

*Submitted for the 2019 meeting of the Western Political Science Association in San Diego*

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### **Centers of Attention**

*Individuations of Truth and Networked Sociality in Post-Reformist Iran, 1997-2009*

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville identified individualism as a persistent issue for the legitimacy of democratic government. He famously distinguished between individualism and egoism, defining the former as “a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows” and “proceeds from erroneous judgment,” in contrast to “blind instinct” and “depraved feelings” that rule the latter.<sup>1</sup> “Among democratic peoples,” he claimed, “new families emerge constantly out of nothing, others constantly fall back into nothing, and all those that remain change face; the thread of time is broken at every moment, and the trace of the generations fades. You easily forget who preceded you, and you have no idea about those who will follow you. Only those closest to you are of interest.”<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville observed that Americans fought against individualism by “[giving] political life to each portion of the territory, in order infinitely to multiply for citizens the occasions to act together, and to make the citizens feel every day that they depend on each other.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, he suggested that the antidote to individualism was a sense of intimacy or, put otherwise, immediacy.

The formulation “out of nothing” or nothing as such that Tocqueville employed to capture the beginning and end of social transformation among democratic peoples is just as well the source of the potential for the recovery of intimate or immediate relations of association. The debate between staunch individualists and the so-called communitarians hinges around the question of

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2010), 882.

<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville, 884.

<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville, 891.

whether the individual or society ought to come first, the former defending the rights of individuals from majority rule, the latter securing the obligation of individuals to collective life.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to pave a third way between individualists and communitarians, George Kateb, recalling the Emersonian tradition, writes that “[p]olitics is necessary, but cannot define an individualist life for most people; its realism is indistinguishable from fantasy, especially group fantasy.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of taking flight from “privatism,” Emerson aims to reform it.<sup>6</sup> The reformation of privatism hinges, it appears, on the practice of dreaming. In contrast to undemocratic individualism, Kateb, thinking within the Emersonian tradition, advocates for democratic individualism, in which “the normal condition of sleep [is] thrown off and life [is] entered into.”<sup>7</sup> Kateb thus reconceived Tocqueville’s conception of the *ex nihilo* creation of associations as mediated by the operation of fantasy.

In a critical examination of and elaboration upon Kateb’s excavation of the Emersonian tradition and his theorization of democratic individualism, Jack Turner argues that individualism as it is conceived by Tocqueville or atomistic individualism is “systematized self-delusion” insofar as the individual is distorted by a “social perception” that it is the author of its own destiny.<sup>8</sup> Turner encourages his readers to “awaken to race” and to thereby perceive the social and histories reality that grounds – and binds – individuals to the same world. James Baldwin personified the “awakening to race,” employing prophetic speech to “re-center political discourse on ‘what (and who) we count as real,’” to incite in others what might be conceived as a rude awakening.<sup>9</sup> Undertheorized in Kateb and Turner’s answer to the problem of atomistic individualism is the

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<sup>5</sup> George Kateb, “Democratic Individualism and its Critics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003), 304. See also George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Kateb, 304.

<sup>7</sup> Kateb, 304.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, 106.

relationship to “reality” of what Kateb describes as a fantasy and what Turner describes as a dream. Unclear as a result is how and why the inscription between fantasy and reality maps upon the distinction between atomistic and democratic individuality. In this chapter, I argue that conceptions of *self-centered individuality* rest upon a fictive depiction of the self that individualism begs as its question such that the reality of both “atomism” and “democratism” are contested.

I ask, specifically, how democratic and atomistic individualisms premised upon a particular conception of the self come into formation during a crisis of legitimacy? In the previous chapter, I suggested that the memorialization of the act of martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq War contested the authority of the so-called Imam Khomeini, whose most staunch followers claimed individually gave presence to the truth of the 1979 Revolution as the truth revealed, in direct contrast to Khomeini’s insistence that his authority was founded upon the “barefoot” masses. The immanent critique of conservative apologia for the authority of the one and the few that I articulated in the previous chapter establishes the groundwork for an examination of the emergence of self-centered individualism both within and beyond the terms of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The specific case of martyrdom during the crisis of legitimacy of the first decade of the Islamic Republic opened to a more general problem: that each individual was a potential medium of truth. In this chapter, I propose that the emergence of a discourse of individualism in the Islamic Republic coincided with articulations of self-centered individuality in which the problem of distance from others was temporarily resolved by an ephemeral and fictive sense of immediate or intimate belonging.

In the years after Khomeini died after which the Ayatollah Khamenei assumed the position of the Supreme Leader, a rift emerged between “establishment clerics” or “hardliners” and “reformists.”<sup>10</sup> Stated crudely, hardliners advocated for the consolidation of power in the juridical

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<sup>10</sup> See Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

branch spearheaded by Khamenei while reformists advocated for democratization within the terms of the Islamic state. In 1997, Mahmoud Khatami was elected to the presidency on a platform of reform, transforming the political landscape of the Islamic Republic by giving representation to reformist tendencies that had been suppressed in the turmoil of state consolidation and the wartime state of emergency. The rift between reformists and conservatives appears in the present-day in ways that defy simple explanation, in part because of the imbalances of power between the executive, legislative, and juridical branches of government such that even when the reformist Khatami was president and even after substantial gains in parliament, he and the reformists were fighting an uphill battle against Khamenei and a conservative dominated juridical branch. If in Chapter III, I reconstructed conservative thought to suggest that conservatives heightened the contradiction of the impossible state, I now reflect on “reformists,” who reckoned with that impossibility by dispersing the authority of the one to individuals, the prophets of the times.

On June 12, 2009, mass demonstrations appeared on the streets of Iran contesting the legitimacy of the re-election of the conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had spent four years eradicating the small gains that Khatami had made, in what was referred to as the Sea of Green or the Green Movement. The predominant slogan of the Green Movement, “*Ray-e Man Kojast?*” or “Where is my Vote?” was self-centered and de-centered: with respect to the former, the political body that the slogan referred to was comprised of individuals Iranians who demanded a say in the future of the state; with respect to the latter, the slogan was articulated by Iranians who resided both within and outside of the Islamic Republic. That slogan coincided with an echo of the resounding slogan of the 1979 Revolution from rooftops: *Allah-u Akbar* or “God is Great.” Without reducing the Green Movement to an Islamic one, I suggest that the chant, “*Allah-u Akbar*” gestured to an *atomistic* conception of self-centered individuality that was co-determinately

mediated by the *democratic* conception of self-centered individuality in the demand for a vote. Though legible within the terms of reformist thought, 2009 opened the state to an exit from itself.

The original contamination of atomistic and democratic individualism in the self-centered demonstrations of 2009 intersected with and was buttressed by the digital space of Web 2.0. and the legibility of “social networks” therein. The Sea of Green was what Manuel Castells describes as a “networked social movement,” assuming multiple forms online and on the ground, transforming urban space into a space of autonomy, simultaneously local and global, sparked by indignation, viral, leaderless, self-reflective, and for the most part lacking a formal program.<sup>11</sup> Operative as a dynamic in 2009 was a movement between the scattering and centering of attention, the former not unrelated to the “information glut” of digital life, the former its resolution.<sup>12</sup> The self-centered individual demanded attention as a self-centered collectivity paid them attention, such that, if the *scattering* of attention presumably imbued social relations with an apparent false sense of intimacy or lack of intimacy, the *centering* of attention recovered a sense of intimacy. On June 20, 2009, when footage of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan went viral online, the otherwise scattered attention of a community of witnesses was centered around her life, creating a fleeting and ephemeral sense of immediacy that, if fictive, was more real than the sociality of “real life.”

Thus far in this dissertation, I have demonstrated how, from 1941, propaganda was employed in the contemporary history of Iran as a mode of communication that was to revive and to re-enact the prophetic tradition, to restore faith in the world, and to enact it anew, towards a transvaluation of values in which propagandizing is not reduced to deception and domination. I have threaded my theorization of propaganda through an intellectual and conceptual history in

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<sup>11</sup> Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Malden: Polity, 2015), 249-256.

<sup>12</sup>

which representative writers, voices, and faces enlisted propagandic activity towards enacting the space of reasons, the silence of the people, and the image of reality that the space of deliberation, the voice of the people, and the vision of the world respectively beg as their question. I now suggest that propaganda enacts the sense of immediacy that mediated life begs as a question by way of an historically-inflected theorization of the emergence of a self-centered collectivity. Thus, in contrast to the popular claim that digitally-mediated social relations lack intimacy, I suggest, on the contrary, that the fictive sense of intimacy therein is the rule of immediate belonging and a condition for the prophets of the times who act and speak in a way immediately understood.

In what follows, I first demonstrate that beginning in the 1980s, the Islamic Republic experienced a crisis of attention, in response to the scattering of attention in technologically-mediated political spaces. I then locate theorization about self-centered individuality in the 1990s and the early 2000s within the crisis of attention: I reconstruct the neo-rationalist Abdolkarim Soroush's justification of democracy as the ideal Islamic government on grounds that individuals were the prophets of the times; I then turn my attention to the Sun Lady, one of the first women to blog in the Persian-language, who encountered first-hand the political quality of how and to what attention is centered, to suggest that Soroush, in concluding that everyone was the same, was unawake to difference. In the penultimate section, I reconstruct a debate between the Sun Lady and her interlocutors, in which elite who saw themselves as in touch evaluated whether and why most Iranians were out of touch, to theorize the "self" of self-centered individuality as a contested terrain in the ecology of attention. I conclude by suggesting that in 2009, the original contamination of atomistic and democratic individualism served as a point-of-departure for the enactment of a collectivity that appeared around the centering of attention and a fictive sense of immediacy.

## **I. A Crisis of Attention**

In this section, I demonstrate that in the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the ecology of attention appeared as a terrain of contestation: individuals demanded attention or were denied it, in coincidence with material and physical processes in which individual Iranians were scattered. I propose that in the early 1990s with the importation and uptake of satellite television in the Islamic Republic, the contested terrain of attention became an object of deliberation among state officials who were paranoid that individual Iranians, no longer beholden to the restrictions of state television, were becoming distracted by foreign content and informed differently than ideally so. In the 1990s, when the courts deployed helicopters to scour rooftops for satellite dishes, they were responding to a real and perceived challenge to the integrity and stability of the order of the state. In Chapter III, I explained that for Ahmad Fardid “mass media” and television especially was a direct assault to the status quo insofar as it dispersed the spectacle of the so-called Imam Khomeini. Coinciding with Fardid’s efforts to regulate the culture of spectacle in the Islamic Republic was an overlapping and intersecting site of contestation over the span and focus of collective attention.

In the first month after Khomeini returned to Tehran, thousands of demonstrators called upon state-run television to pay attention to their demands for employment and for equitable pay. On March 2, 1979, a small group of laid-off workers gathered at the front of the Ministry of Labor in Tehran to voice their grievances in a protest movement that was already in the works from three months prior to Khomeini’s return.<sup>13</sup> Having failed to achieve concrete gains, unemployed workers returned with 2,000 members and returned five times after over the next two weeks demanding that national radio and television give them coverage. On March 17, three thousand unemployed laborers staged a sit-in in the ministry compound and soon after seven hundred laborers initiated a hunger strike. One of the women on strike Zahra Dorostka gave voice to the lack of coverage from

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<sup>13</sup> See Asef Bayat, “Workless Revolutionaries: The Unemployed Movement in Revolutionary Iran,” *International Review of Social History* 42 (1997) for a thorough summarization of the unemployed movement.

national radio and television. “I want to know why radio and television do not broadcast our grievances to inform the world of our sufferings,” she said, “and to make them appreciate how little [the authorities] are offering us.” She continued: “If they broadcast this injustice, the people will no longer be misinformed [by the government] that pretends to give us our due.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the lack of attention paid to the unemployment movement, mass demonstrations beginning on International Women’s Day on March 8 attracted the attention of puzzled spectators of the chaos in Iran following Muhammad Reza’s departure. On February 26, Khomeini chiseled away at women’s rights including the right to not be veiled from before 1979. Though Khomeini enforced the compulsory veil, Afsaneh Najmabadi notes that religious and secular critics of the state from both before and after the 1979 Revolution characterized the “super-westernized woman” as a woman who attracted too much attention in mode of presentation:

She was identified with a woman who wore ‘too much’ make-up, ‘too short’ a skirt, ‘too tight’ a pair of pants, ‘too low-cut’ a shirt, who was ‘too loose’ in her relations with men, who laughed ‘too loudly,’ who smoked in public. Clearly, it signified a subjective judgment; at least to some extent it was defined in the eyes of the beholder... Yet, both felt comfortable in denouncing *gharbzadeh* and the *gharbzadeh* woman in a single voice.<sup>15</sup>

On March 8, tens of thousands of women and men gathered on International Women’s Day to protest Khomeini’s decree that women veil themselves. On March 10 and 11, fifteen thousand women congregated in front of the Ministry of Justice, demanding that they receive equal pay relative to men and that they be able to not don the veil if they so desire.

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<sup>14</sup> Bayat, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader* ed. Albert Hourani and Philip Shoukry Khouri (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004), 65.



The attention that women marching against Khomeini's decree and those marching on their behalf received came at a cost: when women participating in the demonstrations told reporters from abroad that they supported Khomeini and they were not antagonistic to the Islamic Republic, they were ignored, with headlines reading still, "Women March Against Khomeini."<sup>16</sup> Indicated therein was a problem that would become more intensely apparent six months later after a handful of Iranian students raided the US embassy in Tehran and took hostage diplomats: foregrounding the attention paid to popular movements within the Islamic Republic from the US and in the midst of the tendency to produce eye-catching news to draw consumers to the screen was a prevailing conception that those on the streets were positioned with "us" against "Islam." In 1980, Edward Said noted that of the roughly three hundred reporters sent to Tehran in the first days of the crisis, not one spoke Persian, remarking that "it was no wonder that all the media reports coming out of Iran repeated essentially the same threadbare accounts of what was taking place...."<sup>17</sup> "[I]n the meantime, of course," he continued, "other events and political processes in Iran that could not be characterized as instances of 'the Islamic mentality' or of 'anti-Americanism' went unnoticed."<sup>18</sup>

An estimated three million people left Iran in the period between 1979 and 1985 in response to the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. It would not be until the 1990s before the term "diaspora" was used to describe Iranians who were living abroad.<sup>19</sup> Up until then, there were many Iranians living abroad who "frequently compensated for their longing for the home country 'as they had known it' by nostalgically reproducing what they thought of as 'authentic' Iranian

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<sup>16</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 146.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), li.

<sup>18</sup> Said, lii.

<sup>19</sup> See Babak Elahi and Perseis M. Karim, "Introduction: Iranian Diaspora," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (2017), for an historical survey of the proliferation of term "diaspora" in scholarship about Iran, much of which has been published by Iranians living abroad.

culture;” caught in between, they were torn between a “public persona” at odds with the “authentic person” that they were when at home.<sup>20</sup> In the decade after 1979, the exilic community of Iranians living in Los Angeles published periodicals, launched radio programs, organized film festivals, made and performed music and music videos, and broadcasted news and shows on television.<sup>21</sup> Exilic television in LA was dominated by the quest for “collective subjectivity:” television producers imagined that their audiences were “a mass of homogeneous exiles” and targeted “the entire family and community.”<sup>22</sup> The producers of exilic television were also broadcasting in the Persian language and to a Persian community.<sup>23</sup> In turn, exiled individuals phoned-in to the television programs, transforming exilic television into a forum about the selfhood of Iran.

The terrain of audio-visual space within Iran experienced a qualitative transformation in the 1990s with the importation and uptake of satellite dishes. In October 1969, NIRT broadcast international news into Iran, including but not limited to the first moon landing, the Shah’s visit to President Nixon, and the heavyweight title match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, from an earth station in the west of the country.<sup>24</sup> In October 1971, it broadcast the Shah’s 2,500 year anniversary of the Persian Empire to an international audience by that means as well.<sup>25</sup> In 1993, satellite technology could be purchased by individuals in Iran. In May 1993, at the Sixth International Book Exhibition, there were monitors downloading broadcasts from BBC, CNN, and Asia TV which drew large audiences.<sup>26</sup> In the meanwhile, satellite dishes appeared on rooftops in

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<sup>20</sup> Resa Mohabat-Kar, “Introduction,” in *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora Between Solidarity and Difference* (Berlin: Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung, 2015), 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 35-59.

<sup>22</sup> Naficy, 108.

<sup>23</sup> Naficy, 113.

<sup>24</sup> Anabelle Sreberni-Mohammadi and Ali Sreberni-Mohammadi, *Small Media Big, Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 68.

<sup>25</sup> Sreberni-Mohammadi and Sreberni-Mohammadi, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Sreberni-Mohammadi and Sreberni-Mohammadi, 186.

affluent neighborhoods in Tehran. In July 1993, the Ministry of Guidance and Islamic Culture attempted to regulate and censor the satellite realm.<sup>27</sup> Satellite dishes appeared on rooftops in Tehran by 1991, moreover, during which time the state was initiating reconstructive programs to modernize and develop Iran in the wake of the destruction of the War.<sup>28</sup> By the late 1990s, the number of satellite dishes in Iran increased as they became smaller and cheaper. The satellite realm highlighted and exacerbated differences within official networks of the Islamic Republic.

Though in the 1980s, Khomeini, Ghotbzadeh, Hashemi, and others were committed to censoring audio-visual media and could do so since they controlled VVIR, in the 1990s, some prominent officials began to change their tune in part in response to their inability to control the use of satellite dishes and in part because of deep political differences that cut right to the heart of the foundations of the Islamic Republic. Notwithstanding, in 1994, Interior Minister Ali Besharati declared that satellite dishes were illegal though he did not have the authority to unilaterally do so. Ayatollah Khamenei called for resistance against the “prospect of whole nations’ mentalities and attitudes being shaped by a few broadcasting centers.”<sup>29</sup> In conservative newspapers like *Jomhuri-e Islami* and *Kayhan*, editors claimed that because of satellite “the West is mourning that it no longer has any proper sons and daughters, no proper wives, no honour.”<sup>30</sup> In July 1994, Parliament drafted legislation banning satellite television to be enforced in three years, which passed in January 1995. The Council of Guardians demanded that the three-year sunset clause be removed. In the same month, the government deployed airplanes to fly over the city to scout out dishes. The war within and against the satellite realm was a response to the scattering of the state from below.

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<sup>27</sup> Sreberni-Mohammadi and Sreberni-Mohammadi, 187.

<sup>28</sup> Fardin Alikhah, “The Politics of Satellite Television in Iran,” in *Media, Culture and Society: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* ed. Mehdi Semati (New York: Routledge, 2008), 95.

<sup>29</sup> S. Barraclough, “Satellite Television in Iran: Prohibition, Imitation, and Reform,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2001), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Barraclough, 31.

In the section that follows, I demonstrate that the crisis of legitimacy that officials responded to as a matter concerning the collective attention of Iranians in debate over the form and content of satellite television was constituted in debate over individual self-expression after 1997. I examine the political thought of Abdolkarim Soroush who excavated the history and philosophy of Islam to anoint the individual as the prophet of the times, and thereafter reflect upon the writings of the Sun Lady, the first woman to blog in Persian, for whom attention to her individuality did not resolve the problem of social inequality, analogously to the trap of visibility that women demonstrating in March had experienced. Thereafter, I propose that the dispersion of sites and sources of veridiction across lived experience and its materialization in digital space opened to deliberation the nature of the “self” of self-centered individuality by reconstructing a marginal debate among marginal voices that the Sun Lady broached when condescending seventy-percent of Iranians as being out of touch, in part in response to the scattering of collective attention across multi-mediated cultural domains. I thus propose the crisis of attention herein was a condition of possibility for the emergence of a self-centered collectivity, for better and for worse.

## **II. The Anarchy of Revelation**

In 1983, the filmmaker Gholamhussein Sa’idi published “Metamorphosis and the Freedom of the Exiles” in the Paris-based weekly newspaper *Alefba* (*Alphabet*), diagnosing the condition of being exiled as the state of the *barzakh*. Sa’idi reconfigured the concept of the *barzakh* – the purgatorial condition of the soul dreaming in its sleep from Qur’anic history and philosophy – to capture the intermediary status of the exile as a self that is individuated out of nothing. “The person who is mired in the world of the *barzakh*,” he wrote, “is an exile, yes, an exile, not a migrant.”<sup>31</sup> The individual who is caught in the *barzakh*, the condition of “not going to a place,” has “neither

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<sup>31</sup> Gholamhussein Sa’idi, *Digar-disi va Raha’i-ye Avar-e-ha*, *Alefba* 2 (1983), 1.

a way here, nor a way there.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the migrant who is “hopeful,” retains “the power of decision,” and lives as if “every corner of the world is their homeland,” the exile is “hopeless,” does not have “the power to decide,” and is moved by “force.”<sup>33</sup>

Yes, for a while the exile does not recognize her left hand from her right hand since she has not settled into a place and has not become herself; in the wasteland of the *barzakh*, there is not a wellspring from which she can draw continuity and value and measure by measure to give an account of herself. The exilic world is one without borders, without an end. Death in the exilic world is death in the *barzakh*. The death of the exile is not even death. Rigor mortis and decomposition is not at work. If the exile is alive, she is also dead. The dead who comes and goes...The exile is afraid of sleep, is afraid of waking up. The death of the exile is death from exile, the shame of death. For a while, the exile is attached to the identity of her past, to her past spiritual and corporal identity.

The way out of purgatory is attention. “The locks must be taken from the lips [of the exiles],” he stated, “they must yell. The exiles must yell. The season has come when the exiles must now yell. If the exiles do not yell and do not shake the world, you will not receive even half a glance....”<sup>34</sup>

In his 1983 essay, Sa’idi posed a direct relationship between the attention that individual Iranians were receiving who had been exiled from Iran and the “self” – or world – from which individual Iranians were discretely individuated. In contrast to Tocqueville, who observed an effect of individualism as the *ex nihilo* creation of associations, Sa’idi observed a mode of individuation that was mediated by and through a world that was strange for the exile in search of an identity. Yet if, on the one hand, the exile was subsumed as part of a *demos* that was not its own, neither could the exile merely take flight from the world as an atomistic individual alone with the alone.

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<sup>32</sup> Sa’idi, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Sa’idi, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Sa’idi, 6.

The exile, caught in the *barzakh* in which the reality to which they were awakened is in question, began from the original contamination of atomistic and democratic individualism. In the 1990s and the early 2000s within Iran, the crisis of attention and its implications for the identity of individuals was reconstituted in debate and deliberation over whether individuals were the same or different with respect to their capacity for reasoning and the differences that marked them.

In the section that follows, I compare the philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush who claimed that the conditions for democratic individualism had already been met on grounds that individuals were the prophets of the times with the Sun Lady, the first woman to blog in the Persian-language, who could not ignore her suspension in the *barzakh* of atomistic and democratic individualisms insofar as she was marked by the “visible identity” of gender.<sup>35</sup> Soroush proposed that he was awake to reason and thus had an enlightened conception of individuals as the same whereas the Sun Lady centered her body at the heart of her blogs, commanding the attention of her readers to awaken them to gender. The Sun Lady did not have the luxury to recede into the atomistic enactment of individualism that for Soroush was the point-of-departure towards being with others. In the comparison to follow, I propose that atomistic individualism is not a deceptive mode of being, in contrast to democratic individualism; rather, I propose that both individualisms are distinctions that are secondary to the original contamination of the one with the other. In the section that follows, I suggest that what mediates the moment of distinction is a sense of immediacy.

#### *A. Soroush and the Revelation of the Same*

On February 14, 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against the British Indian novelist and literary critic Salman Rushdie shortly after he published *The Satanic Verses*. Khomeini called upon his potential audience to kill Rushdie. He did not explain his decision. It is

not easy to assess if and whether the content of the plot of *The Satanic Verses* inspired so much resentment and rage among the few Muslims who protested it though as it stood its title spoke volumes. It was a reference to *qissat al gharaniq* (Story of the Cranes) when the Prophet Muhammad, hoping to be reconciled with the Quraysh tribe who had persecuted him, revealed Surat al-Najm to a Quraysh assembly. In the nineteenth verse of the surah, Muhammad asks the assembly who it is they think they are worshipping when they worship the deities al-Lat, al-'Uzza and Manat. However, at the end of the verse, Muhammad praised the deities, comparing them to "high-flying cranes" and stating that "their intercession (with God) is hoped for!" As the story goes, Satan was responsible for placing the final two verses in Muhammad's mind. The Quraysh prostrated themselves before Allah. Later, the Angel Gabriel informed Muhammad of Satan's deception and he rescinded the statements. In the Story of the Cranes, the prophet could err.

Critical of Khomeini's *fatwa* against Rushdie and in broader disagreement with Ahmad Fardid and his followers who were characterized as Heideggerians, in 1991, Soroush excavated the archive of Islamic philosophy in "Reason and Freedom," a lecture that he delivered at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran. Soroush set out to theorize "the kind of freedom that is required by reason qua reason."<sup>36</sup> He claimed that the prophets predicated their freedom upon submission to reason qua reason and predicated their submission to reason qua reason upon their freedom to think. Though the seal of prophesy was closed after the death of Muhammad, Soroush claimed that "free societies," regardless of if and whether they are religious or not, "are closer to the prophets than the totalitarian ones," since everyone has the potential to submit to reason and to exercise their rational faculties towards the discovery of a higher order to which to submit.<sup>37</sup> By

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<sup>36</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, "Reason and Freedom," in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam* ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89.

<sup>37</sup> Soroush, 103.

positing the idea of reason qua reason as the end of thinking, Soroush distributed the authority to exercise reason and to render judgments about social and political life across the body politic. His conception of a religious democracy was premised upon his democratized conception of prophecy.

Thus, in response again to the *fatwa* against Rushdie, Soroush extended upon his conception of what he described as democratic religious government in two lectures in 1991 and 1992, respectively delivered at the Human Rights Conference of the foreign ministry of Iran in Tehran and the Human Rights Conference at the Institute of Orientalism in Hamburg, Germany. Differentiating between religious and secular governments on the grounds that the former was not answerable to “the people,” he claimed that a government would be “democratic” only insofar as it partook in “collective wisdom” and respected “human rights.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast to Fardid, for whom the “barefoot” were objects of suspicion as potential embodiments of the *barzakhi* condition, Soroush called for the reconciliation of Islam and democracy on the premise of his conception of the ideal convergence of reason and revelation in the life and thought of prophets and his distribution of prophetic activity across the minds of individuals. “A combination of democracy and religion,” he claimed, “would entail the convergence of reason [*aql*] and revelation [*shar*].”<sup>39</sup>

In 1994, in the pages of the journal *Kiyan* which he himself had launched, Soroush published, “Greater than Ideology,” an essay roughly based on a lecture he had delivered the year prior, in which he compared his and Shariati’s interpretation of the history and philosophy of Islam. Soroush centered his criticism of Shariati’s Islam on the lecture series *Islamshenasi* or *Islamology* that Shariati had delivered at the Husseynie Ershad from February to November 1972, not long after which he would deliver “After Martyrdom” at the Narmaq Mosque, prompting the SAVAK

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<sup>38</sup> Soroush, “The Idea of Democratic Religious Government,” in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam* ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 126.

<sup>39</sup> Soroush, 126



to imprison him. “One of the most important objectives of the late Shariati,” Soroush began, “was the transformation of religion and society into an ideology.”<sup>40</sup> After Ashura 1971 when Shariati had his faith in the voice of the people restored by the collective sound of mourning, he attempted to orchestrate the collective revival and re-enactment of poetic world-making by Shi’as, in which he mapped the idea of a universal silence on the idea of the world as a unified totality or *tawhid*. Ideology, he claimed, referred to “belief” and the “knowledge of belief.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Islam was to be the name that referred to the collectivity that appeared around the idea of an unthinkable truth.

Soroush’s departure from Shariati is notable, since, in his efforts to distinguish himself as a champion of democracy, he echoed the religious propagandists of time past, who, like the blind owl at the height of his mania, believed they were God, by centering the individual as uniquely responsible for reviving and re-enacting the prophetic tradition with reason. Soroush concluded that by transforming religion into an ideology, Shariati had effectively called for the creation of “a closed society” with “closed borders and brainwashed minds.”<sup>42</sup> What remained in the form of a question in *Islamshenasi* – of who would have authority to guide a community that appeared around the unthinkable – was presented in the form of the answer for Soroush that “leadership in an ideological society appears in the form of military commands....”<sup>43</sup> Soroush did not mince words, suggesting that his interlocutor had paved the way for “fascism.”<sup>44</sup> For Shariati, he claimed, “it is possible that people will vote for someone who does not secure their happiness” and, as such, “the leader is not to take into account the desires of the people....”<sup>45</sup> To reason that

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<sup>40</sup> Soroush, “*Farbe-tar az Ideoloji*,” *Kiyan* 14 (1994), 2.

<sup>41</sup> Shariati, 42

<sup>42</sup> Soroush, “*Farbe-tar az Ideoloji*,” 10.

<sup>43</sup> Soroush, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Soroush, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion* trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 12.

the “desires of the people” secured “happiness,” Soroush sutured desire to the truth, reconceiving the crowd as a medium of collective wisdom instead of, as with Fardid, of collective ignorance.

Soroush’s efforts to distance himself from Shariati rested upon a retrojection of the conditions of possibility for democracy onto the arena of electoral politics before and after 1979. “It is possible that people will vote for someone who does not secure their happiness:” if Shariati suggested as much, he did so at time when elections were rigged. Listening to the silences, Shariati attempted to draw into the order of the audible the silenced voices of a collectivity that tacitly disagreed to the sovereign authority – of which Soroush was also a part – and displaced the idea of universal silence onto an inaudible and unthinkable source of authority. Aggressively denounced by clerical elite and persecuted by the Pahlavi State, Shariati died in exile, while Soroush, who not only remained but was readily accepted by Khomeini and took part in the Cultural Revolution, engaged in readily welcomed revisionism. After Khatami was elected to the presidency in 1997, Soroush began lecturing on a working theory of “the expansion of prophetic experience” as part of a broader project of conceiving a rational theology. In contrast to Fardid who heightened the contradiction of the impossibility of the modern Islamic state, Soroush, in attempting to resolve and to salvage it, dispersed its impossibility across the space of reasons.

With the Rushdie Affair in the background, Soroush broke with orthodoxy by looking to the Prophet Muhammad as “a mundane human being” who was “an extremely successful leader.”<sup>46</sup> On the premise that Muhammad was a fallible human being, Soroush proposed that “revelation was under [the Prophet’s] sway, not he, under the sway of revelation.”<sup>47</sup> Muhammad, he maintained, was responsible for and had succeeded in exercising his rational faculties in a quest for truth to discover it in revelation. He went so far as to claim, in reference to the Angel Gabriel

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<sup>46</sup> Soroush, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Soroush, 12.

who delivered the message to the Prophet, that the Prophet “would make the Angel appear.”<sup>48</sup> Soroush described the success of the Prophet in recovering and realizing the messenger, the message, and the truth as “the paradigm case of ‘religious experience.’”<sup>49</sup> The “lowest level” of “prophetic experience” was “‘truthful dreams’,” after which are “mystical visions, raptures, and illuminations.”<sup>50</sup> The Prophet’s success was necessarily incomplete because he was fallible, could err, and yet, could have acquired greater knowledge were he to have lived longer. “Islam,” he thus concluded, “is not a book or an aggregate of words; it is a historical movement and the history incarnate of a mission. It is the historical extension of a gradually-realized prophetic experience.”<sup>51</sup>

Soroush conceived a narrative of progress that unfolded in a dialectic of awakening and falling to sleep in line with his claim that free societies are closer to the prophets. “[The prophets’] task was like trying to awaken sleeping people who believe themselves awake,” he stated, “but who must in fact first be awakened before they can acknowledge that wakefulness is a good thing and that they had never been awake before.”<sup>52</sup> The prophet “must first awaken people with *causes* so that they can then value wakefulness on the basis of *reasons*. Their cry of ‘waken’ first awakens the sleeping person like a cause and, having awakened, the person can then understand the cry.”<sup>53</sup> In contrast to Fardid who conceived the Imam Khomeini as the end of the age of the *barzakh* and the beginning of the age of truth, the neo-rationalist Soroush conceived the *ummat* or the individuals who together comprise the community of the faithful as bearing that responsibility. Soroush had effectively dethroned Ayatollah Khamenei as the exceptional leader. However, by

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<sup>48</sup> Soroush 12.

<sup>49</sup> Soroush, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Soroush, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Soroush, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Soroush, 209.

<sup>53</sup> Soroush, 209.

dispersing the site and source of truth-telling across the space of reasons and by conceiving the individual as the medium of truth, Soroush anointed the individual as the prophet of the times.

Soroush effectively conceptualized the act of election as the revival and re-enactment of the prophetic tradition. In contrast to Fardid who had attempted to resolve the impossibility of the Islamic Republic by looking hopefully towards the Imam Khomeini as the second coming of the Promised Imam, Soroush attempted to resolve its impossibility by centering authority on the rational individual. Like the Prophet in the Story of the Cranes, the rational individual was, though erroneous, responsible for exercising reason to recover revealed truths. The dispersion of the site and source of veridiction across a mental space constituted by individuals found a material substratum in cyberspace. In January 1993, the director of the Institution for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics Mohammad-Javad Larijani sent an e-mail greeting administrators at the University of Vienna; by 2003, there were 1.2 million internet users in Iran and 1,500 Internet cafes in Tehran.<sup>54</sup> By 1994, commercial internet service providers (ISPs) created conditions for competition in the private sector, weakening the state's role in regulating internet access.<sup>55</sup> Clerical elite were at first enthused by its potential for propaganda, some of whom described it as a "gift to spread the word of the prophet" and as a useful instrument for "exporting the revolution."<sup>56</sup>

### *B. The Sun Lady and the Revelation of Difference*

After 1997, reformists invested in liberalizing the Islamic Republic launched, edited, and wrote for newspapers like *Jame'eh*, *Neshat*, *Zanan*, *Khordad*, *Hoveyat-e Khish*, and *Salam*; dominated by conservatives, the judiciary exercised force to push back against the rising tide of reformism. In a single day in April 2000, it closed fourteen newspapers down. Though the Internet

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<sup>54</sup> Rahimi, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Babak Rahimi, "Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 7 (2003), 102.

<sup>56</sup> Rahimi, 106.

had been in Iran for seven years, dissidents there and abroad could not use it in part because Unicode – the uniform coding standard for character sets – did not support Persian.<sup>57</sup> On November 6, 2000, Hussein Derakhshan who would later blog as “Heydar” wrote a column for the reformist paper *Hayat-e Noh* praising Unicode and the potential it had for Persian-speaking Internet users.<sup>58</sup> He immigrated to Toronto by the end of the year. On September 7, 2001, a computer science student Salman Jariri coded and launched the first Persian-language blog, defining the “weblog” as “all personal writings...about an individual’s interests and thoughts.”<sup>59</sup> Derakhshan started his blog “Editor: Myself” three weeks later during which time the word “blog” entered the English lexicon.<sup>60</sup> Within the few months after the first blogs, journalists at *Hayat-e Noh* and other reformist publications blogged to bypass the ill-defined boundaries of state censorship.

Conceiving the mind of the individual as a medium of prophetic and religious experience, Soroush had effectively attempted to establish individuals as extensions of the same mind, as part of a broader intellectual project of justifying democracy on grounds of its proximity to the truth. On November 9, a twenty-four-year-old woman Saman Dolatshahi, who was planning on writing a thesis comparing Sadeq Hedayat’s *Blind Owl* with William Faulkner and who was teaching English in Tehran, posted her first blog with the pseudonym *Khorshid Khanum* (The Sun Lady), in which she conceived cyberspace as an extension of the embodied materiality of the truth of Iran. On November 19, 2001, she conceived the blogger in a way analogous to Soroush’s individual:

I wanted to say that it is a wonderful feeling for a person to know that they are not alone and that amidst all of these computer wires and chips and buttons and numbers it is possible to find a host of

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<sup>57</sup> Cyrus Farivar, *Internet of Elsewhere: Emergent Effects of a Wired World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 170.

<sup>58</sup> Farivar, 170.

<sup>59</sup> Farivar, 171.

<sup>60</sup> Farivar, 171.

friends. I wanted to say that I am an electric sun lady who is very happy. I feel that we were all long-lost pieces of one incredibly large reality and we are now all coming back together. When they place us all next to one another a picture appears of that which we all are. Perhaps in your opinion it is a joke, but I think that as of now these weblogs are a mirror held up against the social and human reality of Iran. The more weblogs appear the more of a reflection they will be. None of the weblogs are like each other, and yet, they all have one thing in common: they yell, for God's sake, enough is enough. Close the curtains on this foolishness. The Iranian is tired. The Iranian reads and thinks. The Iranian does not want to play. I hope that the number of weblogs reaches a thousand.<sup>61</sup>

Like Sa'idi who expressed that the time had come for the exile to yell to leave the *barzakh*, Dolatshahi perceived the blogosphere as a world that had cohered around the cry for attention. Yet, if, on the one hand, she witnessed a commons appear around refusal and the appearance of a collective she could personify as "the Iranian," in the coming months, on the other hand, she witnessed in responses to public displays of her embodied experiences the problem of difference.

Soroush appealed to his readers to attend to the illumination of reason emanating from the individuations of the revelation of the truth, though did not attend to relations of force that constituted bodies differently in relation to one another. As Dolatshahi celebrated blogs with a language that resonated with Soroush, she did not begin her thinking as if Iranians were originally one, emphasizing the self-centeredness of the content of her blogs around the embodied experience of being a woman. On December 2, Dolatshahi responded to an email in which an anonymous critic had asked her to get married, to which she responded that she was married to her thesis. On December 12, she wrote a fictional dialogue between a man and a woman that began with dirty talk on the phone and ended with the woman a single mother. On December 14, Dolatshahi

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<sup>61</sup> Khorshid Khanum, "Rastesho Bigam Emsal Tavalod Khayli," *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), November 11, 2001, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2001/11/19/oeoeoeoeoe\\_oeu/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2001/11/19/oeoeoeoeoe_oeu/).

responded to a now inaccessible criticism of her blog by a blogger Heysar that she had become privy to by way of the blogger Neda who, on November 9, published her first post as “the first Iranian woman blogger.”<sup>62</sup> Until then, Dolatshahi had resolved to answer to criticisms by way of email; however, because Heysar’s criticism of her blog was public, she responded publicly in turn.

Dolatshahi posed a relationship between attention and deception in the fictional dialogue she had written on December 12 – in which the young woman was led to believe that her suitor had her best interests in mind – to which, on December 14, she followed in response to her critics by emphasizing the political quality of the act of demanding, receiving, and paying attention. In response to Heysar and other men who had criticized her for distracting them and others from the social and political issues that ostensibly really mattered, Dolatshahi placed her body at the center of an imbalanced economy of attention and its coincidence with the unequal distribution of justice, speaking a truth that she had access to by virtue of the revelations of a different lived experience:

My dear gentleman, I, like you and many others, am concerned with the political issues of this country, with the mercilessness of prisons, and with many other injustices. If a person doesn’t write about something on their weblog, that doesn’t mean that they’re indifferent about the matter...I can write about this country’s existing political issues, yet, how can my writing, the writing of a twenty-four-year-old who may not know about many matters, be useful when there are two or three good weblogs that write on these grounds? I try to write about those things that I think I have adequate information about or that I have sensed that others may not write about. And if the content that I write is in your opinion...lacking in value and style, I have to say that in my opinion this isn’t at all the case. We are right now precisely undergoing in this country the beginning of a renaissance. We can’t stress upon some things and not do so with others. You can’t pretend to be blind to the equal rights of half this country’s population, meaning women, in respect to men. By posing that issue, I

didn't even want, according to another dear blogger, to make public my complexes about virginity. I didn't even want to say that boys deceive naïve girls. I just wanted to voice my grievance about these wrongful social customs and to present existing two-facedness and dishonesty for criticism.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, in juxtaposition with Soroush's hope for the future convergence of reason and revelation, Dolatshahi, in publicizing the difference she embodied, rendered revelatory a crisis of legitimacy conceived as a loss of faith in the world that, since decades prior, had shown its face in the multiplicity of the spaces of reasons that rational-critical deliberation begged as its question.

Whereas Dolatshahi lamented that men "pretend[ed] to be blind to the equal rights of half this country's population," she also reckoned with the problem of unwanted attention, elaborating a dialectic of responsibility that unfolded in the three-fold of demanding, giving and receiving attention. On December 16, Dolatshahi responded to the Toronto-based blogger *Khurus-i Bi-mahal* (Homeless Rooster), who, three days prior, had indirectly responded to a post Dolatshahi had written in which she complained that some of her students had been ogling at her breasts and were distracted by her body. "Well, what of it," he wrote. "If you see a pretty sight, you look at it."<sup>64</sup> "This Homeless Rooster has fixated upon our breasts," Dolatshahi responded. She continued:

First, I'm not actually discontented if someone is pleased by my breasts and, in my opinion, breasts are among one of the most beautiful of God's creations and it is even a sensitive body part that can be used instrumentally to deceive naïve men....I remember that in high school when I was on the school basketball team, I had a friend who'd always come and give us encouragement. Whenever he wanted to encourage me, he'd say, "CJ, you master of defense," and a hundred other things. (CJ you recall is the same CJ from Baywatch). And when I'd hear this nickname, I'd melt a little. But

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<sup>63</sup> Khorshid Khanum, "Az Ruy-e Veblog-e Neda Motavaje," *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), December 14, 2001, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2001/12/14/oeoe\\_oeuu\\_uoeuo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2001/12/14/oeoe_oeuu_uoeuo/).

<sup>64</sup> Khorshid Khanum, "In Aghay-e Khurus 'Aziz Ham," *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), December 16, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20011216121314/http://www.khoroos.blogspot.com:80/>.



consider waking up at the crack of dawn and going before class, you're still waking up, and you're pulling teeth trying to beat into their heads the difference between "her" and "his" or "does" and "is," then you see some dude with unkempt hair full of dandruff, with side whiskers, an uneven beard, and wrinkled clothes looking not at the blackboard but at you. Doesn't that make you sick?<sup>65</sup>

In reflecting on the experience of receiving unwanted attention, Dolatshahi rendered visible the ethics of centering attention in a condition where attention was scattered and impoverished. The Homeless Rooster complained about being scattered even as he conflated a physical response to the object of attraction with this-worldly habituation. On December 16, he wrote that he had visited Derakhshan's blog and "his head began to hurt." "I too share the pain Neda feels," he continued. "I can't read every weblog. I've fallen out of step with my life and work. My daily routine has fallen apart. (It's been one or two months since my life has no routine)."<sup>66</sup>

In complaining that he had experienced an upheaval because of the sheer amount of attention he paid to blogs, the Homeless Rooster voiced a depiction of the order of things as an effect of practices of attention. On December 22, Dolatshahi, fed up by the Homeless Rooster and men like him who had taken to harassing her online for her relationship to attention, flipped the script by accusing her critics of participating in "girl talk" in gossiping about trivialities:

I'm quite upset but this time because of craven behavior on the Internet. A few days ago, someone sent me a virus. Tonight, someone sent me an email and wrote, "You slut, though you're free to do anything and it's your right to do so, not to the extent that you propagate it online. It's not as if we live in Europe!!" A few days ago, they said I'd shamed all women. I was truly confused. I mean, what had I written? Some flowery turns of phrase that'd spilled from my heart. One word of it wasn't

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<sup>65</sup> Khorshid Khanum, "In Aghay-e Khurus 'Aziz Ham."

<sup>66</sup> Khurus-e Bi-mahal, untitled, *Khurus-e Bi-mahal* (blog), December 16, 2001, [https://web.archive.org/web/20011217185406/http://khoros.blogspot.com:80/?/2001\\_12\\_16\\_khoros\\_archive.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20011217185406/http://khoros.blogspot.com:80/?/2001_12_16_khoros_archive.html)

a lie and not a word of it was simply for the sake of getting attention or anything else. Someone says that I take pleasure from stimulating men with descriptions of my body. Someone else sent me an email saying that me and Neda are immodest. It's as if they're the ones doing girl talk.<sup>67</sup>

Dolatshahi asked why, instead of paying attention and experiencing a deficit of attention in their constant harassment of her, they did not follow their own advice and turn their eyes to the state:

I've become upset by so many things. If you really have so much time and you care so much about the values of this society, do something worthwhile rather than sitting around and gossiping away sending me your fucking meaningless emails. I will write anything my heart desires until I extract every last drop of life straight from your ass...I don't know why some people take things so seriously. I mean, instead of verbally abusing me which doesn't change a thing in the world, go yell at those fuckers who bring children to life and then torture them when they're adults...All of societies problems remain unresolved, and it's the Sun Lady and Neda who are throwing to the wind religion and faith and bringing shame upon women and taking advantage of freedom....<sup>68</sup>

Dolatshahi at once demanded that men pay attention to women in the Islamic Republic instead of regarding demands for attention as a distraction of politics as such while demanding that they center their attention on the injustices of the state, instead of giving her unwanted attention. Dolatshahi was burdened with a problem that Soroush could ignore by virtue of his conception of error as a lapse in judgment not unlike the Prophet in the Story of the Cranes: for Dolatshahi, however, though attention was a condition of being in the world, in a world where difference was embodied, the mere act of attention was potentially a continuation of war by other means.

### III. In and Out of Touch

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<sup>67</sup> Khorshid Khanum, "Delam Khayli Gerefte Vali Indaf'e," *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), December 22, 2001, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2001/12/22/oeuu\\_oeuu\\_uoeu/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2001/12/22/oeuu_oeuu_uoeu/).

<sup>68</sup> Khorshid Khanum, "Delam Khayli Gerefte Vali Indaf'e."

In the previous section, I proposed that Dolatshahi's testimonies about her lived experience revealed the problem of the embodiment of difference in the state of the *barzakh* that Soroush had ignored in conceptualizing the act of ratiocination as a revelation of the same. Though in November and December, Dolatshahi found her footing in the apparent reality of her "spiritual and corporal identity" to give an account of herself, in January, she and other bloggers reckoned with and cast light upon the dispersion of sources and sites of veridiction across lived experience and by consequence the democratization of intellectual history and attendant claims about truth. Specifically, the community of bloggers that Dolatshahi was in conversation with looked upon themselves and other Iranians as subjects of attention, diagnosing the problems of the current state as an effect of the scattering of attention after the 1979 Revolution that state officials responded to by regulating the satellite realm and the emergence of different economies of attention. In this section, I propose that the nature of the "self" of self-centered individuality was implicated by the crisis of the *barzakh* in which the subject of attention is severed from the subject of truth, situating claims about truth premised on what can be felt within the crisis of attention in Iran.

It will be useful to reflect upon the longer history of the *barzakh* in the contemporary intellectual history of Iran. Recall that Hedayat diagnosed the condition of existence in his current day and age in his 1941 novel *Blind Owl* as *halat-e oghma' va barzakh* or the unconscious and liminal state, drawing on a concept of purgatory as the soul dreaming in its sleep. Hedayat introduced thereafter a narrative of decline in which modernity signaled the end of the prophetic tradition, insofar as he depicted the relationship of the mind to truth as unconditionally mediated. In the decades after as I elaborated upon in depth in Chapters II and III, the concept of the *barzakh* proliferated through intellectual culture, apparent in the works of Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati, and Ahmad Fardid. When, in 1983, Sa'idi described the exilic condition as the *barzakh*, he

inscribed the narrative of decline after 1979 within the narrative of decline popularized after 1941, lamenting that Iranians who had been scattered abroad were severed from their place of origin and alienated and estranged from the historical and geographical domain of cultural authenticity. In what follows, I propose that what Sa'idi had diagnosed as exceptional to Iranians abroad had become the rule for Iranians as such, insofar as being scattered was constitutive of being Iranian.

On January 20, Dolatshahi wrote a blogpost in which she claimed that the majority of Iranians were lacking in culture and taste, characterizing seventy-percent of Iranians with the term *javad*, that generated a debate over the course of a week about the perceived consumption habits of Iranians. The term *javad* is difficult to translate. Roughly speaking, *javad* refers to someone who is for the most part inside the social world of the individual who is rendering a judgment about a deficiency of character, specifically concerning whether or not the individual is in or out of touch. Complaining about the music she was hearing in taxis and in busses, Dolatshahi claimed that “if this revolution has done one good thing it was to get rid of these tasteless singers,” in reference to what she deemed were the out-of-touch popular musicians of the 1960s and 1970s:

But when I think about it, I see that around seventy percent of this nation listens to this kind of music. However much the rest protest, it doesn't matter. Seventy percent of this nation are *javad*s (to the many people who are named Javad, especially the Imam Javad, my sincerest apologies). If you say that's not so, take a look at your surroundings. Look at how people dress, how they speak. If you look at the streets, you see *javad*s are coming out of the woodwork...I think that before government and politics and anything else changes, the culture and tastes of the people have to change. It makes no difference if at the head of a nation of *javad*s there is a Shah or the president of a democracy of a mullah. A *javad* is a *javad*. They're not privy to these things. Of course, I hope that nobody mistakes what I'm saying. In my opinion the worth and dignity of a *javadi* person is the

same as a person who is not a *javad*. This isn't a debate of better or worse. What's important is that that specific tastes and culture change the destiny of a country.<sup>69</sup>

Dolatshahi transformed her blog into a forum to deliberate over the consumption habits of Iranians, reflecting upon the attention of her peers as a crucial operation in collective subject formation, and echoing, by way of her critical evaluation of the *javad*, the anxiety of officials that “the prospect of whole nations’ mentalities and attitudes [were] being shaped by a few broadcasting centers.”

On January 21, Dolatshahi derived the authority to evaluate Iranians as *javad*s from lived experience. “But I think,” she stated, “that I can fathom enough and that in my life I have experienced enough to render opinions, right or wrong, about things that I have felt from up close. It is perhaps that I am in part a sociologist! Is that a problem?”<sup>70</sup> On January 22, she posted a criticism from the blogger Sisyphus who confessed that he agreed with her, yet asked, “Is it really that every one of these people who we are speaking about who are apparently ‘*javad*s’ were born that way, or is it that circumstances have led them to become ‘*javad*s’?”<sup>71</sup> He proposed a sociological explanation of the conditions in which he and Dolatshahi could see themselves as tasteful in contrast to the tasteless *javad*: “They say that people are able to attend to their ‘human’ needs (for example, culture), when their ‘animal’ needs have been satisfied,” suggesting that “cultural poverty” is an indicator of “economic poverty.”<sup>72</sup> “In any case,” he concluded, “I wanted to say that as much as we want to call this seventy percent ‘*javad*’ or those who call us ‘*foofool*’

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<sup>69</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “In Ahangha-ye Hamira Dast Az,” *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), January 20, 2002, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/20/oeuu\\_oeuuuoeu/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/20/oeuu_oeuuuoeu/).

<sup>70</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “Man Fekr Nakonam Kesi Ba,” *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), January 21, 2002, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/21/uu\\_uoe\\_uuu\\_uo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/21/uu_uoe_uuu_uo/).

<sup>71</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “Nazarhay-e Mokhtalefi Dar Mored-e,” *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), January 22, 2002, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/uoee\\_uoe\\_uoeo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/uoee_uoe_uoeo/).

<sup>72</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “Nazarhay-e Mokhtalefi Dar Mored-e,” [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/uoee\\_uoe\\_uoeo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/uoee_uoe_uoeo/).

(pretentious), the problem will not be resolved...and if we are not *javads*, our ‘not being *javads*’ is itself an issue....”<sup>73</sup>

In contrast to Dolatshahi, then, who trusted that her intimate proximity to the matter at hand buttressed her evaluation, Sisyphus employed sociological reasoning to suggest that self-centered experience was not adequate for understanding the phenomenon at hand. On the same day, the blogger Pedram offered another sociological explanation for why, after 1979, there was cultural decay in Iran. Like Sisyphus, Pedram suggested that the appearance of the *javad* in Iran was indicative of a broader social and historical problem. He suggested that they were a symptom of the immigration of Iranians from Iran and economic and cultural crises within Iran: “First – a great deal of *rawshanfekr* (intellectual) persons who could have played a part in advancing contemporary culture immigrated from Iran (and continue to do so) by whim or by force and lumpens (in the form of the religious) were preoccupied in cultural works...Second – a class of people appeared who without much effort rode the wave of an economic crisis and became owners of wealth and property. This new class was mostly comprised of people who were lumpens....”<sup>74</sup> Though the intellectuals, according to Pedram, had left after 1979, he suggested that he and the other elite taste-makers had remained, relegated albeit in the subterranean spaces of cyberculture.

Later, on January 22, Dolatshahi openly admitted that she had perhaps been wrong “since eighty percent of the opinions in blogs and emails had differed,” adding, “Yet, well, how good it is to debate the issue and to play the part if only a bit of the sociologist.”<sup>75</sup> On January 23, the blogger Marjan touched upon an issue that neither Dolatshahi, Sisyphus, nor Pedram could resolve,

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<sup>73</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “Nazarhay-e Mokhtalefi Dar Mored-e,” [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/uoeye\\_uoeu\\_uoeo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/uoeye_uoeu_uoeo/).

<sup>74</sup> Pedram SHB, Untitled, *Ye jure dig: Ye Webloge Khanevadegi* (blog), January 22, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20020123142548/http://pedrams.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>75</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “In Bahs Baraye Man Khayli,” *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), January 22, 2002, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/oeuu\\_oeoeoe\\_oeo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/22/oeuu_oeoeoe_oeo/).

whether, like Dolatshahi, they were relying upon what they had “felt from up close” or, like Sisyphus and Pedram, what depiction of reality an apparent objective observer position could offer. Striking at the heart of a crisis, Marjan was paranoid of what appearances would not reveal: “The *javadi* debate has really taken off and it is very interesting yet I am acquainted with another kind of person whose name is :: the hidden *javad* ::!!! Yet, just like a hidden camera and these kinds of things!!! This handful of people wear very nice clothes in appearance and listen to good music and have good tastes and are basically people who appear to have class and appear as respectable....”<sup>76</sup> Though her commentary was flippant, Marjan had, nonetheless, brought to the surface the problem of the unknowable that persisted as an issue for the few who claimed authority as awakened elite.

The problem of unknowability that Marjan gestured to in identifying the hidden *javad* was shaped and informed by the sheer amount of content that Iranians were apparently consuming and dovetailed with deliberation over the relationship of spectacle to truth that appeared as the stuff of political theorization over the status of Khomeini as the hidden Imam. Recall that Ahmad Fardid employed paranoid reasoning towards a hermeneutics of suspicion about the hidden counter-revolutionaries who crowded the image of the 1979 Revolution in the 1980s, periodizing the time before the so-called Imam Khomeini’s return to Tehran as the time of the *barzakh*. Thus, during the Cultural Revolution, the likes of Fardid encountered the limits of knowledge derived from what they had “felt from up close” and what positivist scientific methods could render visible for them. Fardid condemned “mass media” as *fitnah* or sedition because it dispersed the concentrated spectacle of the Imam and posed a challenge to the integrity of the Islamic Republic. Here, amid the *javadi* debate in the nascent beginnings of Weblogistan, Marjan re-constituted the problem of

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<sup>76</sup> Marjan ‘Alemi, Untitled, *Marmaru*, January 23, 2002, [http://marjanalemi.blogspot.com/2002\\_01\\_20\\_marjanalemi\\_archive.html](http://marjanalemi.blogspot.com/2002_01_20_marjanalemi_archive.html).

the *barzakh* – of the soul dreaming in its sleep and for that reason unawake to the truth – to gesture to the necessity of a cultural revolution from below on the terrain of collective attention.

Like Marjan, Dolatshahi read the Persian-language as a potential indicator that the speaker may be a “hidden *javad*,” looking westward as a place where “not being *javad*” was the norm. She was overwhelmed by the severity, intensity, and sheer number of responses that she received. Her inbox filled with hate mail and her name and original post linked to and commented upon by strangers, her exasperation was indicative of a higher order problem of the relationship between the speaker and her public in conditions in which the nature of the public is scattered and in which hidden *javad*s loom in waiting. On January 24, she stated, to that end, in bold, “...a person must be very careful of what they say and if they speak in a way that is even a little indecisive, they’re liable to the groans and anger of many people and what they say will be poorly understood.”<sup>77</sup> Reflecting on the past three months, she concluded that “experience...had shown her that even in the freest place in the world meaning the weblog one cannot say everything” and decided, for that reason, “to soon create a weblog in the English language and to say there what I cannot say here.”<sup>78</sup> In taking an exit from Weblogistan, Dolatshahi hoped for her words to be attended to as they were.

In the discussion above, Dolatshahi, Sisyphus, Pedram, and Marjan were enabled to practice sociological thinking and to occupy a place conventionally reserved for the intellectuals, to provide diagnoses of the relative acculturation of Iranians amidst the crisis of attention therein, deriving authority on the premise that they were habituated to attend to things worthy of attention. Their debate about the *javad* echoed yet was meaningfully different than the overlapping discourse about the *gharbzadeh* or the west-stricken individual – the object of suspicion in legal debates over

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<sup>77</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “Man Hame Harfaton Ra Shenidam,” *Khorshid Khanum* (blog), January 24, 2002, [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/24/uu\\_uuu\\_oeoeueo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/24/uu_uuu_oeoeueo/).

<sup>78</sup> Khorshid Khanum, “Man Hame Harfaton Ra Shenidam,” [http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/24/uu\\_uuu\\_oeoeueo/](http://khorshidkhanoom.com/2002/01/24/uu_uuu_oeoeueo/).



satellite television – who, in outward appearance or inwardly, was a vehicle of the colonization of Iran. In contrast to Al-e Ahmad for whom the west-stricken individual was “standing on thin air” and who, by consequence, was free to become re-constituted and to thus become different than they are, for the participants in the *javadi* debate, the *javad* was an improper subject of attention, constituted by the crisis of attention and re-constituted in turn by unseemly rituals of attention. At stake in the marginal debate among marginal voices about the *javad* was the constitution of Iran, inflected albeit through the coherence of the self in conceptions of self-centered individuality. In a crisis of attention, the scattering of attention was an issue for collective subject formation.

Beginning in 2004, the conservative-dominated judiciary engaged in cyberwarfare, choking off access to digital life, filtering content it deemed propagandic, and arresting cyber dissidents. The dispersion of sites and sources of veridiction across digital space in the early 2000s continued to pose a threat to the authority of state officials to regulate the economy of attention. Cyber laws and press laws after 2000, moreover, were enforced against the spread of propaganda. Left undefined in penal code, the arbitrariness of the distinction between propaganda and the truth bore the mark of a longer history in which state officials presented as the prophets of the times. In disentangling prophecy from propaganda, Soroush had departed from a conception of propaganda as the revival and re-enactment of the prophetic tradition, relegating and circumscribing that conception around conservative apologia for the dominion of the one and the few. If so far, the concept of *tabligh* has been absent, the absence of its employment is significant. The bloggers I examined above, uninterested in propagandizing, resurfaced the loss of faith in the world that the *rawshanfekr* or “intellectual,” who saw and knew the truth, was ostensibly to resolve.

#### **IV. Prophecy after Propaganda**

On June 12, 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected to the presidency, after four years of unraveling the gains that reformists had made when Khatami was in power. Millions of Iranians, donning green, joined in mass demonstrations challenging the legitimacy of the electoral process in what was soon to be named the Sea of Green or the Green Movement. The self-centered slogan, “Where is my Vote?” that was the rallying cry of the Green Movement enacted a conception of the subject of nationhood that was scattered in form and content. The mass circulation of viral footage of the death of Neda-Agha Soltan in digital space appeared as a self-centered subject constellated around collective attention to her life. Invocations of her name, *Neda* or “Voice,” resurfaced the anarchy of revelation that the prophets of the times could not resolve. The configuration of the crisis of legitimacy in 2009 appeared as a terrain upon which a digitally-mediated collectivity inverted the conception that propaganda was after prophecy to gesture towards the enactment of prophecy beyond propaganda insofar as in mediating social relations the image of Soltan’s death enacted conditions for a fictive sense of immediacy. The counter-part of the self-centered demand to have “my” vote counted was the centering of attention around the selfhood of Soltan, who appeared as a medium for witnesses to feel as though they were close.

In the first days of demonstrations, the hashtag #CNNfail trended on Twitter alongside #iranelection, criticizing CNN and mainstream media outlets more generally for failing to pay attention to the protests. In contrast to the unemployed movement in March 1979 in which demonstrators complained that they were not getting any attention, the figure of the “citizen journalist” who, in the words of Negar Mottahedeh, was “part flesh, part data,” emerged in the Green Movement and was able to successfully mobilize “social media” to demand attention from a national and global audience.<sup>79</sup> The citizen journalist was an anonymous figure, without a face

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<sup>79</sup> Negar Motahhede, *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 16.

and a name, who was neither here nor there, navigating the world with one foot “in real life” and one foot in cyberspace. The Islamic Republic mobilized the arm of the state to detract attention from crisis. The aggregate of self-centered audio-visual images produced and circulated by citizen journalists scattered its self-image from below and disrupted the hegemonic order of attention.

The citizen journalist navigated a digital terrain that was qualitatively different than the space that the Sun Lady, Neda, Pedram, and Marjan dwelled in the early 2000s. With the emergence of websites like Wikipedia, YouTube, and Napster, the user was now both enabled to produce and consume content online in what has sometimes been referred to as Web 2.0. During the Green Movement citizen journalists and otherwise engaged in a “trans-spatial” protest that was indexed to the novel configuration of space and time in digital space and that operated as a perceptual geography within which a global collectivity of Iranians could interact.<sup>80</sup> The predominant slogan of the Green Movement, “Where is my Vote?,” was both circulated within the trans-spatiality of digital space and referred back to the figure of a collective digital body therein. Individuals both within the territorial boundaries of the Islamic Republic who were officially part of the electorate *and* those beyond its borders who were not demanded to have their vote counted, and in so doing unhinging the relation of necessity between the territorial and electoral body. The self-centered position implicit in the collective demand to have “my” vote counted mediated the reason and freedom of the individual and the cyber self of which they were a material extension.

The collective demand to have every vote counted doubled as a collective demand to have the voice heard. If in 1979, a collectivity appeared around its own unthinkability in invoking the idea of universal silence in the cry, “*Allah-u Akhbar*” or “God is Great,” in 2009, that cry was

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<sup>80</sup> Reza Masoudi Nejad, “Trans-spatial Public Action: The Geography of Iranian Post-Election Protests in the Age of Web 2.0,” in *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 167.

invoked again, differing insofar as “[the] chant finds its force in referencing the revolution as an ongoing event rather than as a past that has already ended,” instead of the invocation of “an alternative divine against secular rule.”<sup>81</sup> On June 19, 2009, a video began circulating on YouTube in which, from the darkness of the frame, voices chanting “God is Great” could be heard” – over which the voice a woman recited: “Tonight, the sound of *Allahu akbar* can be heard louder and louder than previous nights/ Where is this place?/ Where is this place where everything has been closed down?,” ending with the answer, “This is Iran. This is my land and yours.”<sup>82</sup> The modification of perceptual habits to hear popular silence as tacit disagreement and to be ultimately attuned to the idea of universal silence enacted in 1978 was shaped and informed in 2009 by the trans-spatiality of digital space and the figure of a collective digital body, for which “my land” was secondary to the digital body, part flesh, part data, of the scattered subject of nationhood.

The coincidence of the invocation, “God is Great” and the slogan, “Where is my Vote?” was legible within the terms of debate between reformists and conservatives over the anarchy of revelation and opened for consideration to a global audience the haunting specter of “regime change.” On January 25, 1980, CNN aired a segment on Seyyed Abolhassan Banisadr’s election to the presidency in the first presidential election of the Islamic Republic:

This election is not only the first time that Iran has elected a president. It’s also the closest thing that Iran has ever had to a free election. How free? Well, we don’t know for sure who will win, whereas back in the days of the Shah, there was little suspense at election time. There were no nation-wide candidates then and virtually all the candidates for parliament were on the Shah’s team. But in the present contest for president, there were more than one hundred candidates and Iran’s leader

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<sup>81</sup> Sertrag Manoukian, “Where is this Place?: Crowds, Audio-vision, and Poetry in Postelection Iran,” *Public Culture* 2 (2010), 245-246.

<sup>82</sup> Manoukian, 251.

Ayatollah Khomeini endorsed none of them. Khomeini said that he did not want to interfere with the will of the people.<sup>83</sup>

Since Ayatollah Khamenei endorsed Ahmadinejad in contrast to Khomeini in 1980, the Green Movement was effectively a refusal of his authority to dictate the electoral process. Left uncertain was the positive content of the determinate negation of his apparent lie. The invocation of hope that “the will of the people” desired a transformation of Iran towards a “post-Islamist, postideological pluralist society” forced into submission the will to a future beheld by the prophet of the times, in the name of freedom.<sup>84</sup> In other words, the anarchy of revelation that provided for Soroush a premise to justify the convergence of reason and revelation in democracy was taken to its conclusion in 2009 and the multiplicity of “voices” materialized in the informational maelstrom of digital space, bewildering spectators by the scattered horizon of a future space and time.

On June 20, a paramilitary soldier sniped Neda Agha-Soltan, a twenty-six-year-old student, in the chest while she had stepped out of her vehicle in traffic to cool off. Footage of Agha-Soltan bleeding out on the streets went viral in a matter of hours. Soltan quickly assumed the status of a martyr with emphasis placed on the significance her first name, *neda* or “voice.” She was, in the words of Samira Rajabi, “the first real digital martyr of our time.”<sup>85</sup> The mediation of her death in digital space and public reflection on the meaning of her life was cut across by overlapping, intersecting histories of the mediation of truth in the contemporary history of Iran and of the dispersion of sites and sources of veridiction across literary, aural, and audio-visual space. In being described as “the voice of Iran,” Agha-Soltan was situated at the point that severed the voices of

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<sup>83</sup> “1979 Iranian Revolution,” YouTube Video, 6:02, January 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDeaOOmfxZ8>.

<sup>84</sup>

<sup>85</sup> See Samira Rajabi, “Political Memory and Social Media: The Case of Neda,” in *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

Ayatollah Khamenei and the opposition to the Green Movement from the popular voice. In being raised to the status of a martyr, her image mediated the social relations of the witnesses, occupying a place legible within the history of the spectacle of martyrdom after the Iran-Iraq War. As both voice and martyr, Agha-Soltan appeared as a revelation immediately presenting the truth.

The significance of Agha-Soltan's name was located in-between the significance of the chant, "*Allah-u Akbar*" as the appeal to the idea of a universal silence and the slogan, "Where is my Vote?" as the will of all. Specific to the configuration of space and time in digital culture is the emphatic role of individuals where the anarchy of revelation and the materiality of cyberspace are interwoven. Mediating the abnegation of the individual in the former chant and the presupposition of self-possessive individuality in the latter slogan was the self-centered individual where the self was not necessarily conceived as an atomic, monadic and elementary particle. The enactments of self-centered individuality in the early Persian-language blogosphere, especially from the Sun Lady, occupied a similar space, foreshadowing the liminal space that Agha-Soltan was suspended within in footage of her death, between here and there. In contrast to the Sun Lady who, under a veil of anonymity, centered her account of life in Iran around herself, Agha-Soltan, rendered visible and identifiable, fleetingly became the center of attention of the life of Iran. Another self-centered slogan entered circulation and was popularized thereafter: "We are Neda."

At the height of a crisis of legitimacy in June 2009 over the precise count of votes that were cast was an overarching crisis in which self-centered individuality as such was in question. The slogans, "God is Great," "Where is my Vote?" and "We are Neda" shaped and informed each other, with the selfhood of the individual as an openly contested mediator of the general will and the will of all. They were articulated, moreover, in the context of the scattered constitution of the diaspora, in the attendant wake of the crisis of attention of the exile who is suspended in the

*barzakh*, and amidst debate and deliberation over the improperly and properly attentive or scattered Iranian, echoed in the *javadi* debates from on low and that of *gharbzadegi* from on high. If at question in the *javadi* debate in 2002 was the practice of paying attention, in 2009, that practice was reconfigured in the ritual of bearing witness to the death of Neda and to the future taken from her, opening the horizon of possibility after June 20 beyond what future the ballot box could offer. In contrast to electoral politics where opinion was mediated from the truth, in becoming centered around the death of Neda, a collectivity of individuals cohered around a fiction of immediacy.

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