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***Shukhi-ye Zesht o Tekrāri: Performing Blackness in Iranian  
Entertainment***

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## Note on Transliterations and Pronunciation

Below is a guide to how Persian sounds have been romanized, with corresponding symbols in IPA for reference (note: only the Romanizations are used). Approximate American English examples accompany the vowels to aid in pronunciation, with sounds not found in English marked with an \*. Names of people and texts have been rendered following their original transliterations (i.e. Bahram Beyza'i is not romanized as Bahrām Beyzā'i because the former is more common). Sources in Persian have been cited in the original Persian script so that they may easily be searched and found for any who are curious.

Vowels			
Persian	Roman-ization	International Phonetic Alphabet	approx. English example
ی	i	i	<u>bee</u> t
و	u	u	<u>po</u> ol
ه، ِ، َ، ِ	e	e/ε	<u>se</u> t
و، ُ، ُو	o	o	<u>to</u> ne*
ه، َ، ِ	a	æ	<u>a</u> t
ی، آ، ا، ِ، َ، ِ	ā	ɒ	<u>fa</u> ther*
ی، ِ، َ، ِ	ey	ej	<u>ba</u> it
و، ُ، ُو	ow	ow	<u>no</u> *

Consonants		
Persian	Roman-ization	International Phonetic Alphabet
ب	b	b
پ	p	p
ت، ط	t	t
ث، س، ص	s	s
ج	j	dʒ
چ	ch	tʃ
ح، ه	h	h
خ	kh*	x*
د	d	d
ذ، ز، ض، ظ	z	z
ر	r	r
ژ	zh*	ʒ*
ش	sh	ʃ
ع	‘*	ʔ*
غ، ق	gh*	q/G/ɣ*
ف	f	f
ک	k	k
گ	g	g
ل	l	l
م	m	m
ن	n	n
و	v	v
ی	y	j

## Abstract

There persists a lack of consistent critical engagement with issues of race, particularly Blackness, in Iranian spaces, despite the continuous presence of “race” in the Iranian experience. As such engagements with Blackness range from a denial of its existence in Iran to famous rapper Hichkas calling the beloved blackface figure, Hājji Firuz, as *shukhi-ye zesht o tekrāri*—an ugly and tired joke. This thesis explores what race means in non-Western contexts, specifically through audio-visual manifestations of race in cultural rituals and products. *Siāh-bāzi*, or “playing black,” blackface performances are a form of traditional theatre in which the blackface character serves as racialized comic relief. Much more common and well-known, Hājji Firuz is a perennial blackface character that announces the coming of spring and the spring New Year (Nowruz), whose racialization is also indispensable to his performances. Finally, in a more authentic portrayal of Black Iranian identity through the character of Bashu in Bahram Beyza’i’s celebrated film *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985), race nevertheless continues to be manifested physically through a visual Othering that becomes somewhat resolved through participation in the nation-state’s institutions and standard language, while at the same time revealing the racism in Iranian society and the failures of the nation-state. In examining representations of Blackness, whether as blackface performances or authentic portrayals, this thesis investigates broader questions of race, Othering, nationalism, and scholarship while questioning the wholesale application of English-language, Western-based theories to an Iranian context and rejecting essentialist analyses.

## Introduction

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“A Tork goes to the carwash, but he doesn’t take his car. They ask him, ‘Why didn’t you bring your car?’ He answers, ‘This wasn’t far so I walked.’” –your general, run-of-the-mill “Tork” joke.

“Excuse me sir, why are you black?” –a dark-skinned Southern Iranian quoting what light-skinned Tehrani Iranians would ask him.<sup>1</sup>

“If it weren’t for the stupid Arabs, we wouldn’t be this hairy.” –paraphrased from a middle school Parmida.

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There exists in Iranian Studies and in Iranian communities an absence of critical engagements with race or ethnicity, an absence explained in part as a “taboo” by Rasmus Elling, for various nationalistic anxieties.<sup>2</sup> This is especially prevalent in both Western and Iranian contexts, as popular topics within both academia and Iranian society tend to center around pre-Islamic history, the revolution of 1979, and “apolitical” cultural artefacts such as classical poetry. In reality, concepts of race and ethnicity are essential threads in the fabric of the Iranian experience. None of the above quotations would be considered out of place or frowned upon in mainstream Iranian (and Iranian diasporic) society, though they seem at best, very ignorant, and at worst, perpetuating racist tropes. Jokes about the “Torks” of Iran (Tork being the self-designated term for Azeris, ethnic Turks from the Iranian province of Azerbaijan) are commonplace. They are used to “entertain” at private house parties from Iran to the U.S., and have been the subjects of controversy in Iranian newspapers.<sup>3</sup> They are analogous to jokes about

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<sup>1</sup> SayfMaslul, “Afro Iranians & dark skinned Iranians (Bandaris) about the light-skinned Iranians (Tehranis),” *YouTube*, January 10, 2009, accessed September 17, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s\\_iiHVN7x5k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_iiHVN7x5k).

<sup>2</sup> Rasmus Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2. Elling does important work analyzing the sociopolitical and economic issues faced by Iranian minorities, as well as analyzing how cultural diversity and “the minority issue” is dealt in Iran, in spite of secular ethnic Persian and religious, Shi’ite Islam nationalism over the last few centuries. Although he does not discuss Black Iranians in depth, he has extensive analysis regarding the four biggest minority groups: Azeris (Torks), Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Collin, “Iran Azeris Protest Over Cartoon,” *BBC News*, May 28, 2006, accessed March 18, 2018, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/5024550.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5024550.stm).

Mexican people in the United States, but only very recently have some progressive Iranians turned a critical eye to this type of humor.<sup>4</sup>

The second quote, from a video of a Southern Black Iranian recounting his experiences in Tehran (uploaded in 2009), astounds a Western audience. Questions like “Why are you black?” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem completely out of place and uncalled for, yet show the general ignorance of Iranians about certain races and ethnicities within Iran. In the case of the video, it shows the provincialism of modern Iranian life, a provincialism aided by a general erasure of minority representation. This raises further questions about dominant narratives and representations in a society and state that claims pride in its multicultural and multiethnic heritage while simultaneously taking advantage of this diversity when it suits them and downplaying legitimate ethnic unrest.<sup>5</sup> For example, the state created war propaganda featuring multiple ethnic communities united in the face of the Iraqi army during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.<sup>6</sup> More recently, this theme of national unification against a foreign enemy was mobilized in a short film produced by an Iranian film company, with tacit if not overt support from the government. The film, titled “We Will Resist to the Last Drop of Blood,” shows an alternate depiction of the American attack on the Iranian passenger plane (Flight 655) that killed all 290 people on board.<sup>7</sup> Iranian men from different ethnicities, including a Black Iranian, unite in retaliation to take down the American ships in a supernatural display of power and wish-fulfillment (see Fig. I.1). The film mobilizes multiculturalism for its nationalistic propaganda, but other positive or even normalized representations of ethnicities and races, especially of Blackness, are lacking, not to

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<sup>4</sup> Elling, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Soureh Film / باشگاه فیلم سوره, “ایستاده ایم تا آخرین قطره خون,” *YouTube*, August 22, 2016, accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIxMMkGRCHA>.

mention the discrimination and erasure minorities in Iran continue to face at the hands of governmental policies, such as a denial of language rights for Azeris and forced relocation of Khuzestani Arabs from areas of planned development to camps with inadequate access to water, electricity, and gas.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. I.1: Still from “We Will Resist to the Last Drop of Blood.” The Black Iranian is second from the left.

The third quote unfortunately comes from my own mouth. As most people who aim to perform femininity, puberty corresponded with an increase in the hair on my body and initiated the tiresome coming-of-age ritual of shaving. At the time, my comment was well-received by my audience of other Iranian girls, since we had noticed we tended to run hairier than our white peers. The fact that I remember making such a comment after all these years points to some alarming implications: a) the prevalence of anti-Arab racism in Iranian culture, such that even a child growing up in the diaspora exhibited anti-Arab prejudice while having almost no contact with Arabs, b) the trend of Iranians to blame things they perceive as negative on “others” (especially Arabs) or from “mixing” with Arabs, c) the indirect perpetuation of racist anti-

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<sup>8</sup> Elling, 65, 70.

miscegenation rhetoric and ignorance of the racism of such a statement, and d) the implication that body hair on women is bad, which is a separate but related discussion not delved into here.

The dissonance of the treatment of race in the two cultures I grew up in—American and Iranian—has never escaped my notice. Practices that would go unnoticed or unremarked upon in Iranian settings would at the very least get side-eyed or denounced in American ones. In addition to the quotations above, another good example is blackface. Blackface as a practice is still, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, common in Iranian culture yet quickly criticized in American contexts (usually but not always). Hājji Firuz, a beloved Nowruz (the spring New Year) character, similar to Santa Claus in the U.S. or Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands, always figured prominently in my childhood every spring. Thankfully, the uncles who would take on this role in my community never went so far to paint their faces black (perhaps unconsciously or consciously knowing the way this would be perceived by Americans). Iranian theatrical traditions, at least a century old, made use of blackface for certain characters, and blackface for Hājji Firuz and *siāh-bāzi* plays (literally “playing black”) is still common in parts of Iran and in the diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

This thesis explores the idea that although Iran recognizes different tribes and ethnicities as “Iranian,” albeit in a hierarchy where some ethnicities are closer to true, “Persian Iranianness than others, race is not. Race is still stuck in the nineteenth-century, with divisions between the “Aryan” and “Semitic” races, and with race ascribed to biological characteristics of individual bodies. Representations and performances of Blackness reveal this. Before delving deeply into these representations in Iranian cultural products and rituals, this introduction briefly covers the

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<sup>9</sup> For contemporary examples, see: Maziar Shirazi, “A Review of Tarabnameh, or, Why Are Iranian-Americans Laughing at Blackface in 2016?,” *Ajam Media Collective*, December 7, 2016, accessed September 17, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2016/12/07/why-are-iranian-americans-laughing-at-blackface-in-2016/>, and Sam Nakhai, “Siyah Bazi with Sam Nakhai on Monoto1 سیاه بازی با سام نخعی,” *YouTube*, December 2, 2012, accessed September 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZQbU3nfwSs&t=682s>. More detailed examples in Chapter 1.

history of the African slave trade in Iran, a discussion of racial discourses in nationalism (a significant intervention into the critical treatment of race in Iranian studies), and a short foray into beauty standards to situate the effects of racialized bodies, before outlining the rest of this thesis.

## **African Slave Trade**

Although there were Africans in Iran as early as the pre-Islamic period, the population did not swell considerably until the increase of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Slaves sold at Iranian ports were primarily taken from the Swahili coast, the Horn of Africa, Somalia, and Zanzibar.<sup>11</sup> Iranian pilgrims also facilitated the trade by purchasing slaves while on pilgrimage to Mecca and transporting them overland.<sup>12</sup> Estimates of the number of African slaves imported into Iran throughout the nineteenth century number about 114,800.<sup>13</sup> Abolition campaigns in the mid-nineteenth century decreased the volume of the seaborne slave trade, but slaves from other parts of the Asian continent were also imported into Iran, such as Georgians, Circassians, Turks, and Armenians.<sup>14</sup> Although the British attempted to reinforce the seaborne slave trade ban and discouraged overland slave trading, full emancipation for slaves in Iran (of all backgrounds) did not really take off until Reza Shah strictly enforced emancipation in 1929.

The races of these slaves and the role that race, ethnicity, and color played (and continue to play) in the lives and identities of Afro-Iranians entails complexities and answers still being explored. Mirzai points out the differing nature of slavery in Iran, which consisted of domestic

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<sup>10</sup> Behnaz A. Mirzai, "Identity Transformations of African Communities in Iran," in *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 351.

<sup>11</sup> Behnaz A. Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 56.

<sup>12</sup> Mirzai, *A History*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

and rural labor, and working in palaces and harems, often as eunuchs and concubines, compared to the plantation labor and chattel slavery of the Americas. This, along with the heterogeneous nature of Iranian society, contributed to conceptions of race different from those familiar in the West. Persian documents and sources from the nineteenth century did not use race and racial differences to categorize people;<sup>15</sup> however, European Orientalists and observers did emphasize these differences and did apply their own judgements of race on their observations—for example, associating appearance with patterns of labor distribution. Europeans noted that the darkest-skinned slaves would perform heavy labor and were more likely to work outdoors, while lighter-skinned slaves and those with complexions considered fair and beautiful, especially Ethiopian female slaves, were prized for their beauty and thus were retained as concubines.<sup>16</sup> Other evidence existed for a preference for Ethiopian slaves (i.e. fetching higher prices in the markets than some other groups), which seems to suggest a correlation between lighter skin and those found to be more desirable—beauty standards certainly reflected today (see below).<sup>17</sup>

As the slave trade decreased and the emancipation process began (begun in 1848 but proceeding gradually until 1929), those of African descent in Iran went from identifying as “African” to “freed” and finally, to “Iranian.” Mirzai notes that the term “Afro-Iranian” proves salient mostly only in academic spheres, since the people in question identify as fully Iranian and without any outside associations.<sup>18</sup> “Afro-Iranian” itself is a hyphenated identity, and is used throughout this work with caution, because applying it to a non-Western context risks imposing the Western conception of hyphenated identities upon situations that do not operate in the same

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<sup>15</sup> Mirzai, *A History*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 92. North African slaves received higher prices than East African slaves who were cheaper (because sea routes were more expedient), with Ethiopian women receiving even more since they were prized for their beauty. African eunuchs from all over the continent, however, fetched the highest prices.

<sup>18</sup> Mirzai, “Identity Transformations,” 353.

way. “Black Iranian” is also used rather interchangeably in a move towards recognizing a global Blackness while being mindful of the diversity of experiences of Africans in diaspora.<sup>19</sup> Afro-Iranians today live mostly in the southern parts of the country and many have their own quarters in cities, descending from those freed slaves who congregated in separate quarters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>20</sup> Mirzai contrasts the perception of Blackness and mixed race in Iran with the Americas, saying that in the former, being Black or of a mixed race did not come with the same negative connotations as in the latter and, “as such, there was no advantage in altering blackness or hiding one’s African heritage to escape discrimination or obtain membership in the society.”<sup>21</sup> However, an examination of representations of and allusions to Blackness in Iran turn her assumption on its head. Blackness occupies a shifting liminal space where it comes up against total ignorance, blatant racism, appropriation, and sometimes, acceptance. It is an unescapable reality for Black Iranians but a temporary, comedic identity for non-Black Iranians, who reimagine themselves as blackfaced Hājji Firuzes every year with the coming of the spring new year.

### **Nationalism and Race**

Historian and scholar Reza Zia-Ebrahimi explores the phenomenon of Iranian nationalism as it relates to conceptions of race and dislocation in his book, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (2016). Dislocative nationalism refers to a nationalism that looks for its ideology and foundations elsewhere, in a place or time distant from the nation in question. In regards to Iran, Zia-Ebrahimi notes that the nationalism that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and was cemented in the twentieth century

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<sup>19</sup> Manning Marable and Valerie Agard-Jones, eds. *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Mirzai, *A History*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Mirzai, “Identity Transformations,” 362.

was one based on such a dislocation. The intellectuals and authority figures of this time began to look to Europe as well as pre-Islamic Iran to form their contemporary nationalisms. Zia-Ebrahimi argues this was, first and foremost, to explain Qajar Iran's (1789-1925) apparent backwardness in relation to Europe, for example as evidenced through Iran's devastating military defeats at the hands of Russia and Britain. Explaining this backwardness through dislocative nationalism meant that Iranian intellectuals simultaneously began identifying, racially, with Europeans through an acceptance of the Aryan race hypothesis and denouncing what they saw as the root cause of Iran's degenerative transformation: the Arab invasion and the advent of Islam in Iran in the seventh century AD. The Aryan race hypothesis, originating with European Orientalists, posits that there are two disparate races at odds with each other—the superior Aryans, representative of all things progressive and good, and the inferior Semites (a category that included Turks and Arabs), representative of backwardness and stagnation.

Iranian dislocative nationalism, as it emerged in the nineteenth century through the work of particular intellectuals and as it was popularized and disseminated by the Pahlavi dynasty in the twentieth century, has 4 major tenets: a belief that pre-Islamic Iran was the height of civilization and glory, the acceptance that this glory waned as a result of the spread of Islam into Iran, the wholesale scapegoating of Arabs as the primary culprits responsible for Iran's decline and its present backwardness leading to virulent anti-Arab racism, and the placement of Europe on a pedestal, calling for the blind imitation of the West in order to fix Iran's problems as well as Iranians' racial identification as "Aryan" and therefore, European. The consequences of dislocative nationalism, then, cemented the idea that the categories "Iranian" and "Arab" were mutually exclusive, as paralleled by "Aryan" and "Semite."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.

These ideas were gradually reproduced by other intellectuals (the most important being Mirza Fath‘ali Akhundzadeh, Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, and Fereydun Adamiyat) and authority figures until they became, virtually, the foundational myths of the Pahlavi dynasty in the twentieth century. Iranian scholars during this time not only accepted the Aryan hypothesis but such ideas of race were mass produced and reproduced for the education of all Iranians, as seen through allusions to the “ancient Aryans of Iran” in high school textbooks.<sup>23</sup> One intellectual, Kermani, had internalized European racial discourses and believed

“that if one were to observe ‘an Iranian, a Greek and an Englishman, and then an Ethiopian Sudanese, a Negro (zangi) and an Arab, [one] would clearly be able to judge which one is clean and civilized and which other savage,” that “the blood of a Negro (zangi) and the form of an Ethiopian’s (habashi) brain [are different from] the blood of an Englishman and the shape and form of a Parisian brain.”<sup>24</sup>

What is particularly important, Zia-Ebrahimi notes, is that while after World War II Aryan discourse was largely dismissed in the Western world, dislocative nationalism remains strong in the present day. Iranians continue to refer to the “Aryan race” (*nezhād-e āriyāyi*) and to their belonging in this category, either implicitly or explicitly,<sup>25</sup> while at the same time insisting that Iranians are not Arabs and reinforcing a dichotomy between the two groups (ignoring the existence of Iranian-Arabs and facilitating anti-Arab sentiment among Iranians, usually ethnic Persians). Many use the glorification of the pre-Islamic past as a form of secular opposition to the Islamic Republic.<sup>26</sup>

### **Race and Body through Beauty Standards**

Finally, a concrete example of anti-Blackness can be seen through Iranian beauty standards, which privilege light skin, light hair and eyes, and in the contemporary age, thin and

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<sup>23</sup> Zia-Ebrahimi, 157-158.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 3.

small noses. Beauty standards show how that although race can be called a social construct with no actual scientific basis in biology, societies still hold essentialist views tied to biological presentation. Even as Iranian media and the state, for example, can mobilize narratives of diversity to include Black Iranians as part of a rainbow nation (as in “We Will Resist”), negative attitudes towards Black bodies are inescapable. From the slave trade, lighter-skinned female slaves were preferred for concubines over darker-skinned ones. During Qajar times, art that depicted both women and men, especially in desirable positions, depicted them with light skin (see Fig. I.2).



Fig. I.2: A Qajar couple.<sup>27</sup>

Some widespread current examples include the prevalence of pop songs to refer to these light features, especially in regards to women. Afshin, an Iranian singer based in Germany, has a song called “Shirazi Girl” (“Dokhtar Shirazi”) in which the chorus describes his describes his

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<sup>27</sup> There are interesting gender politics at play, as this is a heterosexual couple but each person’s gender is ambiguous. For a fascinating discussion of gender during the Qajar period, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

belle, a girl from the city of Shiraz, as beautiful with “skin the color of snow.”<sup>28</sup> Other songs describe “eyes the color of the sky,” and feature women who fit European standards of beauty—blonde hair, green or blue eyes (usually with contacts), light skin, and small noses.<sup>29</sup> Both in Iran and the diaspora, blonde (or at least light brown) colored hair and highlights have become widespread, and nose jobs for both men and women are the norm. Light skin also seems to be the preference, and my friends and I remember our mothers cautioning us from staying in the sun too long lest our skin become like *zoghāl* (coal).

The common denominator of all of these variations of racialized representations and beauty standards is the Othering of groups seen as different and separate from the image of the mainstream, ideal Iranian (based off of a European whiteness)—and this is the one exception to the idea of race as taboo. The ideal Iranian is an ethnic Persian, speaking Persian, and is “Aryan.” The term “Aryan” is ubiquitous in the Iranian’s vocabulary, and this is one race card they never hesitate to pull. “Iran means ‘land of the Aryans,’” “Iranians are kin with Europeans,” and even “Hitler loved the Iranians” are phrases constantly recycled today, all of which I have heard or read in my own experience, from high ranking academics<sup>30</sup> and the surrogate uncles and aunts in my community alike. Like blackface, the tension between the two cultural planes I simultaneously exist on is abundantly clear. ‘Aryan’ is an innocent and accurate term in an Iranian context, while existing mostly in white supremacist and neo-Nazi circles in the West.

With my work, first and foremost, I explore representations of Blackness in Iranian entertainment, whether performed by blackface actors or by Black Iranians themselves. My work

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<sup>28</sup> M.S. Salihi, “Afshin – Dokhtar Shirazi,” *YouTube*, October 24, 2011, accessed March 19, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSRBwyd\\_9OM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSRBwyd_9OM).

<sup>29</sup> its Aria, “[Persian Song] TM Bax – Too Kelas - تو کلاس - تی ام بکس,” *YouTube*, March 2, 2012, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UntLSQWBAYs>.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Homa Katouzian, *Iran: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013).

seeks to continue conversations about race and ethnicity in the Middle East, but not by recycling frameworks originating in the West. Productions of identity and representations of Iranians, regardless of race, need to be engaged with on their own terms, so that critical race theories can be developed for multiple contexts with vastly differing historical trajectories and cultural values. This thesis looks to contribute to literature on minorities in Iran, and to move beyond simple anthropological descriptions of such communities into a critical commentary of racial hierarchies and the effects of historical power dynamics on contemporary Iranian society, both in the country and the diaspora. My research methods consisted mostly of visual analysis of racial performance in Iranian entertainment, in live, taped, and film performances.

I seek to shed light on how beloved figures such as the herald of the New Year, Hājji Firuz, have been problematically racialized despite defensive claims to the contrary. I want to trouble the waters of Iranian identity politics and the nationalism that promotes the image of a monolithic society where “Africans” are not considered fully “Iranian.” I want Iranians to seriously consider what it means to claim a white, Aryan identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whether they live in Iran or in diaspora. I want my family, my friends, and my global Iranian imagined community, to realize the promoted image of white-skinned, Persian-speaking Iranians excludes a multitude of identities with the same claim to “Iranianness” as the dominant ethnicity. I want them to consider what it means to imply that the categories of “Iranian,” “Persian,” “Arab,” “Tork,” “Black” are all mutually exclusive. I want them to ponder the existence of Iranian Arabs speaking Arabic, of Iranian Torks telling the most extreme Tork jokes at parties for laughs and approval, of Black Iranians pioneering the *bandari* pop music remixed and marketed as “Persian” in Los Angeles, and ultimately, to question what it means to be Iranian.

This thesis emerged as a result of these questions and these strains of thought, and is split up into three chapters. The first chapter studies *siāh-bāzi*, or “playing black”: a form of Iranian folk theatre that involves a blackface character mobilized for comedic purposes. In this chapter, I examine how the *siāh* (“the black,” as he is referred to) becomes racialized through three primary ways: the narrative structure of the story, the dialogue and stage action, and his make-up. I argue that his body is the site of racialization and not just because of his blackface make-up, but also through his speech, his body movements, and even his body type. The second chapter is a commentary on Hājji Firuz, the blackface herald of Nowruz, and suggests that Hājji Firuz is related to the *siāh* character because of their many similarities. In this section, I argue that even if Hājji Firuz and the *siāh* had completely separate historical trajectories, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries their representation has become virtually identical. The body continues to be racialized through speech and movement, and people laugh at Hājji Firuz for the same reasons that they laugh at the *siāh*. As a result, both are examples of genre characters, a concept borrowed from film theory applied to performances here, who are given set roles because of their set, iconographical appearances. Finally, the third chapter analyzes a representation of a Black Iranian that does not rely on blackface but through authentic performance—the character of Bashu in the celebrated film *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (directed by Bahram Beyza’i, 1985). This chapter continues with an examination of how race is represented in the film and how Bashu becomes racialized—first, through a visual Othering based on skin color, but subsequently through his culture and language. Othering through all these phenomena occurs within the framework of the nation-state, and the chapter acknowledges the important role of this institution in placing groups within racial, cultural, and linguistic hierarchies and the extent to which Beyza’i’s film challenges such hierarchies.

Finally, the conclusion reiterates how race, analyzed through Blackness, is still conceptualized through biology, at least in Iranian society and popular culture. Race is treated as a biological concept that squarely manifests through the body, a phenomenon not unique to Iran (i.e. in the U.S., Black men are still seen as “naturally” better athletes). Broader frameworks of nationalism help to situate race within the Iranian context and partly explain how national rhetoric surrounding race is a paradox: racial and ethnic in Iran are both silenced in discourses yet inescapable realities of Iranian lives.

## Chapter One:

### “Playing Black” – *Siāh-Bāzi* and Theatrical Blackface in Iran and in Diaspora

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“The color of his appearance has nothing  
to do with racism or race, because you know,  
he is the hero of the story.”

—Bahram Beyza’i, on the blackface  
character of his play, *Tarabnāmeḥ* (2016)<sup>31</sup>

“My dad’s from Zanzibar, my mom’s from Ethiopia.”  
—the *siāh* in a Manoto blackface skit<sup>32</sup>

#### Introduction

It is very telling that societies with a history of African slavery also have entertainment forms that involve caricaturized African characters. In the West, these are most known in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century blackface minstrel shows of the U.S., in which a white actor, usually male, uses makeup to blacken his skin and redden his lips and performs in an exaggerated, racist depiction of an African-American. Performances included singing, often using “dialect songs” that poorly imitated the speech patterns of freed and enslaved African-Americans, and dancing with exaggerated and chaotic movements.<sup>33</sup> Iranian history has similar counterparts, with its own history of African slave trade and blackface theatrical traditions. The slave trade peaked in the nineteenth century and continued to flourish until its gradual abolition in the early twentieth century. Despite this, theatrical forms making use of a blackface character

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<sup>31</sup> Shahrokh Shahir, “اجرای طربنامه بهرام بیضایی,” *YouTube*, April 22, 2016, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRLDz-1fbu0>.

<sup>32</sup> Sam Nakhai, “سیاه بازی با سام نخعی,” *YouTube*, December 2, 2012, accessed March 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZQbU3nfwSs>.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Johnson, ed., *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 8.

(known as *takht-e hozī*, *ru-howzi*, or *siāh-bāzi*) continued until their prohibition after the 1979 revolution.<sup>34</sup>

However, blackface has not died out; on the contrary, the blackface Hājji Firuz character (see Chapter 2 for the full discussion) remains alive during Nowruz (Spring New Year for Iran and many other countries and Eurasian communities) celebrations both within and without Iran, popular television programs have recreated short minstrel-like clips even in the twenty-first century,<sup>35</sup> and in 2016, Bahram Beyza'i, celebrated for his inclusion of an Afro-Iranian protagonist in the film *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, directed a play, *Tarabnāmeḥ*, that made significant use of blackface characters, shown in San Jose as part of the Stanford Festival of Iranian Arts.<sup>36</sup>

This chapter seeks to critically analyze the dynamics of race in *siāh-bāzi* (literally, “playing black”) plays and corresponding Iranian discussions of them. While articles and histories of Iranian dramatic forms mention the blackface for what it is—a racialized character performing a caricaturized Blackness—that is often all it is: a mention, lacking a critical engagement with this type of theatre. Following the history of Iranian theatre and *siāh-bāzi*, this chapter lays out the place of the *siāh* (the “Black,” as he is called) in the narrative and the anatomy of the *siāh* quite literally through his body, speech, and motions, using a combination of secondary sources and of various *siāh-bāzi* performances available on YouTube, ranging from the 1970s to 2017. There is no extended comparison between American (referring to the U.S.) and Iranian minstrelsy beyond the brief introduction above, and this is to avoid blankly applying

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<sup>34</sup> VOA Farsi, “سعدی افشار واپسین استاد سیاه بازی,” *YouTube*, January 7, 2013, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=591zVCIPYbQ>.

<sup>35</sup> Sam Nakhai.

<sup>36</sup> “Tarabnameh: Part 1,” Hamid and Christina Moghadam Program in Iranian Studies, Stanford University, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://iranian-studies.stanford.edu/events/tarabnameh-part-1>.

certain discursive frameworks without an appreciation for different cultural and historical contexts. As such, this chapter situates siāh-bāzi within its Iranian history and relates it to work done on Iranian performance and theatrical traditions. Although the Black experience is not universal around the world, many scholars and activists recognize the global nature of anti-Blackness, both in societal attitudes and institutional policies.<sup>37</sup> This chapter (and this thesis) continues the English-language academic conversation on racism in Iran through the racialization present in forms of popular entertainment, and to challenge the concept of “harmless” or “celebratory” entertainment, because the siāh as a genre character is by definition typecast to perform only certain traits.<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of Beyza’i’s *Tarabnāmeḥ* within this broader critique is not to ignore his immense contributions to Iranian cinema and theatre (Chapter 3 engages with his blunt treatment of racism in Iran in *Bashu*), but to continue the question Maziar Shirazi asked on Ajam Media Collective: Why *are* Iranian-Americans (and Iranians) laughing at blackface in 2016?<sup>39</sup>

### **History of Drama in Iran**

The most established form of Iranian drama is the *taziyeh* play, the Shi’ite passion play mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hossein, the third Twelver Shi’i Imam and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his companions at the Battle of Karbala around the year 680. Named as

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<sup>37</sup> See Vilna Bashi, “Globalized Anti-Blackness: Transnationalizing Western Immigration Law, Policy, and Practice,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 4 (2004): 584-606; Opal Tometi, interview by UN Human Rights Office, May 22, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, [http://www.standup4humanrights.org/en/highlight\\_opal.html](http://www.standup4humanrights.org/en/highlight_opal.html); AFP, “Israel Begins Telling African Migrants to Leave,” *MSN*, February 4, 2018, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/israel-begins-telling-african-migrants-to-leave/ar-BBIGwtY>.

<sup>38</sup> Behnaz A. Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 129. Footnote: “[siāh-bāzi] popularized and celebrated African culture rather than denigrated it, as did the ‘blackface’ minstrel performers in American culture, whose acts were deliberately mocking and racist,” emphasis added. The concept of “genre character” will be explored in further detail later in the chapter.

<sup>39</sup> Maziar Shirazi, “A Review of Tarabnameh, or, Why Are Iranian-Americans Laughing at Blackface in 2016?” *Ajam Media Collective*, December 7, 2016, accessed September 17, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2016/12/07/why-are-iranian-americans-laughing-at-blackface-in-2016/>.

“the only indigenous drama in the Islamic world,”<sup>40</sup> taziyeḥ plays date back centuries but really began to thrive during the Safavid period (the sixteenth century) before the patronage of Qajar kings in the nineteenth century spread the art form further.<sup>41</sup> Taziyeḥ plays were performed through verse, without much scenery, on simple, circular stages, and were primarily intended as Shi’i mourning rituals, not necessarily popular entertainment. In this vein, taziyeḥs were usually performed during religious occasions, particularly during the month of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) and on the day of Āshurā (the day of Imam Hossein’s martyrdom, the tenth of Muharram).<sup>42</sup>

In contrast, *ru-howzi*, *takht-e howzi*, and *siāh-bāzi* performances entertained audiences as comic plays, usually at special occasions such as weddings. Theatre troupes would be invited to private homes and performed in the courtyard, which usually had a pool—a *howz*—that would be covered in wooden boards to function as a stage. The interchangeable names *ru-howzi* and *takht-e howzi* derived from this practice: *ru-howzi* means “over the pool” while *takht-e* refers to the boards (the *takhte-hā*) on the pool. Because a central feature of *ru-howzi* was a minstrel-like character in blackface attire, the term *siāh-bāzi* (“playing black”)<sup>43</sup> serves as an umbrella term for comic plays making use of a blackface character. This term will be used henceforth in this paper as well, because as technologies evolved in the twentieth century, *siāh-bāzi* plays would be performed in more public places such as theatre and television stages, or coffee or tea houses,<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> M.R. Ghanoonparvar and John Green, eds., *Iranian Drama: An Anthology* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1989), xi.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>43</sup> The suffix “*bāzi*” is often attached to dramatic forms because it literally means “play.” Examples include *lāl-bāzi* (“play of the mute” aka pantomime), *sāyeh-* or *khiyāl-bāzi* (“shadow play” aka shadow puppetry) and *kachalak-bāzi* (“play of the bald”). Farrokh Gaffary, “Evolution of Rituals and Theater in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 17, no.4 (Autumn 1984): 365-373.

<sup>44</sup> Elmira Kazemimojaveri, “A Short Introduction to Iranian Drama,” *Mimesis Journal* 5 (2016): 73 (footnote 33). Up until 1979, however, theatrical troupes would still be hired out to private homes for weddings and other occasions too.

and were not confined only to the private pools of ru-howzi or takht-e howzi. These plays would have clear and simple storylines, or would reenact famous or popular historical stories, so that audience members could tune in and out without confusion, owing to the origin of these plays as background entertainment at times.

Improvisation was a central initial feature of such plays, which were not simply shallow comedies but have been argued to be important sites of social and political commentary and critique.<sup>45</sup> This was primarily done through the *siāh* (translated as “the Black” or “the Blackman”) character, an Iranian male who wore minstrel clothing, usually a bright red and gold costume with the corresponding hat and blackened his face and hands. Gaffary says of the *siāh*:

The principle character of this genre is the *Siyāh* (blackman), whose date of appearance is unknown. He blackens his face and hands with soot and grease, talks with the accent of former Iranian black slaves using an indecent and obscene vocabulary (like his counterparts in traditional Arabian comedies or in Turkish *Karagöz* and *Ortaoyunu*). He freely criticizes dignitaries, rich men, and social defects, and behind the guise of an “irresponsible simpleton negro” he is able to be very daring.<sup>46</sup>

In general, the *siāh-bāzi* pieces analyzed in this chapter follow these thematic and theatrical conventions, with the addition of exaggerated body movements that range from comic to lewd, depending on the situation.<sup>47</sup> Beeman notes how much of the comedy of such plays relied on the interaction of other characters with the *siāh*, and the bulk of the comedy came from his exchanges with an authority figure, usually the *hājji* (an older merchant or wise man; “hājji” could designate his pilgrimage to Mecca, but was also a general title given to older, wealthy men regardless), but also the master or mistress of the house, a king, magistrate, or other noble.<sup>48</sup> As Beeman and later analysis in this paper both note, a crucial factor of the comedy were the

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<sup>45</sup> Gaffary, 372.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> William O. Beeman, “Why Do They Laugh? An Interactional Approach to Humor in Traditional Iranian Improvisatory Theater: Performance and Its Effects,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 94, no. 374 (Oct-Dec. 1981): 515.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 513.

exchanges between the siāh and other characters, which played off each other and required the constant back and forth to entertain the audience. Examples, adapted from Beeman (1981):

Hājji: *Lā ilāha ila allāh!* “There is no god but God!” (a common angry curse)  
Siāh: *Ay, chi mordeh tu rāh pele-hā!* “Oh, what died on the staircase?!”

(Here, the siāh mocks the anger and exasperation of the hājji by answering him in crude rhyming couplets that are “complete non sequiturs”)<sup>49</sup>

Youth: *Mano maskhareh mikoni?* “Are you making fun of me?”  
Siāh: *Akh, maskhareh budi az aval!* “Pff, you were already a fool from the start!”

(The humor comes from the pun on “*maskhareh*”-the youth uses the compound verb (noun + auxiliary verb) form “*maskhareh mikoni*” –, *mikoni* being the conjugated form of the auxiliary verb “to make.” This translates to “to make fun of,” or literally, “to make a fool of” – while the *siāh* responds with “*maskhareh budi*”, using the same noun “*maskhareh*” but with a different verb, *budi*, the conjugated form of the auxiliary verb “to be,” the usage of which insults the youth by saying “*maskhare budi*” – you were already a fool.)<sup>50</sup>

By the Pahlavi era, however, censorship required that the actors perform off of prepared scripts. According to Gaffary, this censorship “was against the spirit of improvisation and moreover restricted its critical aspects.”<sup>51</sup> Public comedy theatres continued to flourish until the 1960s and 1970s—in 1963, the last theatre of popular comedy closed down but was succeeded by the *Hāfez no* theatre in the red light district of Tehran for a few years until it too was closed down (burned down) in 1979.<sup>52</sup>

Not many other sources have further discussed the effect of censorship on the content and structure of popular comedy, including the siāh-bāzi performances. As the Pahlavi monarchy consolidated its power and sought to create a modern, industrialized nation-state, however, its political and intellectual leaders became much more sensitive to how Iranian traditions were perceived abroad, especially by Westerners. Other forms of Iranian drama, such as the *taziyeh*

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<sup>49</sup> Beeman, 514.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 513

<sup>51</sup> Gaffary, 373.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

plays, were banned by Reza Shah because of their perceived ritualistic backwardness.<sup>53</sup> The Pahlavi modernization projects, which simultaneously sought to Westernize the country, extended censorship to all art forms to ensure that they did not criticize the regime, and, at times, to promote the secular nationalism that promoted pre-Islamic “Aryan” Iranian culture and history. With these processes in mind, censorship limited whatever powers of critical political commentary such *siāh-bāzi* performances may have had, and would have placed a similar restriction on social critique as well, since social conditions would, in part, have reflected the political realities of the time. This limited propensity for critique even more blatantly exposes Iranian blackface plays, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as relying on racist caricatures for comedic effect, as the following exploration of *siāh-bāzi* tropes will reveal further.

### **Situating the Genre Character within the Narrative**

Western audiences<sup>54</sup> will quickly recognize Iranian *siāh-bāzi* performances as blackface, and very similar to American minstrel shows in many respects. Though this and the following sections are not intended as comparative analysis, I take as my starting point a few key tropes of *siāh-bāzi* performances: the blackface character’s position within the narratives, his racialized anatomy, and other theatrical devices such as costuming. Such a profile starts with how the generic narratives situate the *siāh* as a servant or slave, before analyzing how his literal body—his body type, the way he speaks, and the way he moves—cements him as an iconographic genre character. The idea of the genre character emerges from the concept of genre films, films with fixed and predictable plots and with defined and pre-established characters (i.e. “the

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<sup>53</sup> Azadeh Ganjeh, “Performing Hamlet in Modern Iran” (PhD diss., University of Bern, 2017), 23.

<sup>54</sup> This paper emerges in a Western context, but it is important to note that blackface is global. See “Blackface,” *Wikipedia*, April 13, 2018, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface> for a list of countries with blackface practices.

Western,”).<sup>55</sup> Sobchack notes that “A genre film, no matter how baroque it may become, however, still differs fundamentally from other films by virtue of its reliance on preordained forms, known plots, recognizable characters and obvious iconographies; it is still capable of creating the classical experience because of this insistence on the familiar.” Siāh-bāzi performances, though usually theatrical and historically live, can similarly be considered genre theatre, or more broadly, genre performances, since they rely on generic or famous plots, and have recognizable characters. The narrative function of the siāh along with his typecast and standard anatomy (through space and time) solidify his categorization as a genre character, a genre character recognized through an exaggerated physical racialization.

My main primary sources include a televised siāh-bāzi performance filmed and broadcast in 1979, just before the revolution, called *Efriteh Machin* (“The Western Beast”),<sup>56</sup> and a short televised skit broadcast in 2011 from the London-based Persian language program Manoto titled “Siyah Bazi with Sam Nakhai” for the purposes of this chapter.<sup>57</sup> I also include supplementary examples from a short clip from the late 1970s featuring Sa’di Afshar, a renowned Iranian siāh-bāzi actor,<sup>58</sup> as well as some clips of a contemporary comedy group that features a blackface character in some of their acts.<sup>59</sup> By analyzing these sources through the tropes outlined above, it

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Sobchack, “Genre Film: A Classical Experience,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1975): 200.

<sup>56</sup> The full show can be viewed in three parts online, see baritoronto, “Efriteh Machin TV theatre – part 1 عفریته ماجین,” *YouTube*, March 26, 2012, accessed March 19, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HoG2Pq\\_3RQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HoG2Pq_3RQ), baritoronto, “Efriteh Machin –p 2 عفریته ماجین,” *YouTube*, March 27, 2012, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8C201AUuT0A>, and baritoronto, “Efriteh Machin TV show,” *YouTube*, March 27, 2012, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScoqGt3md44>.

<sup>57</sup> Sam Nakhai. Although Manoto is based outside of Iran, it remains popular inside Iran and many Iranians watch it using satellite dishes.

<sup>58</sup> “کلیپ طنز و خنده دار از یک سیاه بازی دربرنامه تکه نمایش,” *Aparat*, August 3, 2017, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.aparat.com/v/3TZla>.

<sup>59</sup> “طنز: تقلید از کلیپ ماهواره || گروه طنز سیاه بازی شیراز,” *Aparat*, November 20, 2017, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.aparat.com/v/VSmD0>; “گروه نمایش طنز ققنوس شیراز - www.IranMarasem.ir,” *Aparat*, January 27, 2014, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.aparat.com/v/kwpPH>; and “نمایش طنز 'سیاه بازی' ویژه جشنها,” *Aparat*, June 15, 2016, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.aparat.com/v/EcBOQ>.

will also be shown how representations of this character remain relatively stable over time and place (both within Iran and in the Iranian diaspora), an essential feature of genre characters that facilitates racial archotyping.



Fig. 1.1: Still from Efriteh Machin (1979, Iran) featuring the hājji and siāh.



Fig. 1.2: Still featuring Sa'di Afshar (far right) in a short siāh-bāzi clip (c. late 1970s, Iran).



Fig. 1.3: Still from Manoto's "Siyah Bazi with Sam Nakhai" (2012, UK) featuring the vizier and siāh.



Fig. 1.4: Still from a contemporary siāh-bāzi skit (2014, Iran).



Fig. 1.5: Still from a contemporary public siāh-bāzi performance (2016, Iran).



Fig. 1.6: Still from a contemporary public siāh-bāzi performance (2017, Iran).

The first of these tropes is the narrative: the story and significantly related elements. As mentioned before, traditional *siāh-bāzi* performances, in play form, made use of simple or well-known stories so that it could function as background entertainment to the larger occasion at hand (usually a wedding or celebration of some kind). As such, there were archetypal characters part of each performance, such as the *hājji* (old wise man or merchant), his wife, other authorities like kings, viziers, or princes, and of course, the slave or servant (*gholām* in Persian, which can be translated as either, or “*nokar*” which usually refers to a domestic servant) as the eponymous blackface character. Both *Efriteh Machin* and the *Manoto* program make use of these tropes, though in *Efriteh Machin*, the comedy arises out of the interaction of the *siāh* with multiple characters (mainly the *hājji*), and in *Manoto*, the *siāh* interacts only with a vizier.

*Efriteh Machin* fits more with traditional *siāh-bāzi* performances, as it is a televised play and thus has a large cast of characters and musicians (with the addition of a narrator/host), with the *hājji/siāh* interactions serving as part of the larger story. The main characters are known by their roles instead of their names, and they include the *hājji* and the *siāh*, the *hājji*'s daughter, the *hājji*'s wife, the young man, the Chinese ambassador and his sister, among a host of other side characters, which follows categorizing *siāh-bāzi* performances as genre performances because their characters are repeated archetypes. The main plot follows the *hājji*'s plan to marry his daughter to the ambassador, so that he (the *hājji*) can in turn marry the magistrate's sister, but the daughter has fallen in love with the young man instead and refuses to marry her father's choice. Shenanigans ensue as the *hājji* attempts to keep the two lovers apart until the end, when the ambassador's sister is revealed to be a man in “drag.” The *Manoto* performance, though only a short skit between two characters (both played by the same actor, Sam Nakhai), still conforms to

the conventional casting of the siāh as a servant—the driving force of the skit is the vizier searching for a nokar and his humorous interrogation of the siāh for the position as a result.

In most of the contemporary siāh-bāzi performances analyzed here, the narrative structures, especially the comedic devices, are remarkably similar and faithful to traditional siāh-bāzi. There is only ever one blackface character, and this siāh is always cast in a subservient role. In *Efriteh Machin*, the siāh follows his master, the hājji, around the stage as the hājji makes various demands. In the very first scene featuring the both of them, the hājji falls down and entreats his servant to help him up, and the two exchange humorous banter as the servant hedges his duty. In a later scene, the two argue over the proper way to walk, as the hājji believes his servant ambles in a shameful and embarrassing way. Similar to the initial scene, the hājji gives the siāh an order (in this case, to walk “correctly”) but interestingly, both times, his orders are not carried out as the siāh continuously challenges him and refuses to do as told. In the first scene, instead of physically lifting the hājji up, the servant refuses so much that the master, frustrated, plays dead. Initially overjoyed at this, the siāh begins dancing in celebration, whereby the master lifts his head and wryly mentions that if he actually dies, there will be no one to pay the servant’s salary. At this, the servant cries out loud and rushes back to his master’s prone body, entreating him to not die and pay his salary. In the end, the servant tricks his master into getting up on his own by pretending to find money by his master’s feet, at which point the master springs up.

In *Efriteh Machin*, the subservient role of the siāh exemplifies an important component of siāh-bāzi performances and the humor that they create. He is one of the most outspoken characters, and the humor clearly comes from his blatant defiance of his master’s orders. Though in this sort of entertainment context such a defiance is acceptable, the humor is successful

precisely because this is a clear, absurd deviation from the norm. Not only is the siāh openly disrespectful towards the hājji, a figure that typically commands respect (master or not), by continuously addressing him informally,<sup>60</sup> but he openly defies the hājji as well, as in the initial scene where he does not help him up, and the second scene with the mockery of the hājji's walk. The audience laughs because this is a clear perversion of the natural order, or because the siāh represents some latent wish fulfillment of defiance against authority, but clearly the humor does not work without the hierarchical distance between the characters (there do not, for example, seem to be many comedic performances with extended interactions between two servants). The question then becomes, why is the subservient role racialized as a Black character (as the name for this archetype is literally "the Black"), a character that is only portrayed through blackface makeup and a particular costume? Taking this further, why is the only "Black" character always a servant or slave? There do not seem to be plays where roles racialized as Black (whether through blackface or with actual Black characters) belong to more prestigious archetypes such as the wise man, or the king. Sam Nakhai's *Manoto* skit goes a step further and actually explicitly comments on the racial origins of the siāh character: when asked where his parents are from, the siāh replies that they come from Zanzibar and Ethiopia. Further analysis regarding the anatomy of the siāh attempt to answer these questions, and to show how the racialized (male) body is nestled within a broader narrative that only allows him the role of the servant.

### **Anatomy of the Siāh – the Tongue**

For both *Efriteh Machin* and Sam Nakhai, the dialogue between the siāh and whoever he is interacting with (be it the hājji, his daughter, his wife, or a vizier) forms a crucial part of the humor while distinguishing it from other dramatic arts. The siāh has a very distinct way of

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<sup>60</sup> Using "tō," the informal you, as opposed to "shomā," the expected, formal you.

speaking, as most of the archetypes present do. He speaks with a very guttural voice and an exaggerated accent, while “mispronouncing” much of what he says. Significantly, this voice seems to be standardized across platforms and eras, as *siāh bāzi* actors from both the pre-revolutionary era and the contemporary age sound remarkably similar (see the clips for comparison), whether in a live comedy performance or a televised play. As for his mispronunciations, many of them form humorous puns that play off the usually serious dialogue of whoever plays opposite the *siāh*, since his utterances tend to be rather close to the statements said by his counterpart. For example, the *siāh* in *Efriteh Machin* mispronounces the phrase of exasperation “*Lā illāha ilallāh*” as “*Rā irāha irarāh*.” He also continually mispronounces “*baleh*” [yes] as “*barreh*.” This particular linguistic substitution seems to be fairly standard across multiple *siāh-bāzi* performances, in which the *siāh* consistently substitutes either the alveolar trill [r] or the alveolar flap [ɾ] for the alveolar approximant [l], or vice versa, both within one performance and across the examples given here. This could be a mockery of an African accent in Persian, as Gaffary notes that the *siāh* “talks with the accent of former Iranian black slaves,”<sup>61</sup> or of certain Southern dialects, such as Bandari, which are mostly spoken by Afro-Arab and Iranian communities. However, more linguistic analysis needs to be done to directly connect the exaggerated speech of *siāh-bāzi* with existing language varieties, but as Hill notes, language used as a tool of mockery may still be (and often is) unrealistic, nonstandard, and ungrammatical, and this could certainly be true in the White Persian-Black Afro-Iranian dynamic as well.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Gaffary, 372.

<sup>62</sup> Jane H. Hill, “Language, Race, and White Public Space,” *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 3 (September 1998): 682.

In one of his performances, Sa’di Afshar as the siāh misconstrues a blessing his master says into a curse while incorrectly repeating his master’s remarks back to him:

Master: <i>Khodā rahmatesh konad.</i>	May God have <b>mercy</b> on him.
Siāh: <i>Khodā la’natesh koneh.</i>	May God <b>damn</b> him.
Master: <i>Khodā rahmatesh koneh, fot kardeh.</i>	May God <i>bless</i> him, he <b>passed away</b> .
Siāh: <i>Tof kardeh? Bichāreh, badbakht.</i>	He <b>spit</b> ? Poor fellow, unlucky. <sup>63</sup>

(the humor first comes from the rhyme between “*rahmatesh*” [to have mercy on] and “*la’natesh*” [to damn or curse], then on the reversal of “*fot*” to “*tof*” [with the auxiliary verb “*kardan*,” “to do,” the phrasing goes from “he passed away” to “he spit”]).

Sa’di Afshar’s siāh also mispronounces “*baleh*” [yes] the same way as the siāh in Efriteh Machin (played by Morteza Aghili), as “*barreh*,” as does Manoto’s siāh, played by Sam Nakhai—one example of the continuity of this racialized trope across time and space.

The Manoto skit focuses on the verbal exchanges between the two characters, wherein the vizier poses a question and the siāh responds with a mispronunciation or a misinterpretation.

Examples of this include:

Siāh: <i>Daret ku?</i>	Where is your door?
Vizier: <i>Rubeh-ru-teh!</i>	Right in front of you!
Siāh: <i>Che rangi-ye daret?</i>	What color is your door?
Vizier: <i>Kerem rang-e daram!</i>	My door is <b>cream</b> -colored!
Siāh: <i>Kerm dāreh daret?</i>	Your door has <b>worms</b> ?
Vizier: <i>Ja’far Barmaki, vazīr-e khalifeh!</i>	[I am] Ja’far Barmaki, the caliph’s <b>vizier</b> !
Siāh: <i>Ahān, to zīr-e khalifeh-i!</i>	Aha, you are <b>under</b> the caliph! (crude, sexual)

Also noteworthy in the Manoto skit, the contrast between the vizier and the siāh is strengthened by their manners of speaking, in addition to their narrative roles. While the siāh speaks with what could be considered a “crude” speech style (through the accent, the informal and choppy syntax) and in the guttural voice characteristic of most siāh-bāzi performances, the vizier speaks with an

<sup>63</sup> “کلیپ طنز.”

overly exaggerated formal accent, by over-enunciating words, speaking in a manner meant to come off as self-important, and by using complex words and overtly formal syntax in his speech (an analogy could be made with a British “posh” accent—received pronunciation).

Towards the beginning of *Efriteh Machin*, all the principle actors and actresses go around introducing themselves and announcing the roles that they play, and the way the siāh’s actor introduces himself is especially intriguing. He is the first person to announce his role (a nod to the importance and prominence of this character in the play) and after the call “*Mo’arefi!* [Introduction!]” by the entire cast, he begins with an accented greeting: “*Vā, sambāro bāreykom, ahvāl-e shomā?*” (Hello, how are you?) spoken in the guttural, forced style that is typical of the siāh (the “correct” or more standard pronunciation would be *salām aleykom, ahvāl-e shomā?*). Immediately after, he switches to his normal pitch and manner of speaking, and says, in standard Persian with a Tehrani accent: “*man Morteza Aghili hastam, naghsh-e siāh-o bāzi mikonam. Mibakhshid agar bad bāzi mikonam.*” “My name is Morteza Aghili and I play the role of the siāh. Please excuse me if my acting is poor.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, throughout the performance, numerous fourth wall breaks add to the humor of the show as actors break character and converse with each other in asides, such as multiple instances where the daughter of the hājji berates the siāh/his actor and reminds him to behave better because they are on television.

### **Anatomy of the Siāh – the Body**

In addition to dialogue, the stage actions and the comporting of the bodies on the stage serve to heavily racialize the siāh and his body. The black make-up used by the siāh in these performances is the most significant marker of blackface, and of the exaggerated racialization

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<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, this last statement could be taken in two ways: Aghili could be asking for forgiveness for bad acting (a poor performance), or for acting badly (bad behavior), perhaps foreshadowing his brazen and somewhat racy performance.

that occurs. A lighter-skinned Iranian man donning very dark make-up on his face and usually his arms and hands as well further racializes this type of comedy and suggests that such an absurd character—humorous, defiant of authority, crude, dumb—could not exist as a “white” Persian. One immediate commonality among almost all the *siāh-bāzi* examples that quickly becomes evident is the literal body of the actor—almost all *siāh-bāzi* actors are thin and small, recalling perhaps the emasculation of African eunuchs given charge of Qajar harems.<sup>65</sup> This implication of the *siāh* as a eunuch is further reflected as the *siāh*’s unfettered access to the women in *Efriteh Machin*. Despite the *hājji*’s frustrations with his servant, he nevertheless trusts the *siāh* to take his daughter, alone, to a remote location, keeping her away from the youth she is in love with. The play includes multiple scenes with the *siāh* either alone with the daughter or the wife. Aghili’s portrayal of the servant has him walking around with his behind stuck out and his arms out, his neck moving out and side to side in very exaggerated movements, cementing the caricature of the (African) slave character. Bodies are instantly racialized in forms of entertainment in Iran, overtly through the application of the blackface make-up and the caricatured actions of the minstrel-like character (seen through the *siāh* and also in the *Hājji Firuz* character – see Chapter 2, as well as in the film *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, as the film’s titular character’s body serves as an important site of racialized culture – see Chapter 3).

The racialization of the *siāh* through his physical movements is especially apparent in *Efriteh Machin*; multiple scenes focus around his walk for humorous purposes: the scene with the *hājji* berating his servant’s walk, and the scene with the *hājji*’s wife imitating said walk. The first scene, as mentioned before, is a humorous aside from the main plot of the play, in which the *hājji* tries to show the *siāh* the correct way to walk (an exaggerated strut in its own right but still

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<sup>65</sup> See the introduction of this thesis for a brief history of slavery in Iran and the various roles of African slaves, and Chapter 2 for more examples of the eunuch body on *Hājji Firuz*.

more controlled than the siāh's wide range of motions). During the entire scene, the hājji and the siāh walk around the stage in a large circle, ending up where they started without any change in either man's behavior.<sup>66</sup> This further reflects the purpose of the siāh throughout the history of Iranian entertainment as a static, genre character, who has no history or plot of his own but simply serves to entertain the audience without experiencing any development or epic storylines.

Another crucial moment in *Efriteh Machin* showcasing the importance of a racialized body and the physical actions of the siāh in cementing himself as the minstrel archetype is a scene with the hājji's wife and the siāh alone in a room; this scene lends further support for the siāh as a eunuch—despite his hypersexualization with his lewd gestures and speech, he is not seen as a threat to the hājji's masculinity. In this comical scene, the daughter asks the siāh for advice on how to break the news of her love for the youth to her mother, when suddenly the mother enters the room. Not ready to face her, the daughter runs out and pleads the siāh not to reveal her secret. Luckily, the mother does not see her daughter and instead, enters looking for the siāh, scolding him for not cleaning the house well, a scolding that quickly becomes a tirade on his entire character. She groans that he does not know how to act properly, saying both to him and the audience, “What an ill-bred man, when will I be able to make a proper person out of you!” After some more back and forth, the siāh retaliates by arguing that if the hājji's wife were a servant, she would do worse than him. She takes this as an opportunity to teach him to be proper, and the two temporarily switch places so she can show him how to act. She gives her veil to him, and he gives his hat to her to cement the changing of places. The hājji's wife tells the siāh to call her over so she can show him the proper way to greet the lady of the house. In a wry twist

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<sup>66</sup> This type of circular movement to indicate a change in spatial and temporal setting can be found in other Iranian theatrical traditions, especially in *taziyeh* plays, as argued extensively in Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

of events, however, the *siāh* turns the critique around and criticizes the lady’s performance as a servant instead, and his loudest criticism is of her walk.

Siāh:	<i>In che tarz-e rāh āmadan-e?! Ākhe rāh āmadan-e ye nokar, bā ye arbāb bāyad fargh dāsh-t-e bāshe! Saret-o mese gāv endākhti pāyin. Mese khaaaaaar-</i>	“What kind of walk is this?! The walk of a servant’s gotta be different than a master’s! You’ve got your head down like a cow. Like an asssssss-
Lady:	<i>Khafeh sho, bitarbiat!</i>	“Shut up, rascal!”
Siāh:	<i>Ākhe vaghti man sedā mikonam, gher bedeh, in kārāro bokon. Ākh goftam, to nemituni nokar bāshi.</i>	“When I call you, shake your hips, do things like that. Ah, like I said you couldn’t be a servant.”
Lady:	<i>Kheyleh khob, bāshe, beshin. Man mese to rāh miyām.</i>	“Okay, okay, sit. I’ll walk like you.”

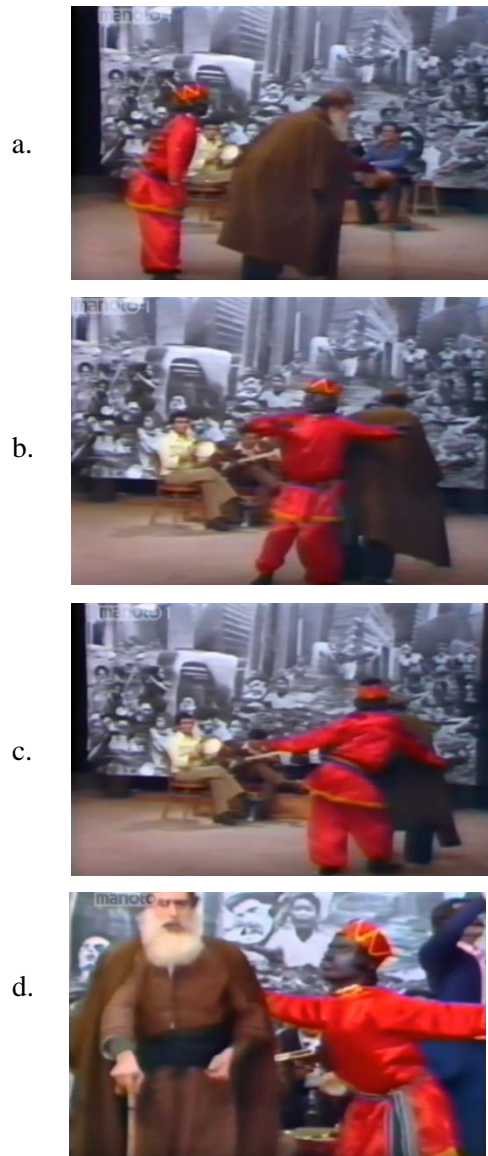
She acquiesces to his critique, and returns to the side of the room; when he calls her again, she walks like a servant is “supposed to”—her arms are out and up, she moves her chest and body to the background music,<sup>67</sup> she raises and lowers her shoulders suggestively, and she moves her head in the *siāh*’s signature, exaggerated way: jutting it out and moving it side-to-side. Only then does the *siāh* find her adequate, and they continue the make-believe until the lady loses her patience again and chases him out of the room and the scene ends. In addition to the mistress’s comically exaggerated walk (clearly very different from the way her character usually comports herself), the humor also emerges from the flipped scenario: instead of her teaching him how to be a respectable servant, the *siāh* takes the power of the teacher into his own hands. Thus, he is the one to critique *her* and to instruct *her* on how to act in a role he has, presumably, lived his entire life. However, the emphasis on her walk is significant because it further racializes the body of a Black servant. The *hājji*’s wife cannot ostensibly change her race by donning blackface (nor would she want to, as the switch is only meant to be temporary)—but she can change her

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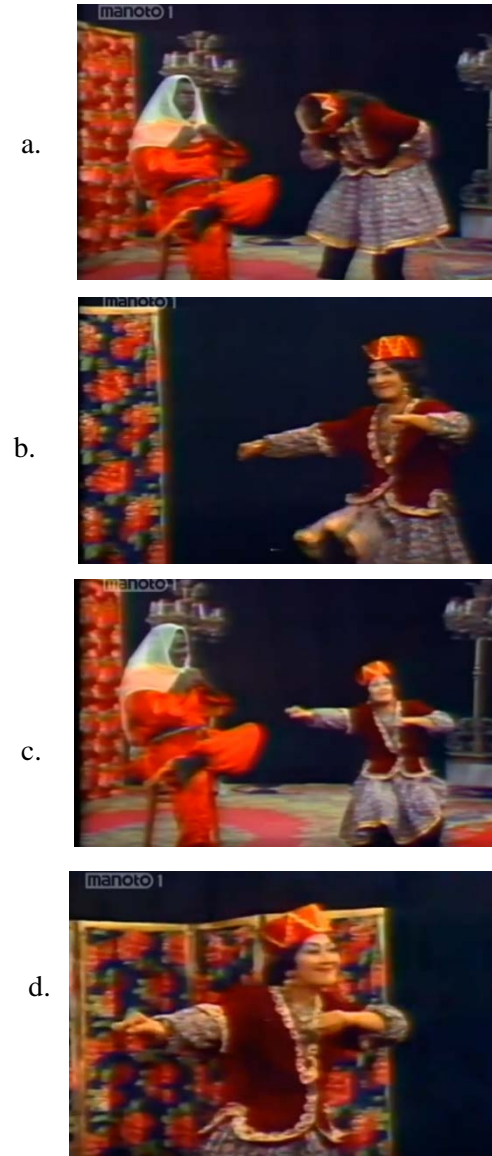
<sup>67</sup> Although this thesis does not explore the overlaps between music and race extensively (see Chapter 2 for a discussion on music and cultural appropriation), it is worth noting that often when the *siāh* enters or exits the set of *Efriteh Machin*, the same slow, rhythmic music plays to give him something to shake his hips and do his exaggerated walk to. This particular theme also plays when the *hājji*’s wife “correctly” imitates her servant’s walk the second time.

body motions to fit the more exaggerated movements of a typical servant. This is also an example of somewhat absurd humor because in the end, this racialization is not complete. Though the corporal manifestation of “race” is an important factor of the racialization of minorities, especially of Afro-Iranians (see also Chapters 2 and 3), the static representation of race on the skin never loses its prominence. The mistress easily reassumes her position in the domestic hierarchy because although she temporarily positions herself closer to Blackness through motion, as the narrative requires, her skin remains white, and at the end of the scene she re-enters her role as the hājji’s wife.

Compare the siāh’s walk... (Figs. 1.7a-d)



...with the lady’s imitated walk (Figs. 1.8a-d).



One could make the argument that when the mistress takes on the siāh's body movements, she is not racialized but class-ified as a servant instead, since slaves and servants in Iran were never exclusively of African origin. However, the purpose of the blackface character in all siāh-bāzi performances was as a servant such that the race was inseparable from the class of the siāh. It would be rare for blackface characters to be anything other than slaves, servants, or minstrel-entertainers (as in the cases of the live performances in Iran)—from the lower-class—and it was just as rare for a blackface character to appear without the racialized antics of distorted speech and jerky, lewd, exaggerated movements. Furthermore, other lower-class characters in these performances do not move in such a way. In *Efriteh Machin*, the youth that the hājji's daughter is in love is a penniless vagabond but he does not jerk his head side-to-side or shake his hips like the siāh does. Unlike the siāh, however, the youth is a championed hero, part of a sweeping love story, whereas the siāh is largely only there for comic relief, humor that only works if he becomes exaggeratedly racialized. The audience would not laugh as much if he spoke and walked normally in blackface. The siāh himself mentions that the walk is characteristic of a (Black) servant only, in the exchange with the hājji's wife. The only other characters in *Efriteh Machin* who move with unexpectedly exaggerated movements are the ambassador from China and his sister, suggesting a similar way of Othering those who are not truly "Iranian" in their racial origins.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Though the brief scenes where this type of caricature occurs are not the focus of this chapter, this analysis makes brief mention of them in order to point out the humor in "non-Iranianness." While audiences do laugh at "Iranian" or "Persian" characters, the point of blackface performances (and the inclusion of antics for the Chinese characters) is to illicit laughter, on some level, purely because of the "Otherness" of race.

Fig. 1.9: For an extra comparison, check the stance of the siāh against other characters:



*Efriteh Machin* further reflects this racialization as the principle actors break character. In the initial scene of the fallen hājji, as the siāh struggles to lift up his master, the actor playing the role of the siāh breaks character and mentions to his co-star: “*bābā man nemitunam bolandet konam, khodet komak kon!* [Man, I can’t lift you up, help me out!]” To which the actor playing the old man responds (also breaking character): “*khob siāh-o bāzi mikoni, yekami zur ham bezan!* [You’re playing the part of the black; put your back into it!]” This exchange, most likely intended for comic relief, interestingly shows attitudes of then-contemporary Iranians to Blacks or at least, the role of “the Black”—as in many other contexts, such as the U.S., Afro-Iranian men are given a hyper-masculinity that includes stronger body strength than the “average” “white” man.<sup>69</sup>

The racialization of the siāh through bodily movements can also be seen in more current examples, where contemporary comedy groups also use exaggerated stances and dances that focus on the behind and on the hips, to characterize the siāh. This racialization is no doubt a

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<sup>69</sup> Herman Gray, “Black Masculinity and Visual Culture,” *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 401+, and Abby L. Ferber, “The Construction of Black Masculinity: White Supremacy Now and Then,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 31, no. 1 (February 2007): 11-24.

caricature, just as necessary to fulfill the archetype of the blackface character as other racist attributes, such as a guttural and exaggerated accent.



Figs. 1.10 (above) and 1.11 (below): Stills like these do not completely capture the motions.



Finally, the racialized body is further reflected through the costume of the characters on the set. In both examples, *Efriteh Machin* and *Manoto* (as well as a host of other *siāh-bāzi* performances found online today), the *siāh* is dramatically distinguished by his clothes and his make-up. He almost always wears a garishly bright red costume, a costume that quickly distinguishes him from the crowd. In *Efriteh Machin*, though there are plenty of other characters wearing colorful costumes, none are as bright or as shiny as the red of the *siāh*'s suit. This serves

as one of many ways of Othering this character, making him stand out by deliberately marking him as different than all the others.

### **A Short Note on Beyza’i’s *Tarabnāmeḥ* (2016)**

So far, the contemporary (21<sup>st</sup> century) examples of blackface examined here have been short television skits (as in “Siyah Bazi with Sam Nakhai,” 2012), or short online clips of live performances in Iran. However, the most recent instance of an extended siāh-bāzi performance has been Bahram Beyza’i’s 8-hour long *Tarabnāmeḥ*, a play broken up into two parts and performed at Stanford University in 2016.<sup>70</sup> I will preface my commentary by noting that I did not attend the performance, nor is a full-length recording of it available for view or purchase as of the time of writing. This discussion is based upon filmed discussions and interviews with Beyza’i regarding the play, as well as Shirazi’s article for Ajam Media Collective. It does not undertake an in-depth dissection of the plot or the way the siāh characters (a male and a female slave, see Figs. 1.12 and 1.13) are portrayed, as with the discussion on *Efriteh Machin*. For an in-depth discussion on why *Tarabnāmeḥ* continues to perpetuate the racist tropes of siāh-bāzi, ru-howzi, and takhte-howzi plays, see Shirazi’s review.

What this section aims to do, then, is to discuss the broader implications for such a showing by a renowned Iranian film director, playwright, and scholar in a diaspora community. Looking at photographs of the performance and brief video clips of rehearsals, it becomes clear that there are many surface similarities with traditional siāh-bāzi performances: the blackface makeup, the bright red costume, and the archetypes of the male siāh, hājji, hājji’s wife, and

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<sup>70</sup> Part 1 was performed in the spring (March 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>; April 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>) while Part 2 was performed in the fall (October 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup>). “Tarabnameh – Part 1: A Play by Iranian Director Bahram Beyzaie,” *Payvand*, March 19, 2016, accessed April 16, 2018, <http://www.payvand.com/news/16/mar/1090.html>; “Tarabnameh: Part 2,” Hamid and Christina Moghadam Program in Iranian Studies, Stanford University, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://iranian-studies.stanford.edu/events/tarabnameh-part-2>, and Shirazi.

young lovers. Beyza’i adds a female slave in blackface and gives the blackface characters a romantic subplot, but this plot is subservient to their minstrel antics; their primary purpose remains comedic, humor through caricaturized race. This of course is not surprising, as exaggerated and racialized characters have been shown to form the foundation for humor in siāh-bāzi performances. What many find surprising, is that Beyza’i, a director renowned for honest and accurate portrayals of racism in Iran and of Black Iranians, especially in *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985, see Chapter 3), would spearhead a production so reliant on harmfully racist tropes, especially one shown in the U.S. In an interview about *Tarabnāmeḥ*, Beyza’i himself denies any racism with the siāh character (Mobārak), saying “The color of his appearance has nothing to do with racism or race, because you know, he is the hero of the story.”<sup>71</sup> He also goes on to mention the common names of siāh characters, those associated with happiness (as in times of slavery)—Mobārak (“Blessed”), Almās (“Diamond”), Javāher (“Jewelry”).<sup>72</sup> According to Shirazi, none of this matters because despite Beyza’i’s claims, Mobārak does not come across as a hero at all because, as in traditional siāh-bāzi his role is primarily for comedic effect.



Figs. 1.12 (left) and 1.13: The male and female siāh characters of *Tarabnāmeḥ* (2016).

<sup>71</sup> Shahir.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 2 for the connection between the names of siāh-bāzi characters, Hājji Firuz’s name, and traditional slave names in Iran and elsewhere in Islamic societies.

*Tarabnāmeḥ* was “well-attended throughout its run by the Iranian community of Northern California”<sup>73</sup> despite its characterization as a “racist minstrel show.”<sup>74</sup> Although this critique is well-founded, especially considering the general tradition of siāh-bāzi performances, it should be noted that Beyza’i was attempting to preserve an art form whose developmental trajectory has been cut off because of historical events, most notably the revolution in 1979. Many Iranians, both in and out of diaspora, have little to no knowledge on what siāh-bāzi, ru-howzi, and takhe-howzi performances are (this is partly why an entire chapter is devoted to Hājjī Firuz, instead of analyzing him alongside siāh-bāzi performances, because one significant difference between both instances of blackface is the ubiquitous nature of Hājjī Firuz). With *Tarabnāmeḥ*, Beyza’i tries to preserve folk traditions that are fading from public knowledge, knowledge especially at risk in diaspora context. Historical context also helps to explain the lack of engagement with race or the recognition of blackface as racist in Iranian spaces. As opposed to the American experience with racism and race, which, in spite of being extremely traumatic, has evolved through engagement with minstrel shows, Black (mis)representation in films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and the general uninterrupted development of race-relations over 400 years. In Iran however, certain historical trajectories have been abruptly shut off because of political events that dramatically reorder priorities within both culture and academia. Iran was under autocratic, monarchial rule up until the revolution, which drastically changed the political, religious, social, and cultural landscapes of the country. With the almost immediate transition from revolution to war when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran on September 22, 1980, the nation was not concerned with examining and resolving ethnic differences—at most, these differences

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<sup>73</sup> Shirazi.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

were pointed out only in propaganda showing all peoples in Iran united on the war front against a common enemy.<sup>75</sup>

The arts were afforded no such luxury of uninterrupted development, or was there an overt need for sustained race-consciousness (especially for a numerically small minority), and thus, there is a continued lack of critical engagement with blackface characters in *siāh-bāzi* performances, and explains how Beyza'i can excuse his inclusion of blackface in a performance in the U.S., in 2016. Although his goal of preservation is a noble one, especially considering his status as the first serious scholar of Iranian theatrical traditions, the context in which he cast, directed, and opened *Tarabnāmeḥ* complicates this piece. An Iranian diaspora community in Stanford, California, cannot only be aware of Iranian sensitivities but American ones, just as Persians must be mindful of Arab, Kurdish, Azeri, and Black (and so on) sensitivities as well. This mindfulness must not stop at the undeniable history of racism in the U.S.; both Iranian and Iranian diaspora communities have a duty to know their own racial histories and the current racial/ethnic make-up of the country and diaspora communities. In other words, *siāh-bāzi* performances such as *Tarabnāmeḥ* should not be critiqued not only because they can easily be identified as similar to American blackface, but more importantly, because they portray a racist depiction of Black Iranians and perpetuate anti-Blackness of Black people regardless of the location of performance.

As such, we can still critique Beyza'i's choices in perpetuating racism (regardless of his intentions) without disparaging all of his work or his incredible accomplishments in preserving indigenous Iranian performance traditions. And to be sure, these traditions should be preserved—no racist pasts or presents should be erased. But to present them unequivocally, without any

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<sup>75</sup> See examples of such war propaganda in Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999).

critical commentary whatsoever, is to continue enabling dangerous essentialist representations of a population that are already discriminated against,<sup>76</sup> viewed as anthropological objects,<sup>77</sup> and who have their cultures stolen and appropriated (see Chapter 2). Perhaps a presentation similar to the continued showing of Looney Tunes, and better mindfulness of the purposes of performance:

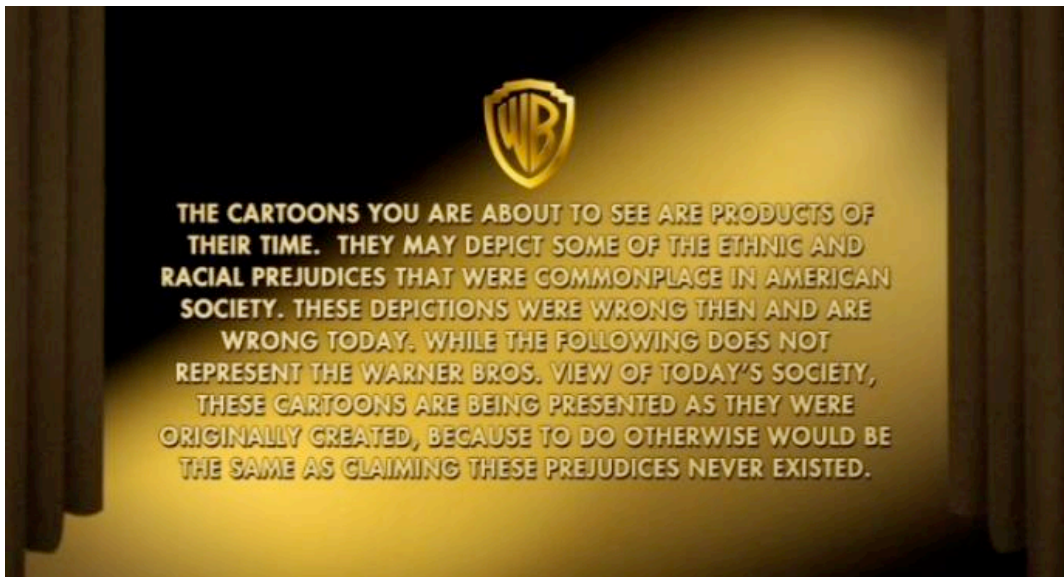


Fig. 1.14: Looney Tunes' commentary on their cartoons.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the role of the siāh character in older and contemporary siāh-bāzi performances, it becomes clear that the character is not meant to be simply a “white” or “Persian” man in stage make-up, but a clear caricature of a Black Iranian as a slave or servant.

When the siāh's race is not explicitly commented one (as the siāh in the Manoto skit is—his

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<sup>76</sup> Rasmus Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 70.

<sup>77</sup> See documentaries such as Behnaz A. Mirzai's “Afro-Iranian Lives” (2007) and Kamran Heidari's “Dingomaro” (2014), and photography projects such as Mahdi Ehsaei's book “Afro-Iran” (2015). See Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “Picturing the Other: Race and Afro-Iranians in Documentary Photography,” *Ajam Media Collective*, July 20, 2015, accessed April 11, 2015, <https://ajammc.com/2015/07/20/picturing-them-vs-us-race-and-afro-iranians-in-documentary-photography/>, for extended commentary on the problematics of photography.

<sup>78</sup> “Ethics Quiz: The Looney Tunes Cartoon Disclaimer,” *Ethics Alarms*, August 25, 2015, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://ethicsalarms.com/2015/08/25/ethics-quiz-the-looney-tunes-cartoon-disclaimer/comment-page-1/>.

parents are from Zanzibar and Ethiopia), he becomes racialized through his body, movements, and speech—sites of intended immutability, sites that imply a biological perspective to race because they are “biological” characteristics. Intended immutability means these characteristics are meant to be seen as unchangeable; in the persona of the siāh, these “immutable” features manifest as the skin color, the small body type, signature body movements, and speech characteristics because these never change within a performance or across performances in space and time. Of course, academic theories of race as rooted in biological difference are extremely outdated, having moved to race as a social construct with consequences (“race” is not real but racism is).<sup>79</sup> However biological essentialism is still a reality, as exemplified through siāh-bāzi performances. In *Efriteh Machin* (1979), the hājji’s wife embodied this sort of essentialism during the scene with Ghanbar, the siāh servant, teaching her how to be a proper slave. Her first attempt at acting his part is wrong because of her body motions—she does not walk “properly,” because all (Black) slaves move a certain way, it is neither instinctual nor learned for her. As a result, Ghanbar must teach her the “correct” way a servant walks because it is a biological characteristic not inherent to her. Even if one were to argue that in the *Efriteh Machin* universe, slaves “learned” to walk a particular way (and it was culturally inherited, not genetic), the walk has become so synonymous with slavery/servanthood that a performance of Blackness, of siāhi, is incomplete without it. Just as she removes her veil and puts on the siāh’s hat, the hājji’s wife needs to switch out her Persianness with Blackness.

In this way, the siāhs of siāh-bāzi become genre characters—archetypes that do not need plots or any introduction because they have transformed into something instantly recognizable.

As noted by Sobchack, “a genre character is conveyed through iconographical means –

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<sup>79</sup> Yasmin Gunaratnam, *Research Race and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge, and Power* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 4.

costumes, tools, settings,”<sup>80</sup> which is easily seen through the widespread use of certain tropes and characteristics of siāh-bāzi performances, tropes that have remained remarkably stable despite differences in time and place. The siāh becomes reducible to and reproducible in the intended immutable characteristics of his body, speech, and clothes, and ultimately fulfills the genre role of slave/servant because of these repeated tropes. In this way, his racialization works in a feedback loop because of his position as a genre character in a genre performance—the narrative pushes him in the position of slave/servant, and in turn, he never appears otherwise. In fact, there is no need for any characters to explicitly mention he is a slave or servant (though they typically do for comedic effect), because as soon as he is seen, it is understood what his role is. In this way, Aghili introduced himself as “the siāh” and not “the servant” or “the slave” because to do the latter would be redundant. A siāh can never be anything else.

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<sup>80</sup> Sobchack, 200.

## Chapter Two:

### “Planting White” – Hājji Firuz, the Perennial *Siāh*: Race in Performance and Cultural Appropriation

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“With my black face, I did good (lit. “planted white”).”  
—Song “Haji Firuz” by famous Iranian pop stars Vigen,  
Aref, Hassan Shamaizadeh, Fataneh, Andy, Hassan Shojaee,  
Nahid, and Kouros (1994)<sup>81</sup>  
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#### Introduction

Once every 365 days, the spring equinox rolls around, and with it, the Iranian or Persian New Year, Nowruz.<sup>82</sup> Nowruz itself literally means “new day” and Iranians celebrate the coming of the New Year with multiple traditions. The *sofreh-ye haftsin* is laid out, a tablecloth containing seven items beginning with “s” (the letter “seen” in the Perso-Arabic alphabet) that symbolize various positive qualities: renewal, rebirth, rejuvenation. Nowruz also brings eclectic and joyous characters that herald in the New Year, Amu Nowruz (“Uncle New Year”) and Hājji Firuz, whose jobs are to dress up and bring cheer to people by giving out small gifts, singing, and dancing. The holiday is a merry time for most Iranians, whether within the country or in the diaspora, as it is a time to visit friends and family, to ask for blessings for the New Year, and to begin anew. Iranians joyfully celebrate the New Year, but rarely do they critically engage with certain rituals that go beyond the playful into the offensive and racist.

By now, if you are Iranian or familiar with Nowruz rituals, you should know exactly what (or who) I am referring to: Hājji Firuz, the character who appears in the streets, in

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<sup>81</sup> Caltexrecords, “Norooz (Haji Firooz) - عيد همگی مبارک,” *YouTube*, March 17, 2011, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QJmRGQCG70>. The song was actually released June 2, 1994, see Various Artists – Topic, “Haji Firooz,” *YouTube*, March 19, 2015, accessed April 17, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K14G8B\\_13Kg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K14G8B_13Kg).

<sup>82</sup> This holiday will hereafter be referred to by its Persian name, Nowruz, because this new year is celebrated throughout the Middle East and is not limited to Iran (celebrated in Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Armenia, China, Georgia, by Kurds, and in Slavic and Baltic communities as well).

blackface, whose job is to entertain in a minstrel role very similar to the *siāhs* of *siāh-bāzi* plays.<sup>83</sup> Sometimes, people explain his appearance by saying his skin color is due to coal dust, soot, or ash because of his job as a chimney sweeper or because he is associated with fire (giving his red costume as an example), but it is impossible to ignore the similarities between the *siāh* and Hājji Firuz. The purpose of this chapter is to explore and analyze Hājji Firuz’s character and his subsequent racialization and to critically engage with his role on a different level from the *siāhs* of the theatrical tradition (see Chapter 1 for an investigation of this role). The investigation focuses on Hājji Firuz because he is much more ubiquitous than a *siāh* character; Iranians across all generations, both within Iran and among the diaspora, know who he is but *siāh-bāzi* plays are much less known and recognized, usually only by those who study Iranian history or visual and performing arts. Chapter 1, for example, mentions the discontinuation of *siāh-bāzi* and other traditional performances after the revolution, and discusses the contemporary *siāh-bāzi* play *Tarabnāmeḥ* (2016), directed by Bahram Beyza’i, along with its tenuous positionality as Beyza’i seeks to preserve Iranian theatrical traditions while ignoring (whether deliberately or not) their racist elements.<sup>84</sup>

Hājji Firuz is also a more versatile character, appearing in multiple settings (he can appear both as the mythic character announcing Nowruz and as a generic *siāh*, as performances analyzed below will note), but is also a more “predictable” character in that he has set songs that

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<sup>83</sup> The *siāh* “black” occupies an important role in traditional Iranian comedies, originating in nineteenth-century plays. Typically played by a non-Black Iranian with blackface makeup, the *siāh* provides much of the humor for these plays through his antics and exchanges with other characters. He is racialized as Black through his body (including body type, movements, and speech) and through his narrative role as a slave or servant—see Chapter 1 for more information and detailed analysis.

<sup>84</sup> *Tarabnāmeḥ* is a play produced by famous playwright and filmmaker, Bahram Beyza’i, shown at Stanford University (California) to a predominantly Iranian audience. The play is interestingly positioned because on one hand, it uses racist stereotypes of Black people as it recreates and reimagines a *siāh-bāzi* play, but on the other hand, Beyza’i is also seeking to preserve a tradition that very few know about in the contemporary age, a tradition whose development and historical trajectory were severed with the Islamic Revolution and did not go through a reconciliation with its racism, as in American minstrel shows for example (see Chapter 1 for more details).

are integral to his performance, songs that accompany almost every iteration of him in some form. In this way, Hājji Firuz is also a genre character like the siāh—they give expected performances and always appear a certain way. This chapter will argue that the close similarities between the siāh character and Hājji Firuz suggest that the two are related, that Hājji Firuz is just a specialized siāh character. This chapter does not focus extensively on Hājji Firuz’s history (due to the dearth of English-language academic materials) and more historical work needs to be done to analyze his trajectory, but this chapter argues that even if the two characters developed completely independently of each other, their contemporary similarity and interchangeability suggests that certain representations of Blackness, especially humorous ones, rely on the same tropes and characteristics. This in turn promotes a flawed one-dimensional portrait of Blackness and of “Afro-Iranians,” contributing to racist portrayals that do not allow for representation beyond this.

First, this chapter examines the similarities between Hājji Firuz and the siāh archetype of siāh-bāzi plays, namely in terms of positionality and body (from body motions to voice and speech and body type) to argue their similar purposes as caricatures meant to evoke laughter. Then, the chapter devotes space to examining contemporary reactions to Hājji Firuz and documenting on what levels Iranians and Iranian-Americans engage with his racialization, especially the paradox that race is fundamental to the humor of Hājji Firuz, yet his performances are defended by rejecting him as Black. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion on cultural appropriation and what this means for broader representations of Afro-Iranians.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, the term “Afro-Iranian” comes with its own baggage, as it is mostly a Western, academic distinction with no counterpart in Persian or in the communities themselves.

## Hājji Firuz, the Perennial Siāh

Hājji Firuz is an example of blackface that happens every year, for a particular event, the Persian New Year, celebrated on the spring equinox and for a designated purpose: to entertain the masses through music (playing on a tambourine), song, and dance. His origins are contested among scholars: Mehrdad Bahar traces the Hājji Firuz character back to ancient Mesopotamian festivals, in which people danced in the street and “many blackened their faces.”<sup>86</sup> According to him, the character is a remnant of these rituals, and can also be traced to the character, Prince Siāvash, in the famous Iranian epic, the *Shāhnāme*.<sup>87</sup> Bahar claims that Siāvash’s name itself means “black man” or “dark-faced man.”<sup>88</sup> However, according to other scholars, such as Mahmoud Omidshahar, Bahār’s views have not been substantiated and this origin story remains speculative. Other scholars have suggested more recent origins for the character. Hashem Razi places him as a descendent of Black slave entertainers during the Sasanian period (224 CE – 651 CE), while Ja’far Shahri gives a similar explanation but seemingly closer in time to the contemporary.<sup>89</sup>

Hājji Firuz’s appearance and antics, as examined later through a wide range of media productions and live performances, are very similar to the siāh characters of siāh-bāzi plays. Some Iranian blogs overtly recognize Hājji Firuz as an example of siāh-bāzi,<sup>90</sup> and this chapter’s investigation greatly supports this. If played by a light-skinned entertainer, as he almost always

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<sup>86</sup> Mahmoud Omidshahar, “HĀJI FIRUZ,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, XI/5, March 1, 2012, accessed February 26, 2018, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haji-firuz>.

<sup>87</sup> The *Shāhnāme* (c. 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) is a famous work of epic poetry by the poet Ferdowsi, well known throughout Iran even through today, a mix of myths, historical legends, and historical fact.

<sup>88</sup> Omidshahar.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* Source is not clear on exact dates.

<sup>90</sup> “حاجی فیروز ایران سیاه بازی,” *Blogfa.com*, March 23, 2013, accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.haji-firouz.blogfa.com/>.

is,<sup>91</sup> his skin is blackened. He usually wears a bright red costume, or other colorful clothes, and a hat that can take different shapes. Appearing in the streets, or at private and public celebrations, he often appears with another holiday character, Amu (or Bābā) Nowruz, “Uncle (or Papa) New Year,” who is a (white) elderly man who also marks the beginning of the new year while passing on stories (see Fig 2.1<sup>92</sup>). In addition to playing the tambourine, Hājji Firuz also sings the same short rhymes (or similar ones) every year (analyzed below).<sup>93</sup>

Fig. 2.1: Amu Nowruz (right) with two Hājji Firuz figures at a Nowruz celebration in Shiraz, Iran, for Nowruz 1397 (March 2018).



Though the two can appear together, Hājji Firuz is much more prevalent, and Amu Nowruz seems to inhabit mostly Western diasporic spaces; as the above photo shows, he can appear in Iran as well, though his appearances are on the decline. Hamid Naficy notes that in the early years of the Iranian-American community (predominantly in Los Angeles and other parts of California), Iranian exiles attempted to draw analogies between Hājji Firuz and Santa Claus but “the equivalence did not last long, chiefly because its new American context, with its own

<sup>91</sup> One contemporary exception to the black make-up is when a Black person plays Hājji Firuz in the comedic video “Persian Driving School” by YouTube vloggers ShareefAllman and DJNima. See ShareefAllmanTV2, “PERSIAN DRIVING SCHOOL!” *YouTube*, April 4, 2016, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESyv2qJScvs>.

<sup>92</sup> “حاجی فیروز و عمو نوروز در بازار شیراز,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 20, 2018, accessed April 18, 2018, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/Photo/3603243>.

<sup>93</sup> Both Hājji Firuz and some siāhs have an unshakeable connection to music. See Chapter 1, note 67.

uneasy and racist history of the blackface mode, exposed the hitherto inoffensive subtext of the Iranian blackface character.”<sup>94</sup> Amu Nowruz, on the other hand, did not evoke such uncomfortable associations, and was transplanted much more easily, becoming more prominent in these diaspora communities than in Iran proper.<sup>95</sup>

**(a) Hājji Firuz, the Black Slave**

Like his siāh counterpart, Hājji Firuz is also in a subservient position as a slave or servant. The most obvious example of this is in his songs; in one of which, “*Arbāb-e Khodam*,” he calls upon his arbāb, his master:

*Arbāb-e khodam sālāmo aleykom,  
Arbāb-e khodam sareto bālā kon,  
Arbāb-e khodam be man negāh kon,  
Arbāb-e khodam loṭfi be mā kon.  
Arbāb-e khodam boz-boz-e ghandi,  
Arbāb-e khodam, cherā nemikhandi?*

Greetings **my lord**,  
Raise your head **my lord**,  
Look at me, **my lord!**  
Do me a favor, **my lord!**  
**My lord**, the billy goat,  
Why don’t you smile, **my lord?**<sup>96</sup>

Slight variations of this particular song exist, but nearly all call upon “*Arbāb-e Khodam*,” (“My Master” or “My Lord”), signaling the lower position of Hājji Firuz and connecting him with the siāh archetype. Another popular rhyme, “*Beshkan*,” self-references Hājji Firuz’s appearance, if not race:

*Beshkan beshkan-e, beshkan!  
Man nemishkanam, beshkan!  
Injā beshkanam yār gel-e dār-e,  
Unjā beshkanam yār gel-e dār-e,  
In siāh-e bichāre cheghad hosele dār-e!*

It’s a snap-snap, snap!  
I won’t snap, snap!  
If I snap here, this one will complain,  
If I snap there, that one will complain,  
How patient **this poor black** is!<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Hamid Naficy, *Making of Exile Culture: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*, University of Minnesota Press, October 8, 1993, 19.

<sup>95</sup> Naficy, 20.

<sup>96</sup> Omidsalar.

<sup>97</sup> Omidsalar.

His very name, Firuz—‘Victorious’—alludes to the practice of naming slaves in Iran and elsewhere in Islamic societies<sup>98</sup> names associated with good fortune, success, or wealth.<sup>99</sup> In this way, there is a direct connection between the legacy of slavery in Iran and the development of both the siāh and the Hājji Firuz character. Recall from Chapter 1 that siāh characters were also named after good tidings and good fortune, such as Mobārak (“Blessed”), Almās (“Diamond”), and Javāher (“Jewelry”).

### (b) Anatomy of Hājji Firuz

The Hājji Firuz character also exhibits many of the same dialogue choices and body movements of the siāh. Hājji Firuz often sings his songs with an exaggerated accent or, as described by scholars, as purposefully indicative of a “speech impediment.”<sup>100</sup> In two examples of expat Nowruz music videos produced in Los Angeles, California, in the 1990s, Hājji Firuz “mispronounces” “*arbāb*” as “*abrāb*” and “*salāmo aleykom*” as “*sabālo baleykom*”<sup>101</sup> or “*sāmboli baleykom*.”<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, both Hājji Firuzes are played by Morteza Aghili, the same actor who played the siāh in the 1979 Iranian television show *Efriteh Machin* (see Chapter 1 for an in-depth look at siāh-bāzi tropes in *Efriteh Machin*, including Aghili’s performance). It is

<sup>98</sup> Hekmat Dirbas, “Naming of Slave-girls in Arabic: A Survey of Medieval and Modern Sources,” forthcoming 2019, accessed April 15, 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/35142692/Naming\\_of\\_Slave-girls\\_in\\_Arabic\\_A\\_Survey\\_of\\_Medieval\\_and\\_Modern\\_Sources\\_forthcoming\\_in\\_Zeitschrift\\_f%C3%BCr\\_Arabische\\_Linguistik\\_2019](https://www.academia.edu/35142692/Naming_of_Slave-girls_in_Arabic_A_Survey_of_Medieval_and_Modern_Sources_forthcoming_in_Zeitschrift_f%C3%BCr_Arabische_Linguistik_2019).

<sup>99</sup> Behnaz A. Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929*, (University of Texas Press, Austin: Texas, 2017): 101. Other examples of male slave names include Almās (“Diamond”), Mobārak (“Glorified”), and Bashir (“Bringer of Good Tidings”). Female slaves were given names associated with flowers and beauty, such as Gulchehra (“Flower Face”), Tāza Gul (“New Flower”), Zibā (“Beautiful”), and Zivar (“Jewelry”).

<sup>100</sup> Omidsalar.

<sup>101</sup> Caltexrecordsmusic, “Morteza Aghili – Haji Firouz in the Market | حاجی فیروز - کمدی,” *YouTube*, September 23, 2009, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kf9x0GhRwpE>, and Caltexrecordsmusic, “Norooz (Haji Firooz).” To an ear accustomed to hearing standard or Tehrani Persian, Hājji Firuz’s speech could be characterized as a “speech impediment” because the different pronunciations of “*arbāb*” and “*salāmo aleykom*” are not immediately explained by dialectal differences.

<sup>102</sup> “حاجی فیروز ایران سیاه بازی.” It is important to note that this blog does recognize Hājji Firuz as a form of siāh-bāzi, but also calls Hājji Firuz as a symbol of “ancient Aryan traditions,” and sports an animated dark-skinned, curly-haired Hājji Firuz in the corner of the page.

interesting (better word) to note that Aghili has a particular interpretation of “siāh” characters, and his portrayal of the servant in *Efriteh Machin* in 1979 does not differ significantly from his portrayal of Hājji Firuz in either music video. His appearance is virtually identical, with the same black make-up and red costume, while his speech and songs are in the same guttural voice and the same phrases are mispronounced, albeit differently between the two mediums (see Figs. 2.2 and 2.3).<sup>103</sup>



Figs. 2.2 (left) and 2.3: A comparison between Aghili’s Hājji Firuz (left), surrounded by expat pop singers, and his siāh in *Efriteh Machin* (1979)

The body movements are very similar, with a distinctive side-to-side head movement (both from left to right, and from back to front, jutting the face out). However, others performing as Hājji Firuz move in virtually identical ways, showing that Aghili’s portrayal of Hājji Firuz and a siāh are not unique to his own acting style. Comparing the images in Figs. 2.2 and 2.3 (above) with stills from a music video/performance in 1978 (for Nowruz 1357) including three Hājji Firuz performers and a live performance in Tehran, Iran in 2011 (below, Figs. 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6, respectively), it becomes clear that they all portray the character’s dances and movements in a highly similar manner.<sup>104</sup> The performers in the older music video exaggerate the movements

<sup>103</sup> In *Efriteh Machin*, Aghili’s siāh mispronounces “salām aleykom” [hello] as “sambāro bareykom,” whereas in both music videos, he says “sabalo baleykom.” See chapter 1 for a greater analysis of *Efriteh Machin*.

<sup>104</sup> TaranehEnterprise. “Aref, Soli, Faramarz Parsi-Haji Firooz حاجی فیروز پارسی - عارف سلی فرامرز پارسی,” *YouTube*, September 2, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9HZoCjUioI> and Masoudsaki,

more than the 2011 performance, in which the actor mostly just moves his shoulders up and down and his head about a little, but still focusing on an exaggerated upper body style. Though it is a little difficult to tell from the stills, watching the videos and comparing them with Aghili's portrayals (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3 above) of both Hājji Firuz and the siāh show striking similarities, especially with exaggerated head, arm, and hip movements and the distinctive arm positions, with one cocked in front and the other pointing outward.



Figs. 2.4 (above, left) and 2.5 (above, right): Stills from the pre-revolutionary music video featuring three Hājji Firuz performers; Fig. 2.6 (below): Still from a live 2011 performance in Tehran, Iran.



This similarity in performance points to support for the idea that Hājji Firuz arose out of the “modern” siāh-bāzi tradition dating from the nineteenth century, and that Hājji Firuz is a more modern invention; a “perennial siāh’ that appears every year much in the same capacity as

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“حاجی فیروز ایران در شب شعر” به رسم خنده” – اسفند 89,” *YouTube*, March 23, 2011, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aW4LokMEztk>.

blackface actors in *siāh-bāzi* plays and performances, not related to the New Year. Especially in Aghili's case, his portrayals of a *siāh* and of Hājji Firuz could be swapped with the audience none the wiser and each separate performance would remain otherwise unchanged. Even if Hājji Firuz and the character of the *siāh* were separate phenomena with different historical trajectories, they have become similar enough to be interchangeable with one another, as the performance of one type of blackface does not differ significantly from the other type. The bodies themselves are thin and tall, and when Aghili's Hājji Firuz sings, it is in a technically altered high voice, both of which compare to the possibility of the *siāh* and Hājji Firuz being eunuchs, as a considerable number of African slaves in Iran during the Qajar era were (see Introduction and Chapter 1).

Further support for this idea comes from a contemporary Hājji Firuz performance from Shiraz, Iran, taking place in 2011 (Nowruz 1390), and counters the argument that the depictions of the Hājji Firuz figures in the music videos (especially with their exaggerated movements) are from an older era (1970s-90s). This performance closely mirrors *siāh-bāzi* performances, especially shorter ones without much plot or narrative structure and instead center around the interaction of the *siāh* with another character (such as in the Manoto skit “Siyah Bazi with Sam Nakhai” or other contemporary live examples—see Chapter 1). In this particular Nowruz performance, Hājji Firuz entertains the audience (an audience including many children) not only by singing, but by joking around with the host.<sup>105</sup> In this piece, while the host talks alone on the stage, guttural and accented calls of “*Abrār-e khodam*” (another “mispronunciation” of “*arbāb-e khodam*”—“my master” or “my lord”) come from off stage, until Hājji Firuz comes on stage. This seven-minute performance is a comedic interaction between the host and the *siāh*-like character, named Javāher (“Jewelery”), who also acts as Hājji Firuz through the “*Arbāb-e*

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<sup>105</sup> Anaghsh, “!حاجی فیروز شیرازی” *YouTube*, March 16, 2016, accessed April 18, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c\\_K8kiOCRt4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_K8kiOCRt4).

*khodam*” and “*Beshkan*” songs (distinctive of Hājji Firuz). Their interaction following the Hājji Firuz songs (in the beginning as the character comes on stage) virtually mirrors the basics of siāh-bāzi tropes: the siāh speaks with an exaggerated accent, and often makes exaggerated and “lewd” movements on stage (see Fig. 2.7).



Fig. 2.7: Hājji Firuz purposefully backing up into the host.

Much of the dialogue of this skit also relies on puns and plays on words, as do traditional siāh-bāzi performances, such as:

Hājji Firuz:	<b><i>Ghāshogh shodam!</i></b>	<b>I’ve become a spoon!</b>
Host:	<i>Chi shodi?!</i>	What did you become?!
HF:	<b><i>Ghāshogh.</i></b>	<b>A spoon.</b>
Host:	<i>Ghāshogh dige chi hast—Javāher! Azizam! Āshegh shodi!</i>	What do you mean by spoon – Javāher! My friend! <b>You’re in love!</b>
HF:	<i>Āreh, hamun, ghāshogh.</i>	Yeah, that, a spoon.

In this first exchange, the humor arises from Hājji Firuz (Javāher) using a phrase that sounds similar to what he actually wants to say (“*āshegh shodam*,” [I’m in love]) but whose meaning is wildly off the mark (“*ghāshogh shodam*,” [I’ve become a spoon]). “*Āshegh*” (“in love”) and “*ghāshogh*” (“a spoon”) have similar sounds, and both can be used with the auxiliary verb “*shodan*,” conjugated for “I” as “*shodam*” (“to become,” sometimes better translated in English

as “to be”). Hājji Firuz continually uses this, to the appreciation of the audience, as the host tries to figure out his true meaning. After realizing what his friend is trying to say, the host is delighted and the exchange continues as he asks Javāher who he is in love with:

Host:	<i>Āshegh shodi—khob, āshegh-e ki shodi?</i>	You’re in love – so, who are you in love with?
HF:	<i>Agar ghol bedi barām beri <b>khar savāri</b>, migam.</i>	If you promise to go <b>ride an ass</b> for me, I’ll tell you.
Host:	<b><i>Khāstegāri.</i></b>	<b>Match-make.</b>
HF:	<i>Hamun, khāksepāri.</i>	Exactly, <b>a funeral.</b>
Host:	<b><i>Khāstegāri..</i></b>	<b>Match-make.</b>
HF:	<b><i>Khak-tu-sari.</i></b>	<b>Dirt on your grave.</b> <sup>106</sup>
Host:	<b><i>Khāstegāri..</i></b>	<b>Match-make.</b>
HF:	<i>Hamun.</i>	Exactly.

This exchange’s humor is similar to the previous one, in which Hājji Firuz uses humorous, close homophones instead of the word he actually means to use, comically changing the meaning of the utterance. He says he will only tell the host the name of his beloved if the host promises to go *khāstegāri* for him (process of matchmaking by which the groom’s family or close friends go visit the girl and her family to discuss a relationship and broker a possible marriage)—but instead he says “*khar savāri*”, which means to ride an ass. The exchange continues as such, as Hājji Firuz uses various other humorous substitutes for “*khāstegāri*,” and the host correcting him at every turn. This mirrors other siāh-bāzi performances, such as one of Sa’di Afshar’s in which he misconstrues “*Khoda rahmatesh konad*” (“May God have **mercy** on him”) with “*Khoda la’natash koneh*” (“May God **damn** him”) (see Chapter 1). As the skit goes on, Javāher reveals that the woman he is in love with is Condoleezza Rice, the Black former Secretary of State of the United States and ironically calls her “as white as I am”—an absurd statement that nonetheless compares her appearance to his and subtly racializes him as Black like her.

<sup>106</sup> A common curse/insult that literally translates to “Dirt on [a] head” and means “dirt on [a] grave” and evokes shame, usually the grave of whoever the addresser is speaking to (the form would then be “*khāk-tu-saret*,” which would mean “shame on you.”)

Hājji Firuz is almost always coded as physically black-skinned and numerous examples support this. From his portrayal in music videos (see Figs. 2.2-2.5), to a Google search of حاجی فیروز “Hājji Firuz,”<sup>107</sup> (Fig. 2.8) to children’s entertainment (see Figs. 2.9 and 2.10), Hājji Firuz is almost always dark.



Fig. 2.8: Google search of “Hājji Firuz” (in Persian)



Figs. 2.9 (left) and 2.10: Hājji Firuz as a Kimdi character

<sup>107</sup> Searched on February 27, 2018:

[https://www.google/search?hl=en&biw=1600&bih=769&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=JhGVWvaOMcrWjwOs5pSoDw&q=%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC%DB%8C+%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2&oq=%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC%DB%8C+%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2&gs\\_l=psy-ab.3..0110.26792.27163.0.27676.2.2.0.0.0.118.118.0j1.2.0....0...1c.1.64.psy-ab..0.1.118.0...114.oC0daateB5M](https://www.google/search?hl=en&biw=1600&bih=769&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=JhGVWvaOMcrWjwOs5pSoDw&q=%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC%DB%8C+%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2&oq=%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC%DB%8C+%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0110.26792.27163.0.27676.2.2.0.0.0.118.118.0j1.2.0....0...1c.1.64.psy-ab..0.1.118.0...114.oC0daateB5M)

In an example of Hājji Firuz in children’s programming, Figs. 2.9 and 2.10 show a Kimdi animation of Hājji Firuz that gives him, an egg, a dark “shell” (analogous to dark skin), implying that his red costume and hat would not be enough to differentiate him as Hājji Firuz if he were a white egg, like the rest of the characters (visible in the background).<sup>108</sup> The animation is set to a short song that makes note of the costume, the character’s (named “Kimdi”) purpose, and of his actions, but not of the skin color:

*Hājji Firuz umadeh, eydeh dobāreh,  
Gol bāzam javuneh, zad fasleh bahāreh,  
**Kimdi bā lebāseh ghermez bā kolāhesh,**  
**Umadeh tā vāsamun khandeh biyāreh!***

Hājji Firuz has come, it’s the New Year again,  
The flowers bloom, it’s the season of spring,  
**Kimdi with his red clothes and hat,**  
**Has come to make us laugh!**

*Hājji Firuz umade beh kuchamun,  
**Bāz miraghseh dāreh tombak mizaneh,**  
**Migeh Hājji Firuz ham micharkhe vo**  
**Beh hameh mikhandeh cheshmak mizaneh,**  
Shādi ro beh bachehā hediye hēdeh,  
Bāz barāsh panjerehā ro vā konin  
Kimdi bachehā ro kheyli dust dāreh,  
Hājji Firuzeh uno negāh konin!*

Hājji Firuz has come to our neighborhood,  
**Dancing and playing his drum again,**  
**He says Hājji Firuz also turns and**  
**Laughs and winks at everyone,**  
He gifts happiness to children,  
Open your windows for him again  
Kimdi loves children a lot,  
Take a look at his Hājji Firuz!

*Hājji Firuz umadeh, eydeh dobāreh,  
Gol bāzam javuneh, zad fasleh bahāreh,  
**Kimdi bā lebāseh ghermez bā kolāhesh,**  
**Umadeh tā vāsatum khandeh biyāreh!***

Hājji Firuz has come, it’s the New Year again,  
The flowers bloom, it’s the season of spring,  
**Kimdi with his red clothes and hat,**  
**Has come to make you laugh!**

The song mentions his red clothes and hat, his job (to make people laugh, to signal the New Year), and his antics (dancing, playing the drum, turning in circles, laughing, winking). This points to the idea that even explicitly mentioning Hājji Firuz’s signature character traits in a song set to accompanying visuals is not enough to truly portray the character—he must also be dark. In other words, Hājji Firuz rarely appears without the blackface make-up, and always with some brightly colored costume (usually red but sometimes other colors, such as purple, as in Fig.

<sup>108</sup> KIMDI, “Eide Dobare,” *YouTube*, March 16, 2014, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YMDyrimtjc>. Kimdi is a toy company based in Iran that also produces children’s programming, such as animation.

2.1). This blackness is explicitly mentioned in the song “Hājji Firuz” sung by a host of Iranian pop singers (and with an appearance by Morteza Aghili) with the line: “*Bā ruye siāh-m sepid kāshtam*” (“With my black face, I did good”; *sepid* literally meaning white and purity though as slang here it translates closer to “planting success” and “doing good,” purposefully contrasting with the “black” of Hājji Firuz’s appearance). Such a line overtly recognizes Hājji Firuz as siāh—black. Though this “siāh” could simply mean “black” without any racial connotations (the Persian designation for the racial term “Black” is usually *siāh-pust*—literally, “black skin,” though “siāh” by itself can also mean Black as in Black people), contrasting black with purity/whiteness uses an indirectly racial dichotomy as a poetic device for a lyrical turn of phrase, that pits blackness as the opposite of whiteness AND purity. This reflects general attitudes that associate positives with the color white and negatives with the color black. Such a dichotomy seems to be widespread across multiple cultures and is not new.<sup>109</sup> Iranian examples include the opposing phrases “*marā ru siāh kard*” (lit. “made my face black,” meaning “made me embarrassed”) and “*marā ru sefid kard*” (lit. “made my face white,” meaning “made me proud”), the premise of the Zoroastrian holiday Shabe Yaldā, which, held on the winter solstice, celebrates the eventual triumph of Good and Light (Ahurā Mazdā) over Evil and Darkness (Ahriman), the comparison of a girl’s honor (read: her virginity) to the color of a white napkin,<sup>110</sup> or the love of a broken heart as black.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Aaron Smith-McLallen et al., “Black and White: The Role of Color Bias in Implicit Bias,” *Social Cognition* 24, no. 1 (2006): 46-73.

<sup>110</sup> The song “Divār-e Yār” (“Lover’s Wall) by Mehrdad Asemani includes the lyric, “Your virtue doesn’t have to be the color of a napkin” (*Mituneh nejābat-e to rang-e dastmāl nabāsheh*). Caltexrecordsmusic, “Mehrdad Asemani – Divare Yar | دیوار یار - دیوار آسمانی,” *YouTube*, May 18, 2009, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiFBmxfMo1k>.

<sup>111</sup> The song “Vedā” (“Goodbye”) by Andy includes the lyric, “If you ask me what the color of love is, I’d say it’s black, yet it is still beautiful to me”, implying that love being black would not normally be interpreted as a positive. Saeedtz, “Andi – Veda اندی – وداع,” *YouTube*, May 14, 2007, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3RM3gvEkjo>.

## “He’s not racist because he’s not Black” – Contemporary Reactions to Hājji Firuz

Despite evidence that Hājji Firuz is a caricatured representation of Blackness, and the evidence presented here that suggests Hājji Firuz is related to the siāh archetype of siāh-bāzi performances (a character understood as a Black slave of African descent), many Iranians do not entertain the idea that he is a racist character. There are many ways to explain away his antics and his appearance, and one principle defense is that he is not actually Black (or is actually Arab, implying but covered in soot, ash, or coal dust) as this post (Fig. 2.11) which circulated on Telegram (a popular messaging app for Iranians both within and outside the country) and Facebook for Nowruz 1397 (March 2018) mentions:



در جریان باشید که عمو فیروز در فرهنگ باستانی  
ما کسی بود که در آتشکده نگهبان آتش بود و  
نمیداشت آتیش خاموش بشه... روی سیاه اون به  
خاطر دود ناشی از آتیش بود نه چیز دیگه ای، در  
ضمن گدایی نمی کنه بلکه اون با عجله پیش تر از  
همه می اومد به کوچه و خیابونها و شروع به جار  
زدن این موضوع که مردم آگاه باشید که بهار چند  
روز دیگه میرسه در واقع نوید بخش اومدن بهار  
بود...

و مردم به خاطر این خبر خوش به اون مزدگانی  
میدادند، اگه لباسش قرمز به خاطر اینه که در  
فرهنگ میتراایسم نگهبان آتش لباسی قرمز داشت  
و باید بدونید که فرهنگ مسیحیت و کریسمس بر  
گرفته از آیین میتراایسم است

Fig. 2.11, translation: Know that Amu Firuz in our ancient culture was someone who watched over the fires in the fireplaces and would not let the flames go out... His black appearance was from the smoke of fire and from nothing else, in addition he’s not a beggar but he would hurry to the neighborhoods and streets before everyone else and would make proclamations so that people would be aware that spring is only a few days away, promising the coming of spring...

And because of this joyful news people would reward him, in the Mithraism tradition, the guard of the fire wore red clothes and you [plural address] must know that the Christian tradition and Christmas are taken from the rites of Mithraism.

Like this post, some Iranians (and non-Iranians) support this by claiming that the red color of his costume is meant to represent the fires he works with or near; a further example are these comments on one of Caltexrecordsmusic's Hājji Firuz videos (Fig 2.12, nonconsecutive, edited together for space):<sup>112</sup>

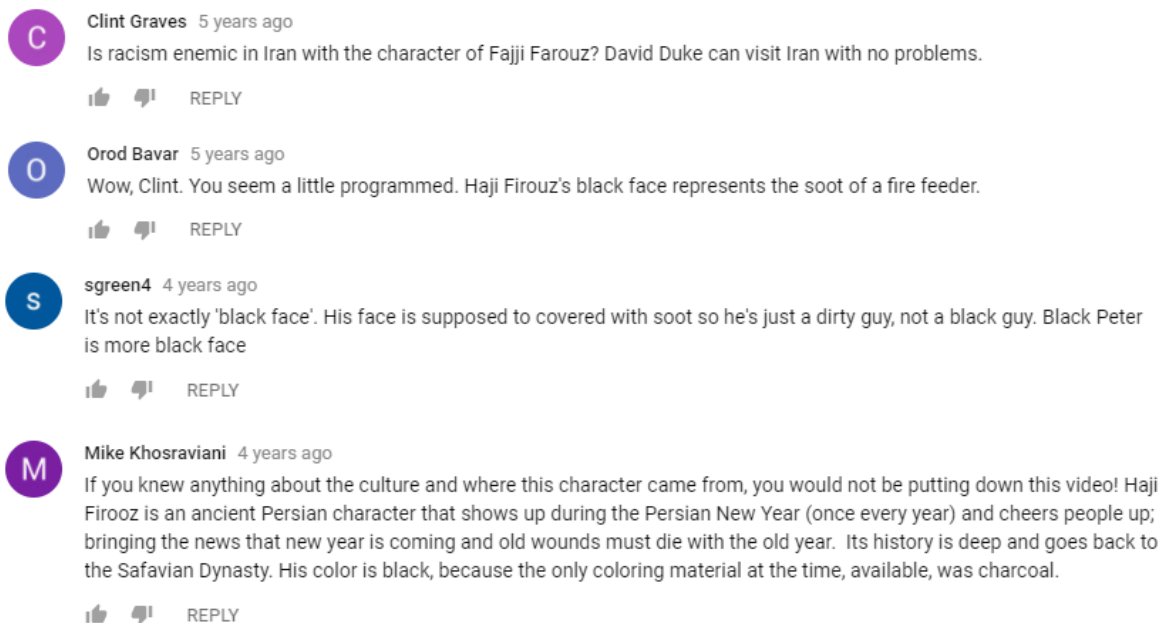


Fig. 2.12

Others say he is actually Arab, implying that Arabs are not Black and that Black Iranians (meaning Iranians of African descent) do not exist in Iran (see Fig. 2.13, emphasis mine).<sup>113</sup>

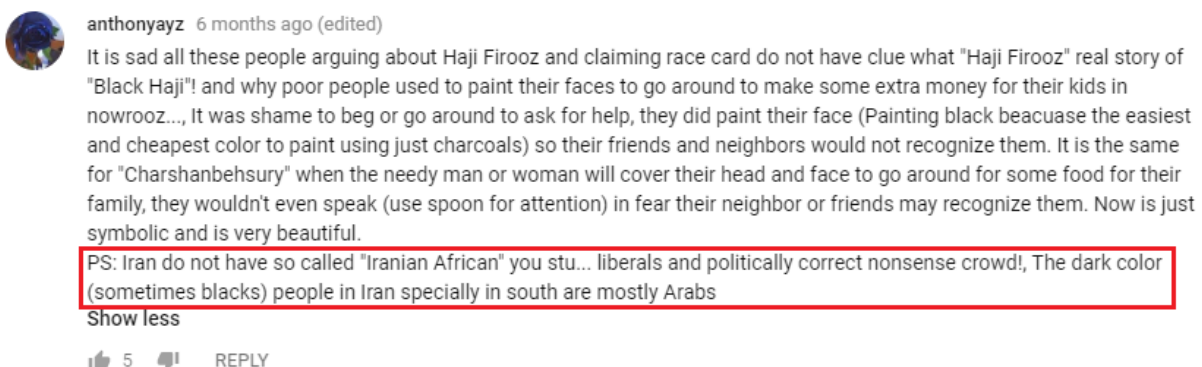


Fig. 2.13

<sup>112</sup> Caltexrecordsmusic, "Morteza Aghili."

<sup>113</sup> Caltexrecordsmusic, "Norooz (Haji Firooz)."

Explanations such as this have become almost as common knowledge, both among Iranians and Iranian-Americans, and they reinforce and are in turn, reinforced by, academics such as Mehrdad Bahar. Because there is little historical work done on the origins of Hājji Firuz, any theories of his origins, whether as a Zoroastrian or Mithraist fire ritual, as a remnant of African slave troupes entertaining Iranians, or stemming from a legacy of satirical minstrelsy as a caricature of Blackness (i.e. siāh-bāzi performances), remain speculative. What this chapter, and this work as a whole, accomplishes is to point out the striking similarities between 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century performances of both siāh-bāzi and of the Hājji Firuz persona, and some areas that suggest continuity from the era of slavery in Iran. Absent further rigorous historical work, connecting these traditions definitively to race and to depictions of African slaves or servants remains primarily an audio-visual exercise, drawing on what we know to be racial and racist in the Western tradition. Regardless of the Western slant on interpretations of blackface, it can be argued that both subtle and overt racializations of Hājji Firuz (and by extension, the siāhs of siāh-bāzi) have significant negative impacts on Black people around the world, as Iranians internalize ideas on race and fail to recognize blackface in an Iranian context as racist. In other words, just as we must not apply Western theories of race and performance wholesale to Iranian contexts, we must not wholly excuse phenomena such as blackface in Iran because “it is different than in the West.”

Other depictions of Hājji Firuz will show him with half his face painted white, but these depictions are neither common nor do they resolve the other, significant ways Hājji Firuz is racialized—through his body movements, his eunuch body type, or the way he speaks and sings. A YouTube comedy video<sup>114</sup> of an Iranian-American man teaching his Black American how to

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<sup>114</sup> ShareefAllmanTV2.

drive (meant to poke fun at how Iranians drive and teach, along with other cultural quirks)<sup>115</sup> ends with the Iranian man getting a phone call asking for a replacement to play Hājji Firuz—as the Iranian repeats, in Persian, “Replacement? Yeah, I think I have a replacement” while eyeing the driver up and down. Immediately after, the Iranian plays a recording of a Hājji Firuz chanting the “Arbāb-e khodam song, in its signature accented Farsi: “*Arbāb-e khodam, sāmbole baleikom/Arbāb-e khodam boz-boz-e ghandi/Arbāb-e khodam cherā nemikhandi?*” The video finishes with the Iranian forcing the Black man into red clothes and a red hat, and ends with images and short clips of the Black man playing Hājji Firuz at an Iranian gathering (though here he is out of character and plays himself; this is not part of the “driving school” narrative).

The significance of this video is twofold. First, the position of the Black man as a “replacement” Hājji Firuz reveals that Black Iranians never actually play the part. In the video, the Black American is not the first choice to play Hājji Firuz but a last minute replacement, an accidental understudy. Second, the very short preparation the Iranian gives the Black man is to play a short recording of “Arbāb-e khodam,” a recording that even in its brevity, begins with the accented “*salamo aleykom*” (“*sāmbole baleikom*”). This reinforces the racialization of Hājji Firuz, as other “siāh” minstrel characters, as Black—through their accents (a “physical” feature perceived as “biological.”) Furthermore, it is telling that this short recording is the only preparation the Black American needs—he is already the correct color.

Other contemporary examples that explicitly comment on the racism of Hājji Firuz are the music and Twitter posts of famous rapper Hichkas. His song “Firooz” draws explicit connections between slavery and Hājji Firuz (and his African origins), recognizing the racism of

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<sup>115</sup> The anti-Blackness of the Iranian-American community is showcased (whether ironically or not) as the Iranian calls the driver a “stupid Black” and makes other microaggressions such as calling the driver “Mr. Mayweather” (referencing the Black American boxer, Floyd Mayweather) and “Tyga” (the Black American rapper), and repeated anguish after finding out the driver has an Iranian girlfriend.

this character, while using this figure to draw parallels between racism, colorism, and classism in Iran and their intersections with each other (relevant lyrics reproduced below):<sup>116</sup>

<i>Beraghs, beraghs, beraghs</i>	Dance, dance, dance
<i>Begirim bardeh-dāri ro jashn</i>	Let's celebrate slavery
<i>Beraghs, beraghs, beraghs</i>	Dance, dance, dance
<i>Hājji firuzeh,</i>	It's Hājji Firuz,
<i>Arbāb khodam sābili beleykom</i>	Greetings, my lord
<i>A' in ādam meseh khar kār keshidi o</i>	You've worked this person like a donkey and
<i>Jāyi ni' bereh chon</i>	They have nowhere to go because
<i>Pul-o nadādi, hesāb-e bānket hey besheh por</i>	You haven't paid them to fill your own bank
<i>Hatman tarafā-ye āfrighā har ruzeshun noruzeh</i>	Around Africa every day must be Nowruz
<i>Ākhe injuri hesāb bekonī,</i>	But if you look at it this way,
<i>Por-e hājji firuzeh</i>	It's full of Hājji Firuzes
<i>Ajdāde mā az kojā kharidanet?</i>	Where did our ancestors buy you from?
<i>Chiye haghghatet?</i>	What is your truth?
<i>Hājji firuzeh</i>	It's Hājji Firuz
<i>Sāli ye ruzeh,</i>	It's one day a year,
<i>Sāli ye ruzeh?</i>	Is it one day a year?
<i>Na, vāseh har ruzeh</i>	No, it's every day
<i>Ru-m siāh,</i>	My face is black/I'm ashamed,
<i>Nezhād parastim</i>	We are racists
<i>Āreh manam hājji firuzam</i>	Yes it's me, Hājji Firuz,
<i>Yādāvar zeshtiyāh</i>	A reminder of the ugliness
<i>Bedeh-kāreh emruz, talab-kāreh diruzam</i>	Today's debtor, I'm yesterday's creditor

From the beginning, Hichkas draws a connection between celebrating Hājji Firuz and his actions (namely dancing) and celebrating slavery. He does this to make parallels between Hājji Firuz, the enslavement of Africans in Iran's history, and the contemporary socioeconomic situation between the underpaid working-class and the "masters" (the *arbābs*, the elite class). In invoking Hājji Firuz, Hichkas uses the chants most associated with him in the popular imagination: the accented "*sābili beleykom*" (recall that standard pronunciation is "*salām aleykom*"), the call to a master ("*arbāb-e khodam*"), and the rhyme "*Hājji firuzeh / sāli ye ruzeh*" ("It's Hājji Firuz / It's

<sup>116</sup> Moltafet, "Hichkas – Firooz," *YouTube*, March 16, 2015, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxkncQCpzzc>.

one day a year”). However, he goes further to argue that Hājji Firuz and by extension, slavery and contemporary economic oppression, are not just one day a year but apparent every day. He references Iran’s history of slavery through direct address: “Where did our ancestors buy you from? What is your truth?” In the last stanza copied here, Hichkas uses the idiomatic phrase “*rum siāh*” which literally translates to “my face is black” but means “I’m embarrassed or ashamed,” followed immediately by “*nezhād parastim*” (“we’re racists”) to draw attention to an otherwise “innocent” idiom, just as he draws attention to the problematics of an otherwise “innocent” holiday character.

Around the same time that the song was released (March 2015), Hichkas also tweeted about the relationship between Hājji Firuz and modern discrimination (Fig. 2.14)<sup>117</sup>:



Fig. 2.14, translated: Hājji Firuz isn’t just once a year... You can see the interactions and racism of the upper class every day...It’s just an ugly and tired joke.

Both his song and his Twitter post are part of an important perspective to include because he is a very well-known figure, both within Iran and in diaspora, due to his status as a pioneer of Persian rap. He offers an Iranian perspective of one who lives and grew up in Iran, instead of (and in addition) to diaspora perspectives that come from Western ideas of race and racism. Though we must be careful not to perpetuate narratives of competing authenticity (“the homeland” vs. “the diaspora”), this perspective is necessary to recognize racial consciousness in an Iranian context

<sup>117</sup> Hichkas, Twitter post, March 5, 2015 (9:41 a.m.), accessed April 18, 2018, <https://twitter.com/HichkasOfficial/status/573538954533797888>.

(though due to globalization and social media, we must also be mindful of assuming that certain ideas are born in isolation).

### **A Short Note on Cultural Appropriation**

Despite different scholarly theories on Hājji Firuz’s origins, this chapter has so far argued that his antics, while light-hearted and meant to signal the joyous beginning of spring, serve as exaggerated caricatures of Black Iranians, representation made even more problematic because of the lack of authentic Black representation in Iranian cultural products. The paradox is that while Hājji Firuz and siāh-bāzi are undeniably, Black caricatures, they are never played by Black or Afro-Iranian people. Part of the Hājji Firuz ritual is the fact that it is ostentatiously a performance of one race by another. Just as the audience laughs at clearly racialized traits (the songs are funny because of the high voices and “mispronunciations,” the body is funny because of the comic, exaggerated, and sometimes sexual way it moves), they also laugh at the absurdity of an Iranian playing a decidedly non-Iranian (or not fully Iranian, or not Persian) character, but one is also decidedly Other. Black people are not meant to play Hājji Firuz, just as they are not meant to be the siāhs in siāh-bāzi performances—they are not meant to represent themselves, even in representations that clearly caricaturize and insult them.

If a culture can be caricaturized and whole racial identities appropriated as in siāh-bāzi and the persona of Hājji Firuz, then other aspects of Afro-Iranian culture can also be “appropriated.” Rogers (2006) broadly engages with the concept as “the use of one culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture—regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome,” further subdividing it into four categories: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturalism.<sup>118</sup> The appropriation

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<sup>118</sup> Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation,” *Communication Theory* 16, no.4 (2006): 476-477.

of Afro-Iranian music, specifically “*bandari*” music, a specific genre of rhythmic music originating from the *bandars*, or ports, on the southern coast of Iran, mostly seems to fit Rogers category of cultural exploitation (aspects of marginalized/colonized cultures are taken and used by a dominant/colonizing culture in such a way as to serve the interests of the dominant).<sup>119</sup> Although most of the research appears to have been done regarding the appropriation of non-Western or Indigenous cultures by dominant Western imperial/colonial cultures, this framework serves to explain the way *bandari* music is produced, marketed, distributed, and consumed by Iranians. *Bandari* music emerges from a distinct Afro-Arab tradition, rooted in *gowati*,<sup>120</sup> but has been disconnected from its roots in mainstream Iranian music. The term “*bandari*” itself simply refers to “of the port,” and its use also tends to generalize and essentialize the music from the south as “any song that simply carries a type of beat used in the Bushehri style of music.”<sup>121</sup> In both Iran and the diaspora, “*bandari*” music refers to the recycled pop songs that are largely produced in California by Caltex Records, the profits of which do not go to the actual communities where *bandari* music comes from.<sup>122</sup> Jarahzadeh’s article discusses the complexity and diversity of southern Iranian music, music, that often gets simplified to diaspora-produced pop (by Persians, *not* Afro- or Arab-Iranians, and marketed as such), an essentialization that, he argues, “creates certain roles that Iranian minorities are required to fill in order to have a place in

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<sup>119</sup> “Cultural exploitation commonly involves the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture in which the subordinated culture is treated as a resource to be ‘mined’ and ‘shipped home’ for consumption, as in the use of indigenous folk music by Western musicians and companies without financial compensation,” Rogers, 486.

<sup>120</sup> Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “The Afro-Iranian Community: Beyond Haji Firuz Blackface, the Slave Trade, & *Bandari* Music,” *Ajam Media Collective*, June 20, 2012, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://ajammc.com/2012/06/20/the-afro-iranian-community-beyond-haji-firuz-blackface-slavery-bandari-music/>.

<sup>121</sup> Kamyar Jarahzadeh, “Music and Race Politics in the Iranian Persian Gulf: Shanbehzadeh and ‘*Bandari*,’” *Ajam Media Collective*, February 8, 2013, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://ajammc.com/2013/02/08/music-and-race-politics-in-the-persian-gulf-shanbehzadeh-and-bandari-music/>.

<sup>122</sup> Errol A. Cockfield Jr., “Southern California Enterprise: Immigrant Cashes in on Sounds from Home: Importing: Encino Firm Caters to the Tastes of Iranians Who’ve Settled in the United States,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1994, accessed March 19, 2018, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-11-21/business/fi-66\\_1\\_persian-music](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-11-21/business/fi-66_1_persian-music).

mainstream cultural discourse. In this context, the dark-skinned Afro-Iranian is stripped of any cultural diversity and is sambo-ified to become a happy, carefree people whose lack of representation in society is justified by his or her frivolity.”<sup>123</sup>

Hājji Firuz and other siāh-bāzi performances directly draw on the “sambo” and related minstrel stereotypes. Because they act in ways perceived as ridiculous, they are able to act out and make the critiques Gaffary mentioned—a “sambo” is already dismissed from the start. These blackface characters are light-hearted jokesters whose antics go to the extreme of both cheerfulness and stupidity in order to appeal to their audiences. As a result, performances like Hājji Firuz and, to a lesser extent, siāh-bāzi plays, are the only representations other Iranians have of Afro-Iranians, representations that are at best, superficial and at worst, essentializing and racist. Just as Jarahzadeh argues that “when Persian Iranians are singing bandari, it is a sort of novelty performance of “playing” Afro-Iranian,” this is exactly what Hājji Firuz and siāh-bāzi performances are—“playing black,” the cultural appropriation of “playing at” another culture. An example of cultural exploitation where the dominant culture gets to decide what aspects of the minority culture to represent, how to represent them, and ultimately to imply, intentionally or not, that the minority culture is actually the dominant culture, erasing the sovereignty and representation of the former. When mainstream bandari music (pop songs produced by Persians in California) is what most Iranians associate with the south, this greatly problematizes southern representations in the Iranian consciousness, not to mention the profit Persian artists make off of “bandari” music.

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<sup>123</sup> Jarahzadeh.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has argued, the Nowruz character Hājji Firuz shares many traits in common with the siāhs (blackface characters) of traditional Iranian folk theatre—the only major difference in the current time is how well-known either is. Both figures are represented as exaggerated caricatures of Blackness that focus on the body as the site of racialization (through body types, skin color, movements, and speech patterns). As such, Hājji Firuz becomes a genre character like his counterpart in siāh-bāzi performances: created through iconographic means (such as their costumes and antics), he has little flexibility to exist outside of the minstrel role. Although there is incomplete evidence on the origins of Hājji Firuz, this chapter has also argued that even if his historical trajectory differed completely from that of siāh-bāzi performances, by the twentieth century both became so similar and interchangeable to suggest that Blackness in Iran has become a stereotype, a temporary identity that is appropriated by non-Black Iranians at their leisure. It has also been noted that the racist caricatures of siāhs and Hājji Firuz are integral to their respective performances—neither performs successfully without the blackface make-up, the exaggerated accent, the costume, or the wild body movements.

Contemporary reactions to Hājji Firuz (more prevalent than reactions to siāh characters because Hājji Firuz is associated with Nowruz while siāh-bāzi performances are less known) tend to be dismissive—“Hājji Firuz is not Black”—or defensive—“He brings joy! How is that racist?” Both of these attitudes discourage critical engagement with these figures and a reluctance to recognize this racism as what it is. And to be clear, these performances are racist. They make caricatures of biological traits meant for comic relief and reproduce these caricatures over and over until they become normalized and accepted cultural artefacts. When there is very little other counter-representation of Blackness in Iran, and when the Blackness of these

characters is denied, it becomes much easier to appropriate and erase Afro-Arab-Iranian culture. The most obvious level is the appropriation of Blackness in performing humor, but also the whitewashing of cultural traditions that originate with a marginalized community, such as the appropriation of bandari music. This facilitates the transformation of Black Iranians from subjects with agency to objects of curiosity, and greatly essentializes representations of Blackness. Hājji Firuz brings us joy, makes us laugh, and ushers in the rejuvenation of spring, but at what cost?

## Chapter Three:

### “Speaking Clear:” Conceptions of Race and Othering in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*

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“If I wash him, he’ll turn white.”  
—Na’i, defending her custody  
of Bashu in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*  
(dir. Bahram Beyza’i, 1985)<sup>124</sup>  
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#### Introduction

A young woman washes her children in a small river, but when she beckons the third, he runs away with a smile. Therein follows an intense chase, as the mother runs after him, shouting at him for to stop and come back. Eventually, she manages to catch him through subterfuge, hiding in a haystack until his guard is dropped, and drags him back to be bathed. As if to reflect his playful nature while expressing her exasperation, she throws the boy into the water. The differences between them could not be greater: him, a young boy with black hair and dark skin, her, an adult woman with light skin and green eyes, the power of motherhood manifested as she looms over him and dunks him under the water. She washes him, scrubbing at his face and hair again and again, attempting to wash the “black” off his skin.

What can this one, brief scene tell us about conceptions of race in Iranian culture? What is the broader significance of the assumption in temporary and default identities, when Na’i, the female protagonist, assumes that Bashu’s blackness can be washed off, revealing the whiteness that surely lies beneath? Could this be a product of temporary images of Blackness, as manifested through *siāh-bāzi* performances and the figure of Hājji Firuz? To end the exploration of race in Iranian cultural products and rituals, this chapter analyzes the treatment of race in

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<sup>124</sup> The full-length film can be found on YouTube (with semi-accurate subtitles, however) as of April 18, 2018, see Ali Reza Khoshkjan, “Bashu, The Little Stranger (Eng sub),” *YouTube*, March 30, 2017, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v2Z33tW1fU&t=692s>.

Bahram Beyza'i's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985). This film has been chosen for its popularity in both Iranian and Western audiences, its portrayal of an “authentic” Black performance, its compelling story and memorable characters, and also for the fact that its treatment of race has not yet been extensively analyzed, despite the wealth of critical literature on the film. For example, although scholars and film theorists have examined linguistic nationalism,<sup>125</sup> ethnicity and language,<sup>126</sup> womanhood,<sup>127</sup> and new cinematic techniques,<sup>128</sup> *Bashu*'s race as a driving plot point or the use of cinematic technologies to showcase racial differences has received little attention.

This chapter draws on other analyses of *Bashu* dealing with ethnic and linguistic nationalism, nationalism in Iran as a whole (see Introduction of thesis) and the use of film technologies to situate the insertion of “race.” In doing so, this chapter asks how race is treated and presented in the film, and what, if anything, this tells us about race in Iranian society. Following historical context regarding Iran's film industry and Beyza'i's career and a brief summary of the plot, this chapter shows how the film pushes back against the ideal (white) “Persian” while continuing to show how race in the Iranian context begins as a visual Othering based on phenotype and other biological characteristics, while culture and language subsequently also become racialized within the nation-state. Beyza'i's rejection of Western cinematic standards and inclusion of indigenous Iranian practices briefly estrange the audience, Othering them in the moment while also calling attention to the way Iranian audiences had historically

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<sup>125</sup> See Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and Nasrin Rahimieh, “Making Gender and Difference in the Myth of the Nation: A Post-revolutionary Iranian Film,” in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002).

<sup>126</sup> See Rahimieh.

<sup>127</sup> See Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future* (New York, NY: Verso, 2001) and Mottahedeh.

<sup>128</sup> See Mottahedeh.

been Othered by Western cinema. Examining *Bashu* (and Iranian society and culture as a whole) through an understanding and acknowledgement of the nation-state reveals how its instrumentality in and contingency on creating racial, cultural, and linguistic Others.

### **History of Film in Iran**

Cinema in Iran has always performed powerful social and political functions, from its introduction in 1900 to the present day. From the silent films of the Qajar era, to the rapid development of commercial cinema in the later Pahlavi period (1941-1978), and finally to the postmodern, globally-acclaimed cinema after the revolution of 1979, Iranian cinema's long history has paralleled the nation's political, social, cultural, and ideological struggles. It can thus appropriately be termed a "national cinema" or a "nation-state cinema"<sup>129</sup> and discussed as a project of modernity. Hamid Naficy, a distinguished authority on Iranian film, points out that "modernity has been associated with cinema from the beginning," and how the creation of a national cinema expressed, sparked, and embodied modernization in Iran.<sup>130</sup> Cinema's emergence and circulation in the West and Western culture made it initially indispensable to the Westernization and modernization of the country—cinema showing Western lifestyles provided accessible models of mimicry.

Indeed, Western films were shown in Iran before Iranian productions evolved. As the West was looked to as a source of imitation by Iranian intellectuals and political leaders, its cinema helped perpetuate Western values and culture in Iran, while providing many Iranians with some of their first encounter with external evaluations of Iran and Iranian culture. Negative representations of Iranians in Western film facilitated the emergence of a self-consciousness that

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<sup>129</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

sparked Iranian efforts of self-representation through cinema. Naficy notes that Iranians “often sought to define and project themselves by means of the cinema, either according or in contradistinction to these othering Western mediaworks.”<sup>131</sup>

The role of the state in film production and its related enterprises (i.e. censorship) initially resulted from this contact, as the state was the primary agent of Westernization from cinema’s inception in Iran to the 1979 revolution. One example is the importance of documentary film-making supported by the Pahlavi state in order to further its ideological aims (one of which was explicit Westernization).<sup>132</sup> Following the revolution, as the Islamic Republic consolidated its power and positions, although Westernization was no longer part of the state’s interest in regulating cinema, the Islamic Republic mobilized film for its own national projects. These national projects included the reinvention of the nation’s culture around a revolutionary Shi’ism rooted in national values and ideas (for example, stances of anti-imperialism and anti-foreign intervention) and the mobilization of the entire nation for the “sacred defense” of the country during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

During the first period of Iranian film, what Naficy terms the “artisanal era” (1897-1941), the control and centralization of cinema did not form the main arm of state formation, and cinema remained a “cottage industry, limited to importing and exhibiting foreign films and to producing and exhibiting locally made nonfiction films, chiefly actualities and newsreels.”<sup>133</sup> Production of fiction films during the first Pahlavi period (1925-1941) remained low, with only nine films made, but pro-government documentaries and newsreels were produced in higher quantities. The bare foundations of a commercial film industry were laid during this time, with

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<sup>131</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1*, 16.

<sup>132</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 55.

<sup>133</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1*, 11.

the establishment of film studios, laboratories, and schools.<sup>134</sup> The film industry in the second Pahlavi era (1941-1978) paralleled the more rapid industrialization and modernization of the country under Mohammad Reza Shah, and the state took a dominant role in censorship and patronage, building the infrastructures of the cinema and television industries.<sup>135</sup> Two major cinemas emerged in Iran during this time—the commercial *filmfarsi*, intended for mass consumption and entertainment, and the new-wave, dissident cinema. Although subject to state funding and censorship, films of the new-wave cinema portrayed increasingly vocal and forward criticisms of the state and marked the beginning of the globalization of Iranian cinema (the films were products of collaborations with Western filmmakers and also received acclaim in international film festivals).<sup>136</sup>

The Islamic Revolution ushered in major changes in the film industry, often likened to a corresponding cinematic revolution. Movies and movie theatres had been sites of protest during the revolution, taken as representations of the moral corruption associated with Mohammad Reza Shah and the West, and revolutionaries destroyed about a third of movie houses nationwide as a result.<sup>137</sup> Rebuilding this industry, the Islamic regime heavily regulated and censored cinema (“purification”), banning films from the previous era, them, and instituting a system to ensure only politically correct films were made and distributed.<sup>138</sup> Bahram Beyza’i, one of Iran’s most famous directors, began his cinematic career during the initial new-wave towards the end of the Pahlavi period. Although many argue that Beyza’i’s films, both pre- and post-revolutionary, helped propel Iranian cinema onto the world stage, garnering a global respect for Iranian movies,

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<sup>134</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1*, 12.

<sup>135</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

he would run into frequent trouble with Islamic government authorities. Two of his films, *The Death of Yazdegerd* (1982) and *The Ballad of Tara* (1979) were banned immediately after the revolution for their portrayal of unveiled woman, and he would sometimes have problems securing permission or funding for his films. Naficy remarks that Beyza'i's career was "damaged by his confrontational personality; his frank criticism of the government; his openly secular and critical view of religious discourses, particularly of Islam; and his generally complicated, expensive, and somewhat abstruse movies that were difficult to finance and that did not generate sufficient box-office returns," with *Bashu, the Little Stranger* an exception to the last point.<sup>139</sup>

### **Introduction to *Bashu, the Little Stranger***

One of the first examples of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and certainly one of the most well-known Iranian films, *Bashu, the Little Stranger* tells the story of a young, dark-skinned Iranian boy who flees the violence of the Iran-Iraq War when his home, in the southern province of Khuzestan (bordering Iraq, the bulk of where the fighting in Iran took place) is destroyed and his family killed. Jumping into the back of a supply truck passing through, Bashu eventually finds his way to the lush and verdant northern province of Gilan, which borders the Caspian Sea and presents a stark contrast to the dusty desert of Khuzestan (see Fig. 3.2). Lost, hungry, and haunted by visions of his dead family, Bashu ends up on a young family's farm and is taken in by the mother, Na'i, and her two children. Interactions between Bashu and Na'i are rife with miscommunication and mistrust in the beginning, with Na'i attempting to talk to him (in her native Gilaki, an Iranian-Caspian language) and Bashu remaining unresponsive. In one pivotal scene, Na'i poses casual questions to Bashu while walking around her yard doing chores, while at the same time the camera shows Bashu's visions of his dead mother wandering around

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<sup>139</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1*, 227.

the screen or standing silently near Na'i. During a lull in Na'i's questioning, Bashu's voice suddenly bursts through, crying for his mother and telling the story of his trauma—but in Khuzestani Arabic, which Na'i cannot understand. After this outburst, relations between Na'i and Bashu warm, and she goes from feeling a grudging responsibility for him to genuinely caring for him and calling him her son. However, in doing so, Na'i goes against the advice and wishes of her fellow villagers and her absent husband (away finding work, presumably on the war front), and the final scenes of the film show the conflict as the husband returns and disagrees about adopting Bashu until suddenly, Bashu runs up to confront the unfamiliar man. As the camera establishes conventional shot, reverse-shots and eye-line matches, the conflict between the two of them is quickly resolved and they all accept each other as family.



Fig. 3.1: Map showing Iran's ethnic diversity (note "Afro-Iranians" are not distinguished).<sup>140</sup>

<sup>140</sup> <http://www.irangulistan.com/cartes/ethnic-iran-map.jpg>.



Fig. 3.2: Cartographic representation of Bashu’s displacement.<sup>141</sup>

The movie was finished in 1985, five years into the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, but whose release was delayed three years due to various issues the censors had with it. Reasons for this include Beyza’i’s refusal to censor certain scopophilic<sup>142</sup> scenes that had Na’i gazing directly into the camera, and the ambiguous, if not overtly pacifist, treatment of the Iran-Iraq War. Naficy notes the film’s multiculturalist and pacifist message, as it showed multiple ethnicities, races, and languages, a “radical message considering the country was engaged in an all-consuming war, which required homogeneity and unity” while also portraying that these differences could be overcome.<sup>143</sup> This need for “homogeneity and unity” refers to the internal condition of the nation-state as it engaged in modern warfare—total war—with an external enemy, requiring the mobilization of the entire country. However, as Beyza’i’s film aptly points out, modern Iran was

<sup>141</sup> Adapted from <https://lizardpoint.com/geography/images/maps/iran-labeled.gif>.

<sup>142</sup> Scopophilia refers to pleasure derived from looking; in cinema, scopophilia also derives from voyeurism and the male gaze. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Summary,” *LuxOnline*, 2005, accessed November 14, 2017, [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual\\_pleasure\\_and\\_narrative\\_cinema\(2\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema(2).html). (Original essay was published in *Screen*, vol. 16 in 1975)

<sup>143</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4*, 35.

by no means a homogenous society, nor had it been one historically. This heterogeneity did not imply a Western (fictional) utopia of “multiculturalism” because people of different ethnicities and “colors” do not coexist in harmony and *Bashu* explicitly comments on the conflicts and compromises of an ambiguous conception of “race” within the framework of the nation-state. The film supplements this ambiguity with multiple portrayals of race: a corporal one based on skin and body, and a cultural performance that becomes racialized. Race becomes only one method of Othering in *Bashu*, however, and the film further explores the creation of cultural and linguistic Others by mobilizing divergent cinematic practices to engender a cinematic Othering of an audience used to different standards.

### “What” is Bashu?

To further illustrate this ambiguity, Bashu’s race is presented in different ways by different scholars, and oftentimes he gets multiple labels within one work. Naficy’s analysis of the film refers to him as “Arab Iranian,”<sup>144</sup> and “the black Arab boy,”<sup>145</sup> while articles written for Ajam Media Collective (a blog) classify him as “Afro-Iranian”<sup>146</sup> and “black.”<sup>147</sup> In popular Persian language sources, he (and his actor, Adnan Afravian) is usually called “Arab” or “black complexioned.”<sup>148</sup> Racial boundaries are never easily drawn, but these terms highlight some

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<sup>144</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4*, 35.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>146</sup> Xavier Wingham, “Blackness on the Iranian Periphery: Ethnicity, Language, and Nation in *Bashu*, the Little Stranger,” *Ajam Media Collective*, September 23, 2015, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2015/09/23/blackness-on-the-iranian-periphery/>, Maziar Shirazi, “A Review of *Tarabnameh*, or, Why Are Iranian-Americans Laughing at Blackface in 2016?” *Ajam Media Collective*, December 7, 2016, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2016/12/07/why-are-iranian-americans-laughing-at-blackface-in-2016/>, and Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “The Afro-Iranian Community: Beyond Haji Firuz Blackface, the Slave Trade, & Bandari Music,” *Ajam Media Collective*, June 20, 2012, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2012/06/20/the-afro-iranian-community-beyond-haji-firuz-blackface-slavery-bandari-music/>.

<sup>147</sup> Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “Picturing the Other: Race and Afro-Iranians in Documentary Photography,” *Ajam Media Collective*, July 20, 2015, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2015/07/20/picturing-them-vs-us-race-and-afro-iranians-in-documentary-photography/>.

<sup>148</sup> The term is “siāh chordeh”, and siāh comes siāh, the word for black. This can also be translated as “dark complexioned” because “siāh chordeh” can be used regardless of “race”—anyone who is dark can be described as such. In other words, it is not only reserved for those of African origin (as “Black” in the West refers to anyone with

simple but significant points about race in Iranian contexts. One is the use of physiognomy to designate those not in the majority “race,” those not fitting the default—while Persian language sources point out that Afravian is “black complexioned,” Soosan Taslimi’s (his co-star) appearance is never used as a way to categorize or introduce her—she is never referred to as “white-complexioned.” The lack of hyphenated terms in the Persian language sources is another characteristic of race in Iranian contexts.

Such terms come from writers in the Iranian diaspora, specifically the American diaspora, and reflect discourses of racial and ethnic identities that arise primarily in Western contexts (i.e. African-American, Chinese-American, Lebanese-Australian, Italian-Canadian).<sup>149</sup> Iranian writers working within the English language use these hyphenated identities in attempts to be accurate and inclusive, but also because they come out of a Western tradition that treats race like separate boxes, or in the case of hyphenated identities, like the overlapping area of a Venn diagram. Each identity forms a circle and the person who comes from both of them exists in the space of the overlap—a space that, taken at face value as the blending of two circles, assumes an absolute “mixing” of both identities. The settler colonial societies that emerged from the sixteenth century

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African origin), or those named as “Black” (“siāh pust” – “black skinned” or simply “siāh” – “black.”). For example, siāh chordeh can refer to Indians, people who are not considered “African” black. See “باشو غریبه کورچک!؛ “سیگار می‌فروشد!+عکس,” *Farda News*, April 25, 2011, accessed November 14, 2017, <http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/145366/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%88-%D8%BA%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%A9%D9%88%DA%86%DA%A9-%D8%B3%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%B9%DA%A9%D8%B3>, “باشو (شخصیت),” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 14, 2017, [https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%88\\_\(%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%AA\)](https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%88_(%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%AA)), and “عدنان عفر اویان,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 14, 2017, [https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86\\_%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86](https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86_%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86).

<sup>149</sup> Li-Rong Lilly Cheng, “The Challenge of Hyphenated Identity,” *Topics in Language Disorders* 24, no. 3 (July 1, 2004): 218; Jumana Bayeh, “A ‘Hyphenated’ Identity: Writing About Lebanese Diaspora Fiction Within an Australian Context,” *West Coast Line* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 124; and Frances Giampapa “Hyphenated Identities: Italian-Canadian Youth and the Negotiation of Ethnic Identities in Toronto,” *International Journal of Bilingualism* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 279.

onwards relied on race as one way to demarcate society and maintain power hierarchies, with “whiteness” or the “Anglo-X” (i.e. Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-American) population at the top. A hyphenated identity, like the overlap in the Venn diagram, implies an equality in the relationship between the races or ethnicities linked together when in reality, both may not have equal social and political value.<sup>150</sup>

In contrast, Persian language pieces either do not hyphenate his identity (Bashu is “Arab”) or use less explicit racial language in describing his appearance as a complexion or a color (one source explained it through the “harsh sun” of the south). Withholding an “Iranian” label from both Bashu and his actor suggests that not all those residing within the borders of the nation have access to the resulting national identity. Taslimi, ethnically Gilaki, is “Iranian” while Afravian is not, though both were born in Iran (Taslimi in Rasht, Afravian in Ahvaz). The framework of the nation-state provides a possible explanation as to why: anti-Arab racism exploded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Iranian intellectuals sought to racially identify with Europe and whiteness in order to reverse the “backwardness” of the country in relation to the West. In doing so, they needed to distance themselves racially from their own neighbors, and thus, Persians (the barely majority ethnicity, certainly the dominant political and social group) became “Aryan” while Arabs (and Turks and other ethnic groups seen as distinct) were inferior “Semites.”<sup>151</sup> Afravian’s language and Arabness, in addition to his Blackness, prevent him from being seen as an Iranian the way Taslimi is. Though she is also from an ethnic

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<sup>150</sup> A familiar Western example may help illustrate this concept: the label “African-American” implies an identity that is equal parts “African” and equal parts “American.” However, the reality is that African-Americans in the U.S. are usually not afforded the rights and statuses the “American” part of their identity should, in theory give them (one need only look at “stop and frisk” policies, the over-policing of Black communities, and the disproportionate imprisonment of African-Americans); to imply both “African” and “American” labels exert equal influence would be blatantly false.

<sup>151</sup> Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

minority, she physically resembles an ideal “white” Iranian, with her light skin and light eyes, while it is easier to Other Afravian and exclude him from the Iranian identity.

### **Conveying Race in *Bashu***

Returning to the film, the subject of race in *Bashu* is shown explicitly and repeatedly. Naficy characterizes the initial conflict as the “unbridgeable cultural and racial gaps separating the white Gilaki woman from the black Arab boy.”<sup>152</sup> His use of colors to signal race (or at least some phenotypical difference that becomes racialized)—“white” and “black”—reflects terms used throughout the film by various characters, while placing the two protagonists, Bashu and Na’i, on the extremes of the racial spectrum: white contrasts with black (race) and Gilaki contrasts with Arab (ethnicity). Beyza’i cast actors whose appearances heightened the divide: a young, dark-skinned Arabic-speaking boy with dark eyes plays opposite a young Gilaki woman with light skin and light eyes. Though Na’i is from an ethnic minority, her appearance fits the image of an “ideal” or “beautiful” Iranian (light skin with light eyes and dark hair). Given the previous context of the linking of Aryanness with Persianness (and more indirectly, with Iranianness as a national identity), one might ask why Beyza’i cast a Gilaki actress instead of a Persian one. Besides plot considerations—Bashu’s displacement and initial alienation rely on the cardinal differences between the far south and the far north—the pursuit of authenticity offers one explanation. As an ethnic minority located in the north, the choice of Taslimi straddles the desirable middle ground between authentic representation (ethnic minorities residing in villages may be more believable to Persian audiences) and sufficient whiteness to contrast with Bashu.

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<sup>152</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, Volume 4, 36.



Fig. 3.3: Bashu, Na'i, and her two children at the marketplace.

The significance of this contrast is reiterated when Bashu interacts with the other Gilaki villagers, and as the movie progresses, we see Na'i's treatment of Bashu improve considerably while that of the villagers' remains largely unchanged. In this, *Beyza'i* shows us the reality of the racism that endures and the optimism of the racism that can be rehabilitated. Upon first meeting Bashu, Na'i and the villagers have strikingly similar reactions—they question his blackness.

(1) Na'i, upon first discovering Bashu:  
 (2) Na'i, while initially attempting to converse with him:

(1) "Why are you so black? You're so dirty."  
 (2) "Perhaps you are a jinn out of a coal bucket."  
 "You're black and dumb [referencing his silence]."

Villagers (at various points throughout the film, from beginning to end):

"Where does this piece of charcoal come from?"  
 "He looks like a soot-blackened lamp."  
 "He's so black."

However, Na'i's attitude changes radically over the course of the film, while the villagers continue to remain derogatory. In one scene, she goes to buy soap in order to give Bashu a bath. The storekeeper asks if Bashu is a relative and she replies, "I have no relatives—he's a guest." The storekeeper's son laughs at this and she follows up with "If I wash him, he'll turn white," insisting that Bashu is "white" like them. Although she is still operating under the assumption

that his blackness is a temporary condition and having come from using and condoning negative language (calling him a “jinn out of a coal bucket”, or staying silent when villagers call him “a piece of charcoal” and other racist names), she uses language to imply that Bashu is not an Other but like them, a guest worthy of respect and hospitality. When she finally does get around to bathing him, she has to coerce him into doing so—he runs away the first time she tries to bring him to the stream, and after yelling at him and chasing him down, she has to hide in order to trick and catch him. Once she manages to get him to the water, she begins to wash him almost in a violent manner while Bashu splashes her back—she practically rips his shirt off, vigorously scrubs his head and hair, and pushes his head underwater to rinse him off. After he comes up unchanged, she exclaims “Why no change in color? No way...Why no change in color?” but does not persist in her attempts to make him white. Though she ceases her efforts because of necessity—she simply cannot change his Blackness—her acceptance (however forced) still involves an acknowledgement of his identity as fixed. Their relationship improves from this point forward, culminating in Bashu recognizing her as his mother and Na’i recognizing him as her son, irrespective of their racial differences.

On the other hand, the villagers’ reactions to Bashu remain the most overtly racist and unchanging throughout the film, and this is indicative of many realities, such as the perpetual existence of ignorance and racism in Iran and the provincialism of village life. In one scene, Na’i is hosting the villagers for tea while Bashu is there, and the evening is characterized by rude remarks and violations of Bashu’s personal space, as if he were an object. “He looks like a bugbear,” one villager comments. “Last year we had a guest who stole, what about this one?” says another. “Isn’t he sick? Hey, show me your teeth,” one man commands while an old woman inquires “Are you sure there are no lice in his hair?” as she proceeds to crawl over to him and

poke her hands through his hair. The camera moves to show Na'i's reaction and she appears taken aback, if not annoyed. A few minutes later, a young girl crawls over to Bashu and tracks a finger down his face, as if expecting to wipe away his blackness—indeed, she shows surprise when her finger comes back clean. The guests continue to pester Bashu and Na'i in this way, disapproving of her decision to keep him, until finally, Na'i has enough and throws them out of her home, physically heralding some of them out.

The villagers' lack of boundaries when it comes to Bashu continue to enforce his status as an Other, an outsider, who is not treated as a guest should be. Although Bashu is unfamiliar and the villagers might treat any stranger with mistrust, their emphasis on his skin color and their intrusion on his body (both aspects about himself he cannot change) suggest an underlying racism, a racially-motivated suspicion. By relentlessly deriding him and touching him at their discretion, they serve to dehumanize him and take away his power—indeed he does not resist. If it had just been adults, this might have been explained away as general paternalistic attitudes of adults expecting obedience, were it not for the young girl who also touches him without permission. At one point in the short evening, someone asks “Who're his people?” rejecting outright any notions that he could be from the same country as them, cementing his Othering and reinforcing ideas that not all Iranians have the same access to their national identity. This is a naïve racism that goes against the image of a typical nation-state as an “imagined community” in which all the members of a nation have figurative (not literal) knowledge of each other.<sup>153</sup> Bashu is unfamiliar, the villagers have never encountered Black Iranians before, and when they do, they

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<sup>153</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2006), 6.

assume he is not Iranian, that he cannot be Iranian. In this we find the film reflects the general Iranian ignorance of their Black countrymen.<sup>154</sup>

Right after the guests have left, Bashu suddenly and mysteriously takes ill and Na'i—fraught with worry—runs back to the guests she just kicked out for assistance. When she asks a neighbor who had cured her children before to help, he responds, “Of course my medicine cures, but it cures only **whites**. I don't know how to cure **black people**. He's **black** and **he stinks**. I wonder if he ran away from a coal mine? [emphasis added]” He explicitly uses the words for “white” and “black” and refuses to treat a sick, young boy simply for his color, through the purported belief that black bodies biologically differ from white bodies (whether or not the character actually held this belief is irrelevant; the fact that he used it as an excuse to not even try to help damns him). Again, race is conceptualized as something phenotypical and biological, reflected in the first thing humans usually notice about each other—appearance. The assumption that Bashu ran away from a coal mine demeans his status further as a lowly laborer, as well as erasing blackness as an identity for Bashu and other “Afro-Iranians”—the only thing that makes them black is coal dust, in the film the villagers do not treat it as a legitimate identity. These two scenes present a bleak and clearly inferior perspective towards blackness, one that dehumanizes through the removal of Bashu's power to represent himself on his own terms, and demeans through the association with unskilled manual labor and erasure of an entire culture, a depiction that Beyza'i does not shy away from or sweep under the rug.

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<sup>154</sup> Black Iranians are so unfamiliar to average (non-Black) Iranians that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a Tehrani can ask a Black Iranian who speaks Persian “Why are you black?”, blog posts and documentaries regarding the Afro-Iranian population are widely shared online and attended, and Afro-Iranians themselves qualify as objects of extended study. See Chapter 2 for more expanded analysis of these points.

## **Racial Othering as Reflected in Cinematic Codes**

As the previous scenes have shown, *Beyza'i* shows a village in which color is racialized as the primary method of Othering—Bashu's skin color is verbally referenced and attacked, and both Na'i and the villagers attempt to remove his blackness (Na'i with the bath, the young girl at the gathering). Whiteness is valued as the default, while blackness is treated harshly—a condition that should be changed. Once this idea has been established, we realize that *Beyza'i* had hinted at the unequal statuses of color from the beginning—the construction of the introductory scenes to both protagonists mirror each other in almost every way except for one: the direction of the characters' gazes. Bashu is introduced first—as the truck he stows away on stops in front of the field he is hiding in, the camera stands in for Bashu's gaze. The camera looks out from between the wheat stalks, showing the audience what Bashu sees: the stopped truck. Then the camera stops acting as Bashu's eyes and cuts to the front of the truck, where we see the driver inspecting his vehicle's tires. The camera then pans left, back over to the stalks in the field, before cutting to a close-up shot of the field. For a split second the shot is empty save for the plants, then Bashu stands up, facing the camera, though his gaze is directed at the truck, a point behind the camera (see Figs. 3.4a and 3.4b). Na'i is introduced in a similar fashion: when her children find Bashu and call for her, the camera cuts from a medium shot depicting her two children, to a blurred shot of the field. Like Bashu's introduction, the shot does not remain empty for long, as Na'i suddenly rises up into the frame in an extreme close-up of her face. In contrast to Bashu, however, she is looking directly at the camera, a subversion of modesty rules for the new Islamic cinema (see Figs. 3.5a and 3.5b).



Fig. 3.4a



Fig. 3.4b

Figs. 3.4a and 3.4b: the two frames introducing Bashu.



Fig. 3.5a



Fig. 3.5b

Figs. 3.5a and 3.5b: the two frames introducing Na'i.

Close-ups on female figures such as these afforded them a “powerful female presence”<sup>155</sup> in cinema, and indeed, Na’i’s confrontation with the camera (and by extension, the audience) turns the gaze back upon the viewer—she is not the only one being observed, she is also doing the observing. This gives her a power that Bashu does not receive in his introduction, and Beyza’i implies this difference in power extends to their respective “races.” On a narrative plane, Bashu never questions or comments on the “whiteness” of Na’i or the villagers. He does not confront whiteness (*or* the camera, *or* the audience) the way Na’i confronts his Blackness (*and*

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<sup>155</sup> Mottahedeh, 21.

the camera, *and* the audience). On a technological plane, each introductory frame is constructed in a way to emphasize the character's skin color and eyes: Bashu's debut films him among pale wheat husks, contrasting with his dark skin and emphasizing his appearance (while also possibly foreshadowing the way he "pops up" among the light-skinned villagers in the north). The light from the sun makes it so that his teeth are whiter than the whites of his eyes; indeed, a clear shot of his face does not come until a few shots later, after he has climbed into the truck and is once again facing the camera but looking elsewhere. In contrast, when Na'i moves up into the frame, the muted but green background of the field emphasizes both her light skin and her green eyes, framed by a white cloth that veils both her forehead and her nose and mouth. Her direct gaze and the *mis-en-scène* around her confront the audience with her whiteness and her power (indeed, she has the power to accept or reject Bashu, to take care of him or leave him to fend for himself) while Bashu is framed as a helpless, scared boy who does not have the same power of confrontation Na'i does. In other close-ups of him in the film, his gaze is never directed at the camera; he never asserts himself through an acknowledgement of the camera, one agent among many that Others him.

This idea of acknowledgement is a powerful motif throughout *Bashu*, one that continues to occur on both the narrative and technological planes of the film. Implicitly, Na'i acknowledges and accepts Bashu's blackness after realizing that it is not a temporary coat that can be scrubbed away. The most powerful and obvious instances of acknowledgement in the story come with both Na'i's and her husband's acceptance of Bashu's place in their family as their son. Na'i names Bashu as her son in a subsequent letter to her husband, while he, upon finally meeting Bashu, names himself as Bashu's father.<sup>156</sup> In terms of the changing use of film

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<sup>156</sup> Na'i and her husband have a loud argument over taking in Bashu, and as Bashu runs up between them, brandishing a stick, he confronts the man: "Who is this man?" To which the husband's demeanor changes, and he

technology in *Bashu*, Mottahedeh points out how in a scene where one of the husband's letters is received and being read aloud, the camera makes its own presence known through a series of shots that break from standard cinematic codes. Thus, the camera forces the audience to acknowledge its interpretative ability and function as a producer of meaning.<sup>157</sup>

### **Racialized Culture and the Paradox of the Nation-State**

The dimensions of narrative and technology converge in a further acknowledgement that uses racialized appearance and culture to analyze the paradox of a nation-state that is flawed and yet pervasive. Bashu's southern Iranian culture visits itself upon his body and becomes racialized through this corporal manifestation. In an early scene, Bashu watches Na'i and her children walk through the field as they vocalize and make noise with bells and pots. Na'i calls over to him to join them, but the camera (representing Bashu's gaze) pans from her to a hallucination of his biological mother, standing off to the side. Bashu softly calls out to his mother in grief, then buries his face in his hands. Cutting to the next scene, as if the family's actions had reminded him of his culture and his severed social connections, Bashu revives the musicality of his southern roots. Seated on a rock, he uses his body as an instrument as he drums on his chest with his hands and briefly sings one note. Though Bashu is an orphan, severed from all his social ties (his family, his original village), he bodily revives the connection to his culture. Performing the music, on his body no less, performs his culture and his race as culture and body become synonymous, just as he and his Blackness are one. This previews the stronger assertion of this

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replies, more calmly, "Your father." Bashu lowers the stick in shock, asking "Where have you been?" And his newly named father responds, "Looking for you."

<sup>157</sup> Mottahedeh points out the camera angles and shots arising from Western cinema that are rooted in efficiency of comprehension. For example, the shot-reverse shot pattern that frames conversations between characters involves a shot of the first character speaking before the reverse shot shows the next participant. In other words, the camera films who is speaking at the given moment. But in this scene, the camera breaks these traditional codes and while the neighbor is reading the letter, we do not see him at all, just the objects being described. In this way, the camera reveals how it has been "seeing" for the audience all along. See Mottahedeh, 35-41.

racialized culture later on in the film, where Bashu uses his culture to undermine the nation-state and expose its flaws.

In this scene, Na'i becomes gravely ill and Bashu runs to the villagers asking for help, crying "Mother is sick!" in Persian. In a more twisted role reversal of the earlier scene where Bashu was the one sick and Na'i begging for help, the villagers immediately close their windows and doors when they see Bashu coming (the villagers do not even help their "own"). Unable to get any medical assistance, in desperation, Bashu performs a *zār* ceremony that successfully cures Na'i. *Zār* refers to an African belief that the body has been possessed by an evil wind, and in order to be cured, a ceremony involving drumming and chanting must take place in order to subdue the wind and return the afflicted to health, brought to Iran by Africans (many of them through the slave trade). Beyza'i's inclusion of a *zār* ceremony is intriguing because starting in the Pahlavi era, (from the 1920s onward), Iranian governments have generally opposed and discouraged *zār* practices for associated connotations of primitiveness and backwardness.<sup>158</sup>

Bashu's performance of such a ceremony directly undermines the state in two ways: performing a forbidden action while also showing the state's failure to provide adequate medical care for all of its citizens. Showing a dark-skinned boy successfully curing an ill light-skinned woman by performing a wholly African ceremony often labeled as primitive and associated with backwardness subverts accepted ideas of modernity and progress. This destabilizes racial hierarchies as well, with progressivism associated with whiteness and with "Aryan" Persians. Not only did the state not care for Na'i, but the *zār* ceremony works as well, if not better than, the state's modern medicines in curing her. A belief in *zār* is almost a rejection of ideals of modernity characteristic of the state and its purported superiority (a superiority that has been

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<sup>158</sup> Maria Sabaye Moghaddam, "Zār," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, July 20, 2009, accessed November 14, 2017, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zar>.

racialized). He asserts himself as a cultural Other and succeeds not only where the state had failed, but shows the validity of alternative forms of knowledge and being.

Despite these short-comings (or perhaps in spite of them), Beyza'i notes that nonetheless the nation-state is inescapable through *Bashu's* multiple letter-writing scenes. In order to communicate with her husband, Na'i must send letters in standardized, written Persian, a language she does not know, and thus must get help first from a neighbor, then Bashu. The scene in which Bashu writes a letter Na'i dictates to him places Bashu sitting with paper and pencil in hand while Na'i walks around the courtyard doing laundry. Negar Mottahedeh has analyzed this scene in light of Shi'i *taziyeh* tradition with a twofold argument: that *taziyeh* plays and actors blur spatial and temporal realities, and that this particular scene in *Bashu* makes use of this tradition of blending space-time.<sup>159</sup> *Taziyeh*, the Shi'i passion play, retells the story of the massacre of Imam Hussein (the third Shi'i Imam and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) and his companions at the Battle of Karbala through a re-enactment centered on, Mottahedeh argues, the blurring of spatial and temporal boundaries. The *taziyeh* stage, a circular arena, never changes—places and times shift because characters announce that they do.

Such a spatial-temporal blending is also used in this scene, both to connect Na'i to her absent husband (showing a romantic relationship while getting around modesty rules that forbid physical representations of it)<sup>160</sup> but also to remind the audience of the eternal presence of the state. As Na'i hangs clothes to dry, walking in the circular path characteristic of *taziyeh*, the background shows both soldiers and construction workers. Evoking these images reminds the audience of the omnipresent state, despite its shortcomings and the village's isolation. First, to participate in the state-funded and implemented postal system, Na'i needs to use the standardized

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<sup>159</sup> Mottahedeh, 18.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

language of the state, putting her on the lesser end of the unequal relationship of power (Fig. 3.6a). In other words, not only does she rely on the state to deliver her letters to her husband and vice versa, to even send a letter she must acquiesce to the demands of the nation-state (in this case, knowledge of the standard language, the language of power). The nation-state's imposition of a standard language create in her a linguistic Other. Second, the image of the soldiers blurs spatial boundaries as it recalls the Iran-Iraq War, a state conflict (Fig. 3.6b). And third, the image of the construction workers blends temporal boundaries as it recalls earlier action in the film (when the explosions of tunnel construction scared Bashu off the truck and into Na'i's farm) that represents the state's development projects (Fig. 3.6c). Beyza'i's use of the *taziyeh* tradition in this scene also accomplishes several goals. First and foremost, the *taziyeh*'s blending of space-time reveals the omnipresence of the nation-state. Second, using an indigenous Iranian form (adapted from its original theatrical style) in cinema provides an alternative to the Western standards similarly ubiquitous in film. Beyza'i thus helps herald in a "true" Iranian cinema that did not simply copy Western cinematic narratives or styles, a cinema that following the revolution became internationally renowned as an artistic cinema.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 335.



Fig. 3.6a: In order to communicate with her husband, Na'i must both participate in the nation-state's postal service and in its standardized Persian.



Fig. 3.6b: As Na'i walks around hanging up the wash, uniformed soldiers can be seen in the background (left).



Fig. 3.6c: Helmeted construction workers also appear in the background, on either side of Na'i.

### **Linguistic Others, Linguistic Citizenship?**

Revisiting the theme of standard languages mentioned above, the effects of the nation-state on life in the village are perhaps most obvious in an iconic scene of state-sponsored nationalism. As Bashu helps Na'i perform chores one day, he begins to hear the sound of warplanes and yells for everyone to get down. The village boys are nearby and proceed to make fun of him for this, teasing that very quickly escalates into violence. Na'i comes to Bashu's aid and splashes the boys with water, scolding them for their actions while Bashu, on the ground, has a hand on a stone. One of the boys' school textbooks lies a few feet away from him and he

makes the conscious choice to abandon the stone in favor of the book. The camera cuts to Na'i's back, with her facing the children and still berating them, when suddenly we hear Bashu's voice from off the screen, as he begins to read the standard Persian in the book. "Iran is our country. We are all from the same land. We are the children of Iran." The boys respond immediately and stop pestering him, instead asking curious questions such as "Have you gone to school?" "Where are your parents?" Through one common language—standard Persian—the ethnic, racial, and linguistic divides between Bashu and the children have been overcome. Bashu joins the community once he begins "speaking clear"—the standard language that is seen as unmarked, unblemished, and unproblematic.

This is a nationalist message rooted in linguistic commonality ("one nation, one language")—though Beyza'i is not explicitly advocating for one national ethnicity or culture, he is pushing a nationalism that unites its people under the language of the dominant ethnicity. Such a depiction and the scene itself have been praised by other scholars as a realistic nationalism: Iranians come from a variety of ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, but can be patriotic and united Iranians under one common language. This scene is one of the most touching and heartwarming of the film and is ripe with symbolism. The choosing of knowledge and unity (textbook) over violence (stone) in the midst of war, between an Arab and Gilaks (close to ethnic Persians; some sources consider Gilaks Persian),<sup>162</sup> is powerfully pacifist. The three sentences Bashu chooses to read push a nationalism based simply on Iranian citizenship—those who reside within the borders of Iran are its children and brothers and sisters of one another. They are good children and citizens of the nation-state, which watches over them as their proper guardian.

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<sup>162</sup> Sources such as this ethnic map consider Gilaks and Mazanis (another northern ethnic group) to be Persian: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f3/Ethnicities\\_and\\_religions\\_in\\_Iran.png/1200px-Ethnicities\\_and\\_religions\\_in\\_Iran.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f3/Ethnicities_and_religions_in_Iran.png/1200px-Ethnicities_and_religions_in_Iran.png).

Again however, whether through a monopoly on knowledge or violence (textbook vs. stone), this scene shows the pervasiveness of the state and its power over its citizens. Though Bashu and the village boys are united, for an instance, through a standardized language, the imposition of such a language participates in state-sanctioned Othering. A standard language by default privileges one language above others, creating a hierarchy, a marginalization, an Othering that has been reflected in the privileging of color in Bashu. These hierarchies are not “natural”—speaking in written Persian is not natural for anyone, not even Persians—just as Na’i’s normalization of whiteness is also challenged as unnatural.

These ideas of standardization and marginality can be extended to the notions of citizenship presented in this scene, which both counteract the earlier scene of the villagers questioning Bashu’s origins and reflect different realities. Through reading the book, Bashu claims for himself the citizenship denied to him (because of his color) before by the villagers at Na’i’s house. Bashu only accesses this citizenship by using the language of the state, a citizenship that has undergone revision throughout twentieth century Iranian history. As Mottahedeh has argued, the Islamic regime purified and rebuilt the nation’s film industry in order to train its citizens to be righteous wards of the state.<sup>163</sup> For this state to consolidate its power, a standard language for all citizens (from diverse linguistic backgrounds) was necessary, and had been in place since the Pahlavi era. However, if film was to be used by the Islamic Republic as a way to retrain its citizens, Mottahedeh points out that Iranian cinema would need new cinematic codes and conventions, a new standard language of film that did not simply copy Hollywood’s standard.<sup>164</sup> One major reason cinemas were a target of revolutionaries from 1978-79 were because of the marginalization they represented: they were sites of Westernization and

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<sup>163</sup> Mottahedeh, 41.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

decadence that alienated a large portion of the Iranian population (specifically, anyone who was not part of the elite, middle/upper-middle/upper classes). Beyza'i calls attention to cinema's power to estrange through using standard conventions during the scene of the schoolbook (such as the shot-reverse shot pattern), but then disposing of these in the scene where Na'i receives the second letter from her husband, momentarily throwing the audience off.<sup>165</sup> And in this we see how race in *Bashu* has only been one way of Othering—cinema itself makes its audience into Others if the language of the film alienates (the alienation of lower classes of Iranians with Hollywood-style *filmfarsi*) and once new standards become necessary. Through this, Beyza'i challenges all the defaults present both in the film and in Iranian society as a whole—"white" skin is not the default (nor necessarily is it desirable—see the *zār* scene), standard Persian is not, in fact, known by all, the state is not infallible, and a standard film language is not necessarily understood by all.

## Conclusion

The tension between the artificiality and yet salience of color, of language, of cinema itself is remarked upon extensively in Bahram Beyza'i's film, *Bashu, the Little Stranger*. From the beginning, *Bashu* is marked as an Other (the film calls him a "stranger") primarily because of his dark appearance. It is what his adopted mother, Na'i, first comments on when she is face to face with him, and also the subject of the rest of the villagers' first remarks. Their racism goes so far as for Na'i to attempt to wash him "white" while the village doctor flatly refuses to treat *Bashu* because his medicine only cures "whites." Race in this film is broadly conceptualized as phenotypical color, through both the narrative and dialogue (employment of the words "white" and "black"), and through film choices that highlight the skin colors of the characters. Beyza'i

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<sup>165</sup> Mottahedeh, 38.

does not stop here, however, and the film also shows how cultural and linguistic Others destabilize the nation-state, a destabilization reflected in the divergence from traditional cinematic codes—the audience become the Others.

This destabilization challenges common ideas of Iranianness and assumptions of the nation-state. Na'i's assumption that she can wash off Bashu's blackness to find "normal," white skin underneath is a product of a society taught that it is white. Identities, especially physiognomies that deviate from these assumed defaults are automatically assumed to not be Iranian—recall the different ways Afravian and Taslimi, the actors playing Bashu and Na'i respectively, are labeled in Persian language sources (he is "Arab" while she is "Iranian"). Modernity cannot help Na'i when she is sick, only a (racialized) cultural practice deemed "primitive" can.

An analysis of race in *Bashu* shows that the framework of the nation-state is essential to the inclusion of race in Iranian studies, because the state has historically been instrumental in propagating racial hypotheses. As mentioned before, race informed a substantial part of Iranian nationalism, especially that of the Pahlavi period. Racializing Persians as white Aryans within an insecure nation-state seeking to Westernize created default identities and expectations that point out critical flaws in the whole nationalizing system. *Bashu* and the scholarship surrounding the film shows an ambiguous concept of race that nevertheless assumes whiteness as the default—the closer one is to this standard, the less racialized one is.

*Bashu* then puts forth the idea of accessibility in multiple ways. Accessibility to the rights of citizenship, of the nation-state, depend on one's position within the racial and linguistic hierarchies created within such a framework. The villagers denied Bashu his citizenship—"Who are his people?"—but through his knowledge of the state's language, standard written Persian, he

was able to reclaim it to some extent. “Iran is our country. We are all from the same land. We are the children of Iran.” But are we?

## Conclusion

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“Being black or of a mixed race was not associated with inferiority or shame in Iran, as opposed to the Americas. As such, there was no advantage in altering blackness or hiding one’s African heritage to escape discrimination or obtain membership in the society.”

—Behnaz Mirzai, 2014.<sup>166</sup>

“[Siāh-bāzi] popularized and celebrated African culture rather than denigrated it, as did the ‘blackface’ minstrel performers in American culture, whose acts were deliberately mocking and racist...”

—Behnaz Mirzai, 2017.<sup>167</sup>

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Writing in 2014, historian and anthropologist Behnaz A. Mirzai implied that there were no stigmas associated with Blackness in Iranian culture. Much of Mirzai’s work centers around the Afro-Iranian communities on the southern coast of Iran, and in 2017 she published the foremost English-language work on slavery in Iran, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929*. She also mentions, regarding both siāh-bāzi and the character of Hājji Firuz, that because of their association with laughter, joy and renewal, these performances were not meant to denigrate or mock.<sup>168</sup> This thesis has argued the opposite: there are clear negative stereotypes associated with being Black in Iran, though they do not always take overtly negative forms. The siāh in siāh-bāzi brings laughter; similarly so does Hājji Firuz, who also announces the spring New Year. Even the portrayal of an actual Black Iranian, Adnan Afravian as Bashu in *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985), does not free Iranians from the problematics of representation—Beyza’i bluntly portrays the provincial racism and stigma of Blackness through the racist actions of the other characters.

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<sup>166</sup> Behnaz A. Mirzai, “Identity Transformations of African Communities in Iran.” In *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 362.

<sup>167</sup> Behnaz A. Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 129.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Though race has scientifically been debunked as biological difference, it still manifests in biological ways, especially in Iranian entertainment, cultural rituals, and mundane realities such as beauty standards. This is reflected in the linguistics of race—not just the racialization of language, but the language of race: terms for “races” include body modifiers such as skin (“*sefid-pust*,” “white-skinned”) and complexion (“*siah-chordeh*,” “black-complexioned”)—a fascinating area for further linguistic research. Studying Iranian Blackness reveals the power of historical revisionism, nationalist rhetoric, and culturally appropriated narratives. Mirzai’s incredible historical and ethnographical work remains critical to Iranian Studies and her research is indispensable to those who wish to study race and ethnicity in Iran—but her blind spots when it comes to race and racial prejudice are indicative of larger issues. For example, they could serve to downplay the real history of slavery in Iran (which continued until a quarter into the 20<sup>th</sup> century). There are also real historical events and national anxieties to take into consideration. Twentieth century Iranian history has been characterized by multiple political upheavals, from the Constitutional Revolution at the start of the century, to the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the ascension of the Pahlavis, to the CIA-backed coup of democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, to a popular revolution that overthrew centuries of monarchy and ushered in an Islamic Republic in 1979. The concerns of minority ethnic groups are not prioritized and often, they are feared by nationalists for the potential destabilization they might bring (such as mobilizing for autonomy and separation from the nation-state).

Broad frameworks of nationalisms help to explain the precarious situation of race in Iranian societies throughout time and space. Nationalism creates hierarchies and standards, privileging certain groups over others. During the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, secular dislocative nationalism that theorized Persians as the superior “Aryans” against inferior

“Semites” (including Arabs and Turks and their Islam), creating racial and ethnic hierarchies still present today. Although the Islamic Revolution promised to do away with such vertical power dynamics, these attitudes were not easily lost, having been taught in classrooms and in public spaces for decades. This is present in the discriminatory policies that ethnic groups still face in the Islamic Republic. Even as there is an emergence of the “rainbow nation”—a diverse nation where different ethnic and racial groups live in harmony—as seen through cinema such as *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985) and “We Will Resist Until the Last Drop of Blood,” (2016) these ideals are less implemented in practice, as some Iranians are slow and reluctant to critically engage with racism in Iranian spaces. *Bashu* also points out the fallibility of the nation-state in dealing with ethnicities, races, cultures, and languages because its structure requires standardization and hierarchies. Empowerment within the nation-state obliges its subjects to participate in its institutions, participation that can continue to reproduce uneven power dynamics (for example, Bashu is an “Other” until he speaks standard Persian, privileging this language above his native Khuzestani Arabic).

So what is “Blackness” in Iran? As this thesis has argued, Blackness is often a performance, whether exaggerated and appropriated (through *siāh-bāzi* and Hājji Firuz) or authentic (through the character of Bashu), a performance whose most important site of manifestation is on the individual body. Blackness looks a certain way, moves a certain way, speaks a certain way. These images, the racist, ugly, and tired jokes, become so reproduced that at the same time that they freeze Black Iranians in a mold, they also erase them—recall the scene in *Bashu* where the little village girl draws her finger down Bashu’s face, expecting it to wipe off what is surely charcoal or dirt, not black skin. Thus is the paradox of Black existence in Iran—if it does not fit the joyful, minstrel archetype put forth by the *siāh* and Hājji Firuz, then it is not

Black at all because “Iran doesn’t have Africans!” Even if their existence is not denied, their agency often is as Black Iranians have become the objects of anthropological research, documentary films, and photography projects, reduced to distant and numerically insignificant curiosities on the southern coast until the “outside world” takes interest.

Blackness reveals ideas of “Iranianness” and of the “true Iranian” as an assumed and default identity. What does it mean to be Iranian? “True Iranianness” rejects other identities like Arab- or Afro- and do not allow these to modify or hyphenate the “true Iranian.” Blackface, one of the most mainstream representations of any kind of Blackness, is a caricature, and a temporary identity “white” Iranians have the power to take on and discard at will. Confronting preconceived notions of “Iranianness” results in a richer and more aware cultural and political experience that deepens critical understandings of Iranian lives in particular and cultural experience in general. It opens up critical race theories for non-Western contexts while recognizing the benefits of these methodologies. The real and artificial borders between “homeland” and “diaspora” help us recognize a need to take the spectrum (not binary) of both into account when studying how historical trajectories result in modern identity politics. Further research in race in Iran should keep these in mind just as it seeks to establish stronger historical evidence for the identity trajectories we see today.

Blackness and racism are real in Iranian space; they are integral to some of our most joyful celebrations and significant cultural traditions. We cannot recognize one without the other, and we must recognize both. At the same time, we must recognize all forms of Blackness and that Blackness and Iranianness have multiplicities in order to avoid essentializing these experiences and reproducing such harmful essentialisms. There is no “one” “true Iranian”

experience, just as Hājjī Firuz definitely is not the only Black Iranian experience. Iranians can look like anything, move however they want to, and speak however they like.

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