

Affective Resistance Against Sovereign Erasure: Historicizing the (Maternal and) Feminist Politics of Shared Grief in Iran's *Woman, Life, Freedom* Uprising

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Abstract This article argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran's codified and institutionalized gender apartheid created a unique form of militarized women's domestic role from which grief and mourning became protected, even expected, forms of expression for maternal subjects. Bringing Iran's unique historical and political context to bear on an analysis of bereaved mothers' affective resistance during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) uprising, it demonstrates how mothers' expressions of "shared grief" constitute a life-affirming form of affective resistance that not only challenges sovereign erasure but also subverts traditional motherhood to perform a feminist politics of lamentation that enacts equality—revealing a maternal politics that threatens the performative undoing of Iran's essentialist gender apartheid and exposes the fragility of its theocratic rule.

Keywords Mourning, grief, affective resistance, Iran, Honig, Butler, Hooker

On September 17, 2022, as the battered and lifeless body of twenty-two-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini was laid to rest in her native Saqqez, in Kurdistan province, journalist Elaheh Mohammadi captured historic video on her cell phone. The unsteady footage depicted Jina's mother, Mojgan Eftekhari, encircled by a crowd of women holding their headscarves in fisted hands, waving them around to chants of *Jin, Jiyān, Azadi!* (Woman, Life, Freedom). Galvanized by the collective response to this loss and the broader context of systematic discrimination against women and Kurdish peoples by Iran's apartheid state and its "morality police," the crowd attending Jina's funeral rites transformed into a march, with protesters chanting *Marg Bar Dictator!* (Death to the Dictator), as they pressed onward from her grave site to the local governor's building.^{1,2}

Whereas in life, Jina's identity as a woman and a Kurd entailed a doubly minoritized and segregated reality, in death she embodied intersections that served to unite the shared grief and political outrage

of myriad constituencies—women, ethnic minorities, students, workers, and the unemployed. Their chants of “Woman, Life, Freedom” (WLF)—the phrase that would become the name of the movement—sparked widespread protests expressing grief and political opposition across the country.³ Within twenty-four hours of Jina’s burial, protestors had gathered in the Kurdish city of Sanandaj and in Tehran.⁴ Before the month was through, similarly defiant crowds had broken out in upwards of 160 cities and towns across all thirty-one of Iran’s provinces.

The political resistance emerging from this outpouring of grief merits deep consideration. It is not in and of itself surprising that a movement born of a mother’s grief should take on political dimensions. As Bonnie Honig has critically observed, there exists a “historic alliance of mothering with mourning,”⁵ manifested in what *appears* to be a global tradition of bereaved women lamenting their slain and disappeared children to political ends. In the United States, the privately endured Black grief of the Jim Crow era’s horrific lynchings found powerful public expression at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement through Mamie Till-Mobley’s unfathomable sorrow. Her public display of grief before her son Emmitt’s open casket forced Americans to reckon with the egregious racist violence that had mutilated his youthful body, demonstrating the imperative of collective action. Similar imperatives have driven bereaved movements across the Global South, including the Mães de Maio in São Paulo, Brazil; the Bosnian Mothers of Srebrenica and Ćepa; Turkey’s Saturday Mothers, and their historic counterparts in Argentina, the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo, among others, the WLF movement included.⁶

Feminist scholars who have engaged with these movements have tended to produce essentializing accounts that make sense of women’s political actions through a universal ideology of maternalism. That is, they have read these movements and mothers’ publicly shared grief as merely a societal extension of “feminine” moral values of nurturance and care. Sara Ruddick’s seminal analysis of the Madres best exemplifies this trend. She portrays these activists in the mold of the *mater dolorosa* (mother of sorrows), advancing an essentializing conception of motherhood as inherently nurturing and peace-oriented, reducing women to their familial roles.⁷ As Honig notes, Jean Bethke Elshtain’s analysis of the Madres likewise connects them “to an ideological maternalism that represents motherhood as timeless, universal, and natural, tethering it to an ethics of care that is all these things as well.”⁸ In Honig’s astute critique, ideological accounts like these have detrimental and depoliticizing effects: Motherhood is naturalized, and lamentation is maternalized, assuming an extra-political character—existing as a timeless universal divorced from historical context.⁹

However, a closer examination of the WLF movement in Iran—particularly the distinctive role of mothers within it—and the specific historical and political trajectory of mourning, maternal grief, and its gendered dimensions in the Islamic Republic reveals that this apparent alliance between mothering and mourning is neither a natural nor essential bond, but rather a historically contingent relationship shaped by state-imposed “gender apartheid.”¹⁰ Although my account is limited to the case of Iran, it serves as a helpful example that demonstrates the importance of context for all feminist analysis, and its particular strength in highlighting the failures and shortcomings of essentialist narratives and assumptions about women’s participation in politics. It also suggests that it is worth revisiting and questioning the apparent alliance between motherhood and mourning in other cases as well.

Militating against what Honig calls “maternalism’s extra-political spell,”¹¹ this article argues that in Iran’s distinct historical and political context, mothers’ publicly shared grief carries a particular political salience and transformative potential—overlooked in prevailing accounts—that neither relies on performing essentialized characteristics of “motherhood,” nor reproduces ideological maternalism and hierarchies shaped around gender.¹² To be sure, there is no maternal monopoly on grief-activism in Iran nor is there an essential quality of “motherhood” (or “womanhood” for that matter) that explains the particular significance and power of mothers’ involvements in such affective forms of contention. Rather, like all publicly shared grief, theirs carries a particular political salience and transformative potential that emerges from the specificities of the political conjuncture. More specifically, Iran’s distinct historical and political context reveals that maternal mourning’s very political potential depends on its subversive resistance to essentialized boundaries and categorization.

My analysis begins with an examination of the role that the foundational myth of bereavement played in Iran’s 1979 revolution, demonstrating how its public mourning rituals, elegies, and performances became regulated sites through which the post-revolutionary state’s national theocratic identity would be legitimated and its essentialist gender apartheid inscribed and performed. Building from this foundation, I argue that the regime’s essentializing system of gender apartheid, developed as part of Ayatollah Khomeini’s post-revolutionary theocratic consolidation of state power and war with Iraq (1980–88), created a unique form of militarized women’s domestic role. Specifically, I contend that as the essentialized, prescribed, and archetypal representation of women’s maternal sacrifice became codified in the state’s founding document as early as December 1979, and as women’s revolutionary value came to be measured by their ability to produce, nurture, and ultimately surrender male bodies for warfare in

the years that followed, motherhood was militarized and transformed into a political “institution” serving state power.¹³ This transformation had the effect of historically marking mothers as a special category of subjects.

Yet precisely from this position, where gender is militarized through sacrifice, grief and mourning became protected—even expected—forms of expression for maternal subjects, thereby opening an avenue of resistance within Iran’s otherwise thoroughgoing police state. In other words, I argue that in its attempts to exploit maternal sacrifice for its military campaign, the state inadvertently generated a protected subject status that would garner greater political resonance and visibility for mothers’ public share of grief. Thus, whereas mourning mothers initially worked to consolidate a fragile state sovereignty during the Iran-Iraq war, by the late 1980s their gender and grief began to reemerge “in uncalculated forms and unpredictable domains,”¹⁴ enabling them to resist and subvert that same sovereignty.

They accomplished this resistance through an affective repertoire that I call “shared grief”—practices that see individuals who have experienced state-inflicted loss converge in embodied, public displays of shared mourning that sensorially affect onlookers and audiences. As we will see, shared grief coalesces through what Clare Hemmings has termed “affective solidarity,” and in coming together it activates oppositional crowds who, through politicized expressions of fellow-feeling, contest the state’s ability to disappear and deny its victims or to exercise what Banu Bargu theorizes as “sovereignty as erasure.”¹⁵ This process confers upon the bereaved a limited recognition of their loss that marks its injustice at the level of the community. The Iranian case also shows us how, like gender,¹⁶ embodied displays of shared grief can and readily do produce political effects beyond the intentionality of grieving subjects.

Bringing this political history to bear on the present, I examine how this affective resistance reaches its zenith during the WLF uprising. Through an analysis of shared grief’s manifestations, especially in Iran’s ethnic minority communities, I demonstrate how mothers’ politicized laments both encompass and exceed a life-affirming form of affective resistance that challenges sovereign erasure and shields broader dissent. These laments further subvert state-sanctioned scripts of traditional motherhood and perform, in their stead, a proscribed and gendered politics of lamentation that enacts feminist equality. As these unruly mothers’ laments threaten the performative undoing of the state’s essentialist gender apartheid, they are met with increasingly harsh punishment as the regime attempts to deter future grieving mothers from emulating them.

The irony of this dynamic, of course, is that as the state endeavors to re-inscribe its sovereignty over that of the grieving mother, it

simultaneously attacks and undermines the very mythologized, codified, and ideological foundations upon which its legitimacy and apartheid system stand. Thus, insofar as the state's disciplinary sanctioning of bereaved mothers testifies to the potency of women's grief in the WLF uprising, it also speaks to the increasing fragility of theocratic rule.

1979's myth of bereavement: Regulating grief to legitimate theocracy & inscribe apartheid

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has, from its inception in December of 1979, grounded its religious-political authority and distinctly Shia nationalism in a populist mythology centered on loss and ritual lamentation. This narrative framework, which proved instrumental in mobilizing opposition to the Shah's rule well in advance of the revolution's later association with "Islamic" or clerical leadership, evolved into a cornerstone of the post-revolutionary order – providing a mechanism for legitimating the state's theocratic national identity and inscribing its systematic gender apartheid. An examination of this foundational mythology is thus essential to any analysis of public and gendered manifestations of grief and their transformative political potential in contemporary Iran.

The foundational myth centers on the Battle of Karbala, a critical event in the Shia tradition. In 680 CE Hussein, a grandson of the prophet Mohammad and son of the Shia Imam Ali, fell to the armies of the Sunni Umayyad caliph Yazid I and became a pivotal martyr for Shia Islam.¹⁷ In Iran, this narrative acquired revolutionary potential through Ali Shari'ati's retelling in public lectures at the Hosseiniye Ershad Institute in Tehran in the early 1970s. At Sorbonne from 1960–1964, Shari'ati, immersed himself in the anti-colonial thought of Frantz Fanon and the existentialist writings of Jean Paul Sartre. Hamid Dabashi explains that Shari'ati also spent years "translating works on political aspects of Shia Islam" before revolutionizing the traditional understanding of the Battle of Karbala into a call for active political engagement.¹⁸ His syncretism emphasized what Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson describe as the compelling ideal "that Hussein's martyrdom had taken place because Shia Muslims remained passive and ignorant of political and ideological issues," thereby encouraging mass participation in political and civic life.¹⁹ As a result, Shari'ati's creative lectures galvanized a generation of students for whom, as Michel Foucault has astutely remarked, "the distrust of [Islamic] legalism seemed to [...] be essential, along with a faith in the creativity of Islam."²⁰ In this spirit, his lectures inaugurated a politically charged current that newly conceived of Shia Islam as a movement for social justice that centered on the Shia sect's original and collective experience of bereavement and mourning.

While Shias failed to mobilize in defense of Hussein's life and their own political community in the seventh-century battle, his religious and political descendants forged a unique opportunity for worldly redemption with the 1979 revolution. Unfortunately for Shari'ati's own anticlerical views (and those of his mobilized students), it was *after* his death in 1977, and after the militant success of the revolution itself, that his novel interpretation of Karbala was woven into and appropriated by Ayatollah Khomeini's populist rhetoric in the lead-up to and aftermath of his violent usurpation of the constitutional process (between March and December 1979), where it proved particularly effective at galvanizing the Iranian masses.

Today, this massacre is commemorated on the Holy Day of Ashura through rituals of *sineh zani* (chest beating, a mild form of self-flagellation) and public mourning. Whereas the variegated and spectacular mourning rituals, accompanying elegies (*nohe*) and passion plays (*Ta'zieh*) commemorating Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala, traditionally undertaken during the first ten days of the Islamic calendar (*moharram*), predate the revolution by centuries, the post-revolutionary clerical state has systematically worked to contain and regulate this grief to political ends by institutionalizing the rituals, and for good reason: As Honig notes, "[t]he narrative [of Ashura] dramatized annually in different local iterations throughout the country, also provided a framework, Foucault saw, for the repetitive demonstrations that—in their sheer repetition—finally succeeded in toppling the Shah."²¹ Indeed, animated by Sharia'ti's retelling of the events at Karbala and propelled by the wanton killings of the Shah's police state, cycles of ritualized mourning and protest galvanized a revolution whose popularity and scope was unprecedented in the twentieth century.²²

Having ridden in on this revolution's coattails,²³ the theocratic state is all too aware "of the dangerous revolutionary potential of the rituals," in recent years forging "governmental structures to organize and supervise them."²⁴ Beyond requiring performers to register before enacting their lamentations, this institutionalization has proliferated the ritual's practice while regulating its *gendered* performance. To appreciate how this mourning became a site through which the state would legitimate its theocratic identity and inscribe its gender apartheid, it is helpful to contrast the narrative's origins with its regulated and institutional expression after the revolution.

The narrative of Hussein's martyrdom originates neither with clerical interpretation nor with Sharia'ti's retellings of the events of Karbala, but in the testimony of Hussein's sister, Zaynab, who witnessed her brother's death in the massacre only to be taken as a prisoner by Yazid I's forces. As Zaynab was brought before the caliph's *majlis* in shackles and threatened with a life of enslavement, her grief manifested as a fierce and politically charged lamentation that documented her

brother's killing, marked it as a political injustice before the caliph's court, and decried Yazid I's forces as tyrannical. It was as a result of her bereaved courage and protest, that Zaynab would secure an unlikely liberation for herself and her brother's progeny – an act that would go on to consecrate the tragedy and inscribe its lasting memory for Shia Muslims.

Crucially, despite having been a bereaved mother in her own right (her two sons were also killed fighting alongside her brother in the battle), Zaynab's grief manifested in a radical departure from the essentializing image of *mater dolorosa* (mother of sorrows), transcending gendered tropes of passivity, weakness, or mere sorrow in the face of suffering and loss. Neither did her oration contain nor express maternalist tropes of nurture or care. Rather, recalling Antigone's defiance of Creon's burial prohibition, Zaynab's grief constituted a direct challenge to sovereign authority through the very act of mourning. A radically fearless subject impelled by overwhelming grief, Zaynab's sororal lament over the loss of her brother mobilizes a righteous rage and mournful speech in defiance of her captors' narratives, while refusing to submit herself to their arbitrary and tyrannical rule. The historical text emerging from her testimony eschews the image of a mourner bent in tears, instead illuminating grief's potential to constitute a political and affective modality of resistance against tyrannical rule.

Beyond the conventional reading of Creon's sovereign decree prohibiting Polynices' burial and mourning as tyrannical overreach contested by his sister Antigone, Zaynab's grief more precisely evokes Honig's interpretation of Antigone as both sister and "partisan political actor."²⁵ In Honig's conjunctural analysis, Antigone's mourning of Polyneices carries explicitly partisan political force through its capacity to mobilize passions and behaviors that align with an alternative conception of sovereignty. While Zaynab's grief advances a sovereignty that prioritizes Ali's anointed line and its claims to ascension over the rule of the Sunni caliphate – a partisan grief that the IRI's clerical leaders frequently evoke to legitimate the post-revolutionary state's theocratic and Shia nationalist identity, Honig's Antigone advances a sovereignty that privileges "fidelity to... clan over polis,"²⁶ manifesting as precisely the kind of aristocratic assertion of family loyalty that Solon's democratic legislation had attempted to circumscribe. Despite their innumerable differences, both figures can be said to furnish powerful examples of political and partisan grief manifesting as affective resistance to sovereign erasure – a point to which I will return later in the paper.

Significantly, although most *nohe* (elegies) in Iran reflect these origins and portray Hussein's martyrdom "from the point of view of a woman: Zaynab,"²⁷ the institutionalized expressions of this myth

following the clerical consolidation of the state have thoroughly *masculinized* portrayals and re-enactments of Zaynab's grief. Contemporary public performances of Ashura's mourning rituals are thus the exclusive domain of male subjects, with women confined to spectator positions or relegated to private, gender-segregated spaces. Barring the recent, brave, and singular act of civil disobedience undertaken by a group of young and unveiled women in Karaj who defiantly performed the ritual of *sineh zani* amid a procession of grieving men in solidarity with the WLF uprising,²⁸ in post-revolutionary Iran, self-flagellation, like the singing of public *nohe* and the acting out of public *Ta'zieh* performances are strictly led by men, with young boys often acting out Zaynab's role and are re-enacted by a group of men beating their chests before an audience of women relegated to passive spectator roles—a reality that, I assert, mirrors the post-revolutionary state's theocratic and patriarchal conceptualization of political authority. Gender apartheid is given a theological and political basis in these performances.

Premised on the fear that women's publicly shared grief might animate the narrative's grief-stricken testimony and opposition to tyrannical government in the present, the IRI's strict and gendered regulation of *nohe*, *Ta'zieh*, and *sineh zani* rituals aims to suppress women's political agency. At minimum, the requirement that men or boys perform Zaynab's grief rests on a prohibition that constitutes women's "unruly" affective expressions as in need of containment. These regulatory mechanisms carry faint echoes of Solon's sixth-century prohibition of the professional mourners' *threnos* and his privatization of the intimate family *goos*—which, as Honig has noted, suppressed powerful forms of women-led lamentation that carried partisan political force.²⁹ In both cases, the gendered regulation of mourning serves political, albeit vastly different, ends. Whereas Solon's ancient prohibitions served a democratic politics aimed at suppressing cycles of revenge catalyzed by aristocratic women's passionate lamentations,³⁰ Iran's modern masculinization of the public mourning rituals associated with its foundational myth of bereavement serves to inscribe and perform a gender apartheid designed to subordinate women to second-class status. Inasmuch as these expressions risk evoking a woman's powerful dissent from theocratic tyranny, their suppression functions to regulate and (re)inscribe women's subordinate position.

According to the ruling theocrats' logic, only masculine subjects can be trusted to serve the myth's political functions reliably, that is, to legitimize the state's distinctly Shia and theocratic national identity and its prescribed gender order. To be sure, women's grief would be deemed venerable once given its own role to play in the Ayatollah's essentialist vision of apartheid, as was the case with bereaved mothers during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) whose grief was mobilized to

consolidate what was then a deeply fractious and divided post-revolutionary state. What the clerical leadership did not anticipate, however, was how the association of motherhood with mourning would also afford the same with a greater latitude for acting politically.

Mourning mothers, martyred sons: Consolidating theocracy & militarizing motherhood

To understand why mothers' public expressions of grief attract significant political attention and resonance in contemporary Iran we must turn to consider the militarized role that mothers and their sacrifices played in defining the nascent theocratic state in the turbulent aftermath of 1979. At that juncture, Ayatollah Khomeini's calculated political maneuvers—from the hostage crisis to the manipulation of the constitutional process—transformed what had materialized as a broad-based revolutionary movement into an explicitly theocratic state.³¹ His orchestration of the hostage crisis served as a *coup* that precipitated the dissolution of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's provisional government, enabling Khomeini to circumvent democratic processes and institute a constitution that inscribed the "divine authority" of the supreme religious jurist (*faqih*) "over state and society" through the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*.³² This constitutional codification of the Ayatollah's supreme clerical authority marked a pivotal step towards the consolidation of a nascent theocratic state, one very much plagued with internal opposition and external adversaries. Nevertheless, the December 1979 constitution provided the requisite legal foundations for institutionalizing a male-supremacist state and regime of gender apartheid while it also enshrined an essentialized, prescribed and archetypal representation of womanhood, one tied to women's maternal sacrifice, into the state's constitutional fabric.

Conveniently, this idealized model of womanhood was conceived with reference to yet another favorite lecture topic of Shari'ati's: none other than the archetypal figure of Fatemeh Zahra—Prophet Mohammad's daughter, Shia Imam Ali's spouse, and mother of Hussein, the Shia martyr at Karbala.³³ By March 8, 1979, only weeks following his return from self-imposed exile in Iraq (a move he undertook in protest of women's suffrage in 1963), Ayatollah Khomeini had already moved to suppress International Women's Day celebrations, relocating the annual celebration of women to Fatemeh Zahra's birthday. In the months preceding the December constitution's enactment, he had publicly and repeatedly linked Fatemeh Zahra's figure to the prescribed ideal for Iranian wives and mothers, portraying them as "producers of revolutionary subjects."³⁴ Of course, the irony of Khomeini's temporal displacement of women's revolutionary

commemoration is particularly striking, given March 8's intrinsic connection to revolutionary praxis through its commemoration of the Russian February Revolution.

As the annual recognition of women's revolutionary demands for political rights was silenced in favor of their essentialized commemoration as "wives" and "mothers," the constitution's passage instituted what Haleh Afshar conceptualizes as two distinct classes of citizens: the male-led Guardian class, invested with exclusive "power over life and death," and Iranian women, who, to borrow Afshar's ingenious phrase, were positioned as "guardians of cradles and coffins."³⁵ This essentialized conception of women's domestic role, I contend, found its most explicit articulation in the constitutional preamble "Woman's Role."³⁶ Within this founding document, the revolution's triumph over the "imperialist-bred corruption" of monarchical tyranny is explicitly tied to Iranian women's responsibilities for rearing and nurturing a new generation of just and moral men, positioning Iranian mothers and their reproductive labor at the core of the Muslim family and nation, as dedicated bearers and sacrificial defenders of its revolutionary sovereignty.³⁷ Amid a deeply fraught and fractured post-revolutionary context preceding the Iran-Iraq war, this prescribed archetypal role would prove crucial to entrenching the sovereignty of the nascent theocratic state. By positioning Iranian women as mothers, and mothers as sacrificial guardians of revolutionary martyrdom, the state historically designated mothers as a special category of subjects who would be mobilized in service of its external war effort.

The outbreak of the war with Iraq in September 1980 provided Supreme Leader Khomeini with a decisive mechanism for consolidating his theocratic power. While deploying the war to eliminate political opposition—as evidenced by rival President Banisadr's displacement to the front lines—Khomeini simultaneously mobilized and militarized Iranian women's domestic roles, calling on them to fulfill their revolutionary duties of maternal sacrifice in service of state military power. For eight agonizing years, mothers in Iran were compelled to produce soldiers, celebrated by the state for sacrificing their sons (many as young as eight or nine years old) to Iran's *basij* (volunteer) forces. As child soldiers were deployed to clear landmines on the frontlines in what became one of the bloodiest conventional wars of the twentieth century, the theocratic state consecrated their status as "martyrs" of revolutionary sovereignty while elevating their bereaved mothers as sacred guardians of the same.

Distinguishable from analogous conceptualizations of "sacrificial republican womanhood" globally, the IRI's construction of women's domestic roles is unique both in that its gendered role and archetype is *codified* in a dedicated preamble of the state's constitutional framework,

and in that its prescribed role is subsequently exploited and mobilized in the state's military effort, which compelled mothers to live up to this archetype by "volunteering" their children for sacrifice as a "maternal duty" and service to the "revolutionary" state. Thus, I assert that as women's revolutionary value came to be measured by their ability to produce, nurture, and ultimately surrender male bodies for warfare in the post-revolutionary period, the state's militarization of women's domestic roles had the effect of militarizing motherhood and transforming into a political institution serving state power. This was an institution that, over the course of the post-revolutionary war with Iraq, was no less than essential to consolidating the state's nascent, theocratic and embattled hold on sovereignty.

Notably, as women's prescribed gendered roles were militarized through sacrifice, grief and mourning became protected, even expected, forms of expression for maternal subjects.³⁸ Due in large part to the severely distressing nature and sheer magnitude of the sacrifices the mothers of martyred sons had been compelled to make, their roles were cemented as deeply revered and somewhat *untouchable* figures in Iran's post-revolutionary political landscape.³⁹ The bereaved and grieving mother whose son's martyrdom served the revolution emerged as a powerful symbol of the state's religious and political authority, a figure celebrated as integral to its very survival and legitimacy. As Roxanne Varzi explains, the state crafted a carefully controlled narrative of "the strong mourning women and the heroic martyrs," one that simultaneously celebrated maternal sacrifice while confining legitimate grief expression to highly regulated scripts and spaces.⁴⁰ As a result, the very statecraft and rhetoric that carved out a unique form of militarized women's domestic role—a role that proved essential to defining the sovereignty of the nascent theocratic regime—opens a unique avenue of resistance for bereaved mothers within Iran's otherwise thoroughgoing police state.

Mourning mothers, desecrated kin: Subversive performances of maternal grief

As the state elevated bereaved mothers to consolidate its rule against external threats, it simultaneously pursued systematic repression of internal opposition. Beginning in 1981, during the war with Iraq, Supreme Leader Khomeini authorized a clandestine campaign of mass executions that would reach its apotheosis in the 1988 prison massacres.⁴¹ Many of the executed dissidents, serving sentences for non-capital offenses, were newly charged as "heretics," "apostates" and "unbelievers" during the purges for espousing a spectrum of leftist politics.⁴² By late 1988, the discovery of mass graves in Khavaran, southeast of

Tehran, revealed the scale of these killings and soon gave rise to a new political force: mothers whose expressions of grief would not entrench state sovereignty, but rather subvert its very ability to materialize as *erasure*.⁴³

The movement now known as the Mothers of Khavaran was the first in post-revolutionary Iran to subvert maternal grief and mourning into a site and expression of resistance. For nearly four decades, the mothers have publicly lamented their lost loved ones in a wildly successful and public challenge to the state's ability to disappear and deny its victims. In this endeavor, their efforts are enabled by what Judith Butler has famously theorized as the fundamental instability characteristic of gendered positions.⁴⁴ Whereas the post-revolutionary state's gender apartheid system is premised on rigid essentialist assumptions about stable binary gender categories, and even assigns gendered characteristics and proclivities to these categories so as to regulate them—it is also a system that fundamentally misapprehends gender as an ongoing performative process, one that inevitably exceeds regulatory attempts at containment. As Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir, building on Butler, have perceptively argued in the context of women's activism at Israeli checkpoints, "gender cannot be tamed and restricted to specific and prescribed functions; gender emerges and reemerges in uncalculated forms and unpredictable domains."⁴⁵ In other words, gender has a subversive potential that resists domestication and confinement within designated and institutionally mandated roles. The Mothers of Khavaran exemplify precisely this subversive potential, demonstrating how maternal roles, far from reflecting essential feminine characteristics, can be strategically reinhabited to challenge the very system that seeks to contain them.

Thus, while the state can carve out a special status and script a role for bereaved mothers as a category of subjects and even prescribe the political function of motherhood as an institution, it cannot control how gender itself operates or manifests within and through these roles. By setting up these rigid gender categories, the state fails to apprehend that gender affords a degree of political unpredictability. It cannot fully domesticate gender so as to determine how maternal grief will be embodied, expressed, performed, or politically activated, and it is precisely this subversive quality—which Kotef and Amir have theorized as gender's "corporeal excess"⁴⁶—and its overlap with maternal impunity in the IRI, that has enabled women to re-embody and re-inhabit their grief as mothers in ways that continue to exceed the state's rigid schemes and calculations. Indeed, this capacity for excess becomes all the more pronounced when we are dealing not merely with a gendered presence, but with grief itself. After all, grief's process, is, in the words of Lauren Berlant, both "disorganized and

disorganizing."⁴⁷ As an affective and thus sensual matter, it "is elsewhere to sovereign consciousness,"⁴⁸ and, we might add, sovereign control.

Early on in their activism, the Mothers of Khavaran were drawn together through what Clare Hemmings terms "affective solidarity"—a transformative process whereby experiences of emotional discord and marginalization generate novel "modes of engagement."⁴⁹ More specifically, their grief coalesced shortly after prisoners' families were abruptly denied visitations in mid-August 1988 and subsequently informed of their loved ones' deaths, which prompted the bereaved to converge outside the prison gates and before Parliament and the Ministry of Justice, where they initiated sit-ins before being dispersed by the state's Revolutionary Guards.⁵⁰ Denied conventional repertoires of protest, yet drawn together on account of the affective dissonance they had experienced through the disappearances of their loved ones, their grief generated new affective modes of resistance as the women brazenly defied the state's prohibition against convening ceremonial gatherings for mourning and honoring the dead.

As the mothers and their families proceeded to gather on weekly pilgrimages to mourn their losses at suspected mass burial sites, what had initially taken shape as an experience of affective solidarity was quickly transmuted into an affective repertoire of "*shared grief*"—practices where individuals subjected to state-inflicted loss converge in embodied, public displays of collective mourning. These manifestations are the sort that produce sensorial impacts upon audiences, activate oppositional crowds and thereby contest hegemonic state narratives of violence. As an affective repertoire of resistance, shared grief directly confronts what Bargu theorizes as "sovereignty as erasure" understood as the state's capacity to disappear and deny its victims.⁵¹ Where Bargu locates the "practical proof (and fantasy) of [sovereign] power" in the state's ability to violate, torture, destruct, and ultimately, *erase* the insurgent's corporeal existence, I posit shared grief as a vital, affective, and frequently spontaneous modality of resistance that interrupts and undermines this sovereign operation.⁵² Even under conditions of extreme authoritarianism, as exemplified in the case of Iran, public and embodied manifestations of shared mourning enable those who have experienced private losses at the hands of the state to converge with communities born of affective solidarity and to directly challenge state control over disappeared bodies and authoritative narratives of political violence. In its challenge to sovereign power, shared grief also confers upon the bereaved a limited recognition of their loss, marking its injustice before members of the community.

To be clear, the notion of shared grief I advance here diverges fundamentally from accounts that locate in grief a common vulnerability

which, as Butler argues, “serves as the basis for an apprehension of our commonality” or establishes an ethical foundation for mutual understanding and reconciliation across divided communities.⁵³ Rather, the shared grief I theorize is irreducibly political. While manifesting in public spaces, it does not entail universal participation, nor does witnessing such grief constitute participation in it. The identity of those who grieve, and the genealogy of their grief, are constitutive of its political character and agonistic dimensions. Crucially, shared grief does not encompass the mourning of arbitrary or accidental losses, and it categorically excludes mourning for lives sacrificed to legitimize the state (unless, of course, this mourning also expresses an opposition to the state and its excessive or wrongful sacrifice). Instead, shared grief tends to emerge around lives the state has desecrated and deemed legitimate to kill, or whose very elimination the state refuses to acknowledge – paradigmatically, the disappeared.

In her compelling analysis of Medea’s politics of loss, Danielle Hanley illuminates a parallel dynamic within grief’s operations, yet her account of how affective solidarity is mobilized through grief diverges from my own in important ways.⁵⁴ Drawing upon the insights of Audre Lorde, Hanley conceptualizes affective solidarity as requiring the work of choreography – that is, the deliberate *conscious intention* of actors who endeavor to orchestrate mourning choruses and their collective actions into harmonious alignment.⁵⁵ By contrast, my theorization of shared grief and the affective solidarity through which it coalesces, proceeds from a different premise: namely, that conscious intentions are frequently subverted by affective currents, just as affects themselves may betray our avowed purposes. Thus, movements that either consolidate or fracture solidarity through emotions such as grief and anger are, I contend, more often *impelled* than voluntarily undertaken – driven by the unconscious stirrings of passions manifested, foremost, at the level of the body. In this respect, my account of shared grief has something in common with Butler’s framework insofar as neither posits grief as a conscious undertaking or volitional act. I contend that grief, much like gender, can ‘do’ things behind the subject’s intention. As Butler writes, “One cannot say, ‘Oh, I’ll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I’ll apply myself to the task, and I’ll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me.’”⁵⁶ Rather, it is grief that has plans for us. Grief impels our actions and spontaneously takes the reins.

Through weekly Friday morning gatherings at unmarked mass-burial sites in Khavaran, Beheshte Zahra, and suspected mass graves throughout the country, the mothers have persistently enacted shared grief in what have since become widely documented and publicized campaigns. Leaving flowers and markings over their loved ones’

suspected resting places, the mourners often punctuate their visitations with appearances before the Ministry of Justice.⁵⁷ Unable to settle their grief so long as their loved ones remain unaccounted for, decades on from their disappearances their public lamentations persist in frequent and embodied convergences that transform their private losses into public contestations of state power. Indeed, by performing maternal grief at the suspected sites of their children's mass burial, the Mothers of Khavaran do not simply reproduce and reinforce a gendered and traditional role prescribed by the apartheid state. Rather, by grieving the lives marked as killable by the state in place of the lives sacrificed in its name, the mothers are, however (un)intentionally, 'failing' to perform maternal grief correctly and thus, "may be read as performing a subversive implementation of this gendered position, making use of a prescribed identity" while exceeding the state's expectations of maternal grief to transform its expression into a powerful site of resistance.⁵⁸

There is perhaps no better indication of both the subversive threat of mothers' shared grief and the state's relatively constrained capacity to suppress it than the Iranian state's response to the Mothers of Khavaran's decades-long campaign. While the women face routine surveillance, harassment, detainment and arbitrary arrests by state officials seeking to silence them, the state has generally refrained from the harsher punishments typically applied to other civil and political activists. Severe punishment would not only expose the state's veneration of mothers as disingenuous, undercutting its legitimating and ideological force, but also render state officials vulnerable to public accusations of assuming the tyrant's role in the foundational narrative of bereavement (*even Yazid had the mercy to set Hussein's mourners free*). Avoiding direct confrontation with mothers as much as possible, as it could destabilize state ideology, officials have nonetheless gone to great lengths to undermine their agency by resorting to systematically suppressing commemorative practices and violently dispersing gatherings and destroying memorial markers.⁵⁹ The 2009 bulldozing of the Khavaran mass grave site, documented in a 2018 report, represents a particularly significant attempt to eliminate forensic evidence of the executions.⁶⁰ These actions demonstrate the state's ongoing efforts to erase both physical evidence of the killings—the marks of its own sovereignty—and the collective and subversive memory maintained through mothers' shared expressions of loss.

Successive iterations of bereaved movements in Iran—from the Mothers of Laleh Park, emerging in the aftermath of the 2009 protest movement, to the Mothers of Aban, materializing following the November 2019 revolt—have also enacted shared grief in subversive and novel ways. Most tellingly, the Mothers of Laleh Park differed

fundamentally from both the Mothers of Khavaran and Mothers of Aban movements, which primarily comprised bereaved mothers. The Mothers of Laleh Park group, by contrast, did not consist mainly of grieving mothers but rather emerged when civil rights activists and protest organizers at Laleh Park strategically incorporated grieving mothers of slain protesters into their demonstrations “to create a space of activism through the opportunity that grieving mothers could create.”⁶¹ By appropriating maternal grief as a protective cover for non-mothers participating in shared grief against state killings, organizers further subverted its performance into a shield for broader political grievances. Maternal grief was thus transformed into a means of forging rare and relatively protected zones of political dissent within Iran’s comprehensive police state—providing necessary analytical context for understanding both the overrepresentation of mothers in this repertoire of affective resistance and their unprecedented role in the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising.

In loss, feminist reclamations of life: Shared grief in the WLF uprising

In the immediate aftermath of Jina’s passing, street protests turned deadly, and within weeks, those who ventured outside their homes did so without any guarantee of return. As the state mobilized to contain the uprising, its agents fired indiscriminately on protesters and arrested tens of thousands.⁶² Its sovereignty embattled, the state laid siege to Kurdish towns and cities, concentrating lethal force on the deeply impoverished, systematically neglected, and hyper-exploited Baloch peoples of Sistan va Baluchistan⁶³ before initiating a sustained campaign of chemical attacks targeting girls’ schools that affected upwards of 127 institutions.⁶⁴ United Nations documentation conservatively estimates that 551 protesters, including 68 children, were shot dead in the streets.⁶⁵ Simultaneously, the state’s revolutionary courts imposed arbitrary death sentences, predicated on confessions extracted through torture, in show-trials broadcast via state media, before executing ten young men at the morning call for prayer.⁶⁶

It is within this perilous context that by mid-October 2022, Iranian Kurdistan emerged as the epicenter of both state violence and resistance, with politicized mourning at burial grounds taking on an increasing significance for the movement. Despite targeted threats and shows of force across the region, on October 26 Saqqez became a focal point as tens of thousands from across the country converged at Amini’s grave in Aichi Cemetery. As multi-ethnic crowds joined her Kurdish community to publicly share their grief, they manifested forms of cross-ethnic solidarity that distinguish this uprising in

contemporary Iranian history.⁶⁷ Collectively, they observed *chehelom* – the ritual fortieth-day commemoration where loved ones gather for final farewells to the deceased.

The subsequent day, too, witnessed masses gathering for the *chehelom* of slain sixteen-year-old protester Nika Shakarami in Lorestan's capital of Khorramabad and in the village of Hayat al-Ghayb. In Khorramabad, women mourners cut their hair, resurrecting a powerful gesture of mourning dating back to the eleventh century, reconstituting it as an act of civil disobedience amid chants attesting to the limitations of state violence.⁶⁸ "Artillery, tanks, guns – these are no longer effective! Tell my mother she no longer has a daughter!"⁶⁹ While in Hayat al-Ghayb mourners of all genders articulated demands for greater solidarity across ethnic cleavages: "From Lorestan to Kurdistan, I sacrifice my life for Iran!"⁷⁰ Analogous sentiments materialized among mourners in Piranshahr, at the interment of sixteen-year-old protester Karwan Ghader Shokri, where masses chanted "Kurd, Baloch, Azeri, freedom and equality!"⁷¹ While crowds converging at Ghazaleh Chalabi's *chehelom* in Amol mourned by burning headscarves, chanting, and dancing,⁷² those at Siavash Mahmoudi's articulated collective commitment: "We swear on the blood of our loved ones that we are resisting until the end!"⁷³ On November 3, 2022, when the *cheheloms* of two slain protesters, Hadith Najafi and Parsa Rezadoost, coincided, thousands of mourners traversed Karaj to manifest their solidarity.⁷⁴

Against the backdrop of relentless scenes and expressions of shared grief like these—which simultaneously harken back to the revolutionary grief that once contributed to the Shah's overthrow and reflect the particularly devastating toll and incommensurable loss visited upon Iran's ethnic-minority communities under the prevailing theocracy—mothers' shared grief re-emerged in uncalculated forms yet again, this time, performing a proscribed and gendered politics of lamentation that enacts feminist equality. To substantiate this claim, we need to look no further than the cases of Mahmonir Zaynab Molaei-Rad and Nasrin Shakarami.

In the aftermath of the November 2022 solidarity strike across Iran, the state's violent response in the small city of Izeh, Khuzestan, culminated in a massacre claiming nine lives, including that of nine-year-old Kian Pirfalak. State media swiftly attributed the massacre to "terrorists" on motorbikes affiliated with the Islamic State (ISIS), before retracting this account the following day.⁷⁵ The subsequent funeral gathering became a site of profound political significance when Kian's mother, Mahmonir Zaynab Molaei-Rad, stepped before hundreds of mourners to lament her loss and, still at the height of her grief, spontaneously broke into recounting her recollections of the events leading to her son's premature death. Surrounded by members of her Bakhtiari

ethnic-minority community, she began: "Hear from my own lips what happened during the shooting. They shouldn't say it was terrorists — they are lying."⁷⁶

With the crowd encouraging her funeral oration, Mahmonir described how their family vehicle approached a checkpoint where uniformed and plainclothes officers were stationed. After initially passing the checkpoint, an officer commanded them to return. According to Mahmonir, Kian expressed trust in police intentions, stating, "Dad, trust the police this time and come back, they want our wellbeing." It was upon their return to the checkpoint, however, that officers opened fire on their vehicle. As the crowd erupted in chants of "death to Khamenei," Mahmonir continued through tears: "I told the kids to get under the seat. . . My little one was under the dashboard, I don't know why Kian didn't get under the seat—he was chubby." Ultimately, she exclaimed, "they barraged the car with bullets!"⁷⁷ Bullets that took Kian's life and left Mahmonir's husband, Meysam, critically injured.

Mahmonir's funeral oration marked a radical departure from state-sanctioned performances of bereaved motherhood. Her grief marked her as unwilling to accept her son's life as a sacrifice offered to the state, and on that account alone, she had "failed" to perform maternal grief correctly. Like her namesake, Zaynab, the chronicler of Hussain's martyrdom, when she declared "Hear from my own lips what happened," Mahmonir asserted herself not as a passive vessel of state-sanctioned sacrifice, but as an authoritative witness and plaintiff of state violence demanding to be heard. Her sharing of her grief transformed the traditional role of the grieving mother, as seen from the local and statist perspective, from one of sorrowful mourning into an affective expression of resistance against sovereign erasure.

Whether speaking through an amplified microphone before hundreds of mourners—a role typically reserved for male religious figures—or singing a childlike nursery rhyme in memory of her son, Mahmonir embodied a challenge to normative and gendered expectations of bereaved motherhood. Rather than embodying the scripted performance of the sobbing sorrowful mother, her anguish manifested in part as a forceful political indictment, one that spontaneously activated the crowd's responsive and politically charged chants of "death to Khamenei," underscoring how her public mourning generated an affective opening for the movement from shared grief to political grievance.⁷⁸ As her trembling but assertive voice converged with the crowd's embodied displays of mourning, their shared grief not only challenged the state's narrative but implicated specific authorities in Kian's killing, recalling precisely the kind of lamentation that Zaynab had levelled against Yazid I's forces in the foundational myth

of bereavement, which the IRI has gone to lengths to proscribe from women. As Kotef and Amir have elsewhere argued, the enactment of maternal roles by women constitutes more than a mere replication and reinforcement of conventionally prescribed social positions. Rather, the inadequate or improper execution of “maternal” behaviors may be interpreted as a form of resistant performance, one that enables these gendered subjects to subversively manifest a mandated identity that they cannot entirely circumvent.⁷⁹

Indeed, whether intentional or not, Mahmonir’s grief manifested as it did in the moment. Driven by the unpredictable and often self-defying nature of grief, her case would go on to demonstrate how shared grief *can* and readily does *produce political effects* beyond the actor’s intentionality.⁸⁰ Unbeknownst to her, as smartphone recordings of her funeral oration circulated through digital networks, they too inspired greater rounds of protests, followed by a great deal of controversy. State media outlets concocted rumors pointing to Mahmonir’s “unusual” comportment to claim that she was not a bereaved mother, but a political agent—as if she must be one or the other, but surely not *both*—and that her nine-year-old son, Kian, about whom videos and images were circulating online, was a doctored fabrication of a child that had never existed. Such rumors, however, have done little to sway public opinion. In much the same way that actors who may not intend to embody their grief as maternal subjects may nonetheless be read as bereaved mothers against their explicit intentions,⁸¹ the meanings obtained from their gendered performances of grief, once circulated within what Sara Ahmed calls an “affective economy,” are themselves vulnerable to appropriation.⁸² As in Mahmonir’s experience, a gathered crowd of observers can create such a context—one that, for her, also came at a personal cost. Two months later, she was summoned by officials in Izeh and was subsequently banned and suspended from her workplace at the Education Ministry and Fatemieh Conservatory.⁸³

While the cost of Mahmonir’s mournful testimony was her livelihood, the cost of Nasrin Shakarami’s shared grief was the temporary loss of her freedom, but more on that in a moment.⁸⁴ When sixteen-year-old Nika disappeared following her participation in the WLF protest in Tehran, her mother Nasrin confronted not merely the loss of her child but the state’s systematic efforts to obscure the circumstances of her death. While still immersed in raw grief and justifiably enraged by the state’s refusal to surrender her daughter’s remains, Nasrin recorded a video—later broadcast by Radio Farda—that transformed her personal loss into publicly shared grief. In this recording, Nasrin’s maternal grief embodies a fundamental challenge to the essentializing trope of *mater dolorosa*. Though dressed in the traditional black mourning attire, she appears deliberately unveiled—perhaps in

solidarity with the protests for which her daughter died – articulating her grief with somber and resolute determination to expose the truth of state violence.

Despite visible exhaustion from her ordeal, Nasrin recounts her daughter's disappearance with remarkable precision, documenting how the state's handling of Nika's death exemplifies established patterns of evidence suppression and narrative coercion. According to Nasrin's bereaved testimony, she was speaking with Nika by telephone at 11:30 pm on the evening of the protest when she overheard her daughter's friends mention security forces – moments before the call disconnected and the phone permanently shut down. Nasrin's subsequent search for her daughter encountered systematic institutional obstruction. She notes that "Everyone was saying they had no records of her except for one official who kept telling us that she was alright and being kept in a safe place. He said he had submitted Nika's ID number and that he had received information that Nika was arrested by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)." ⁸⁵

As Nasrin explained, post-mortem examination would later reveal the devastating truth: Nika had died the very night of the protest during which she was initially apprehended. The authorities, Nasrin charged in the video, concealed Nika's body for ten days before allowing her to identify her daughter's remains. Worsening the ordeal, state officials pressured her relatives to endorse an official narrative claiming suicide.⁸⁶ In her video testimony, Nasrin bravely and methodically challenges the state's narrative: "I probably don't need to try that hard to prove they're lying... my daughter was killed in the protests on the same day that she disappeared." While her grief is palpable, it takes a back seat to her systematic presentation of forensic evidence: "I saw my daughter's corpse myself... Her body was in ordinary healthy shape, her fingers, feet, hands, and body were intact. [In addition to the autopsy suture], her face and her cheeks were broken." Despite audible emotional exhaustion, Nasrin's grief manifested as a testimony that challenged state deception through a precise and detailed account of the state violence inscribed on her daughter's body: "Her teeth were crushed, and on the back of her head, which had sustained a very big blow, she had a big cavity in the back of her skull." ⁸⁷

Despite the gravity of her loss, Nasrin maintained her composure, even as the authorities proceeded to arrest Nika's aunt and uncle, forcing her aunt to appear on state television to claim that Nika had been "thrown" from a building. In the face of mounting falsehoods, Nasrin systematically exposed the state's coercion, stating that her sister "had been forced to make the confessions and broadcast them." ⁸⁸ While state media circulated carefully selected surveillance footage allegedly showing Nika entering a building on the night of her death,

Nasrin's measured yet somber testimony highlighted critical inconsistencies in the official narrative, particularly regarding the unexplained delay in identifying Nika's body.

In Juliet Hooker's powerful critique of the asymmetrical burdens of grief-activism in the United States, she makes the poignant claim that Black communities are forced to transform private grief into public grievance to be heard at all. For Black women like Venida Browder and Erica Garner, she writes, "making Black loss visible often comes at the expense of surviving loss."⁸⁹ Hooker's timely analysis of unequal loss here alerts us to the disparate and often desperate dynamics affecting Iran's ethnic minority regions. There, the lack of state funding for life-saving hospitals and blood banks renders these populations more vulnerable to loss of life when they are invariably targeted with a greater degree of indiscriminate violence during political uprisings.⁹⁰ At the same time, Nasrin's case further demonstrates how the incommensurable grief of Iran's ethnic-minority communities tends to operate under a different set of political constraints and possibilities.

Before such communities can articulate their losses, state officials routinely subject surviving family members to harassment, arrests, and substantial fines.⁹¹ In Iran's deeply authoritarian political landscape, the state's strategies—from demanding exculpatory narratives through state media to requiring monetary compensation for ammunition before releasing remains to families of slain protesters—effectuate a particularly extractive and dehumanizing effort to erase evidence of sovereign violence and silence the grief that might challenge its authority.^{92,93,94} Thus, while Hooker rightly emphasizes the significant—even lethal—costs of grief-activism in the charged landscape of American racial politics, Iran's authoritarian context presents distinct imperatives for those bereaved by state violence, particularly within ethnic minority communities. As Nasrin's case so vividly demonstrates, all too frequently grievance becomes necessary simply to recuperate the bodies of the deceased—that is, if they are ever recuperated at all. The relative costs of publicly sharing one's grief thus remain contingent upon the political conjuncture in which such loss occurs.

Compounding Nasrin's earlier grievances, as Nika's seventeenth birthday coincided with her funeral, the state made the unilateral decision to relocate her remains to her father's isolated village of Hayat al-Ghayb—forty minutes from Khorramabad, her predominantly Lur ethnic-minority hometown where her family, friends, and thousands of mourners had congregated to pay their respects. Before security forces dispersed the chanting crowd at the cemetery, a video captured Nasrin, bareheaded, holding aloft her daughter's photograph before the impassioned crowd declaring with remarkable composure: "Today was your birthday, my darling. Today I say congratulations on your

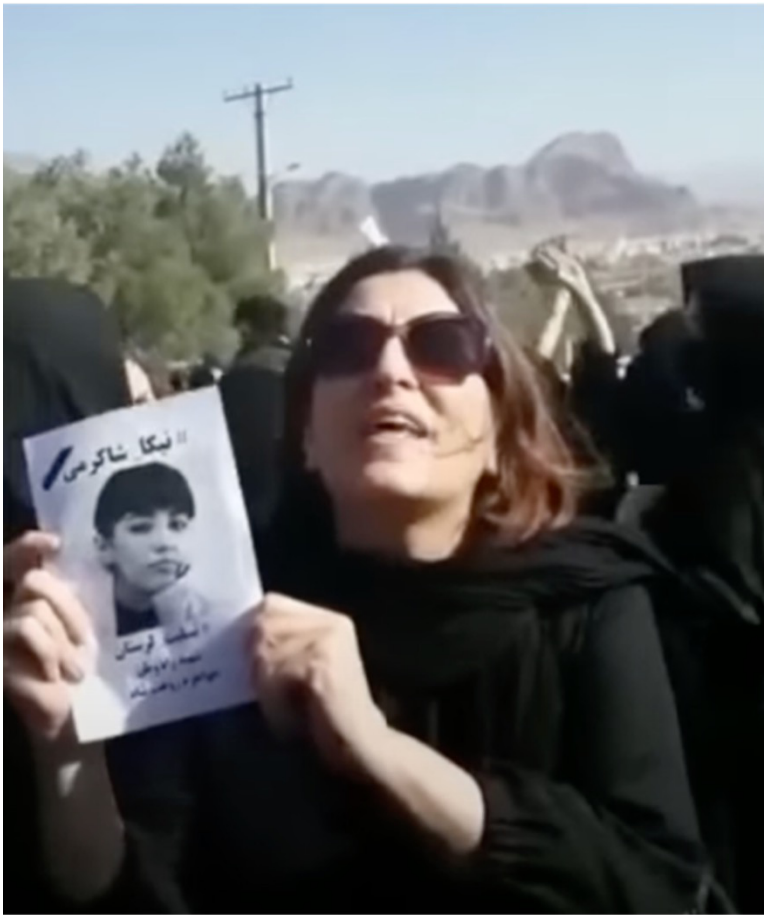


Figure 1. Nasrin Shakarami congratulates her slain daughter Nika. Photograph by the author.

shahadat, Nika! Congratulations on your *shahadat*, Nika!”⁹⁵ Far from embodying an archetypal sorrow or despair, Nasrin’s shared grief was inflected with a sense of pride in her daughter’s untimely death – for it had been occasioned by her daughter’s courage to bear witness to and testify against the injustices of an apartheid state.

For her public challenge to the state’s narrative surrounding her daughter Nika’s death, Nasrin was sentenced to a year in Khorramabad prison before securing conditional release on December 2, 2024, after forty-five days of confinement.⁹⁶ Indeed, as the state cottoned on to women’s subversive performances of maternal grief in the course of the uprising, it also began meting out ever-harsher punishments to try

and motivate future grieving mothers from emulating them—trying to further domesticate them, if you will, in an effort to re-inscribe the sovereignty of the state over that of the grieving mother. The irony of this dynamic, of course, is that state endeavors to re-inscribe its sovereignty over that of the grieving mother simultaneously attack and undermine the very mythologized, codified, and ideological foundations upon which its legitimacy and apartheid system stand. Thus, insofar as the state's disciplinary sanctioning of bereaved mothers testifies to the potency of women's grief in the WLF uprising, it also speaks to the increasing fragility of theocratic rule.

Such suppressive measures, however, have done little to deter the countless women who, like Mahmonir and Nasrin, have performed maternal grief in unruly, perhaps even unwitting, yet nonetheless subversive enactments of feminist equality in defiance of the ideological expectations of state-sanctioned motherhood.⁹⁷ Following the momentum of *chehelom* rituals through December 2022, mothers in Iran discovered new occasions for shared mourning. From *Nowruz* (New Year's) celebrations to birthdays, they continued to share their grief through convergence at burial sites and digital dissemination. Countless artifacts capture their affective expressions—howling,⁹⁸ crying,⁹⁹ singing,¹⁰⁰ screaming,¹⁰¹ and shouting¹⁰²—their raw manifestations of grief reaching expanded audiences through digital networks. As bereaved mothers and their ethnic minority communities gather side-by-side holding photos of the slain, their continued acts of shared grief document the state's violence for a wider and global audience.¹⁰³ Marking a radical departure from state-sanctioned maternal mourning scripts, their practices—like those of Mahsa Yazdani, mother of slain protester Mohammad Javad Zahedi, who stood by her son's memorial photograph with her arms raised and fingers forming a “V” for “victory,” and those of Gohar Eshghi, mother of executed blogger Sattar Beheshti, who removed her veil publicly for the first time in eighty years—have not further maternalized lamentation, but *politicized* it, reconstituting it as an affective expression of solidarity with the feminist uprising.¹⁰⁴

Whether they appeared unveiled at their children's burial sites, methodically documented state violence, raised fists and victory signs, and/or voiced polemical slogans as they mourned lives the state had desecrated or disappeared, their shared grief transformed their individual losses into public contestations of sovereign erasure, as their defiance of dress codes, ritual hair cutting, and publicly articulated grievances¹⁰⁵ embodied grief in ways that threaten the performative undoing of the state's gender apartheid. Having supplanted traditional funerary rites with a proscribed and feminist politics of shared grief, their affective resistance sustained the movement as street protests became untenable and contributed to a broader reimagining



Figure 2. Mahsa Yazdani mourns her slain son Mohammad.
Photograph by the author.

of political horizons where dignified life materializes as possibility against existing hierarchies. Their mourning thus transcended expressions of loss and manifested as feminist enactments of equality and autonomy, exceeding memorialization to imbue the deceased's lives with meanings that serve their surviving communities.¹⁰⁶

That the undeniable potency of the WLF uprising's politics of lamentation has rendered such gatherings the routine targets of state violence and arrests is not without consequence.¹⁰⁷ Consider, for example, that when masses converged at slain protester Mehran Samak's grave to celebrate his birthday in May 2023, special security forces descended on Anzali Cemetery wielding their batons.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, on both the first

and second anniversaries of Jina Amini's passing, militarized forces prevented commemorative gatherings at her grave, instituting checkpoints, deliberately inundating the cemetery, and subjecting her kin to domestic confinement.¹⁰⁹ These desperate security actions, combined with repeated desecration of her tombstone and deployment of militarized units to secure Aichi Cemetery,¹¹⁰ suggest that the state apparatus confronts an intractable political challenge: An unruly and feminist politics of loss and lamentation that, absent its eventual silencing, threatens to destabilize the orchestration of politics as the exclusive domain of masculine mastery.

In yet another departure from Hooker's contextual concern over the tendency for Black grief to be coopted by narratives that ultimately serve to rehabilitate rather than transform white democracy,¹¹¹ it appears that subversive performances of maternal grief in Iran can only be appropriated by and reconciled to the advantage of the state at the price of a hefty concession that borders on existential change. It would require nothing short of walking back its foundational, codified and ideological commitment to gender apartheid.

CONCLUSION

Derived from the uprising's namesake, Jina (Life), and inspired by the legacy of Kurdish feminists' militant resistance to the apartheid state, the WLF movement has further adhered its symbolic meaning in and through bereaved mothers' affective resistance. In post-revolutionary Iran, where public mourning functions as a gendered and politicized terrain for state legitimation, and where bereaved motherhood has gained distinct visibility for shoring up the state's theocratic system of gender apartheid, the shared grief that materialized in the wake of Jina's killing and burial protest manifested unique political potency as maternal subjects transformed their individual losses into life-affirming forms of affective and feminist resistance.

Returning to Honig, and the notion of a "universal maternalism," my analysis has problematized essentializing feminist accounts that read women's political actions through an ideological lens of so-called maternal qualities or attributes. These might be qualities like nurture and care, as in Ruddick's account of the *Madres*, or attributes like "intimate 'homeliness,'" as in Sara Tafakori's account of the #justice-seeking mothers' network in Iran, which the author characterizes as an instance of "maternalism-from-below" as defined by Carreon and Moghadam, that is, a grassroots politicization of motherhood that opens up the prospect of a "better and more just society."¹¹² While I agree that in the particular context of contemporary Iran, where the mobilization of mourning channeled through a populist myth of

collective bereavement has succeeded in overthrowing tyrannical authority before, that shared grief may enable the possibility of doing so again, I do not see this affective repertoire of contention as engaged in a politicization of motherhood, even when mothers are involved. Rather, if Iranian mothers are overrepresented in shared grief, it is because their visibility as a special category of subjects has been shaped through the state's militarization of women's domestic roles in the post-revolutionary period. As I have argued, it is this historical marking-out of motherhood as a political institution in service of state power that enables both their greater visibility and latitude as grieving subjects. It is why their public share of grief finds political resonance and attracts the attention that it does. It is why their grief is afforded a relative—albeit not absolute—impunity in Iran's otherwise deeply authoritarian context.

As my analysis of shared grief in the WLF uprising has shown, women's performances of maternal grief are subverting state-sanctioned motherhood. Whether intentionally or not, their shared grief performs a proscribed and gendered politics of lamentation that resists both the state's attempts to erase the violent marks of its sovereignty and threatens to performatively undo the state's gender apartheid. Theirs is a life-affirming form of affective resistance that contests sovereign erasure while enacting feminist equality: one that manifests in the service of a more equal, dignified, and livable horizon.

My challenge to the feminist literature's assumptions about maternalism aims to expand our understanding of mourning's gendered dimensions and political possibilities through an engagement with Iran's political history. By showing how maternal grief exceeds essentialist boundaries, I have also demonstrated the limitations of generalizing about grief's political potential—including where mothers' involvements are concerned—underscoring, instead, the vital need to interpret such movements within the particular political conjunctures that give them their meaning and force. At the same time, I recognize that context cannot contain signification. Just as women's laments travel from their scene of articulation to other places via phone cameras and recordings, so too the context of maternal mourning while always local is never only local, exceeding its location in the event of its articulation.¹¹³

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NOTES

1. Niels de Hoog and Morresi, "Mapping Iran's Unrest: How Mahsa Amini's Death Led to Nationwide Protests," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/oct/31/mapping-irans-unrest-how-mahsa-aminis-death-led-to-nationwide-protests>.
2. In the west, the Islamic Republic of Iran's institutionalized Guidance Patrols (*Gasht-e Ershad*) are often mistranslated as the "morality police."
3. For detailed accounts of the WLF uprising, see: Eskander Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's uprising for 'Women, Life, Freedom': Overdetermination, crisis, and the lineages of revolt," *Politics* 43, no. 3 (2023): 404–438; and Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, "Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of the Uprising in Iran," *Dissent* 70, n.1 (2023): 82–98.
4. de Hoog and Morresi, "Mapping Iran's Unrest."
5. Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15.
6. Jaime Amparo Alves, "From Necropolis to Blackpolis: Necropolitical Governance and Black Spatial Praxis in São Paulo, Brazil," *Antipode*, no. 46 (2013): 323–339; Jasmina Gavrankapetanović-Redžić, "In the Shadow of Genocide: Mothers of Srebrenica and New Social Power" in *Constructing Motherhood Identity Against Political Violence: Beyond Crying Mothers*, ed. Deniz Ülke Arıboğan and Hamoon Khelghat-Doost (Springer, 2023), 143–164; Banu Bargu, "Sovereignty as Erasure: Rethinking Enforced Disappearances," *Qui Parle* 23, no.1 (2014): 35–75; and Marysa Navarro, "The Personal is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo" in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements, Updated and Expanded Edition*, ed. Susan Eva Eckstein (University of California Press, 2010), 241–258.
7. In Ruddick's analysis, the Madres "speak a 'women's language' of loyalty, love, and outrage" publicly enacting "clichés of maternal work" such as "[p]reservative love." "These women," she asserts, "are the daughters, the heirs, of Kollwitz's *mater dolorosa*," the mother of sorrows who "[s]crong[es] for food to keep her children alive, weeping over the body of her son" as the emblematic idol of "maternal peacefulness." See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Beacon Press, 1989), especially 142, 229, 233. See Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13, no.1 (1985):19–37, 20.
8. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 39.
9. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 15–16.
10. "Gender apartheid" is essentialism as a legal regime. I use it to refer to a modern constitutional and legal system that essentializes gender, conflating it with a binarized understanding of sex, and which operates to formally

render women-second class citizens by situating them in the prescribed roles deemed appropriate to their essentialized “natures.” The IRI’s gender apartheid situates women within the family and positions them as the wards of their male guardians, be their fathers, husbands, or male kin (no matter their age), and differentially assigns them to spaces and institutions of appearance and manners of comportment on its basis.

11. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 16.
12. Prevailing accounts of bereaved mothers’ activism in Iran, such as Sara Tafakori’s, characterize the activism of groups like the “#justice-seeking mothers’ network as a “maternalism-from-below” as defined by Carreon and Moghadam, that is, a grassroots politicization of motherhood that opens up the prospect of a “better and more just society’.” In Tafakori’s analysis, mothers’ activism “mediates intimate ‘homeliness’ in ways that contest official discourses of mourning.” See Tafakori, “Wild Intimacies: Justice-Seeking Mothers in Iran, Networked Activism and the Affective Politics of Mourning,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 26, no.5(2023): 698–721, 701 and 703. For further analysis of maternal grief-activism in Iran, see Sama Khosravi Ooryad, “Dadkhah mothers of Iran, from Khavaran to Aban: digital dadkhahi and transnational coalitional mothering,” *Feminist Theory* 25 no.1 (2024): 42–63.
13. When referring to motherhood transformed into a political “institution” I have in mind Adrienne Rich’s writing in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, in which the author distinguishes “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control,” 13 (W.W. Norton & Company, 1986).
14. Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir, “(En)Gendering Checkpoints: Checkpoint Watch and the Repercussions of Intervention,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 4 (2007): 988.
15. Bargu, “Sovereignty as Erasure,” 63.
16. See Kotef and Amir, “(En)Gendering Checkpoints”; see also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Routledge, 1999).
17. Sara Hassani, “Cloistered Infernos: The Politics of Self-Immolation in the Persian Belt” (PhD diss., New School for Social Research, 2022), 166–167, ProQuest (29210052).
18. Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York University Press, 1993), 109.
19. Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 60–1.
20. Foucault in Bonnie Honig, “Review: What Foucault Saw at the Revolution: On the Use and Abuse of Theology for Politics,” *Political Theory* 36 no.2 (2008): 301–312, 306.
21. Honig, “Review: What Foucault Saw in the Revolution,” 306.

22. By all accounts, militant leftist forces were integral to the eventual toppling of the Shah's oppressive forces during the revolution. That does not, however, detract from nor compete with the unprecedented scope and participation of the masses in the dynamics described here.
23. The revolution had succeeded at the hands of Iranian masses, while Ayatollah Khomeini remained in self-imposed exile in Iraq.
24. Esha Momeni, "The Politics of Collective Mourning: Negotiating Power at the Intersection of Shi'ism, Gender, and Popular Culture in Iran," (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2019), 10.
25. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 95.
26. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 97.
27. Momeni, "The Politics of Collective Mourning," 18.
28. "Police Summon Women Who Appeared in Video Without Hijabs During Ashura Procession in Iranian City," *Radio Free Europe*, 17 July 2024: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-women-ashura-procession-hijab/33040453.html>.
29. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 100–101, 103, 95.
30. Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 100.
31. Hassani, "Cloistered Infernos," 181–183.
32. Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229.
33. Shari'ati's famous lectures on Fatemeh Zahra, were published in a 1971 edited volume entitled, *Fatemeh is Fatemeh*.
34. Hassani, "Cloistered Infernos," 188–189.
35. Haleh Afshar, "Women and wars: some trajectories towards a feminist peace" in *Development, Women and War: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Haleh Afshar and Deborah Eade, (Oxfam, 2004), 43–59, 51.
36. "1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Introductory note by Ruhollah K. Ramezani," *Middle East Journal* 34, no. 2 (1980): 181–204, 186.
37. Hassani, "Cloistered Infernos," 187–192.
38. Writing of the "irrepressible practice of 'public nagging'" commonly practiced by mothers and homemakers "while standing in long rationing lines at bakeries or butcher shops," Asef Bayat coins the term "maternal impunity" calling it "the one gender-based comparative advantage" and "protection" available to "women's maternal status" in Iran. See Asef Bayat, "A Women's Non-Movement: What It Means to Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27, no.1 (2007): 160–172, 170. Although we both identify forms or expressions of what may fall under the umbrella of "maternal impunity," the account and argument I develop in this article is uniquely concerned with maternal status to elucidate its implications for the politics of lamentation in Iran.
39. See Roxanne Varzi, "Iran's Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War," *Feminist Review* 88 (2008): 86–98, 89.
40. Varzi, "Iran's Pieta," 94.

41. Nasser Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre: Untold Stories of Life and Death in Iran, 1988*, ed. Nasser Mohajer (Oneworld Publications, 2020), 204.
42. Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (University of California Press, 1999). See Author's citation
43. Bargu, "Sovereignty as Erasure," 63.
44. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Routledge, 1999).
45. Kotef and Amir, "(En)Gendering Checkpoints," 988.
46. Kotef and Amir, "(En)Gendering Checkpoints," 975.
47. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 53.
48. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 53.
49. Clare Hemmings, "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation," *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012): 147–48, 147, 154.
50. Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre*, 213.
51. Bargu, "Sovereignty as Erasure," 63.
52. Bargu, "Sovereignty as Erasure," 63.
53. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 36.
54. Danielle Hanley, "Choreographing Affective Solidarity: The Choral Politics of Responding to Loss," *Theory & Event*, 25, no. 4 (2022): 873–899.
55. Hanley, "Choreographing Affective Solidarity," 874.
56. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.
57. Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre*, 222.
58. Kotef and Amir, "(En)Gendering Checkpoints," 989.
59. Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre*, 224.
60. "Criminal Cover-Up: Iran Destroying Mass Graves of Victims of 1988 Killings," *Amnesty International*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/8259/2018/en/>.
61. Gilda Seddighi, "Mothers' affective networking and privileges in online space: the case of Iranian Mothers of Park Laleh," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 3 (2014): 523–527, 525.
62. The Kurdish cities of Sanandaj, Mahabad, and Javarud were each subjected to militarized states of siege. As were university campuses in Tehran, including the prestigious Sharif Institute of Technology.
63. "One Year Protest Report: At Least 551 Killed and 22 Suspicious Deaths," *Iran Human Rights NGO*, September 15, 2023, <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6200/>.
64. "انزوم‌آشن‌اد تی‌موم‌سم یری‌گرد ین‌ات‌سا مشقن نی‌رت‌دی‌دج | ین‌فار‌گوفن‌یا" "Infographic: The latest provincial map of student poisoning," *Etemadonline*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.etemadonline.com/کی‌فار‌گوفن‌یا‌ش‌خ‌ب-11/600572-ان‌زوم‌آشن‌اد‌تی‌موم‌سم‌ری‌گرد‌ی‌ان‌ات‌سا>.
65. The United Nations Office at Geneva, Multimedia Newsroom, "HRC Press Conference - Fact-Finding Mission Report on Iran," March 18, 2024, <https://www.unognewsroom.org/teleprompter/en/2100/hrc-press-conference-fact-finding-mission-report-on-iran-18-march-2024/6343>.

66. As of August 17, 2024, ten protesters were put to death by the Islamic Republic of Iran for their involvement in the uprising: Majid Kazemi, Saleh Mirhashemi Baltaghi, Saeed Yaqoubi Kordafli, Sayed Mohammad Hosseini, Mohsen Shakeri, Majid Reza Rahnavard, Mohammad Medhi Karami, Milad Zohrevand, Mohammad Ghobadlou, and Reza Rasaei. At the time of this writing, an eleventh protester, Mojahed Kourkour, is at imminent risk of execution. Human rights organizations tracking the exponential rise in Iran's use of the death penalty since the uprising have also reported that protesters, particularly those belonging to Kurdish and Baloch communities, are being put to death under the false guise of drug and other capital offenses as well. See "Iran must end crackdown against protesters and uphold rights of all Iranians, especially women and girls, Fact-Finding Mission says," *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/iran-must-end-crackdown-against-protesters-and-uphold-rights-all-iranians>.
67. Iranhrdc.org (@IHRDC) "Thousands have gathered in Saghez, hometown of #MahsaAmini, to commemorate the 40th day of her death at the hands of the Islamic Republic's morality police," Twitter video, October 26, 2022, <https://x.com/IHRDC/status/1585231013130956800?s=20>.
68. Such symbolic acts would be replicated in later protests both within Iran and internationally. Afary and Anderson, "Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of the Uprising in Iran," 86.
69. ۱۵۰۰+تصویر (@1500 Tasvir) Twitter Video, October 27, 2022, <https://x.com/1500tasvir/status/1585677260312514565>.
70. "مراسم چهلم نیکا شاکرمی در آرامگاه او در روستای حیات الغیب - یک," *Zamaneh Media*, Youtube, October 27, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7K-3sOD26ZQ0>, minute 5:05.
71. Collectif98 (@collectif98) Instagram video, November 21, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIO220CNcZu/?igsh=em5yMHJ2Mno2bDdi>; Center for Human Rights in Iran (@centerforhumanrights) Instagram video, December 30, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/centerforhumanrights/p/CmzMWqype1b/>.
72. ۱۵۰۰+تصویر (@1500 Tasvir) Twitter video, November 4, 2022, <https://x.com/1500tasvir/status/1588643072162033665?s=20>.
73. ۱۵۰۰+تصویر (@1500 Tasvir) Twitter video, November 1, 2022, <https://x.com/1500tasvir/status/1587485704808005632>.
74. ۱۵۰۰+تصویر (@1500 Tasvir) Twitter video, November 3, 2022, <https://x.com/1500tasvir/status/1588108463275753472>. As crowds grew large, many were blocked by government forces at the highway exit leading to Beheshte Sakineh Cemetery on the outskirts of the city. Some hundreds of mourners marched south along Beheshti Boulevard where video records show security forces shooting and killing seventeen-year-old Mehdi Hazrati. For footage see, Nilo Tabrizi and Atthar Mirza, "When Protesters Were Killed in Iran, Their Funerals Became Deadly," *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/iran-protests-funerals-mahsa-amini/>.

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111. Hooker, *Black Grief/White Grievance*, 228.
112. Tafakori, "Wild Intimacies," 701 and 703.
113. I am grateful to Bonnie Honig for her feminist praxis and for suggesting these thoughtful words.