, that positions slavery as a highly specific historical instance. Because blackness materializes—epidermalizes—slavery in such a specifically violent way (Fanon), it marks not just one history or one period of history amongst others that might be abstracted to the status of history in general. In Fred Moten's remarkable interpretation of Saidiya Hartman's work, the "event" of slavery would be a kind of "nonparticulate diffusion" in excess of both temporality and spatiality.²⁴ Spillers, in a distinct but loosely connected iteration, writes about the history of transatlantic slavery as marking a kind of conceptual-material branding that

would bear the weight of this unlocalizable, uncontained, and uncontainable diffusion, a point visual studies-oriented scholars of racial blackness have made in unique ways.²⁵ Blackness would be the exteriorization of the binding of interiority to historicity da Silva names as a crucial moment in the history of race, but also one which comprehends singularly the dangers of historical alignment by revealing the stakes of its imposed and tangible grafting onto the human. Sā'idī's "native informants" knew about this grafting, and experienced it in the segregated arrangement of their living conditions. That lived imposition of slavery—borne out in persisting social hierarchies—could not be forgotten along with its memory.²⁶

In the Persian Gulf, the history of slavery has not yet been articulated into popular form—at least, not into a legible form of political consciousness

shared amongst various slave descendant populations. One scholar of slavery in Iran predicts that in a matter of decades this will change; that African descendants in the Middle East will begin to identify as black, over and beyond national identifications. With the recent spate of younger scholarly research on the Indian Ocean world, this is likely true, if the case of India's Sidi population is any indication.²⁷ And it may be empowering for both the larger black diaspora and for the individuals who don't yet identify as part of it. But in this moment when that has not quite occurred, something else worthy of attention has been continuing for centuries. It involves another form of power unrecognizable as political and impossible to celebrate because its value is unplaceable. It is a kind of nonvaluable forgetting, or simply, indifference to memory that merits understanding and recognition for what it does not assume. ■

- ¹ For example, while Sā' idī notes that the winds tend to afflict areas of poverty more frequently, in the case of Egypt, Morsy reports the winds affect the wealthy and poor alike. Soheir A. Morsy, "Spirit Possession in Egyptian Ethnomedicine: Origins, Comparison and Historical Specificity" in I. M. Lewis, Ahmed Al-Safi, and Sayyid Hurreiz, eds. *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 189.
- ² Ghulām-Husayn Sā' idī, *Ahl-i Havā* (Tehran: Chapkhanah-i Danishgah, 1966).
- ³ In other regions, such as Somalia or Tunisia, change in the tone of voice or the emission of strange sounds substitutes for this moment of foreign speech. Virginia Luling, "Some Possession Cults in Southern Somalia" in *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).
- ⁴ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- ⁵ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- ⁶ Hortense Spillers, "Mama' s Baby, Papa' s Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 205.
- ⁷ Richard Natvig, "Oromos, Slaves, And the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20.4 (1987): 669-89.
- ⁸ Ehud R. Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- ⁹ Hortense Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.
- ¹⁰ Jeremiah Wilson Moses, "Africa and Pan-Africanism in the Thought of Du Bois" in *The Cambridge Companion to W. E. B. DuBois* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ¹¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.
- ¹² Lindon Barret' s posthumous *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014) is exemplary of a school of thought in black studies that views transatlantic slavery as a kind of rupture—particularly due to its connection to the origins of capitalism.
- ¹³ Gwyn Campell, ed. *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004). Of course, various strains of black studies have succeeded in undermining the chronologically ordained itinerary of genealogy as it is instituted by disciplinary historiography. See, for example, Nahum Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- ¹⁴ Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 32.
- ¹⁵ Abdul Sheriff, *Afro-Arab Interaction in the Indian Ocean: Social Consequences of the Dhow Trade* (Cape Town: Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2001), 20.
- ¹⁶ Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, eds., *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- ¹⁷ Although, as an anomaly to this trend, Frederick Cooper has noted identification with slave roots on the Kenyan coast free of reluctance. Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977), 240.
- ¹⁸ Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds., *Slavery & South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁹ Anie Montigny, "L' Afrique Oubliée des Noirs du Qatar" *Journal des Africanistes* 72.2 (2002), 213–225.
- ²⁰ Mathew S. Hopper, "African Presence in Eastern Arabia," in *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, ed. Lawrence G. Porter (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

²¹ Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1995).

²² Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 11.

²³ Because for centuries African-Americans have been actively and violently denied access to self-authorship and thereby disassociated from the historical time of the world, it is easy to see how the fruition of historical consciousness has been essential to the pioneers of black studies and continues to be for black politics and radicalism.

²⁴ Private correspondence. In the past, I have been critical of Moten's treatment of Hartman's work, specifically of what I interpreted as the former's abstraction of structural violence into aporia (<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/vaziri.html>). I revise my position to reflect the fact I had missed a crucial aspect of Moten's logic. I now believe his operationalization of aporia illustrates the inseparability of violence from its innumerable iterations of abstraction, of which his famous example of jazz might be just one. "Non-particulate," then, indexes the texture of this inseparability, which remains, to some extent, unthinkable.

²⁵ Spillers, "Mama's Baby." Nicole Fleetwood writes about blackness as a "multisensory" experience. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Through analyses of the works of contemporary black artists, Darby English writes about the way blackness overflows bodies and objects into apparently neutral space. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

²⁶ Sā' idī was one of the few Iranian authors who observed and wrote about (nonformalized) racial segregation in Iran: "In the large and small coastal regions blacks are often isolated in their own neighborhoods; for example in Bandar Abbas they live mostly in the neighborhood called 'Blacks' Quarters' [Manabar-Siahhan] or 'Behind the City' (Posht-i Shahr)" (6). Their living conditions, he went on to note, were inferior to those of white Iranians.

²⁷ John C. Hawley, ed., *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008)