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Seeing Race And Erasing Slavery: Media And The Construction Of Blackness In Iran, 1830-1960

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Seeing Race And Erasing Slavery: Media And The Construction Of Blackness In Iran, 1830-1960

Abstract
This dissertation explores conceptions of blackness in Iran through a visual, textual, and spatial analysis of enslavement and manumission during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This dissertation asks the critical question: how and why did the abolition of slavery in Iran fail to unravel forms of racial difference, instead making them more powerful and persuasive? Departing from previous studies that cast Iranian slavery and society as unencumbered by racism, I argue that mass media technologies, particularly photography, communicated clear racial hierarchies, crystallizing a particular language of slavery that racialized Africans as slaves even as the legal institution of slavery was being dismantled. This racial visibility allowed other slaves, particularly Caucasians, to disappear from visual sources, further reifying blackness as equivalent to enslavement. Abolition efforts focused on erasing the history of slavery and ultimately failed to address these racial dynamics. Drawing on analyses of photographs, architecture, theater and circus acts, newspapers, memoirs and sports clubs, I show how mediated understandings of blackness produced multi-dimensional forms of social exclusion. Each chapter of the dissertation examines a crucial period, from the last decades of legal slavery, to the manumission of slaves in 1929, to the subsequent reverberations of abolition. This study on the racialization of blackness and its legacies expands current discourses on race and racism to Iran and challenges popular and academic notions that undermine the trauma of Iranian slavery.

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SEEING RACE AND ERASING SLAVERY: MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACKNESS

IN IRAN, 1830-1960

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

A DISSERTATION

in

History

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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For my family
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout my life, my mother has collected various stories about how much I enjoy being in school. One is about how the worst punishment she came up with was keeping me home from preschool (she never actually did this; the threat alone was enough). More recently, she explains my career path via another memory: during my freshman year of undergrad, I called her and said, “I want to be in college forever!” Though I managed to prolong my education by a fair amount, my time as a student has reached an end. 2018 has been a year of graduations for our family: my sister Mahta finished medical school and began her psychiatry residency, and my youngest sister Neekta graduated from elementary school and will begin middle school in the fall. Our parents, Parvin and Jahangir Baghoolizadeh, always put our education first, and I owe this to them.

I feel extremely grateful for pursuing my doctoral degree at the University of Pennsylvania, where I worked with my “dream team” of a committee. Sincere thanks go to my advisor Eve Troutt Powell, who pushed me intellectually while reminding me to believe in myself and my project. I am indebted to Kathy Brown and Jamal Elias who supported me throughout the highs and lows of the dissertating process.

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My PhD began and ended with Ali Karjoo-Ravary, my best friend and my partner in life. We like to say that we met on the first day of school, and we are making our exit at the same time as well. I managed to write this dissertation, but I’m not sure I can write an adequate thank you. I love you.
ABSTRACT

SEEING RACE AND ERASING SLAVERY: MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACKNESS IN IRAN, 1830-1960

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

Eve Troutt Powell

This dissertation explores conceptions of blackness in Iran through a visual, textual, and spatial analysis of enslavement and manumission during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This dissertation asks the critical question: how and why did the abolition of slavery in Iran fail to unravel forms of racial difference, instead making them more powerful and persuasive? Departing from previous studies that cast Iranian slavery and society as unencumbered by racism, I argue that mass media technologies, particularly photography, communicated clear racial hierarchies, crystallizing a particular language of slavery that racialized Africans as slaves even as the legal institution of slavery was being dismantled. This racial visibility allowed other slaves, particularly Caucasians, to disappear from visual sources, further reifying blackness as equivalent to enslavement.

Abolition efforts focused on erasing the history of slavery and ultimately failed to address these racial dynamics. Drawing on analyses of photographs, architecture, theater and circus acts, newspapers, memoirs and sports clubs, I show how mediated understandings of blackness produced multi-dimensional forms of social exclusion. Each chapter of the dissertation examines a crucial period, from the last decades of legal slavery, to the manumission of slaves in 1929, to the subsequent reverberations of abolition. This study on the racialization of blackness and its legacies expands current discourses on race and
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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I have followed a simplified version of the system recommended by The International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) for the transliteration of Persian words, phrases, and book titles. Diacritical markers for consonants have been omitted. For the sake of readability and familiarity, I transcribed Persian names according to the IJMES standard with the exception of those with common English spellings, as is true with Reza Pahlavi (in lieu of Riza Pahlavi), Dehkhoda (in lieu of Dihkhuda), and so forth.
INTRODUCTION

When I was eight years old, I remember seeing a group of upset and disappointed mothers at the annual Nowruz\(^1\) bazaar in our Los Angeles suburb. These women, who were also the organizers, were angry that a local group of African-Americans had reported the festivities as racist, leading City Hall to intervene and ban Haji Firuz from the bazaar. Haji Firuz, recognized widely by Iranians as the herald of the new year’s holiday, appears with a blackened face and simple red outfit, playing a tambourine while singing songs in pidgin Persian. At these diasporan events, he was usually played by a father or a willing teenager who danced and made goofy faces, making people laugh in preparation for the holiday’s arrival. Without Haji Firuz, the women complained, Nowruz would not feel like Nowruz, and the barring of such a happy figure felt like an unjust strike against the community.

“Yes, yes, he blackens his face, but Haji Firuz isn’t about slavery! It’s not about black people! It’s not about them; we never had slavery!” “This is our culture! How dare they!” and finally, “They are racist against Iranians.” They lamented that without Haji Firuz, us children would be denied a critical link to our heritage. They repeated the same explanations to us, making sure that we knew the face paint represented smoke from the Nowruz fire\(^2\) and was not making a mockery of anyone.

---

\(^1\) Nowruz refers to the new year’s holiday, celebrated annually on the spring equinox.

\(^2\) Iranians jump over fires on the last Tuesday night of the year.
I recount this story not because it is particularly unique, but the opposite, because it encapsulates the rhetoric I heard year in and year out. Regardless of whether Haji Firuz was present at any given Nowruz event, we heard about how different he was [from American minstrels], how he only brings happiness [and not racism], and how we, as the children of Iranian immigrants, should cherish this bit of our culture.

It was not until much later that I decided to research representations of blackness in Iran and what links existed between a history of enslavement and constructions of race. Far from the cheer and gaiety of Nowruz celebrations, I heard similar disclaimers and dissociations at nearly every juncture of my academic work. At a prominent archive in Iran, an archivist responded to my request for documents on slavery, “You must be from overseas, where they had slaves. We never had slaves. Cyrus the Great freed them all. You’ve been poisoned by the racism of wherever you’re from to think that we are like that, too.”3 After some insistence, he shrugged his shoulders and allowed me to peruse their materials.

Others acknowledged the presence of foreign individuals in household units, only to undermine the inherent violence of enslavement by emphasizing the intimacy of the relationships. “But they were family!” echoed as a popular refrain.4 At an international academic conference, a descendant of the former ruling family responded to my presentation on slavery in Iran with the comment, “I grew up with slaves. And let me tell you, the black ones were the fun ones. And they weren’t slaves—they took care of the

---

3 The exaggeration of Cyrus II’s accomplishments during his rule from 559-530 BCE is common amongst Iranians in Iran and in diaspora. I had heard this claim from others in diaspora, but suffice it to say I was surprised to hear it from someone working in an archival setting.

4 This argument was common amongst both non-specialist individuals, as well as archivists.
babies and shopping. Sometimes we even left them alone with the kids.” Another Iranian academic in the U.S. responded to my work saying, “Sure they were slaves, but it’s not like we had separate water fountains for them!” The underlying premise, sometimes openly asserted and other times tacitly referenced, is that American plantation slavery and Jim Crow laws constituted true slavery or racism, and that domestic forms of forced servitude do not carry the same weight. My dissertation investigates the history behind these statements and the history they erase.

Tracing Slavery, Abolition, and Erasure in Kashan’s House Museums

In 1778, a 6.1 magnitude earthquake flattened Kashan’s urban dwellings. A major city that lay at the intersection of trade routes crisscrossing across the country, Kashan had once been home to caravansaries, castles, bazaars, and homes, all of which crumbled under the sheer force of the rattling earth. Although the local mosque was repaired in the following five to six years, the earthquake’s magnitude and regular aftershocks had deterred builders from undertaking sizable developments for decades. As memories of the earthquake faded, well-heeled elites hired architects to build expansive homes for their families and their slaves, designed to display their wealth and last multiple generations.

5 N.N Ambraseys and C.P. Melville, A History of Persian Earthquakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 53-54. While other prominent urban centers, such as Isfahan or Shiraz, had the spatial confines of pre-existing structures to build around, Kashan’s earthquake presented its residents with somewhat of a blank canvas for architects and builders alike. As a result, the city provides a unique blueprint to see how residents envisioned their society and its trajectory.
The trajectory of these new homes mirrors the history of slavery and abolition in Iran. Much of the construction took place between 1829-1880, coinciding with the Iranian loss of Caucasian territories and British pressures for abolishing the Persian Gulf slave trade. Despite being built at a pivotal moment for abolition efforts, these opulent homes all included separate slave/servant quarters, indicating to what degree wealthy families not only relied on domestic servitude but also failed to take abolition efforts seriously. By the 1930s, following the Iranian Parliament’s passage of a law manumitting all slaves in 1929, the slaveholding families had largely abandoned their former abodes. In the decades that followed, indications of Iranian slavery were erased on a wide scale. Investors and the city tourism council bought the homes, renovating them as boutique hotels and house museums. In these instances, the slave/servant quarters were either closed to the public or completely renovated into administrative centers or in-house restaurants, welcoming locals and tourists to a sanitized history devoid of references to slavery. Their narratives, both visual and spatial, rewrite the history of slavery without ever mentioning it.

In Kashan’s Abbasi House, now a museum and restaurant, there is a large framed photo of a woman posing with a vacuum and dressed in Qajar fashion. The caption reads,
“taking a souvenir photograph of the arrival of an electric vacuum to Tehran.”

This, indeed, would have been a noteworthy moment, if the photograph did not come from Shadi Ghadirian’s *Qajar Series* (1998), a set of 33 stylized photographs intended to comment on the state of modernity and women’s rights in Iran. The inclusion of this photograph at the Abbasi House, where the servants’ quarters has since been renovated into a *sunnatī*-style restaurant, further obscures the history of slavery. In homes such as this one, the matriarch would not have vacuumed her home with the convenience of an electronic household appliance, not just because that technology did not yet exist, but rather because she would have relied on the forced labor of an enslaved person.

The way in which this artistic and anachronistic photograph erases the historical presence of slaves in the Abbasi House is nothing short of ironic, especially since slaveholders during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries expended enormous amounts of time and money to document in painstaking detail their ability to own slaves. Throughout this dissertation, I take this irony seriously and trace how slaveholders – wealthy families with extensive resources at their disposal – went to lengths to assert their status through their slaves and the visual mementos they created and kept, only to have these histories actively rewritten during the twentieth century. In fact, a slave-owning woman would have been photographed with her domestic slave, the same person who swept her home, as a souvenir recording her status and femininity.

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9 Ghadirian’s pains in creating a convincing and realistic portrait, save for an anachronistic element in each frame such as a can of Coca Cola, a boom box, or in this case, an electric vacuum, has led to misunderstandings and misleading claims since she photographed them twenty years ago. Shadi Ghadirian’s *Qajar Series* is now held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled (*Qajar Series*), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), [https://collections.lacma.org/node/580927](https://collections.lacma.org/node/580927) (accessed 15 July 2017).
The erasure of marginalized groups is not uncommon in any historical record. Indeed, enslaved individuals are among the most marginalized, and the loss of their histories and legacies is far too common around the world. I argue that the case of the enslaved in Iran presents a different type of erasure. While few records written by slaves remain, slaveholders at the very top echelons of society deliberately commissioned memoirs, histories, and photographs to preserve memories of their slaves and their ability to own them. Slaves occupied significant spaces, and they were acknowledged during the Qajar period. Their presence was so notable that it informed not only racial attitudes but also practices of class, gender, and sexuality. Prized as symbols of prestige and wealth, they were also victims of sexual and corporeal violence. By any measure, their presence was regularly noted in the historical record, from private documents to government-commissioned manuscripts. These documentary efforts engendered racial difference and distance between the slaveholder and the slave, reifying blackness as the prime characteristic indicating enslavability.

Then how is it that so many Iranians, academics and non-academics alike, have come to reject that history, arguing at best for a benevolent reading and at worst, denying slavery altogether? Abolition, I argue, was not a humanitarian effort, but rather a project of erasure aimed at unraveling the very meticulously documented history of slavery and re-packaging Iranian society as one bereft of such a sordid past. But, as with any project of erasure, these efforts yielded uneven results, and perhaps the most visible and visually abhorrent remnant of this past – blackface minstrels and theater – continues to thrive in Iran and in its diaspora today.
Abolition efforts also came to restructure how slavery is discussed in Persian. Until the twentieth century, Persian labels for slaves were as varied as their specific roles, delineating status differences among eunuchs, nannies, wet nurses, concubines, and others enslaved in Persian. Persian-speakers did not commonly use a catch-all term to describe slavery, an indication that the practice was not thought of as a single institution, but rather as distinct practices to separate ends. It is only towards the end of Qajar rule (1785-1925) and the rise of Reza Shah (1925-1941) that the inclusive terms bardih-dārī (“slave-owning”) and bardih-furūshī (“slave-selling,” or “the slave trade”) were used in and translated from legal treaties. This was the case because abolitionist discourse, largely influenced by the British, relied on an umbrella term to discuss all of the different types of enslaved people within Iran. Although the Manumission Law of 1929 explicitly used bardih to described enslaved people in Iran, the term now refers specifically to African-American plantation slaves in the American south, the direct result of active erasures that privileged an American history of slavery over an Iranian one. Applying the term bardih-dārī strictly to plantation slavery excluded much of Iranian slavery, as most enslaved peoples in Iran served as court and domestic slaves, with the exception of laborers and pearl divers along the Persian Gulf coast. Instead, re-imagined histories cloaked both racism and slavery as foreign concepts native to the United States.

To circumvent these archival, social, and cultural erasures, I looked to a wider breadth of sources that moved beyond the textual and incorporated visual and material forms of media that communicated the racialization of slaves and their subsequent

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10 For a discussion on slavery in the Persian Gulf, see Matthew Hopper, Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
erasures more loudly. Throughout this dissertation, I focus on domestic servitude, the most common form of slavery, in an effort to understand how a practice so pervasive across urban spaces in Iran could be so rapidly forgotten. These material and visual sources, paired with textual sources, denote significant trends in the history of slavery and in their subsequent erasures. By drawing on a multitude of different visual and textual sources, I trace a visual system of racial meaning that has been largely disregarded. As Laura Wexler notes, photographic meaning is “…established not in but between images,” which included not only other photographs, but portraits as well.\(^\text{11}\)

Although photographs from the Qajar court were not intended for public consumption, I argue that the relationships and close proximity between multi-generational families of court photographers and commercial photographers to emerging blackface actors demonstrate the interconnectedness of technology and industry in creating, informing, and perpetuating racial and gendered attitudes. The circulation of black-and-white photographs made slaves legible in a color binary, and these cues appeared in paintings and photographs and entered theater and minstrelsy practices as well.

By reading these sources in tandem, I found that blackness, or sīyāhī, emerged as the prime marker of enslavement during the late nineteenth century. Although blackness had long been associated with various groups enslaved in Iran, primarily the hindū (South Asians),\(^\text{12}\) habashī (Abyssinians) and zangī (of Zanzibar),\(^\text{13}\) it did not necessarily equate


\(^{12}\) In the Safavid period, sīfīd va sīyāh (“white and black”) referred to court eunuchs. While sīfīd described Caucasian slaves, sīyāh had referred to enslaved men from the subcontinent. The phrase was used especially in *Dastūr al-Mūlūk*, an administrative handbook from the period. Sussan Babaie, Kathryn
enslavement, as Iranians also enslaved peoples from the Caucasus, including the gurjī (Georgians) and chirkisī (Circassians). Throughout my research, however, I trace how as the numbers of “white” or Caucasian slaves diminished, sīyāh appeared as a primary moniker for identifying slaves. As variegated terms used for identifying the diverse backgrounds of the enslaved faded away, sīyāh came to serve as a common denominator, sometimes even replacing the need for the word slave. This, I argue, flattened the landscape of enslavement and paved the way for stereotypical caricatures that would ultimately carry the legacy of slavery.

Despite the common denial of both slavery and racism in Iran, the single most recognizable holiday figure in Iran today is a blackface minstrel, Haji Firuz, a jester who arrives annually at Nowruz to ensure his master’s happiness. Street performers paint their faces black in an effort to bring joy and cheer to the streets of Iran, altering their voices and singing jingles addressed to their master to passersby. Haji Firuz’s presence, however, is viewed as divorced from slavery, and popular narratives attribute his blackness to soot from a fire. This dissertation connects Haji Firuz, along with the broader genre of blackface theater, to a history that encouraged and sustained stereotypes


By the nineteenth century, however, African slaves outnumbered the South Asians, and the racial term was transferred to refer to the dominant enslaved group, a term still rife with disdain.

13 Zangi refers to Zanzibar (“Zangbar” in Persian), likely derived from zang or “rust.” Although in the Ottoman Empire, zenci remained common racial and geographic label for identifying East African slaves throughout this period, the Persian zangi was gradually elided in favor of sīyāh. For a discussion on the continued use of zenci in Turkish and history, see Michael Ferguson, "White Turks, Black Turks and Negroes: The Politics of Polarization" In The Making of a Protest movement in Turkey: #occupygezi (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014), 77-88.

14 At the Kamal al-Mulk Museum in Tehran, a display shows a figurine of Haji Firuz, hunched over and holding a tambourine, accompanied with the caption “Haji Firuz, the one who appears just before new year in Iran and announce Nowruz [sic].” Kamal al-Mulk Museum, Bāgh-i Nigāristān, Tehran, Iran.
and caricatures of those enslaved in Iran. These caricatures, I argue, remain the most grotesque, and yet, most common vestige of slavery in Iran.

Seeing Race and Seeing Slavery

This dissertation joins a growing body of scholarship on the history of enslavement and race in Iran. Existing scholarship on Iranian slavery during the Qajar era is largely written from a political or social history perspective, including Behnaz Mirzai’s recently published monograph *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929*, which presents valuable information about the logistics of enslavement, the bureaucracy in abolition efforts, and the diversity of religious opinions on the practice of slavery.

Many of these scholars have described slavery in Iran in entirely intimate terms of benevolence and generosity, contributing to the idea that the domestic slavery is a kinder, softer practice than the violence evoked by references to American plantation slavery. Scholars who have dismissed the question of violence as a legitimate inquiry have also pointed to the diversity of peoples enslaved across Iran and the broader Middle East, an effort that both undermines the role of race and stifles discussions of racism.

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Although several scholars of Middle East slavery, including Chouki El Hamel, Ehud Toledano, and Eve Troutt Powell have discussed the importance of investigating the many faces and forms of racism and not denying the violence of slavery at the expense of slaves, scholars of Iranian slavery continue to privilege uncritical readings of this history.\footnote{Chouki El Hamel, \textit{Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Ehud Toledano, \textit{Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Eve Troutt Powell, \textit{A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).} Probably the most concise summary and rejection of racial stereotypes in Middle East historiography comes from Mirzai:

Although it is undeniable that beauty was attached to fair or light complexions in the Middle East, Segal writes that “color prejudice, whatever its extent,” did not preclude, in Iran as elsewhere in Islam, the humane treatment of black slaves, their frequent freeing and, for some at least, the relative ease of social assimilation.” Similarly, Zilfi asserts: “Color was undeniably important in Middle Eastern and North African slavery...Still it did not hold the same value as in the Atlantic context nor did race play the structuring role that it did in the Americas.” She adds, notwithstanding, that while race and skin color did influence where an enslaved person was destined to work, racialized stereotypes did not dictate labor segmentation entirely.\footnote{Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery}, 104-5.}

In her discussion, Mirzai echoes Segal and Zilfi in centering American conceptualizations and experiences of race in her rejection of racial prejudice in Iran. The argument that Iranian slavery was bereft of racial attitudes rests on anecdotes from foreigners, particularly Europeans and Americans, and comparisons to foreign forms of slavery, neglecting sources that indicated otherwise, including memoirs, photographs, plays, architecture, and more. Though my work diverges from Mirzai’s in this regard, I rely on her analysis and extensive compilation of government sources pertaining to slavery and
abolition, particularly those from the Foreign Ministry Archive in Tehran, Iran, as I was denied access to this archive.

In this dissertation, I push for a serious consideration of the development and crystallizing of racial terminologies in Iran. Although a few scholars have attempted to incorporate race in their analysis, they have done so from the perspective of a black-white binary, accepting anti-blackness and the whiteness of Iranians as a foregone conclusion in the nineteenth century. This is especially the case with scholarship that deals with visual analyses of photography from the late Qajar period, namely Pedram Khosronejad’s *Qajar African Nannies: African Slaves and Aristocratic Babies* and Staci Gem Schweiller’s *Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iranian Photography: Desirous Bodies.* Khosronejad, whose album focuses entirely on enslaved African eunuchs and women, makes no mention of non-black slaves and goes so far as to crop or ignore the Caucasian slaves out of his selection of photographs. Schweiller, whose book focuses on the gendering and sexualization of photographs during the late Qajar period, curiously elides Caucasian slaves, who were sought after as slaves explicitly for their sexual appeal. Instead, she focuses entirely on photographs of African slaves, equating whiteness with Iranians. This analysis unintentionally replicates the very free/non-free binary exacerbated by the black and white nature of the photographs and is rooted in imposing later racial realities back onto the late nineteenth century.

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Studies of Iranian racial hierarchies outside of slavery provide insight to the social ideologies that undoubtedly contributed to the racing of Africans. Reza Zia Ebrahimi’s discussion of the Aryan myth and its pivotal role in Iranian nationalism in his book, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, provides significant context for understanding nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran. As Zia Ebrahimi examines an increasingly racial language used to describe Iranian subjects as a citizenry and inheritors of an Aryan legacy, Neda Maghbouleh’s sociological research continues this discussion, tracing the Aryan myth’s pervasive quality among Iranians immigrants who have carried these ideologies with them into diaspora and used them in a bid to assimilate into American whiteness. My dissertation traces the opposing process: as Iranians viewed themselves more and more as white, they viewed Africans more and more as black. The dissertation traces a shift in racial hierarchies. While Iranians had once viewed themselves in between “white” Caucasians and “black” Africans in the nineteenth century, the diminished presence of Caucasians led to the creation of a clear category of enslaved blackness framed by an Iranian whiteness. I argue that understanding conceptualizations of blackness is an important for these lasting racial legacies.

This dissertation turns a critical eye upon the erasures that enabled a collective denial of the history of slavery. Drawing on Michael Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past*, I consider what he describes as the four stages of historical erasures: “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the

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making of the sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of final history in the final instance).”

Silences surrounding Iranian slavery entered at each of these phases, with the exception of the first moment, or “the making of the sources.” Technological limitations contributed to the difficult of preserving memories of slavery, entire words and phrases were recast with independent meanings, and public museums dismiss the existence of slaves entirely. This dissertation serves as a corrective of this final stage of erasure in an effort to move beyond equivocations and make space for addressing the long-term ramifications of enslavement on Iranian society.

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I begin this dissertation before the first treaty abolishing the Persian Gulf slave trade in 1848 and end it after the Manumission Law of 1929 freeing all slaves. The dissertation is primarily concerned with two questions: first, how was blackness defined, and how did this definition come to not only refer to Africans but to cruelly mimic them as well? And second, if abolition was a process of erasure, which vestiges from slavery were allowed to remain?

This dissertation is comprised of four chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter, “The Language of Slavery,” examines the destabilizing effect of abolitionist discourses

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24 The aforementioned Kashan house museums are only one example of the structural and spatial erasures. Gulistan Palace, the seat of power during the Qajar era and the backdrop to many of the earlier sources in this dissertation, does not reference the enslaved peoples who managed the day-to-day activities of the court in their museum.
and treaties on the presence of slaves during the mid-nineteenth century. Through an analysis of three distinct sets of sources – texts and contracts, an illustrated manuscript, and court photographs – this chapter demonstrates how changing attitudes towards race elided or highlighted racial difference through different media. In this chapter, I argue that blackness came to eclipse the multiplicity of ethnic and geographic terms available to describe slaves, rendering slaves one-dimensional and vulnerable to stereotypes and caricatures.

The second chapter, “The Final Deaths and Afterlives of Court Eunuchs, 1848-1907,” examines the multiple preservation efforts around the dying generation of eunuchs at Nasir al-Din Shah’s court, and how these projects, intended to preserve their legacy, came to inform and inspire a minstrel style of theater. This chapter links court life to the early forms of blackface theater, which was built around mimicking the bodies of the eunuchs.

The third chapter, “The Black King and the Modern Family, 1896-1925” examines the Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath as the last period of legal slavery in Iran. During this time, slaves were at once cast as foreign intrusions into maternal and romantic relationships and intimate members of the family. This tension over the bodies of slaves and their presence in the Iranian home at a time of revolution, civil war, and nation-building reveals the degree to which they posed an obstacle for progressives attempting to modernize Iran. Despite the crawl towards abolition, the racialization of black slaves was so great that children born from master-slave relationships faced unique situations, including re-enslavement, due to the blackness of
Finally, the last chapter, “Erasing Slavery and Seeing Abolition, 1925-1960,” investigates the manumission of slaves in 1929 and the immediate steps taken to abolish not only slavery but its footprints as well. This chapter examines how Reza Shah’s government prioritized the abolition as a process of erasure. Gradually removing traces of slavery from the architectural to the intellectual, Reza Shah’s government was concerned with a re-structuring of society that presented Iran as a modern and competent society on an international and domestic stage. The uneven process of erasure resulted in a society that denied a history of slavery but ultimately embraced blackface minstrelsy as a folk tradition.

The epilogue notes the long life of these racial attitudes, describing the degree to which images and symbols rooted in Iran’s history of slavery and anti-blackness have been valued and carried around the world by Iranians in diaspora. My dissertation identifies the erasures that have allowed these practices to continue and the racism that allowed them to thrive in the first place.
CHAPTER 1: THE LANGUAGE OF SLAVERY, 1830-1896

In 1837, in a brief, handwritten contract, only eight lines long, Yaqut Ghulam lost parental rights to any future children.\textsuperscript{25} Instead, he signed them off to Muhammad Baqir Silmi,\textsuperscript{26} in exchange for marrying his female slave.

Whoever brokered the agreement and drafted the contract used various descriptors to identify the different individuals involved. The author addressed the slaveholder Muhammad Baqir Silmi as a hājjī (one who has undertaken hajj) and “dignified and generous” (mafākhir va makārim), underscoring his esteemed status within his community. There is no mention of his skin color, a clear contrast to how the drafter referenced the blackness of Yaqut Ghulam and his new wife, emphasizing their distinct foreignness. Muhammad Baqir Silmi’s coloring therefore remained an implicit neutral, absent but far from irrelevant, while the contract described Yaqut Ghulam as sīyāh fām, “black colored.” The contract failed to name his wife, instead describing her as “a comely, sweet mannered, enslaved black-faced Abyssinian slave girl,” jarīyih mamlūk-i habashī-yi nahv-i shīrīn mishkīn jabīn-i khush āyīn. Drafters of slave contracts sometimes excluded the names of the slaves, instead relying on racial markers to identify them.

But, this contract is different. Yaqut Ghulam was not a slave. Despite his name, \textit{Ruby the Slave}, the contract explicitly identified him as a freedman. His name was a vestige of his enslavement, a reflection of how one’s past could limit the contours of

\textsuperscript{25} File 296-26454, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Salma} is also a possible pronunciation.
freedom, his very identity reduced to a reminder that he was once a prized slave. The name itself operated more as a title than a name, as Yaqut Ghulam was not the only Yaqut Ghulam, but rather, one of many Yaqut Ghulams in Iran at this time. The name was commonly given to enslaved Africans.\(^{27}\) After abolition in 1929, \textit{Yaqut} would be used as a generic name for blackface characters in theater, as well as an eponymous satirical magazine which featured a caricature of an African slave as its mascot.\(^{28}\)

In any case, Yaqut Ghulam’s children should have inherited his freedom, as paternity determined the free or enslaved status of a child.\(^{29}\) And yet, six individuals approved of the contract, as their personal stamps testify to its legitimacy along its margins, despite its incompatibility with Islamic codes for slavery.

Perhaps the arrangement was not so uncommon, as those with power undermined and abused the rights of others, especially those who had been enslaved and were enslaved. The peculiarity of this arrangement rests in the existence of the contract itself, that the creation of a written, signed and stamped private contract could abrogate religious injunctions. Instead of permitting the marriage of two compatible individuals who intended to raise a family, the contract required Yaqut Ghulam and his wife to procreate slaves, to breed offspring for her master. As several scholars have noted, the

\(^{27}\) While the name was given to enslaved Africans, some, if not most, kept their enslaved names in their freedom as well. There are several records identifying or pertaining to enslaved African men named Yaqut Ghulam during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. File 97/280/491, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.


\(^{29}\) Islamically, Shi’i and Sunni jurists agree that children inherit their paternal status. Only children of enslaved men inherited enslaved titles; children of free men remained free. A mother’s status was legally irrelevant. Afary, \textit{Sexual Politics of Modern Iran}, 57.
nineteenth century institution of marriage involved contractual arrangements with the expressed goal of producing children, rather than the culmination of a romantic relationship. This marriage and accompanying contract, however, promised that the children from this union would be slaves. In many ways, the contract rendered Yaqut Ghulam as a slave again, denying him one of the clear advantages of being a freedman.

Why would Yaqut Ghulam agree to such an arrangement? Muhammad Baqir’s social status, as indicated by the lofty adjectives, gave him an inordinate amount of power to dictate the terms of the marriage to his approval. Muhammad Baqir would have held sexual access to any and all of his slaves and could have raped this particular slave per his whims. Had his Abyssinian slave borne her master children, they would have been free by virtue of his status. Instead, he ceded his sexual rights over her and married her to Yaqut Ghulam. As for Yaqut Ghulam, we can only conclude that he accepted this contract because he had no other choice. In this regard, his life as a freedman was not too different from his life as a slave. Even less is known about the unnamed slave woman, who is only identified by her beauty and blackness. Instead, the drafted reduced her from a wife to a potential vessel for breeding future slaves for her master.

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31 Ehud Toledano discusses a slaveholder’s ability to rape and cause unwanted pregnancy in the particular case of Semsigul. Though Toledano focused on an Ottoman case, the same would have been true for Muhammad Baqir Silmi. Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 59-80.
32 If a master married his kaniz to another man, regardless of his free or enslaved status, the master would lose sexual rights over her. Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 55.
contract involved the exchange of unborn children in a language that mimicked contracts that validated the sale of specific living persons, revealing the extent blackness to which was associated with enslavement during this period.

The racialization of East Africans as black slaves in nineteenth century Iran was directly linked to the changing demographics of enslavement. Between the 1830-1880s, the Iranian slave traffic changed, shifting away from the Caucasian slaves to the north, and instead filling the demand with people from the south. The enslavement of Indians, once referred to as the black slaves of the Safavid court, had also petered out. East Africans remained the last demographic group to be enslaved in Iran. Gradations of blackness often reflected different types of enslavement. The hardening of a racial hierarchy relegated the very darkest of slaves to chores and domestic work, while the lighter African slaves served as signs of prestige and nobility for their owners. During this period, Iranian slavery changed fundamentally from operating within a hierarchy of aesthetic preference of light-skinned Caucasians over dark-skinned East Africans, to one that equated slavery with blackness, regardless of preference. By exploring the intersections of slavery and race in three distinct groups of sources, including texts, illustrations, and photographs, this chapter charts how black bodies became understood as universally enslaved in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. These equivalencies not only dehumanized the enslaved and dismissed their diversity, but also marginalized the

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34 Sussan Babaie et al., *Slaves of the Shah*, 158.

35 This colorism, where lighter skinned slaves were preferred for sexual duties and darker skinned slaves were granted menial type labor has been well recorded in the Ottoman Empire as well. See Ehud Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
experiences of East Africans who arrived in Iran as free laborers, merchants, and sailors.

Developing the Language for Slavery

This chapter is primarily interested in the use of sīyāh, or black, as the primary moniker for East African slaves. For centuries, major Persian poets, among them Firdawsi, Hafiz, Rumi, and Nizami Ganjavi, associated blackness with different groups, including the hindā (South Asian), habashī (Abyssinian) and zangī (Zanzibari). During the nineteenth century, sīyāh came to refer to all East Africans and the few Indians who remained within Iran, not only replacing the individual ethnic and geographic terms, but also rendering a color synonymous with enslavement and enslavability. The eliding of the nuances of the different labels allowed for these individuals to be more readily dehumanized, allowing for the rise of caricatures by the end of the nineteenth century. I argue that diminishing numbers of slaves, in part due to abolition efforts and regulation laws, served as a catalyst for intensifying the racialization and dehumanization of black slaves.

The racialization of African slaves is curious, as Iranians managed to enslave people from all around their borders during the nineteenth century. Multiple slave trades


cut through the Iranian plateau. Prior to the nineteenth century, Iranians enslaved indiscriminately, trafficking peoples from the neighboring regions, primarily buying and selling individuals from the Caucasus, Central Asia, the subcontinent, and East Africa.

Slaves performed a variety of different types of roles in different spaces, but were overwhelmingly placed in domestic spaces. Nineteenth-century Persian had a myriad of gendered terms used to describe the enslaved, which reflected the complexity of slave culture in the Iranian context. Contracts differentiated between sex – ghulām (male slave); kanīz, jārīyih, or mamlūkhī (female slave). Because of their castration, eunuchs fell into a separate category as khwājīh. Domestic roles for female slaves were further defined, including terms such as dāyyīh and nanih, that identified them as childcarers.

The Caucasian slave trade had troubled the Russians. Although Russian officials denounced the selling of Christians during the eighteenth century, their weakness left them unable to enforce major changes in the trade. It was not until a series of wars between Russia and Iran in 1796, 1806–1813, and 1826–28 that the Caucasian slave trade slowed to a stop. The Russo-Persian wars were fought in the Southern Caucasus, and Russia’s victory gave it supremacy over the region. Consequently, Russia blocked the slave trade routes. As a result, East African slaves gradually displaced Caucasian and Central Asian slaves as the dominant enslaved presence within Iran’s shrinking borders.38


39 Afary notes that after the Russo-Persian Wars and the Treaty of Turkmanchay, Russia prevented the sale of Armenians, Georgians, and Circassians as slaves. Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 53. See also Kurtyanov-D’Herlugnan’s *The Tsars Abolitionists*, where she asserts that the Crimean War was launched in part to prevent the Christian slave trade to Anatolia. This war, however, had little consequences on the
While the idea of Caucasian slaves grew prominent in Europe and the United States for sensationalist entertainment purposes,\(^{40}\) they quietly disappeared from Iranian society, swallowed into a culture that prized them for their whiteness.

Throughout these tumultuous events, slavery remained legal. During Nasir al-Din Shah’s rule (1848-1896), the British signed multiple treaties with the Iranian government in 1848, 1852, and 1877, guaranteeing the abolition of the Persian Gulf slave trade.\(^{41}\) The last of these treaties in 1877 allowed the British to board ships in the Persian Gulf and inspect them for carrying slaves.\(^{42}\) The treaties slowed the traffic of slaves to Iran via Gulf routes, but wealthy families compensated by trafficking slaves over land instead, ensuring that their family status was visibly communicated through the presence of a black slave.\(^{43}\) Russian and British attempts to block the slave trades to Iran did not necessarily eradicate slavery within Iran, but instead created conditions that led Iranians to traffic slaves from elsewhere.

Though Iranians had engaged in slavery for centuries, these various events – wars, territorial losses, and foreign encroachment – all led to the diminishing of human trafficking across Iranian borders. These changes affected how slavery was perceived and described as an institution and as a social practice. Though ethnic and racial terms have a

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\(^{41}\) The 1848 treaty briefly preceded Nasir al-Din Shah’s ascension to the throne.

\(^{42}\) Mirzai, A History of Slavery, 63.

long history of describing the other in different social contexts, I argue that the end of the Caucasian and Central Asian slave trades rendered African slaves as more visible, and blackness a more potent racial marker that identified black as slave and slave as black. Non-black individuals – Iranian and foreign – constantly negotiated blackness as a label that allowed them to define the dominant presence of Africans as slaves in Iran, and the equivalency between these terms gradually grew stronger throughout the nineteenth century. As these changes in the racial lexicon were mediated, both visually and textually, this chapter examines the heightened racialization of this period through an analysis of texts, illustrations, and photographs. Each medium offered its own framework for understanding and communicating race as a social marker and category within and beyond the Qajar court.

Writing and Ascribing Race

The timing of Yaqut Ghulam’s contract, about ten years after the Treaty of Turkmenchay and ten years before explicit British abolitionist pressures, was signed at the precipice of changing racial lexicons that intimately informed the both the slave trade and abolition efforts at this time. Yaqut Ghulam’s contract concerning his unborn children rested on his blackness and proximity to enslavement. As Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer have described, the American experience of emancipation was “informed as much by

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memories of the past as by expectations and visions for the future.” A similar sentiment defined Yaqut Ghulam’s freedom, one which was restricted by the same limitations he faced as a slave. His blackness and former slave identity legitimized the illicit contract, which still introduced him by his slave title. Slaveholders racialized freed black individuals as non-persons, re-inscribing their slave status even in freedom. The hardening of racial labels cannot be boiled down to a single moment in. This section moves between private family documents, high-level government missives, and public-facing travelogues and memoirs to trace how hierarchies of blackness informed enslavement and abolition in the decades following the end of the Caucasian slave trade.

In 1847, ten years after Yaqut Ghulam’s marital arrangement, a certain Aqa Abu’l Husayn married Sahib Baygum Khanum. The tri-colored document—red, blue, and gold—included all the elements necessary for a completed marriage contract: the naming of the bride and groom, religious verses, and the dower. At the very bottom of the scroll document, buried beneath lines and lines of prayers and blessings, the bride’s name is followed by an itemized list of her dower (*mahr*):

Sahib Baygum Khanum, with a dower of one hundred and fifty *ashrafī tuman* minted with Muhammad Shah Qajar’s name, one hundred and fifty *mithqāl* of pure un-minted gold….and one *habashī ghulām* for the price of thirty tuman, and one *habashī jāriyih* for the price of thirty *tuman*.

There, after listing piles of coins and acres of land, clear monetized forms of property, the


\[\text{\textsuperscript{46}}\text{Gold coins issued by the Qajars during Nowruz. Rudi Matthee and Willem Floor, The Monetary History of Iran: From the Safavids to the Qajars (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 230-231.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{47}}\text{“Aghdnāmih, 1263 Q,” File 296/16904, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.}\]
dower ends with the inclusion of two slaves, an Abyssinian male slave and an Abyssinian female slave, each to be purchased for thirty tuman, a fraction of the total dower. The dower, a series of gifts promised from the groom to the bride on their wedding day, served as the concrete seal that validated the marriage. One wonders if Yaqut Ghulam’s children were ever promised and sold via similar contracts, hand-painted and decorated with floral motifs, celebrating the union of two people by contracting the dis-union of other families.

The dower served as a stage for performing the ideal family within social constraints. Complete with the appropriate prayers and dower, these contracts blessed and legitimized the weddings of two persons, sometimes with the promise of a domestic slave. Marriage contracts served as the site where slaves were torn from their prior family structures and implanted in new ones to create new, proper families. The slaves were not, however, members of the families. Rather, they served as elite objects that performed particular duties and physically testified to the family’s status. At this nexus, the changing slave trade shaped racial preferences for the ideal slave in the ideal family.

Prior to weddings, the two families negotiated and agreed on a dower, promised from the groom to the bride. Because the dower had to be paid at the bride’s request, dowers had to be specific, concrete, and within the groom’s means. Dowers served as the primary way for the groom to guarantee the bride’s ability to maintain a proper household, and could be as modest as a single copy of a Qur’an to as lofty as deeds to

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48 Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran, 41-42.
houses or entire villages, accompanied with hundreds of gold coins. The larger the house, the wealthier the home, the more amenities available to the married couple for raising children better ensured of success. In some marriages, like that of Abu’l Husayn and Sahib Baygum Khanum, dowers included female and male slaves to tend to household responsibilities and raise the children. The slaves’ domestic roles made them the ideal dower: recognition of the husband’s true commitment to his wife’s ease in motherhood and domesticity. Slaves, however, were a luxury and only included in dowers that had provided the bride with a wealth of other resources.

In stark contrast to the rest of the marriage contract, the dower was not written in grandiose or poetic language. Rather, the items of the dower were listed in plain terms to prevent any future confusion. When the dower included a slave or more, the contract may have specified their gender, cost, or ethnicity. In 1819, Mehdi Quli Khan’s dower to Malik Sultan Khanum included three *gurjī* male slaves and three *gurjī* female slaves. As the daughter of Fat’h ‘Ali Shah, Malik Sultan Khanum’s mahr represented the expectations and standards of the very elite. But slaves as dowers were not limited to royal weddings: in the same year, a woman named Bibi Fatimah married a Shirazi merchant, Agha Muhammad Husayn, with the promise of one Abyssinian slave woman, a

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50 Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 21-22.
52 Female slaves were often used as nannies for free children. See Chapter 3 for more on the enslaved nanny in Iranian households.
54 Trans., “Georgian.”
While sale contracts usually included visual descriptions about the slaves in question, such as the 1810 sale contract that involved a *black-colored Abyssinian male slave of medium height*,\(^57\) or a later one that requested a *black slave girl needed for house work*,\(^58\) marriage contracts only included the barest of details. The vague descriptions of the marriage contract reflected a hypothetical agreement, a promise to be fulfilled at the bride’s request. By the mid-nineteenth century, as the northern slave traffic had slowed to a stop, many marriage contracts included dowers with slaves without reference to ethnicity. It may have been futile to specify an ethnicity when most slaves were African. Or conversely, identifying a slave of a particular ethnic group may have rendered the marriage void, since different ethnic groups were becoming more scarce, and the groom’s ability of fulfilling the dower guaranteed the legitimacy of the marriage. The exclusion of ethnic terms therefore might have reflected the hypothetical nature of the dowry.

Technically speaking, the groom was only required to provide the dowry upon the bride’s request, and often the bride did not request her dowry immediately. In these cases, the contract had to be written in such a way that if the bride requested her dowry years later, it could still be fulfilled. The inclusion of slaves in these contracts reflected how these individuals understood that it was becoming more difficult to locate and purchase particular individuals from specific ethnic backgrounds, but still did not believe that slavery at large would disappear from Iranian society completely. This treatment of

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\(^{56}\) The mahr in this contract from 1819 included 100 *Tabrizi tuman*, 20 *misghāl* gold, 1 *habashī kanīz* worth 30 *tuman*, some silk. File 999-29986, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.

\(^{57}\) File 296-18668, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.

\(^{58}\) Letter sent to Mostowfi al-Mamalek, requesting the purchase of a black slave for “*umūrīh khāniḥ*” (household affairs) 124? Q (1820s-1830s). File 210-597, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
ethnic labels did not apply to sale contracts, which continued to use language that clearly identified race and gender since they referred to the impending sale of a specific person.\(^{59}\)

In their negotiations of terms, those drafting marriage contracts tacitly acknowledged the changing landscape of slavery. Any slave, regardless of ethnic background, would suffice in these marriages, where dowers were specific to determine the slave’s sex and cost, though their purchase amounts were similar to other sale contracts for East African slaves.\(^{60}\) These changes, however, did not mean that Caucasian slaves had disappeared completely. But as they were harder to come by, they would not have been mentioned without their ethnic marker. Instead, wealthy families seem to have embarked on their search for a Georgian or the sifid-chihrih (“white-faced”) slave girl independently of wedding rituals.\(^{61}\)

The inclusion of slaves in the mahr spoke to the function of the slavery: rather than being a common object, the slave signified status. Just as a groom provided foundational and prestigious items to confirm the legality of the marriage in a mahr,

\(^{59}\) See the following sale contracts for examples: the sale contract of “yik nafar jāriyih bumbasi-yi sīyāh Sanubar” (one black Bumbasi slave woman Sanubar) in 1866, Bahman Bayani Collection, Women’s World in Qajar Iran, Harvard Library, http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/31b075.html (accessed 10 November 2016); the sale contract of a habashī ghulām (Abyssinian slave man) and jāriyih sifid (white slave woman) to Shahjahan Khanum and Monjam Bashi in 1866, File 296-18668, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran; the sale contract of a kanīz to Nim Taj Khanum, wife of Nizam al-Mulk, Nim Taj purchased Sifid Chihrih from Agha Muhammad Hussain in 1875 (1272 Q). File 296-7135, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.


\(^{61}\) 1869 (1286 Q), File 295-2198, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
brides were expected to provide everyday household items and furnishings in a *jahāz*.⁶² For example, in a late nineteenth century *jahāz*, the bride furnished her new home with a lamp, samovar, samovar stand, tray, cups and saucers, teapot, spoons, prayer rugs, sewing tools, and so forth.⁶³ Slaves were not included among these mundane household wares. Instead, slaves were considered a supreme gift that would indicate the how well the groom would provide for his future wife. As time passed, finding slaves, even black slaves, to fulfill these marriage contracts became more difficult, in part because of the British efforts towards the global abolition of the slave trade.

As the British government harnessed abolitionism as a significant part of their strategy in geopolitical engagements around the world, they applied pressure on Iranian officials to ban the slave trade in the Persian Gulf beginning in the 1840s.⁶⁴ Letters between British and Iranian officials acutely highlighted the presence of East African slaves in Iran. Despite the ethnic and racial diversity of individuals enslaved in Iran during the nineteenth century, the British focused on African slaves in particular, either due to their strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and greater Indian Ocean world or the legibility of black bodies as slaves for the British.⁶⁵ Georgian slaves seemed so scarce in

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⁶⁴ The British government carried out abolitionist efforts around the world, the motivations of which I explore more fully in Chapter 4. The British applied similar tactics and pressures around the world, including the Mediterranean and the broader Middle East, where it stationed patrols to prevent slave trade by water in particular. Benjamin Reilly argues that these patrols were largely ineffective and did little to decrease the presence of slavery. Benjamin J. Reilly, “A Well-Intentioned Failure: British Anti-slavery Measures and the Arabian Peninsula, 1820-1940,” *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (14 April 2016), 91-115.
⁶⁵ The humanitarian efforts of the British in the Persian Gulf dovetailed with their geopolitical interests in maintaining supremacy over the region, especially with regards to its proximity to India. See “British Interests in the Persian Gulf,” *Bulletin of International News*, vol. 18, no. 19, (20 September 1941), 1193-
Iran that on November 16, 1846, Colonel Justin Sheil wrote to the prime minister, Haji Mirza Aqasi with a simple—perhaps too simple—argument for abolishing the slave trade:

> When British ships can block the bringing of hostages, then they [slave traders] won’t bring them [African slaves], if they bring them, then whoever wants will buy; but like the example of the Georgians, now they [slave traders] do not bring [Georgians], and no one buys [them].

The absence of Georgians in Iran figured into Sheil’s anti-African slavery argument, with the small addition of British patrol ships in the Persian Gulf. Sheil, who represented the British legation in Iran, also attempted to debate the legality of slavery in Islam, to which Aqasi responded, “our religion, the religion of Europe, and the religion of Africa all vary.” He then pointed to the Ottomans, who he claimed traded slaves more than anyone, implying that the Iranians should not be expected to ban slavery when the caliphate was not concerned with it either. In the margins, Muhammad Shah Qajar noted his response to the Sheil’s numerous letters, questioning British motives and interest in these enslaved Africans. “There were plenty of hostages in Bukhara and Khiva,” he surmised, “why not discuss them?” Despite this, the following year, British embassy reports to Haji Mirza Aqasi and other Iranian officials regularly used siyāh-hā in their discussions of slave

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67 For numbers on Ottoman slavery, see Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 9.

traffic in the Persian Gulf. While it is unclear whether they were translating English into Persian, or writing directly in Persian, the growing usage of this term signals the identification of blackness as a marker of enslavement.

By the time Nasir al-Din Shah assumed the throne in 1848, his father had already signed a treaty with the British, committing Iran to the abolition of the Persian Gulf slave trade. Nasir al-Din Shah and his cabinet, however, did not prioritize abolition efforts until prodded again by the British. By this time, racial confluences of Africans as slaves appeared in internal Iranian government missives. In 1850, prime minister Amir Kabir referred to slaves as sīyāh, “the black,” in letters to governors on attempts to curtail the influx of slaves into Persian Gulf ports: “…It has been commanded to the governors of the Persian Gulf ports, Khuzistan, and Arabistan that citizens of the High Government are forbidden from bringing sīyāh from the sea…” Amir Kabir’s missive continues on, mentioning recent imports of black slaves through the Port of Muhammarah were forbidden. Amir Kabir repeated the ban on trafficking “black” by the sea again in his letter, reinforcing geography and race as the major identifiers of slavery in the treaty. Throughout multiple letters, Amir Kabir emphasized on slave trafficking via the Persian Gulf and its illegal status. This particular letter from 1850 followed pressures from

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69 Alipour, Asnād-i Bardīh-Fūrūshī, 96-99.
72 Many of Amir Kabir’s letters on slavery have been published, one in compilation of transcriptions of Amir Kabir documents, another a volume of documents pertaining to slavery and abolition. Amir Kabir’s tenure as prime minister was brief, due to internal political turmoil and ultimate murder at the order of the
British officials, who expressed concern that the Persian government had not been making adequate efforts in upholding the 1848 treaty on abolishing the slave trade.\(^7^3\)

His concerns revealed his priorities: while the Persian Gulf served as one particular zone of trafficking, it was by no means the only middle passage into Iran. Wealthy Persian merchants outmaneuvered the British patrols in the Persian Gulf by purchasing African slaves in Mecca and brought them to Iran via alternate routes.\(^7^4\) But condemnations of black slave trafficking focused on the Persian Gulf, reflecting British interests in controlling the coveted water route.

The language of the missive—where \(sīyāh\), “black,” stands in for African slaves—points to the function of the Persian Gulf as a middle passage that transformed individual peoples into enslaved blacks. First, Amir Kabir’s failure to identify free versus enslaved \(sīyāh\) indicates a critical identity, where black slave could be abbreviated as simply black, rendering enslavement as intrinsic to blackness. Indeed, it was Yaqut Ghulam and others like him who required additional adjectives clarifying their freedom. In this particular letter, Amir Kabir’s use of \(sīyāh\), the singular word for black, instead of \(sīyāhā(n)\), “blacks,” underscored his monolithic and reifying view of Africans in Iran in this period. Beyond equating black to slave, Amir Kabir equated all Africans who arrived in Iran via the Persian Gulf to a solid color. In other letters, he qualified black with words such as \(tāifih\) (group) or ghulām (male slave) or kanīz (female slave). His isolation of

\(^7^3\) Alipour, Asnād-i Bardih-Fūrūshī, 113-115.
\(^7^4\) I discuss the Meccan market for slaves further below. See Zekrgoo, The Sacred Art of Marriage, 22. Farahani, A Shi'ite Pilgrimage to Mecca, 1885-1886, 226-227.
siyāh as a noun instead of an adjective spoke to the changing geographies of slavery and abolition during this period.

While political missives rendered blackness one-dimensional, individuals still communicated racial preferences through ethnic and geographic labels to describe varying levels of blackness. Yaqut Ghulam’s contract rested on their blackness, as Yaqut Ghulam’s black color and his wife’s sweet blackness cost them their children. As mentioned earlier, Iranians also used ethnic or geographic markers to identify their slaves—Yaqut Ghulam’s wife was identified as habashī, Abyssinian, indicating that her skin tone might have been lighter than other slaves who were classified as zangī (Zanzibari), sumālī (Somalian), and bumbāsī (of Mombasa).\(^75\) Coloring determined function and status, with habashī used for the most desirable and light-skinned African slaves.\(^76\) These geographic markers identified slaves seemingly by origin and were qualified with siyāh (black) regularly. In an 1866 sale document, a contract described the sale of “one individual, a black bumbāsī slave woman named Sanubar.” Sanubar sold for thirty-five tuman.\(^77\)

These nuanced terms, however, were lost on the government officials who reduced slavery to blackness. In 1867, one year after Sanubar’s sale, the Tehran

\(^75\) Sumālī (Somalian) and bumbāsī (of Mombasa) were far rarer terms than habashī and zangī and did not carry the same historic importance in articulating Persian imaginations of blackness prior to the nineteenth century.

\(^76\) The preference for light-skinned slaves in the Middle East has been widely written on in the scholarship—see Babayan et al, *Slaves of the Shah*, 21; Ceyda Karamursel, “‘In the age of freedom, in the name of justice’: Slaves, slaveholders, and the state in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic, 1857-1933” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015); Mirzai, *A History of Slavery*, 104; Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent*, 12; Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 155; C

municipality conducted a census of households in the city.\textsuperscript{78} The municipality attempted to gather information about various groups according to age, gender, and social standing. Although the category on employment status including a series of specific terms, including men and wage-earners, black ghulām (male slaves), male servants, respectable women, black kanīz (female slaves), servants, and children/youth, the range of terms failed to include the wide range of enslavement in Tehran at that time. Sanubar, the black bumbāsī slave woman would have been categorized under black kanīz, but what about the non-black enslaved women in Tehran at this time? Ricks discussed the absence of “white slaves” in the original census and calculated their missing numbers based on the available statistics. While the census reported a total population of 147,256 people in Tehran, including 756 black ghulām and 3,014 black kanīz, Ricks found that the total population numbers and the numbers in the free/working status category indicated that 1,177 people were missing from the free/working status category. He attributed this to the census categories failure to specify non-black slaves, which he defined as including peoples from the Caucasus, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.\textsuperscript{79} Given their historic racialization, South Asian slaves were more likely included under the “black slaves” categories.\textsuperscript{80} The discrepancy in numbers and statistics demonstrates the difficulty of

\textsuperscript{78} Nasir al-Din Shah had undertaken various censuses during his rule, the first of which was in 1853. Depending on the census, various categories were used to distinguished subjects, including Home Ownership: homeowners or renters; Age: adult men, adult women, children, or youth; Free/Working Status: men and wage-earners, black ghulām, male servants, respectable women, black kanīz, servants, or children/youth; Ethnic/City background: Qajar, Tehran, Isfahani, Azerbaidjani, or Other/Mixed.


estimating slave populations in Tehran, let alone nation-wide numbers.

The organization and categorization of the census, however, furthers the recurring conceptualization that slaves were black, and vice versa. Per their inclusion, black male and female slaves comprised a significant visible population in Tehran at this time. While Ricks’ analysis accounts for what he deemed as “white slaves,” primary sources in Persian did not use “white” in the same way they used “black.” “The whites” did not indicate slave status in the same way “the blacks” could. Ethnic and geographic markers accompanied slave titles, but white could only be an adjective and could not substitute the need for the slave label. The census’ exclusion of white slaves indicated that their marginal presence would soon be engulfed into the rest of society. Differentiating white slaves from the rest of the population was futile, as their foreignness was temporary. The overwhelming number of female Caucasian slaves were sexually incorporated into larger Iranian families, resulting in their assimilation.

This invisibility was only compounded by foreign pressures and the Iranian reaction to reject them. A few years later, in 1873, Nasir al-Din Shah visited England during his tour of Europe, where he was faced with questions about the continued practice of slavery in Iran. On July 5, 1873, a letter was sent from Buckingham Palace to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society included the following message:

\[\text{For example, “the white slave woman” or “jārīyih sifād” for Shahjahan Khanum. 1883, File 296-18668, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.}\]

\[\text{Ehud Toledano describes the difficulty of tracing Caucasian women in Ottoman society as due to their “social absorption” as well as their visible disappearance. Toledano, \textit{As If Silent and Absent}, 12. It is difficult for me to trace the degree to which slaves were “socially absorbed” in their own generation, so I prefer to focus on the growing legibility of white bodies as free, which rendered these slaves invisible.}\]
I am commanded by His Majesty the Shah to acknowledge the receipt of your Memorial praying for the abolition of slavery in Persia. His Majesty is glad to be able to inform you that in the year 1851, He entered into a convention with the British government for preventing the importation of African slaves into Persia by sea, and He is now occupied with measures for renewing and confirming the obligations which he then accepted. There are no slave markets in Persia, nor any traffic in slaves entailing misery and cruelty. His Majesty will give you his best attention to the general question of slavery on his return to his country.  

Nasir al-Din Shah left England to continue his travels that same day, eager to visit France and the rest of his tour of Europe. The original letter to the Shah discussed the depleted populations from “the vast tracts of the Continent of Africa” in Persia, echoing Sheil’s logic from the 1840s: as long as slavery is allowed to remain legal, there will always be a demand for a greater supply. British pleas with the Shah reduced the slave trade in Iran to an African problem, which the Shah evaded by pointing to treaties with the British government.

Travelogues written and published for a public audience undermined the Shah’s assertion and revealed the changing racial landscape of slavery within Iran. Different shades of blackness determined value. Charles James Wills, who had worked as a physician in Iran for about two decades, remarked on the gradations of blackness in Iran:

They vary in color and value: the “Habashi” or Abyssinian is the most valued; the Souhâli or Somâli, next in blackness, is next in price; the Bombassi, or coal-black negro of the interior, being of much less prices, and usually only used as a cook. The prices of slaves in Shiraz are, a good Habashi girl of twelve to fourteen, forty pounds; a good Somâli same age, half as much; while a Bombassi is got for fourteen pounds, being

83 MSS Brit Emp S 22 G 94, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford University.
84 His travelogue was almost immediately translated and published in English the following year in 1874. Nasir al-Din Shah, The Diary of HM the Shah of Persia During His Tour of Europe, trans. J. W. Redhouse (London: John Murray, 1874).
85 MSS Brit Emp S 22 G 94, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford University.
chosen morely for physical strength.\textsuperscript{86}

Wills’ account of the varying types of blackness, as determined by a linear geography, demonstrates that a white/black binary did not explain Iranian racial hierarchies during this period. An imaginary line down the East African coast traces the contours of Iranian racial mapping. The further the origin was from Iran, the lesser the price of the slave.

Wills’ travelogue was widely read, and his definitions were used in \textit{A Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms; Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive}, first published in 1886. The Glossary included a reference to Wills’ book when defining “Bombasi,” as a “coal-black negro of the interior.”\textsuperscript{87} It also defined “Hubshee” (\textit{habashī}) as Persian for “an Abyssinian, an Ethiopian, a negro,”\textsuperscript{88} and defined Zanzibar as “originally general and applied widely to the East African coast.”\textsuperscript{89} The vagueness of these definitions calls to question their geographic value, especially as they corresponded with color as much as they did place of origin.

In the same year the Glossary was published, Mirza Muhammad Farahani had returned to Tehran from his pilgrimage to Mecca, and Nasir al-Din Shah asked him to compose a travelogue of his journey. The travelogue, intended as a guide for Shi’i

\textsuperscript{86} Charles James Wills, \textit{In the Land of the Lion and the Sun or Modern Persia: Being Experiences of Life in Persia During a Residence of Fifteen Years in Various Parts of That Country from 1866 to 1881} (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 326-327.
\textsuperscript{87} Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, \textit{Glossary Of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words And Phrases And Of Kindred Terms}. (London: John Murray, 1902) 77; Willis, \textit{In the Land of the Lion and the Sun or Modern Persia}, 326. The Glossary cites an 1883 publication of the book.
\textsuperscript{88} Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, \textit{Glossary}, 326.
\textsuperscript{89} Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, \textit{Glossary} 746.
pilgrimage, included practical information about currencies, climate, and geography. It also included extensive demographic information, including a breakdown of the Meccan slave market:

Slave girls and male slaves are plentiful here and relatively inexpensive. There are three enclosed areas in the middle of the bazaar specifically for selling male slaves and slave girls. They put wooden benches arranged in three tiers there. Those on the first tier are well dressed [with] clean, fresh clothes, [and olive skin] are very beautiful, with pretty eyes, and full of charm, banter, and coquetry. [Those on] the second tier are of a little lower quality than these. [On] the third tier are the very black, thick-lipped, and dirty slave girls, most of whom are brought to Iran where people like us are willing to own them. Their price is from thirty to forty tomans to two hundred tomans. Male slaves are cheap. Good eunuchs, young and old, can be obtained there…Thus the wife of ‘Ala ol-Molk, who, I heard, had come to Mecca this year bought a young eunuch for two hundred tomans and took [him] back… Transporting them by sea is a source of trouble and dispute.

In a few sentences, Farahani provided a remarkable amount of information about the logistics and attitudes towards the slave trade, intentionally and unintentionally. He discussed the spatiality of the slave market, wherein slaves were divided into three physical divisions per their perceived “beauty and cleanliness,” coded words for their skin tones and raced bodies. He offers benchmarks for the costs of the different slaves. Per Farahani’s description, most Iranian slaveholders purchased the slaves from the “third tier,” the “very black.” And although the Persian Gulf slave trade had been banned, making the transport of slaves by sea difficult, members of the Iranian government still

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92 Mirza Husayn Farahani, trans. by Hafez Farmayan, A Shi‘ite Pilgrimage to Mecca, 226-227.
93 Here Farahani uses the phrase, khaylī siyāh, literally “very black.”
94 Ala al-Mulk, whose wife and eunuch are mentioned by Farahani, was a statesman, governor and minister of the Qajar court. H. Mahbubi Aardakani, “Alā‘-Al-Molk,” Encyclopedia Iranica, 1984.
managed to travel to Mecca, purchase their slaves, and return to Iran with them. The brief allusion to ‘Ala al-Mulk’s wife and the new eunuch indicates a significant barrier to the abolition of the slave trade in Iran: those with the financial and legal means to purchase and import slaves continued to do so, despite decades banning the slave trade in Iran. In a society where only the elite and wealthy participated in the enslavement of others, how would slavery be abolished if the very members of government traveled to bring slaves into their homes?

Though Wills and Farahani each wrote with very different audiences in mind – Wills, a British audience, and Farahani, an Iranian one – their memoirs, both published in the mid 1880s, demonstrates the degree to which the Caucasian slave trade had been diminished within Iran’s borders. Though Farahani discussed Circassian slave girls in the Ottoman court in his travelogue, he made no mention of them being enslaved within Iran. Both described the different slave groups as divided into three groups – Farahani emphasized skin tone, while Wills used ethnic terms to distinguish the groups. In this way, Wills’ descriptions and prioritization of habashī slaves might offer another explanation for Yaqut Ghulam’s marriage and paternal rights contract. Not only was Yaqut Ghulam almost a slave by virtue of his blackness, but his wife was habashī, the most prized of African slaves, and therefore the most capable of rearing more prized slaves. The popularity of Wills’ first book led him to write another book, Persia as It Is: Sketches of Modern Persian Life and Character in 1886, where he expounded on the


95 Farahani also expresses some confusion at their enslavement, as Circassians are Muslim and “buying and selling them is inconsistent with the enlightened holy law.” Farahani, A Shi’ite Pilgrimage to Mecca, 1885-1886, 128.
merits of habashi slaves:

“The third and best kind of slaves are the Habasshis, or so-called Abyssinians. These are of a still higher type. The lips are thin, the colour light brown; there is often a distinct red in the cheeks; the hair is long, often nearly straight: both males and females have considerable pretensions to good looks. As much as 80 or 100 pounds may be given for a healthy young Habasshi girl. As a rule, these girls are not bought as servants, but as wives. Young Habasshis of both sexes are purchased by the grandees of Persia as playmates and confidential servants for their sons and daughters. The girls become confidantes of their young mistresses, and ultimately occupy the position of housekeepers or wardrobe-women...From this class of slave are taken the eunuchs (few nowadays) maintained by the nobility. The few eunuch children imported are eagerly purchased at double or treble the price of ordinary slaves. As a rule, the Habasshis are delicate, and feel the severe winter of Central and Northern Persia. The greatest care is taken of them. They do no real work, and it is not expected of them. They are well clad, and often the master or mistress glories in lavishing money on the dress of a favourite slave.”

Wills dismissal of eunuchs as doing “no real work” is indicative of his preconceived notions that equated slaves with manual labor. From Wills’ extensive description, however, one can see the importance of habashi in Yaqut Ghulam’s contract: the slaveholder Muhammad Baqir Silmi orchestrated the union between Yaqut Ghulam and his wife to breed black slaves of the highest value possible. Not only would he profit from the habashi-looking children, but Muhammad Baqir Silmi would have also retained Yaqut Ghulam’s wife as his own slave. The slaveholder lost nothing, and perhaps, in the event of successful pregnancies, gained the most prized black slaves, which could only increase his status or fortune.

But these descriptions and differentiations also indicate that coloring may have been more important than actual geographic origin. The Glossary’s inclusion of “negro”

97 I discuss the role of eunuchs at court in more depth in Chapter 2.
as a definition of *Hubshee* indicates that it may have become a catch-all term for African slaves of lighter complexions, which fits with Farahani’s description of the slave market divisions.

Rather, it seems that an individual with lighter skin whose features fit Iranian standards of beauty, like Yaquf Ghulam’s sweet-faced wife or the beautiful enslaved women described by Farahani, would have been classified as *habashi* regardless of her ethnic or geographic origin.

Government documents, private contracts, and public-facing writings indicate the increasing elisions in identifying slaves in nuanced terms during this period. Although enslaved Caucasians still existed in segments of Iranian society, their mention was largely elided from documents from the later nineteenth century, reflecting not only their diminishing numbers but also their diminished relevance to discourses of slavery and abolition in Iran at this time. East Africans from all parts of the African coastline became the dominant and most referenced group of enslaved peoples, which led to a flattening of their identities reduced to the color black.

Painting Blackness

The visuality of blackness was particularly important in storytelling through illustrations, especially through hand-illuminated and lithographed books, as well as paintings in this
A royal manuscript of the famous story, *A Thousand and One Nights*, offers some insight to how race was translated into Persian literally and visually. As a young prince in 1846, Nasir al-Din Mirza visited Tabriz, where the Abd al-Latif Tasuji’s 1845 Persian translation of the Arabic was read out loud to him. Within two years, Nasir al-Din Shah ascended the throne and commissioned the piece with no expenses spared.

The transmission history of *A Thousand and One Nights* is convoluted, though scholars agree that it is an amalgamation of stories from across Asia and North Africa that revolves around a pair of royal brothers whose wives both betrayed them by having affairs with slaves. One brother deals with the betrayal quite violently, marrying virgins at night and executing them the next morning, until one woman, Shaherzad, saves her life by narrating never-ending stories, causing the king to postpone her execution until he realizes his love for her. Extant copies in different languages from the fourteenth century onwards reveal that although the individual stories told by Shaherzad differ, the frame story has remained remarkably consistent. The origin of these stories, however, remains irrelevant to this discussion, as we are primarily concerned with the nineteenth century illuminated manuscript commissioned by Nasir al-Din Shah. Sani’ al-Mulk, the royal court painter, oversaw 42 artists working on the project until its completion in

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In the illuminated manuscript, a series of seven illustrated panels tell the frame story of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Despite the original frame story being set in the Sassanian era, the illustrations all imagine the stories through the lens of the Qajar court, as evidenced by their dress, furnishings, and architectural motifs. This choice may have reflected the Shah’s love of the story. The first illustrated page includes four frames, the first of which, for example, introduces the two brothers, Shah Zaman and Shahrbaz, and their father. The artist depicted the father as a white-bearded king wearing a turban, sitting on an elaborately carved and gilded wooden and red velvet throne, not unlike the ornate furniture associated Louis XIV. The sons stand to either side of their father, dressed in European-style uniforms and with tasseled fezzes on their heads. The next frame depicts Shah Zaman preparing to leave his personal kingdom to visit his brother’s palace. The third frame shows him returning inside his palace for a last minute detail and walking in on his wife and her black slave lover laying on a floral-patterned

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1855.103

105 The Sassanian Empire ruled over roughly present-day Iran from 224-651 AD, and was the last pre-Islamic Persian empire.
106 The use of contemporary dress is particularly interesting, as Collaco draws upon Tavakoli-Targhi to describe a kind of “time-distancing,” where the Qajars “would contemporize themselves by casting off their traditional Persian dress in favor of European modes.” Gwendolyn Collaco, “Crafting Time Through Dress: A Pastiche of Periods and Regions,” *An Album of Artists’ Drawings from Qajar Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 2017), 42. The 1001 Nights manuscript involves a bit of both, creating a more realistic depiction of the cosmopolitanism of the Qajar court amid depictions of monsters and other mythical beings.
mattress in a room adorned with Corinthian-like columns and a gilded mirror. Though the text narrates, the lady was sleeping in the arms of a zangī slave, the illustration depicted them as very much awake, illustrating the slave’s lips puckered for a kiss, with his fully erect penis in the hand of Shah Zaman’s wife. His nose and lips are exaggerated in shape and size, and a golden earring hangs from his ear, a visual and poetic device used to signal his slave status. The woman, also unnamed, resembles typical illustrations of Qajar women – arched unibrow, flushed cheeks, hair parted down the middle, wearing a bodice and an embroidered robe, leaving her legs exposed, her mouth slightly agape. The final frame on this page shows Shah Zaman killing his wife next to her murdered lover. The slave appears with fallen on the ground, his penis flaccid, his eyes rolled back and his mouth gaping open. This image concludes the first sequence of events in the One Thousand and One Nights manuscript.

The next page, which illustrates the rest of the frame story, is equally as graphic. After arriving at Shahrbaz’s palace, Shah Zaman remained depressed and stayed at the palace while his brother left for a hunt, only to witness his brother’s wife sleeping with a lover amidst a garden orgy of slaves. When Shahrbaz returns home, he learns of his wife’s betrayal, and together they leave for a trip, only to meet a kidnapped woman in a

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108 The inclusion columns may be an allusion to wings of the Gulistan Palace which have since been destroyed. Photographs of the palace harem show several similar columns in its façade. “Imārat Khwābgah bi taraf-i qiblīh,” 209-2, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran
110 The phrase, ghulām-i halqih bih gūsh, or “slave with an earring,” appears in Persian poetry, including the thirteenth century poet, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Iraqī’s poem with the same first line. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Iraqī, Ghazal #90, Divān-i Ash’ār. The phrase, halqih bih gūsh, “with an earring” or more literally, “with a hoop to the ear,” is so commonly associated with slaves that a search in Dehkhoda’s online dictionary leads to the entry for ghulām, a male slave. See www.vajehyab.com.
stranger situation than their own. Upon their return to the palace, Shahrbaz begins his serial execution, and the story continues with Shaherzad’s arrival and storytelling. The frame story was reduced to three final scenes: Shahrbaz away at the royal hunt, Shah Zaman’s view of the palace gardens, and the final scene where the two brothers come upon the ‘Ifrit and the kidnapped woman. The hunting scene depicts Shahrbaz on a hilly landscape, while members of his entourage hunted elephants and his collared hunting dogs brought a large porcupine to its end, an image similar to other Qajar era hunting scenes. The dress and the animals, especially the hunting dogs, speak to the relatability of this manuscript for a royal Qajar audience.

The following scene depicts Shah Zaman looking out intently from his window in the palace, watching his brother’s disrobed wife beckon towards Mas’ud, her black slave lover. Much like his own encounter with Shah Zaman’s wife and her lover, Mas’ud is depicted as fully erect. Three other African couples are also present. While the text referenced Mas’ud entering Shahrbaz’s wife, “like a demon atop an angel,” neither of the Shah’s wives were depicted as having vaginal intercourse in these illustrations. The same cannot be said of the African couples, who are all depicted in the same sexual position and openly engaging in coitus. The sexuality of black men, particularly slaves,

\[111\] It is clear that Sani’ al-Mulk has maintained a notably Qajar aesthetic in his work, distinctly different from earlier Safavid pieces. See “A Hunting Scene” from 1663 (W.626.213B, Walters Museum), http://art.thewalters.org/detail/83763/a-hunting-scene/, and “Binding from Five Poems (Quintet)” from 1854 (W.622.binding, Walters Museum), http://art.thewalters.org/detail/81991/binding-from-five-poems-quintet-11/.

\[112\] “Huṣṣūt bi žūr anđar ūḏīvī bizībār bar” Folio 23, Abd al-Latif Tasuji, illustrated by Sani’ al-Mulk, Hisār va Yik Shab, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.

\[113\] Comparisons with later lithographs of One Thousand and Nights highlight the role of race in Sani’ al-Mulk’s illustrations. In one lithograph, first published in 1936 with updated illustrations alongside Abd al-Latif Tasuji’s Persian translation, the illustrations depicting the frame story are reduced to two. The first, a header at the beginning of the story, portrays Shah Zaman’s wife with her slave lover, and the second
recurs throughout the manuscript, suggesting a fear of sex between Iranian women and African men. These fears or anxieties seem to have deterred artists from depicting interracial penetrative sex as opposed to other sexual acts. It is important to note that neither of the two wives are shown bare breasted, a popular visual in depicting maternal and feminine beauty in Qajar art. The decision to keep these women’s breasts covered while their legs were exposed signaled their impropriety and their lack of attractiveness. Interestingly, the ethnic background of the women is never alluded to – only their illustrated skin color and stylized eyebrows indicate an Iranian-like background. Though many of Nasir al-Din Shah’s wives were not Iranian in origin, their presence took on an Iranian identity in the manuscript’s version of Shah’s harem. The overemphasized sexuality of African slaves is particularly relevant in the context of the Qajar court, where castrated slave men guarded the harems.

Finally, in the illustration where the two brothers traveled in an effort to forget their sorrows and came upon an ‘Ifrit sleeping besides his kidnapped bride, the artist illustrates the garden scene, with Shah Zaman and Shahrbaz pointing at the spectacle from an overlooking window. The illustrations differ significantly from the earlier manuscript, as the lithograph images depicted the characters in a manner more closely related to Safavid figural paintings, where people were drawn with narrower eyes, and the images lacked realistic perspectives. The most remarkable distinction from the earlier manuscript, however, is the depiction of whiteness and blackness. Because of the nature of lithographs and the nature of block ink printing, the artists maintained the blackness of the principle slave lovers of the two wives, but rendered the rest of the slaves frolicking in the gardens as white. Unlike Sani’ al-Mulk’s paintings, none of the images depict the people actively engaged in sexual intercourse, but rather are shown in each other’s arms, some kissing on a cheek, some with bare breasts, others hugging, and so forth. The shift away from illustrating sexual positions may be tied to the public-facing nature of the lithograph, unlike the very exclusive nature of Sani’ al-Mulk’s illuminated manuscript, which was intended for the Shah himself. Muhammad Ramizani, ed. *Hizār va Yik Shab* (Tehran: Chāpkhānī-yi Āftāb, 1936). Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Reading for Gender Through Qajar Paintings,” *Royal Persian Paintings: the Qajar Epoch, 1785-1925* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with I.B. Tauris, 1999), 78-79.

114 Although eunuchs were castrated, some were known to have engaged in sexual relations. Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 137. Folios 19, 20, 28, Abd al-Latif Tasuji, illustrated by Sani’ al-Mulk, *Hizār va Yik Shab*, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran. By contrast, the manuscript illustrations rarely depicted the non-black male body as exposed.
painted the beast in the same color and manner that he painted the black couples in the
garden. In fact, the illustration depicted the ‘Ifrit the same shade of brown as the black
slaves with so many limbs bent in different directions that it resembles the earlier figures
of black slaves atop one another.\textsuperscript{116} The clear reference provided a visual lexicon that
equated the black slaves at court with mythical monstrosity, a reference to the earlier line
that compared Mas’ud to a demon and the Shah’s wife to an angel.

Enslaved African women were marginal characters in the illustrated manuscript.
In these first few pages, they were faceless, hidden by the bodies of their sexual partners.
When included as dressed characters in the context of other scenes, they were painted
along the edges, representative of their lower status and their overall irrelevance to the
plot. The African women either trailed their masters, cooked food, or even spied on a
master as she brushed her hair from the margins of these scenes.\textsuperscript{117} The manuscript’s
illustrations depicted enslaved African women as deferential to others, active in their
chores but passive in agency. Other paintings from this period contrast with the
manuscript’s illustrations, as they depicted enslaved African women as active in
regulating and policing illicit sexual behavior.\textsuperscript{118} Still, these women were painted along
the edges of the painting, with their faces turned towards their master’s, cuing the viewer
to look away from them as well.

\textsuperscript{116} I should note that the rest of the manuscript does not feature monsters as uniformly black.
\textsuperscript{117} Folios 79, 343, 375, and 407, Abd al-Latif Tusuji, illustrated by Sanî’ al-Mulk, \textit{Hizâr va Yik Shab},
\textsuperscript{118} Mira Schwerda has written about the spying of female slaves on sexually illicit scenes in stand-alone
paintings. Mira Schwerda, “Amorous Couples: Depictions of Permitted and Prohibited Love,” \textit{An Album of
Artists’ Drawings from Qajar Iran} (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museum: 2017) 78-83. Staci Gem Schweiller,
\textit{Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iranian Photography: Desirous Bodies} (New
York: Routledge, 2017), 185.
Although the manuscripts’ text sets the story during the Sassanian era, Nasir al-Din Shah’s fondness for the manuscript, as well as the illustration of the scenes in the very image of the Qajar court, reveals the extent to which the story and its attitudes towards gender and race resonated during this period. Notably, the illustrations of the frame story only depict the “Iranian” characters in the same lighter skin tone, while the slaves – as well as the monster – are presented in the same darker tone.\(^{119}\) This visual binary remains true for the majority of the manuscript, and the various levels of blackness as described in the sources mentioned in the earlier section are largely obfuscated. As Browne has noted, “…these are ways of seeing and conceptualizing blackness through stereotypes, abnormalization, and other means that impose limitations, particularly so in spaces that are shaped for whiteness.”\(^{120}\) These illustrations did not only highlight a particular mode of blackness for the consumption of the court, but also a uniform whiteness for members of the court to see themselves in, indicating that the paintings were not only shaped for whiteness, but were actively shaping whiteness as well.

Photographing Black Slaves, Ambiguous Others

The photography of slaves at court represents the third set of sources for understanding race and racial dynamics at the capital of the Qajar Empire. While in the textual and illustrated sources, a scarcity of Caucasian slaves was tacitly articulated, photographs of women at court demonstrate how visibly Caucasian women were camouflaged next to

\(^{119}\) The ‘Ifrit’s kidnapped bride, who is presented as a foreigner in a foreign land, is slightly paler in tone than the two brothers.

their free masters. Enslaved African women, like in the illustrations discussed earlier, were often relegated to the corners of the photographs, again visually alerting the viewer to their status.

The diminishing slave trades in Iran coincided with the most exciting invention of the nineteenth century: the camera. First invented in 1837, the camera quickly became a favored piece of technology in Iran. Nasir al-Din Mirza, then still a prince, received gifts of cameras from the Tsar and Queen Elizabeth in 1839, and Nikolai Pavlov took the first daguerreotype in Iran in 1842.\textsuperscript{121} The advent of photography, coupled with Nasir al-Din Shah’s eager love for this technologically advanced hobby, provides us with many documentary-styled photographs that provide glimpses of life in some detail.\textsuperscript{122}

The arrival of the camera in Iran marked an important moment for the documentation of slavery, especially slaves at court. While commissioning illustrations or painted portraits remained costly and time-consuming, photographs provided an alternate avenue for the documentation of people, places, and things. Still exorbitantly expensive for the average Iranian, members of the royal class were able to photograph and preserve their memories for posterity. Photographs operated as a currency as well. Not only did the

\textsuperscript{122} See Ali Behdad’s “Royal Portrait Photography in Iran: Constructions of Masculinity, Representations of Power,” \textit{Ars Orientalis} (2013), 32-45. Nasir al-Din Shah pursued several other cataloguing projects, including having his lands photographed and documenting his political prisoners, which are currently held at the Gulistan Palace Archives. Mira Schwerda discusses prisoner photography and their popularity as souvenirs for Westerners in her article. Mira Schwerda, “Death on Display: Mirza Riza Kirmani, Prison Portraiture, and the Depiction of Public Executions in Qajar Iran,” Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, 8 (2015), 172-191. The photographs I discuss here remained different, however, as they were not circulated or gifted outside of the royal family, and were kept for private uses only. Instead of pandering to European tastes, which Behdad discusses in \textit{Camera Orientalis}, these photographs reflected how Nasir al-Din Shah wanted to remember his court.
ownership of slaves signal wealth and status, but the ability to spend valuable film on the slaves further contributed to the imagery of lavish living.

Nasir al-Din Shah was especially invested in photography as a tool for preserving his court. At a time when he regularly commissioned travelogues and memoirs, photographs served as another means of writing history. Though the Gulistan Palace Archives have now re-organized many of the royal albums into loosely thematically-oriented binders, one can see that Nasir al-Din Shah was especially interested in photographs that documented major monuments and landmarks across his imperial domains, as well as photographs that focused on everyday court life. The information about the individual photographs, especially those held at Gulistan Palace, is rather limited. Likely taken in the 1880s, these photographs have since been separated from their original albums, and the only photographs made available to researchers are black and white copies of ones deemed suitable for the public. Women in these photographs, for example, appear fully clothed, which was not true of all Qajar photography. Despite their relative modesty, photographs featuring the women of the harem and the slaves of the court were not meant for circulation. The following photographs may have been intended for nephews to his prominent wife Amina Aqdas, Nasir al-Din Shah’s favorite children at the court, Aziz al-Sultan and Hassan Khan, who feature prominently

123 See Chapter 2 for more examples.
124 The Gulistan Palace Archive does not release photographs that include nudity of any kind. The black and white comment is not to imply that the photographs were originally in color, but that the reproductions were done in a grayscale, which was likely not the original pigmentation of the photograph.
125 Photographs guarded by descendants of the former ruling family reveal a different aesthetic. Schweiller has published a few of these photographs, held by the Kimia Foundation. Schweiller, *Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality*, 102, 135-144. Presumably these photographs also existed at the palace archives, either they are not made available to researchers because of decency codes or because they have since been destroyed.
in this series.\textsuperscript{126} This album may have stemmed from anxieties concerned with preserving rapidly-changing court life for these young children. Although Nasir al-Din Shah had several photographic cataloguing projects, including multiple albums worth of Iranian landscapes and historical monuments,\textsuperscript{127} his cataloguing of slaves points to a particular project hinged on the social and political moment, as his government was legally responsible for the abolition of the slave trade, even if it was halfheartedly enforced.

These photographs are particularly important for categorizing the different slaves at Nasir al-Din Shah’s court. A comparison of how Caucasian and East African slaves appeared in these photographs reveals some distinctions in how whiteness and blackness were viewed through the lens. In many ways, whiteness allowed for an invisibility that prevented non-African slaves from being racialized, and necessitated labels to distinguish them from the free women of the harem. While Iranians positioned themselves in between whiteness and blackness, the white slaves blended in with other Iranians, making it difficult to identify them without captions. In albums generally labeled the “women’s albums” of the archives, several photographs taken and captioned by Nasir al-Din Shah both demonstrate and obscure the racial diversity of the harem.

\textsuperscript{126} Aziz al-Sultan was born in 1879 and seems to be between 6-8 years old in these photographs, which places some of these photos in the mid 1880s. Nasir al-Din Shah gave him the title “Aziz al-Sultan” in 1886, but we cannot use this as a sure measure of when the photographs were taken, as the Shah was known for returning to earlier photographs and annotating them after some time had passed. See Chapter 2. Abbas Amanat, “‘Azīz-Al-Soltān,” \textit{Encyclopedia Iranica}, 1988 http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/aziz-al-soltan-golam-ali-khan (accessed 5 August 2017).

\textsuperscript{127} See Badri Atabay, \textit{Fihrist-i Album-hāyi Kitābkhānīh-yi Saltanaṭī} (Tehran: Chāpkhānīh-yi Zībā, 1976) for a catalog of the royal albums.
Several photographs of the Shah’s harem were taken on the same day, with Nasir al-Din Shah corraling the women into different poses and positions, allowing them to hold props and even allowing one of the Shah’s favorites and most photographed women of the harem, Anis al-Dawlih,\(^{128}\) to have a few costume changes as well. In these photographs, an enslaved African woman appears at various ends of the frames, demarcating her relationship with others physically and spatially. Although her exact role is unknown, her inclusion in photographs that revolved around Anis al-Dawlih may indicate that she was her slave. The visuality of her intimacy with the women around her changed dramatically depending on the space and the person. This is particularly

\(^{128}\) Schweiller, *Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality*, 44.
poignant in large group photographs of the harem, where the Shah attempted to include over twenty women in the same frame. Why were slaves incorporated into these images and how did blackness affect the posturing for the photograph?

A photographic index of some of the harem’s female slaves and eunuchs provides viewers of the royal album with her name: Guli Chihrih. Meaning “Flower-Faced,” Guli Chihrih sat alongside others in the front row, while most of the eunuchs stood behind them. Nasir al-Din Shah’s own captions filled the margins of the photograph – everyone in the photograph, save for a young prince wearing a crown, was a slave. Nasir al-Din Shah’s handwritten caption listed the names of those photographed around the margin. A visual catalog, the photograph captured an almost neutral expression of intimacy. Guli Chihrih, who sat cross-legged, appeared wearing a plain black scarf and patterned pants. A woman to her right, with a young Hassan Khan in her lap, rested her hand on Guli Chihrih’s leg.

129 Najmabadi describes female-only spaces as characterized by homosociality during this period. This particular photo, which includes the eunuchs, does not carry the same kind of intimacy seen in Figures 2-6. See Najmabadi, Women with Mustaches, 38.
130 Album 210: 25. Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran
The black and white gradations of the photographs indicated race in a different way than color illustrations. Instead of setting the scene, or serving as plot devices, slaves were photographed with members of the royal family to physically frame them with their bodies. In another photograph, captioned “Group of Women sitting on the Marble Steps” (Figure 2), Nasir al-Din Shah arranged the people of the harem along the steps, creating a messy triangle-like shape instead of two clean lines.\textsuperscript{131} Schweiller describes Nasir al-Din Shah’s portraits of women as “pyramidal,”\textsuperscript{132} and this photograph seems to be an expansion of that rule, likening the harem to one prime woman. Their seating was

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{“Group of Women Sitting on the Marble Steps,” Album 210: 7-3, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran. Guli Chihrih is photographed in the back, the third person from the right. Her face is partially blocked by an elbow.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{131}“Group of Women Sitting on the Marble Steps,” Album 210: 7-3, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{132} Schweiller, \textit{Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality}, 41.
perhaps intended to look more casual and familiar, though they were equally as contrived – striking model-like poses and presenting carefully held fans and teapots, a nod to the trendiness of Chinoiserie at the time. Again, two young princes were featured at the center of the group, and Nasir al-Din Shah’s handwriting identified one as Aziz al-Sultan. Only a few others’ names were included in the marginalia.

The film caught Aziz al-Sultan wrestling away from an embrace, blurred but still identifiable. Just below him, his younger brother, Hassan Khan seems to have thrown a tantrum frozen in time, kicking his feet out and shaking his head. The children were not the only ones disrupting the photo. On the right, a woman walked into the portrait, interrupting the stylized scene. The rest of the women, similarly dressed in plain black or pattern chador and skirts, were seated on the stairs, but a few towards the middle stood, asserting their position. Two young eunuchs stood at the peripheries of the camera lens, one fully included, the other halved by the frame limitations.

Despite the inclusion of twenty-two individuals in the frame—young princes, harem women, and slaves, Nasir al-Din Shah only captioned five names: Shah Nigin or “the Diamond King,” the eunuch to the left; Pari Khanum, a young girl dressed with a plain scarf towards the middle of the photograph; another woman, Banu Khanum’s daughter; and again, Siyah Guli Chihrih. Notably, Guli Chihrih is named here too—\textit{Siyah Guli Chihrih}, or \textit{“The Black Flower Faced.”} Her face is partially covered by a woman standing in front of her, but Nasir al-Din Shah’s inclusion of \textit{Siyah—black}--prevents unfamiliar readers from confusing Guli Chihrih with the other woman blocking her full visibility. Unlike the previous image, where the woman next to her had posed with her
hand on her knee, Guli Chihrih appears to be ignored and even pushed out of view in this photograph. The difference in intimacy is related to the difference in status, where poses indicating companionship also identified their similar positionality at court.

The Shah typically only included marginal captions for children or the enslaved, leaving most of his wives unnamed. The captions seem to highlight the balance of the photographs as well – Shah Nigin and Guli Chihrih are positioned almost exactly across from one other, anchoring the photograph, while Pari Khanum and Banu Khanum’s daughter, younger light-skinned women, stood closer to the center. In contrast to the catalog-like photograph of the slaves in Figure 1 where everyone was meticulously named, the marginalia for this large group photograph did not include the names any of his wives. Instead, Nasir al-Din Shah specifically named those who future generations are likely to forget: children, whose appearances change as they grow older, and enslaved individuals, whose names represented both power and intimacy. Schweiller argues that the volume of harem photographs indicates the dominance of women at court, describing the photographs as an attempt “to reign them in.” Extending this logic to the many photographs of enslaved men and women at court, the selective naming constituted another dimension of asserting this power. Naming the slaves ensured that any viewer would recognize them as enslaved.

133 Schweiller, Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality, 58.
Instead, the wives were made identifiable by their stances, clothing, and positions in the photographs. A favorite amongst the Shah’s wives, Anis al-Dawlih was almost always photographed in the front or center, wearing the most beautiful of clothes to highlight her special status in the Shah’s harem. In Figure 3, which the Shah captioned simply as “Group of Women,” twenty women and children posed for the Shah to take their photograph on one of the porches of the Gulistan Palace. Anis al-Dawlih sat on a front step, dressed in a pleated Victorian gown and feathered hat, while the rest of the

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135 Album 210: 1-4, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
women were dressed in plain or patterned black chador.\textsuperscript{136} Notably, Anis al-Dawlih’s hair was exposed, curled and arranged under her luxurious hat, further setting her apart as a tastemaker at court. Other members of the Shah’s harem also sat along the step, but Anis al-Dawlih’s dress signaled her elevated status in the harem. To the right, the young Aziz al-Sultan sat cross-legged. Behind the seated women, eight women stood, some beaming with smiles and clutching their \textit{chador}, while others faded into the hallway and darkness.

In contrast to Anis al-Dawlih’s regal yet relaxed pose in the front, three women stood stiffly, patiently waiting for the Shah to release them of his camera’s gaze. The woman in the center had placed her arms around the two next to her, one of whom was Guli Chihrih. Like in Figure 1, this photo showed an acknowledgement of Guli Chihrih’s presence in the photo by the person next to her, rather than an obstruction of her face and person.

Guli Chihrih’s face is again partially blocked in a photograph of a women’s party at Anis al-Dawlih’s residence. Guli Chihrih, wearing her same black scarf, was surrounded by the elite women in their starched, white scarves, and floral \textit{chador}, some inside a tented area, while others stayed seated on the balcony.\textsuperscript{137} The uneven lighting and film technology cast some of the women into the darkness, while others were over-exposed. Only Anis al-Dawlih and those immediately next to her were photographed clearly. Anis al-Dawlih, who often modeled for the Shah’s photographs, posed for the


\textsuperscript{137} Album 210:2-3, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
camera with her hand to her mouth, while the guests held more conservative poses.

In contrast to the previously discussed photos, this photo has no identifying marginalia outside of a quick remark that a party had taken place at Anis al-Dawlih’s residence. One might think that Guli Chihrih was not intended to be photographed, but the slow shutter speeds of these photographs required them to be meticulously staged. She had been included, but was intended to be seen as a contextual marker of the presence of slaves at the party, an attendant rather than a guest. In these photographs, Guli Chihrih is in close proximity with those around her, but the stances and framing were intended for the

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viewer, to distinguish her as distantly different from the others photographed.

Figure 5: Untitled [2], with the following labels from left to right: Zivar, Chirkisi, Hassan Khan brother of Aziz al-Sultan with his nanny (dayyih), Bashi. Album 210: 8-3, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.

Another enslaved woman, Chirkisi, can also be traced through Nasir al-Din Shah’s photographs. Chirkisi posed in the same index photograph (Figure 1), two people to the right from Guli Chihrih. Her identifying name, Chirkisi was more of a label, simply “Circassian.”\(^{139}\) It is unclear whether her name was Chirkisi, or Nasir al-Din Shah had only intended to distinguish her as the only Circassian slave in the photo. No additional information was provided, and due to the discoloration of the photo and the archival reprint, further identifying her remains a difficult task. Figure 5 features a much smaller group of individuals—four women and a child—again includes another Chirkisi caption

\(^{139}\) Chirkisi is the first girl from the right. Album 210: 25, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
instead of a proper name. Here, Chirkisi is small statured, and the discoloration of the photograph almost makes her seem pale and meek, a stark contrast to another girl—labeled Bashi or “in charge”—who struck a pose with a parasol. Yet in the photograph of women sitting on marble steps (Figure 2), both Chirkisi and Bashi had appeared in stronger poses: Bashi in the front row, posing with her arm bent, and Chirkisi in the back row, striking a similar vogue. Though Nasir al-Din Shah had singled out the enslaved women and Aziz al-Sultan, he had not marked Chirkisi. Without a caption, Chirkisi blended in with the other harem women. Without the label, her ethnic ambiguity prevents a clear racialization. One might point to the plainness of her clothes to distinguish her from the true elites of the harem, but her all-black attire does not isolate her from the others the same way Guli Chihrih’s complexion does.

Similarly, Bashi, seen in Figure 5 holding a parasol, seems to be the same person with her arm around Guli Chihrih in Figure 3. Their photographed intimacy, then, was derived from the nature of their relatively comparable statuses. Though her name has been truncated, one can guess that Bashi, which translates to “in charge,” was also a slave, though one entrusted with some responsibilities. It may well have been an intentional intimacy staged by Nasir al-Din Shah as a visual cue of Bashi’s status, as associated with Guli Chihrih’s blackness. The ethnic ambiguity is significant in obscuring Bashi’s role at the court. Ultimately, though her appearance has been preserved, the photograph has not maintained her status and clearly as racialized slaves at court.

140 Album 210: 8-3, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran. 141 Bashi appears to be the same person with her arm around Guli Chihrih in Figure 3. Though her name has been truncated, one can guess that Bashi, which translates to “in charge,” was also a slave, though one entrusted with some responsibilities.
Clothing and jewelry also indicated status amongst enslaved women. In another photograph, again labeled “Group of Women,” Chirkisi stands in the center, wearing a patterned pinned scarf with multiple layers of gold jewelry hanging from around her head. Similarly, photographs including enslaved African women, however, depicted them in the plainest of clothing, an indication of their different status and roles at court. Though all were sexually vulnerable to Nasir al-Din Shah, Caucasian women were more sexualized and prized for their sexualization, whereas African women were primarily tasked with managing chores and children, distinctions that were made clear in their poses in these albums. Another woman, also possibly a Circassian or otherwise light-

\[142\] Album 210: 5-3 Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
skinned slave, standing third from the right in Figure 6, framed her pregnant belly with her hands, a visual indication of her desirability and fertility.\textsuperscript{143} Although the photo was taken outside, a few of the women sat cross legged on the floor, and Anis al-Dawlih sat on a chair while Chirkisi stood next to her. Although six eunuchs accompanied the group, the presence of the eunuchs did not negate Nasir al-Din Shah’s characterization of this photograph as a “women’s” photograph, a nod to their undermined sexuality, but also that the eunuchs themselves did not seem like they belonged. Their blurred faces starkly contrast those of the women, who patiently and stiffly waited for their images to be recorded. Without a caption, Chirkisi’s presence is, again, not notably different from the rest of the women. As she stands next to Anis al-Dawlih, however, it is clear that her presence signified high status: while she was indistinguishable from the other women, she stood out of respect for Anis al-Dawlih and the other proper wives of the Shah, flanking her with her jewels.

These photos, some taken in quick succession or within a short time frame, place Chirkisi and Guli Chihrih in the same visual space. Despite their close proximity, however, their images operated in two different ways. Although Guli Chihrih’s name, sometimes preceded by \textit{black}, allowed Nasir al-Din Shah to isolate her from the other women, her skin color already identified her as black and slave. In some ways, her blackness re-inscribed her enslavement in these photographs.\textsuperscript{144} In Guli Chihrih’s

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Pregnancy and successful childbirth provided a path towards freedom for slave women. Afary, \textit{Sexual Politics in Modern Iran}, 8.
\item Ehud Toledano discusses the importance of naming in recreating a new slave identity for the enslaved. Toledano, \textit{As if Silent and Absent}, 31. Though Toledano notes that names were used to replace any former identity or ties, Chirkisi’s name serves as a loud reminder of her ethnic origin, the very reason that she was enslaved – for her coveted Circassian identity. There is also another possibility, that Chirkisi was not her
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
photographs, she was the lone representative of the African slaves at the Gulistan Palace. Yet Nasir al-Din Shah had taken photos of other African women as well, labeling them as a prince’s nanny (dāyyiḥ)\textsuperscript{145} or not labeling them at all.\textsuperscript{146} While Nasir al-Din Shah took photos of other African female slaves, Guli Chihrīh remains the only black female slave to be named in his photographs. He revealed her name only when naming the unremarkable subjects of the photo. Chirkisi’s identity, however, operated differently. In fact, Nasir al-Din Shah allowed her to appear and disappear, depending on his mention of her ethnic background. The inclusion of her name was secondary to her status as a Circassian slave. The rarity of white slaves made her presence invaluable, an ideal status symbol, especially when lavished with gold. Chirkisi’s presence at court was a sexualized one, bought for her whiteness and beauty. Her whiteness, however, allowed her to disappear from the photographs, causing even scholars of sexuality and photography of this period to neglect the court’s Caucasian women in their analysis.\textsuperscript{147}

As Chirkisi blended in with the Iranian women of the harem, the color gradient of the photographs emphasized the blackness of those photographed, leaving little room for discerning shades of whiteness on film.

Nasir al-Din Shah’s photographs of his harem and slaves operate as a partial index of sorts. Some individuals are named, others are not, and between the captions and the poses, an orchestrated language of power and intimacy emerges. Although the Gulistan Archives’ facsimiles of the photographs have heightened the black/white binary

\textsuperscript{145} Album 210: 8-3, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{146} Album 210: 20-1, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{147} Schweiller, Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality, 179-199.
due to their reproduction in grayscale, the framing of the photographs and their marginalia indicate that blackness was intended to be hyper-visible, and that extra efforts had to be made to highlight Caucasian slaves, including even an ethnic label in lieu of a name. Those who were named risked being forgotten the most. Their naming not only affirmed their presence, but also affirmed the court’s power and ability in having slaves, even decades after Nasir al-Din Shah’s father, Muhammad Shah Qajar, had agreed to abolish the slave trade. Photographs, illustrations, and texts all provided a different view on what this abolition meant for the uneven landscape of enslavement and racialization in Iran.

And what of Yaqut Ghulam’s family? Aside from that very brief contract, the story of Yaqut Ghulam’s family is lost to us. What happened to those children? Did Muhammad Baqir Silmi keep them in his own home? Did he sell them or gift them in marriage contracts? We may never know the answer to these questions, but whatever their fate, we can assume that they, like their parents, would have been known for their blackness, a moniker that defined not only the trajectory of their lives but for many others as well. Yaqut Ghulam ability to raise his own children was denied to him, a metaphorical castration not unlike the eunuchs at Nasir-Din Shah’s court.
“Since in the previous pages mention was made of the eunuchs of the Imperial Harem, 
and some details were mentioned of the honors of late Manuchehr Agha and Agha 
Bahram, it is fitting that a little about the lives of the other eunuchs should be mentioned 
as well. Especially those who were not as famous, so that they would not remain 
completely obscure, since they had no means of leaving behind offspring for their names 
and deeds to be remembered. If a little more time passes, they will have been completely 
forgotten.”

Eunuchs, prized for their castrated and emasculated existence, played a large role in 
organizing the Qajar court during the nineteenth century. In 1886, Azud al-Dawlih, the 
49th son of Fat’h ‘Ali Shah, set to index these key court characters at the early Qajar 
courts in his memoir. Per Azud al-Dawlih’s rationale, his memoir might be the only 
opportunity for remembering these eunuchs and their humanity, as their castration 
precluded their foremost means of preserving their identity—children—who could 
remember their “names and deeds.” But while Nasir al-Din Shah’s court (1848-1896) 
struggled to humanize the eunuchs, later court clowns and jesters re-commodified them 
as objects of entertainment. Memoirs and photographs failed to effectively humanize 
eunuchs, while eunuchs’ bodies played a central role in Iranian theater and circus acts. 
Despite the limited efforts to humanize their existence towards the end of their lives, the 
memories and legacies of eunuchs survived most vividly through stereotypical imitations 
in blackface theater by non-black Iranians. Their memories were largely left at the mercy 
of memoirs, private journals and photographs belonging to their masters. Both white and

148 Soltan Ahmad Mirza ‘Azod al-Dowleh, Life at the Court of the Early Qajar Shahs: Tarikh-e ‘Azodi, 
149 Eskandari translated nām va nishān as “name and deeds.” Ahmad Ibn Fath ‘Ali ‘Azud al-Dawlih, 
Tārikh-i ‘Azudi, dar sharh-i hālat-i zawjat va bānīn va banāt-i khāqān (Bombay, 1888 or 1889), 43.
black eunuchs lived and served as slaves in the Qajar court, and both were fetishized for their unnatural bodies. Juxtaposing the grotesque humor of the clown performances with the court’s somber documentary photography, this chapter considers eunuchs’ negotiation and denial of personhood at court and on stage.

The representation of eunuchs and other supposedly non-normative bodies demonstrate the multilayered roles of race and gender in Iranian humor. These troupes harnessed the crudest of stereotypes in the name of innocent entertainment, creating a new series of memories attached to eunuchs and their bodies. These shows visually defined the parameters for normality and acceptable body politics in late Qajar society. Although eunuchs were once valued for their bodies, their slow disappearance from the Qajar court was justified by their divergence from normalcy. Instead of representing a physical link between masculine and feminine spaces, they pointed to a marginal figure that did not fit in with the rest of society.

This chapter investigates the memorialization and memory of eunuchs at the courts of Nasir al-Din Shah (r.1848-1896) and his son Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907) during a significant period for the abolition of the slave trade in Iran. The British repeatedly pressured the Qajar authorities to enforce treaties ending the trafficking of slaves through the Persian Gulf that had been signed in 1848 and 1852. By 1872, British ships patrolled the Persian Gulf, which severely diminished the trafficking of East African slaves to Iran. Not only had the slave trade had slowed dramatically, but the

trafficking of castrated slave boys had grown much rarer.\textsuperscript{151} Eunuchs at court embodied a particular paradox—enslaved in mutilated bodies but privileged in power and access—and this paradox was drawing to an end. I call their diminishing numbers and gradual disappearance as a final death, because it represented the end of not only their individual lives, but also an end to a broader gendered category and a series of social conventions that necessitated their presence. Their afterlife, I argue, was not found in the numerous memorialization projects of their lifetime, but rather, in court jesters that mocked their very existence.

First, I examine memorialization projects, both written and photographed, at Nasir al-Din Shah’s court that explicitly sought to preserve the identities of the Qajar court eunuchs. Second, I explore exaggerated racial and gendered representations of eunuchs in circus acts that derided their visuality. The rise of blackface clowns is intrinsically linked to the disappearance of these eunuchs during this period. Despite those earlier documentary efforts, the rise of blackface theater overshadowed documentary-styled attempts and effectively created a visual stereotype that would survive the twentieth century. I focus on this period because Nasir al-Din Shah was the last shah to have a large retinue of eunuchs, and second, because twentieth century blackface theater, including those during Muzaffar al-Din Shah’s rule (1896-1907), recreated imagery largely inspired by the Qajar court. By the twentieth century, Iranian blackface theater largely defined the eunuchs through their commodification and consumption.

\textsuperscript{151} I have not come across reports of castrations done within Iran. Mirzai suggests that only a few castrated boys were brought to Iran. Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery}, 113.
Castration cast boys and men into a particular form of enslavement that prized
them for their desexualized ungendered identity, designed to enable them to cross
boundaries into forbidden zones, especially the women’s harem. While the mutilation of
the body and castration is expressly forbidden in Islam,\textsuperscript{152} eunuchs served at the Qajar
court and the homes of Iranian nobility. As gatekeepers of the harem, their castration
allowed them to be in close contact with women without raising suspicions of sexual
intrigue.\textsuperscript{153} They were prized not only for their practical ability to cross between gender
boundaries, but because they embodied the highest level of prestige.\textsuperscript{154} Eunuchs played a
significant role at the Qajar court, as evidenced by their almost ubiquitous presence in
visual and written records from the royal family.

The fluidity of gender and sexuality in modern Iran has remained a central topic
of analysis, as scholars including Afsaneh Najmabadi and Staci Gem Schweiller have
attributed changing categories of gender in Iran to European influence or the advent of
photography.\textsuperscript{155} I argue that, while both of these may be true, the extinction of eunuchs as
a common category of gender within Iran also contributed to the furthering of the male
and female genders from each other as distinct and not fluid genders. Eunuchs
represented an “in-between” liminal space that, once eliminated, left a void that was not
filled. The disappearing gender of eunuchs made gender appear less like a continuum and
more like a clear duality. Further, while slavery studies in Iran remains understudied,

\textsuperscript{152} This is not to say that Muslims did not perform castrations, but rather, to highlight another paradox in
the lives of eunuchs.
\textsuperscript{153} Eunuchs played similar roles at the Safavid and Ottoman courts. See Sussan Babaie et al, \textit{Slaves of the
Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran}; Toledano, \textit{Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East}.
\textsuperscript{154} Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery}, 111-112.
\textsuperscript{155} See Najmabadi, \textit{Women with Mustaches}, 26; Schweiller, \textit{Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality}, 4.
Behnaz Mirzai recently published the first full-length monograph on the subject. In it, she asserts that Iranian sources did not mention race, and it was European sources that articulated race based on their own prejudices. A visual analysis of portraits and photographs, however, demonstrates that Iranians were extremely well-attuned to depictions of race and racial diversity and produced both nuanced and stereotyped representations of different peoples.

This chapter also challenges the literature on theatrical conventions, particularly in sīyāh-bāzī, or “playing black” theater during the late nineteenth century, a performance characterized by the intersection of blackface and lewd humor in a court setting. Bahram Beyzai, William Beeman, and others attribute the history of sīyāh-bāzī to the late Qajar period. Yet the reach of these performances lived on long beyond the Qajar era, popularly produced throughout the twentieth century and even today. As a result, its commonality has led some to view the genre of sīyāh-bāzī as an unchanging form of Iranian folk theater. According to Beeman, the sīyāh is played by an actor in blackface, generally using an ointment of black grease to blacken his skin. My research shows

156 Mirzai, A History of Slavery, 3.
158 I discuss the longevity of blackface theater in Chapter 4 and the epilogue. Blackface theater continues to take place in Iran, with many of these elements still intact, including a mimicking of Qajar court settings.
160 Beeman, Iranian Performance Traditions, 137.
that freed black men (and women\textsuperscript{161}), however, sometimes pursued entertainment as a means towards establishing their livelihood and joined these troupes as well. The inclusion of freed slaves as black actors and clowns destabilizes the literature on comedy and theater in late nineteenth century Iran, much of which asserts blackface theater to have developed independently of Iran’s history of slavery. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, however, saw much more dynamic portrayals of blackness and whiteness, especially in the role of black and white slaves. Blackface was not limited to non-black actors plastering their faces with greasy ointment. Rather, both white and black actors took on the role of the sīyah, using masks or their bodies to participate in these roles. My analysis demonstrates how the histories of enslavement and theater were thus inextricably linked.

Finally, this chapter represents an attempt to remember those eunuchs that ‘Azud al-Dawlih feared might be forgotten and those he chose to forget. The legacy of these eunuchs survived largely through their caricatures in theater, effectively condemning them to a permanent legacy that mocked their condition, appearance, and overall existence. More broadly, this chapter considers the racial and gendered implications of memory and mockery.

\textsuperscript{161} Although they remain outside of the scope of this chapter, freed female slaves also found their livelihoods as performers after their manumission. One particular story, retold by Munis al-Dawlih, a servant of the Shah’s retinue, describes the story of Haji Ghadam Shad, a black slave woman who bought her freedom using the extra money she made from singing. Munis al-Dawlih, ed. Sirus Sa’dvandian, \textit{Khātīrāt-i Munis al-Dawlih} (Tehran: Kitābkhānīh va Markaz-i Asnād-i Majlis Shurā-yi Islāmī, 2001)173-175. Haji Ghadam Shad’s troupe is also referenced in Taj al-Saltanih’s memoir. Taj al-Saltanih, \textit{Khātīrāt}, 234.
The Eunuch King and His Dynasty

The Qajar dynasty began its rule with a particularly complicated relationship with eunuchs: their founder, Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar, was castrated. In a moment of political chaos after Nadir Shah’s death in 1747, Agha Muhammad Khan’s father, Muhammad Hassan, attempted to seize Astarabad in northeast Iran. Nadir Shah’s heir, Adil Shah retaliated, captured and castrated Agha Muhammad Khan at the young age of five. In the years following his castration, Agha Muhammad Khan attempted to seize Astarabad as well, but the failed incursion led to him being sent to Tehran as a Karim Khan’s hostage. Only after Karim Khan’s death in 1779 was Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar able to lead an insurrection against the Zand dynasty and establish his dominion over Iran in 1789.¹⁶²

Despite his castration, Agha Muhammad Khan (r. 1789-1797) still followed common royal protocol and maintained a small harem of his wives and adopted children. While traditionally staffed by eunuchs who serve as liaisons between the harem and the king, his eunuchs had a diminished presence outside of the harem to prevent upsetting Agha Muhammad Khan.¹⁶³ When his nephew, Fat’h ‘Ali Shah succeeded him, however, he expanded the harem to accommodate his one thousand wives and their children.¹⁶⁴ Such a harem required extensive staffing, and hence, enslaved eunuchs played large role the Qajar court.

More than fifty years had passed after Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s (r. 1797-1834) death when I’timad al-Saltanih, the court historian and translator, asked ‘Azud al-Dawlih to write a history of life at his father’s court. Having only been ten years old when Fat’h ‘Ali Shah passed away in 1834, ‘Azud al-Dawlih resisted writing the history, as he did not feel confident in his childhood memories. After some consideration, he went to his mother for help, and together they chronicled the court’s history. In the memoir, ‘Azud al-Dawlih painstakingly described court relationships, identifying multitudes of different people. The compilation, later titled Tarikh-i ‘Azud al-Dawlih, or “the History of ‘Azud al-Dawlih,” is swimming with names, but highlighted particular biographies and stories for posterity, citing the need for future generations to remember them.

In one particular section, he charts out the important eunuchs of Agha Muhammad Khan and Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s harems. ‘Azud al-Dawlih’s reasoning for including a section on the significant court eunuchs was rooted in their poignant and singular mortality. He identified fifteen eunuchs: Agha Ja’far from Agha Muhammad Khan’s court, and the rest from Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s court: Agha Kamal, Agha Ya’qub, Ya’qub Khan, Khusraw Khan, Agha Husayn Baluch, Haji Mirza ‘Aliriza, Manuchihr Agha and Agha Bahram, as well as Taj al-Dawlih’s eunuchs: Agha Mubarak, Agha Sa’id Ibrahim, Ghulam Taj, and Khazin al-Dawlih’s eunuchs: Agha Almas and Agha Sa’id. ‘Azud al-Dawlih failed to mention, or realize, however, that had these men not been eunuchs, they would not have held their slave names. In other words, their enslavement

165 ‘Azud al-Dawlih had grown up in the harem and remained closely connected to the seat of power, later marrying his daughter to Nasir al-Din Shah.
166 The inclusion of harem details caused drama upon publication. Azod al-Dowleh, trans. Eskandari-Qajar, Life at the Court of the Early Qajar Shahs, XXIII.
and castration prevented them from having a proper legacy that retained the full range of their identities.

‘Azud al-Dawlih’s descriptions of the eunuchs varied. He referenced the Georgian ancestry of multiple eunuchs, some in passing, others as titles to their names. For example, he referred to Agha Ya’qub as Agha Ya’qub Gurjī, “the Georgian,” and that Khusraw Khan boasted of his Georgian family:

Khosrow Khan, as much as possible, would stay apart from the other eunuchs and considered himself of nobler origin. He would say, “In Georgia, my father was of nobler origin than the father of Manuchehr Khan. As much as Manuchehr Khan was calm, Khosrow Khan was the opposite. When a task was hard and required harshness and not calm, the late Khaqan would send him. He [Fat’h ‘Ali Shah] did not trust his [Khosrow Khan’s] wisdom. His standing in the court was seen and is known by most of those alive today and thus does not require further elaboration.

Here, Khusraw Khan’s simple sentence represents two rejections of his slave status.

Although ‘Azud al-Dawlih portrays him as haughty, Khusraw Khan’s rejection of the eunuch class represents a clear assertion of identity and personhood. By avoiding the other eunuchs and proclaiming his family lineage, Khusraw Khan claimed his personhood in a clear way not usually mentioned in memoirs of the royal family.

Khusraw Khan’s refusal to forget his family—and insistence on their noble standing—represents an important reclamation his social life. One wonders how Manuchihr Khan

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167 The Persian may be translated as something closer to, “if possible, Khosrow Khan would not have included himself in this class.” ‘Azud al-Dawlih, Tārīkh-i ‘Azudī, 43.
169 In Slavery and Social Death, Orlando Patterson attributes the loss of family ties and lineage, or “natal alienation,” as one of the foundational forms of social death required for enslavement. Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982), 5.
responded to Khusraw Khan’s claims, or whether any of the black eunuchs made similar
declarations.

‘Azud al-Dawlih’s memoir paints a particular image of eunuchs at Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s court. The mentioned eunuchs were mostly of Georgian origin, but he also
included a short biography on Agha Husayn, a Baluch prisoner of war. But none were
honored to the same degree as Manuchihr Khan, who ‘Azud al-Dawlih remembered
favorably as one of the highest ranking eunuchs at Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s court. ‘Azud al-
Dawlih wrote his father’s praises of Manuchihr Khan, describing him as “our partner,”
and consulting him on all matters, both political and courtly in nature. His focus on white
slaves does not betray a particular disdain for the black eunuchs, but rather, a rigid
hierarchy that ranked slaves as unequal and worthy of different recognition. While the
black slaves of Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s court remained unnamed and unremarkable, white
slaves could aspire to be a “partner of the Shah” or “Yusuf of the court,” a reference to
the legendary beauty of the Prophet Joseph.170 Nor did he dedicate any remarks to
describing acts of resisting their enslavement, as he did with Khusraw Khan. He
overlooked the black female slaves entirely, deeming them unworthy of reference and
vaguely referring to them as kanīz.171 While ‘Azud al-Dawlih’s Tārīkh, written in 1886,
provides encyclopedic information about the many people in the Qajar court, its silences
and absences are as loud as the available information.

Eskandari-Qajar, Life at the Court of the Early Qajar Shahs, 34.
171 ‘Azud al-Dawlih, Tārīkh-i ’Azudi, 42. Eskandari’s English translation uses black slaves, leaving out the
gender while emphasizing the ‘Azud al-Dawlih’s tacit reference to race.
The trope of beautiful white eunuchs reappeared in Dr. Feuvrier’s journal. Written in 1889-1892 and published in 1899, Dr. Feuvrier served at the Qajar court as Nasir al-Din Shah’s doctor. In his journal, he references ‘Aziz Khan, a white eunuch to Amin al-Sultan:

Tall, slender, with fine features, a pale white face, a soft beardless face, which give him the appearance of a young girl in spite of having thirty years. How many I have seen, especially in Russia, giving attentions to him normally reserved for the fair sex, which was very awkward for the shy Aziz Khan. He was thus often taken for a woman in man’s clothes, whereas in reality he is only a eunuch of the royal andarūn, lent by his mistress to Emin es Sultan. 172

Having special status, ‘Aziz Khan accompanied Amin al-Sultan on the Nasir al-Din Shah’s last European tour in 1890. Feuvrier wrote that ‘Aziz Khan’s feminine appearance made him the object of desire to men on multiple occasions. 173 Beyond his appearance, however, Amin al-Sultan relied on ‘Aziz Khan such that some called him ma’shuq-i Amin al-Sultan, or Amin al-Sultan’s beloved. His pre-eminence as a eunuch, however, is best summarized by his wealth and later endowments. Having had no inheritors, ‘Aziz Khan gave his extensive collection of books to a waqf, naming the ruling shah as its guardian. In 1938, Reza Shah established the National Library of Iran and included ‘Aziz Khan’s collection of books amongst the original collection. 174 'Aziz Khan’s legacy in

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172 Jacques Feuvrier, Trois ans à la cour de Perse (Paris: F. Juven, 1899), 63.
173 This complicates Schweiller’s argument on the inclusion of eunuchs in Qajar photography, where she asserts their inclusion was to balance out the oversexuality of the women pictured, to conjure an image of the harem. Schweiller, Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality, 187. Rather, Feuvrier demonstrates how eunuchs may have been objects of desires themselves.
preserving Iranian history, however, remained unparalleled amongst the Qajar court eunuchs.\(^ {175} \)

Portrait representations of white and black eunuchs from Nasir al-Din Shah’s court, however, painted a very different image of them. Rather than presenting eunuchs as significant members of court, Sani’ al-Mulk, the chief royal painter of the court, manipulated size and stature in his works to present caricatures that visually conjured their ineptitude or impotence for comedic effect.\(^ {176} \) His paintings emphasized enslavement as a simultaneously natural and strange phenomenon. For example, in a portrait of Taqi Khan-i Bīqavārih, “the misshapen Taqi Khan” from 1859,\(^ {177} \) five miniaturized black and white eunuchs appear around him, all about half his height and looking up at him. Because the satire here targeted Taqi Khan’s size, Sani’ al-Mulk had miniaturized the eunuchs for additional comedic effect, especially as they were known for their height.\(^ {178} \) This type of portraiture suggests that despite their status, eunuchs were still vulnerable to mockery during their lifetimes.

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\(^ {175} \) In instances wherein eunuchs amassed a significant amount of wealth, establishing a *waqf* prevented the dissolution of their belongings and allowed them to maintain their legacy. Jane Hathaway explored the life and inheritance of a seventeenth century Ottoman eunuch, ‘Abbas Agha, whose *waqf* inventory also revealed an extensive library. Jane Hathaway, “The Wealth and Influence of an Exiled Ottoman Eunuch in Egypt: The Waqf Inventory of ‘Abbas Agha,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1994), 293-317.

\(^ {176} \) I discuss Sani’ al-Mulk’s portraits and other painted works from this period in greater detail in the first chapter of my dissertation.

\(^ {177} \) Taqi Khan “the misshapen,” son of Muhammad ‘Ali Khan, Commander of the Royal Arsenal, watercolor on paper, 38.x5 x 47.3 cm, inscribed “His Majesty commanded Sani al-Mulk to make this painting in 1276 [1859].” Held at the Gulistan Palace Museum. Yahya Zoka, *Life and Works of Sani’ ol-Molk*, 76.

\(^ {178} \) In photographs, eunuchs appear to be significantly taller than others.
Taqi Khan’s clothes bulged slightly, highlighting his large physique for comedic value. While four of the eunuchs are staring up towards Taqi Khan, totally overwhelmed by his large stature, Sa’id, a black eunuch, is standing behind him and looking straight at the artist, drawing attention towards himself. The cheekiness of staring straight at the viewer breaks the third wall and almost seems to ask, “do you see what we see!!”
Even as eunuchs were not the main subjects of portraiture, their inclusion was not an afterthought. In a portrait of Prince ‘Abd al-Samad Mirza, Nasir al-Din Shah’s brother, and his entourage, completed in 1859, thirteen people crowd around the prince in the center, some with their arms reaching or clutching the prince’s robe.\textsuperscript{179} With the exception of the prince, who gazes upwards, and the two individuals behind him looking straight towards the viewer, most of the people have their gazes and bodies oriented towards the prince, as if he served as the physical axis of their worlds. While Sani’ al-Mulk painted most of the men with generic features, he painted the eunuch with an

\textsuperscript{179} The other dark-skinned individual in the portrait is not a eunuch, signaled by his ability to grow a thick beard. Based on his beard and other features, including his nose, we can assume he was meant to represent an Iranian, or perhaps, a visiting ambassador from India. Portrait of Prince ‘Abd al-Samad Mirza, Nasir al-Din Shah’s brother and entourage in Chaman Sultaniyeh. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 26.7 x 37.3 cm. Inscription, “Commanded by His Majesty, Raqam Naqqashbashi Ghaffari Kashani, in the year 1276 [1859].” Held at the Gulistan Palace Museum. Yahya Zoka, \textit{Life and Works of Sani’ ol-Molk}, 79.
exceptional amount of detail, not only in his facial expression, but also in his embroidered overcoat. As a servant, the eunuch was the most solicitious of the royal, reaching over to place his hand on ‘Abd al-Samad Mirza as others had done. Contrary to most group photographs with eunuchs,\(^{180}\) in which they maintained impeccable posture, Sani’ al-Mulk’s inclusion of the eunuch here indicated his subservience to the prince.

Eunuchs had a ubiquitous presence in the Qajar court. Court journals sometimes left eunuchs anonymous or elided their presence completely, but this did not necessarily indicate their absence. Rather, their elision indicates that their presence was so common that it did not require mentioning. In entries where present company was listed, eunuchs mostly remained unnamed, unless they had achieved significant status at court. In Feuvrier’s entry about Badr al-Saltanih and her cataract surgery, the eunuchs make a brief appearance:

Badr es Saltaneh, surrounded by her son, a handsome child of six or seven years old, his brother, three eunuchs, and a few friends, did \(\text{estekaré}^{181}\) one last time to know if the operation would succeed. It came out favorable, she was happy, and everyone congratulated her…\(^{182}\)

The three eunuchs, here left unnamed, served as supporting individuals for Badr al-Saltanih’s entourage. Whether they congratulated her out of performance, obligation, or sincerity, we will never know, as the agency of enslaved peoples was constantly suspended between their duality of being both humans with free will and property with none.

\(^{180}\) See Chapter 1, Figure 1.
\(^{181}\) Trans., a divinatory prayer.
\(^{182}\) Feuvrier, \textit{Trois ans à la cour de Perse}, 214.
Some of the eunuchs of Nasir al-Din Shah’s reign had been bought, sold, and inherited multiple times throughout their lifetimes. On Saturday, the 17th of Rabi’ al-Awwal 1305, or November 20, 1888, I’timad al-Saltanih wrote about the life of Mu’tamid al-Harem, who had passed away before sunset that afternoon.

His name was Haji Agha Jawahir, and he was Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s eunuch. He was eighty-eight years old. Fat’h ‘Ali Shah gave him to his son, Kamran Mirza. After the death of Kamran Mirza during the first plague of Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s reign, the wife of the Head Treasurer bought [him] for 100 tuman. Twenty years ago, when my own wife, who was the daughter of Fat’h ‘Ali Shah, went to Makkah and got the manumission paper from the Head Treasurer. Then, by the connection of Mahd Ulya, the departed became the eunuch of Galin Khanum, the great wife of the Shah. Seventeen years ago, when Agha Bashir, the head eunuch, died in Lar, he became the head eunuch in his stead. He was a well-understood, calm, and good man. They carried him with respect. They washed his body by the river. They pitched a tent near Sari Aslan, so that tomorrow they could take him to [the shrine of] Hadhrat-i Abd al-Azim and bury him there, even though he himself had willed for him to be buried in noble Najaf. He left 6,000 tuman and valuable property. His land was given to Aziz al-Sultan.183

Agha Jawahir was born in the year 1800, and brought to Fat’h ‘Ali Shah’s court at a young age. I’timad al-Saltanih’s brief overview of Haji Agha Jawahir’s long life chronicles the many times he exchanged hands as property and later managed other people as property for nearly a century. Did his manumission grant him respite? I’timad al-Saltanih offered little in this regard, although he notes that Agha Jawahir accumulated a notable fortune, the land of which ultimately went to ‘Aziz al-Sultan, Nasir al-Din Shah’s favorite nephew. Nothing is said of the money, nor of any other specific belongings, all of which were undoubtedly dissolved by the government. Even wealth could not protect his memory – unlike the inheritance of ‘Aziz Khan, who had left his

belongings as a *waqf*, Haji Agha Jawahir’s possessions were gifted within a day of his death.\textsuperscript{184}

But did Hajji Agha Jawahir escape the paradox his body had condemned him to? In this regard, I’timad al-Saltanih describes the care with which they carried his body and carried out the ritual washing of the corpse, a requirement for all Muslims. They respected him enough to bury him at a local shrine, but not enough to heed his wishes about his preferred place of interment—Najaf, the burial place of ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, the first Shi‘i imam and cousin of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{185} Agha Jawahir, who, for so long outlived his masters, was finally lain to rest.

Photographing the Last Generation

Nasir al-Din Shah understood the fragility of the slave trade and its impact on the castration of eunuchs, and he used photography as the prime medium to preserve images of his slaves. As discussed in the previous chapter, Nasir al-Din Shah and others generally photographed court slaves in large group settings or with the women they served. Although these photographs are attributed to Nasir al-Din Shah himself, Iraj Afshar notes that eunuch’s may have also assisted as apprentices or photographers

\textsuperscript{184} I’timad al-Saltanih does not say whether Haji Agha Jawahir intended for ‘Aziz al-Sultan to inherit his land. It is possible that he did, though I’timad al-Saltanih indicates that Hajji Agha Jawahir’s will was not heeded completely.

\textsuperscript{185} One should note that Nasir al-Din Shah was buried at this same local shrine as Agha Jawahir upon his death. Sabri Ates discusses the difficulties of cross Iranian-Ottoman burials, particularly at Shi‘i shrines in his article “Bones of Contention: Corpse Traffic and Iranian-Ottoman Rivalry in Iraq,” *Comparative Studies of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30, 3 (2010): 512-532.
themselves.\textsuperscript{186} While other solo portraits of eunuchs remain extant, this series of portraits was framed by the mortality of its subjects in both visual and written form. While Nasir al-Din Shah’s personal photographs often included photographs of eunuchs and other court slaves, to have a series of portraits marking their deaths seems rather unusual. A few of these eunuchs appear particularly frail, approaching an age where their deaths were eminent. Their fragile status, paired with announcements of their death, seem to overwhelm this series, which were likely taken to commemorate their manumission and their service.\textsuperscript{187} Notably, only black eunuchs appeared in this particular series of photographs, as they were taken long after the death of the last white eunuch in Tehran in 1856.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure9.jpg}
\caption{“Haji Firuz,” Album 362: 42/1, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{187} Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery}, 113. Schweiller suggests that these portraits were taken in 1865. Schweiller, \textit{Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality}, 188. Based on Atabay’s index of royal photography, however, I believe these photographs were part of a series of slaves who were freed in 1872. Atabay, \textit{Fihrist-i Album-hāyih Kitābkhanīh-yih Saltanaṭ}, 110.
Haji Firuz, the private eunuch to Mahd ‘Ulya, Nasir al-Din Shah’s mother, stared back at the camera, seated in a wooden chair gifted from Indian royalty. Nasir al-Din Shah, an avid photographer, developed the photograph and later added it to his album, where he labeled it with the eunuch’s given name and title, Haji Firuz—“Victorious Haji.” His name, Haji Firuz, shared with other eunuchs throughout Iran, would one day become synonymous with blackface holiday theatrics. Haji Firuz was not the only eunuch photographed in this manner. About ten of these photographs remain intact at the Gulistan Palace Archives, all featuring the same makeshift studio with a wooden chair against the same black fabric. Each of the eunuchs, Bashir Khan, Haji Bidil, Haji Surur, Aqa Suleiman, Aqa Salim, Aqa Mihrab, Agha Jawhar, and Haji ‘Ali Ghulam, were photographed by the Shah himself. The portraits differed slightly in the details. Some wore overcoats over their paisley robes. Aqa Mihrab clutched a cane across his lap. All wore conical hats, though the exact shapes differed slightly, with Bashir Khan’s more cylindrical than conical. And while most stared back at the camera, Agha Jawhar had closed his eyes.

Portraits outlive their subjects, and these particular photographs imprinted the images of some older eunuchs with sunken cheeks. Once developed and inserted in the Shah’s album, each photograph was framed by the Shah’s handwriting, titling each

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189 This wooden chair, along with a matching pair, is on display at the Gulistan Palace Museum. The companion to this chair was Mahd ‘Ulya’s favorite seat, where Nasir al-Din Shah photographed her as well.
190 “Haji Firuz,” Album 362: 42/1, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
191 Haji Firuz is the name of the herald of Nowruz in Iran. He is a minstrel—wears blackface and sings songs to his master about the joyous holiday. I explore Haji Firuz and his popular affiliation with the Iranian holiday in Chapter 4.
portrait with the eunuch’s given name and title. Beside each photo, in measured handwriting, each of the portraits is annotated with marhūm, or “one who has received [God’s] mercy,” indicating their passing. Their physical mortality frames these images of their social deaths as slaves.

Figure 10: Aqa Bahram, Amin al-Aqdas’ eunuch, Album 330: 9, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.

Although the portraits had similar compositions with the same key elements—eunuch, chair, studio backdrop—Agha Bahram’s lone portrait exudes a particular sense
of strength. Labeled with his name and title, Āghā Bahram, Amin-i Aqdsā’s eunuch, Agha Bahram role as the eunuch of the Shah’s wife was clearly stated. Despite his furrowed brow and bags under his eyes, Agha Bahram appeared healthy with a steady composure. His upright posture and strong gaze evoke a sense of control in the photograph, as though he was ready to get up and carry on with his busy schedule as soon as the photograph was taken. Even the framing of the photograph highlights Agha Bahram’s importance: the cropped photo barely fit into the oval album slot, creating the impression that Agha Bahram had a domineering presence. Dust ‘Ali Khan noted his demeanor in Nasir al-Din Shah’s memoir,

Agha Bahram Khan, who was of the Shah’s eunuchs and in service of Anis al-Dawlih was among the most respectable of the eunuchs. He had an awe-inspiring solemnity and a formidable appearance: large, red eyes, strong cheekbones and large, protruding lips. When he laughed, one could see his boar-like teeth shine through. He wore a tall hat of lamb skin sat upon his head, a long and wide coat on his body, and red cotton pants. He had the attention of the king and the respect of the noblemen and viziers. All important petitioners went to him, and none ever lost hope.\textsuperscript{193}

One might guess from Agha Bahram’s photograph that his eyes were not truly red. Regardless, Dust ‘Ali Khan presents him as a force to be reckoned with and used his blackness to draw on peculiar stereotypical descriptions. The reference to \textit{boar-like teeth} seems to have a longer racial history, as it was used in a line of Assadi Tusi’s epic \textit{Garshāseb-Nāmih} from the eleventh century:

\textbf{Garshāseb-Nāmih} from the eleventh century:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{192} “Āghā Bahram, khwājih-yi Amin-i Aqdsā,” Album 330: 9, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran. Amin-i Aqdsā ranked as one of Nasir al-Din Shah’s preferred wives. Her title translates to “the Confidant of the Most Holy.”
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
With a black face and a long torso    Seeking the devil with the teeth of a boar

Though Agha Bahram’s blackness was not explicitly mentioned, references to his supposed thick lips, teeth, and eye color indicate Dust ‘Ali Khan’s stereotypical characterization.

The portrait series, however, carried a vastly different overtone than Agha Bahram’s singular portrait. Their sunken cheeks and tired expressions hint at their resignation, while the satin of the robes almost glimmered, indicating the paradox of their elevated status amongst slaves of the court. The strength of Agha Bahram’s stance is replaced with a visible weakness, as the eunuchs clutched the armrest or slumped into the deep seat of the chair. Of these nine portraits, four of the eunuchs appear visibly more frail from their younger counterparts. Their presentation here runs counter to various descriptions of the tall, foreboding eunuchs, including Feuvrier’s description of the *khwājīh-bāshi*, which he describes as typical for all eunuchs:

> I then entered the home of their chief, the head-eunuch, a great Abyssinian, more than two meters tall, with legs and arms like those that I have seen on other eunuchs, that have developed beyond measure.

Contrary to Feuvrier’s description of tall and lanky black eunuchs, the photographs were taken with the camera angled down at the eunuchs, creating a more diminutive impression with little free space, visually restraining them. As Schweiller notes, “Iranian ‘white’ men were not usually portrayed as such in his photographs—they were given

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more space, (more) props, and creativity.”196 Even later photographs of clowns dressed as eunuchs were given more space than the eunuchs themselves. The uniform style of the eunuchs’ portraits spoke to Nasir al-Din Shah’s view of them—all similar with few distinguishing attributes.197

The uniformity of the portrait style and composition indicates that the eunuchs, along with Za’firan Baji, had posed for their photographs in quick succession. Not only is the framing identical to the rest of the series, the photographs reveal similar or identical wrinkles in the makeshift backdrop, indicating few, if any, adjustments between each take. These similarities, plus the advanced age of some subjects, raises the question of whether Nasir al-Din Shah organized these portraits to be taken out of a fear of his eunuchs passing away before they were properly photographed. After developing the photographs, Nasir al-Din Shah preserved them in a personal album that he annotated later with their deaths.

One marked difference, however, lies in the naming of each photograph. Between these nine eunuchs, one held khan, three were called haji, two āqā, and one āghā. Comparisons of different court photographs, however, reflect the fluidity of their gender. The gendered difference between āqā and āghā, where the former refers to men while the

196 Schweiller, Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality, 188.
197 Included in the series is a lone photograph of a slave woman, Za’firan Baji, or “Saffron Sister,” who was photographed in the same matter and on the same chair as the eunuchs. Her inclusion supports Schweiller’s thesis, that Nasir al-Din Shah had photographed his slaves, both men and women, to perhaps showcase his power. Schweiller, Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality, 188. But why would Nasir al-Din Shah photograph her, but not the remaining eunuchs at court? Had they passed away? Perhaps she, too, was granted manumission alongside the other eunuchs. Were there more photographs that have since been destroyed? Another image, published in Vanessa Martin’s Qajar Pact, provides a small clue about the other remaining photographs: a portrait of Aqa Anbar from the same series, held at the Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia in Tehran. More images likely remain scattered in various albums and repositories inside and outside of Iran.
latter refers to women, was elided.\textsuperscript{198} The fluidity of the eunuchs’ gender physically permitted them to enter differently gendered spaces, especially the women’s harem or the Shah’s closed quarters. The interchangeability of these titles allowed them to rhetorically enter these gendered spaces as well. For example, while his solo portrait identified him as \textit{Agha} Bahram, another photograph labeled his as \textit{Aqa} Bahram.\textsuperscript{199} The interchangeability of the titles did not change their prized emasculated status—the \textit{āqā} did not bestow more honor than \textit{āghā}. Rather, their prized status was intrinsic to their ability to take either title.

The addition of “one who has received [God’s] mercy,” or \textit{marhūm}, alongside each of these nine portraits frames the photographs in different light than other slave photographs. While \textit{marhūm} operates in the same way “the late” does in English, \textit{marhūm} also underscores the eunuchs’ most basic relationship to God. That they, like all others before them, had met the mercy of their creator. While common, these religious phrases underscore the humanity of the eunuch, whose bodies were mutilated in a process that dehumanized them. While their lives were marked by being slaves to man, their death represents the end of their corporeal responsibilities. Other photographs of eunuchs reflected that reality, where captions linked the slaves to the particular owners. Instead, in accordance with Islamic cosmology, these captions imply that the eunuchs, like all

\textsuperscript{198} In today’s standardized Tehrani dialect of Persian, speakers elide the distinction between the letter \textit{qāf} and \textit{ghayn}. This is a rather recent development in the Persian language, as older generations of Persian speakers tended to emphasize their difference in pronunciation.

\textsuperscript{199} Another photograph of Agha Bahram, for example, labels him as Aqa Bahram. Album 210: 25 Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
mankind, are slaves to God and not man. Their deaths were significant on not only the religious plane, but on a historical plane as well. They were not only dying; they were disappearing from the realities of Iranian royalty. In many ways, eunuchs were disappearing into the past. While their deaths freed them from their enslavement in this world, the photographs memorialized their existence as slaves.

Figure 11: “Photograph of Agha Davud, 40 days after a wrestling match with a slave girl,” Album # Unknown, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.

For other eunuchs, however, their fragility served as a type of entertainment for the court. A later court photograph, dated to 1893, shows a eunuch holding a wooden crutch under his left arm. The caption reads,

Agha Davud Khwan a little while before this, in the presence of his Highness wrestled with one of the kanîz\textsuperscript{201} in such a way that the opposing party…picked him up on her back and threw him on the ground, and gave him a grave injury…he was bedridden for close to forty days and has just recently been able to stand…”\textsuperscript{202}

We can assume that it was not common for men and women to wrestle each other, and that this kind of contact was enabled by both their slave statuses. Aqha Davud, a eunuch, was not considered a man. Likewise, because of her slave status, the slave woman was made sexually and physically accessible, stripped of any protections and gender boundaries afforded to free women. Agha Davud’s photograph is framed by this caption that identified him as so weak, so emasculated, that even a kanîz, likely a black slave girl, not only beat him in a wrestling match, but would seriously injure him as well. The fight, which took place in the presence of the Shah, was likely orchestrated as “entertainment” for his benefit. Other eunuchs were not so lucky. In her memoir, Taj al-Saltanih recounted her memory of when Aziz al-Sultan shot a gun and permanently injured another eunuch, Abdullah, in the leg. Like Agha Davud, Abdullah suffered a serious injury for no other reason than personal amusement, a limp that he had for the rest of his life.

\textsuperscript{201} Trans., “female slave.”
\textsuperscript{202} “Photograph of Agha Davud, 40 days after a wrestling match with a slave girl,” Album # Unknown, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
Such a lighthearted take on the injuries of the eunuchs complicates the imagery around the somber portraits found in Nasir al-Din Shah’s albums.

Mocking a eunuch and praising him for knowing his place extended beyond photography as well. For some, comedy saved them from the brutality of slavery and even fatal punishments. Nasir al-Din Shah’s brother and governor of Isfahan, Zill al-Sultan, kept a diary where he documented more grandiose adventures alongside daily musings and mundane events, including encounters with memorable eunuchs. For example, when Mushir al-Mulk, vizier to the prince, asked Agha Sa’id Khwajih to deliver an aggressive letter to the prince Zill al-Sultan, the eunuch was gravely aware of the circumstances. Zill al-Sultan was notorious for his harsh reputation, and Agha Sa’id feared retribution as the messenger. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Agha Sa’id talked himself into Zill al-Sultan’s good graces.

Kaka Sa’id apologized, flattered me, and I told him and ensured him that at no point am I interested in revenge, even in the slightest rudeness or dishonor, and I even told the kākā: give him this on my behalf, and God willing I will not make you black in the face [dishonor] you in the presence of your master, and make Mushir understand this. The kākā was of Shiraz and funny, he joked with me so much that “My sir, God has colored me, don’t you color me too!” Because this is a saying in Shiraz where they say, “don’t color me” [don’t dishonor me]. I gave the diamond ring to the kākā and in my heart and soul I assured him [that nothing was wrong] and let him go.

In a short few lines, Zill al-Sultan documented Agha Sa’id’s fear and quick wit in ensuring his own safety in a moment of danger. Although Zill al-Sultan recounted the conversation casually, Agha Sa’id diffused a tense situation which could have ended much differently for him. Zill al-Sultan’s reputation for cruel punishments and an

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204 Zill al-Sultan, *Khātirāt-i Zill al-Sultan*, vol. 2 474-475.
uncontrollable temper was widely known, and Agha Sa’id’s concern for being punished was not misplaced. Yet Zill al-Sultan’s memory of the encounter is deeply rooted in confirming his own benevolence towards the slave. Describing him as a very obedient kākā, Zill al-Sultan highlighted Agha Sa’id’s ability to joke about his own blackness and highlighting his servility. The phrase rū-sīyāh translates to black of face, used to describe the loss of honor. While the prince used the phrase idiomatically, Agha Sa’id used his blackness to make a joke and deflect the tension. Blackness as a comedic tool would come to define African eunuchs as the years passed on.

Eunuchs as Critique of the Shah

Fictional works provided another avenue for the portrayal of black eunuchs, especially in the writings of Mirza Fat’h ‘Ali Akhoundzadeh, also known by his Russian name Akhoundov. Akhoundzadeh has been described as “perhaps the most intriguing and important personality to participate in the nineteenth-century Iranian national revival,” for his incisive writings on progressivism and secularism. An outsider—an Azeri intellectual who worked as a translator of the Russian bureaucracy—Akhundzadeh did not write in Persian, though he often focused his social critiques on Iranian society. Rather, a close correspondent, Muhammad Ja’far Qarachih-Daghi, translated them into

205 “Bisyār kākā-yi zabān fahmi būd.” As I discussed in the introduction, this is a derogatory term for a black slave.
Persian during Akhundzadeh’s lifetime, citing character-building as his main goal. Critiques of human relationships were central in these plays. Akhundzadeh set his plays and short story in Persianate courts, using eunuchs to critique the politics of Iran’s governing elites. Contrary to base forms of entertainment that rested on the eunuch’s physique and impotence, Akhundzadeh did not mock the bodies of the eunuchs. Avoiding caricatures of eunuchs, he critiqued society at large. His critique included a realistic portrayal of the enslavement of eunuchs. Akhundzadeh’s pieces portray Iranian society as abnormal and backwards with black individuals as some of the only redeeming characters. In his novella Yusuf Shah and play Vazīr Khān-i Lankarān, both translated into Persian from the original Azeri in 1871, Akhundzadeh used the eunuchs to expose both the brutality of enslavement as well as the elite’s extreme dependence on eunuchs.

In Yusuf Shah, first written in 1857, Akhundzadeh highlights the expansive role of eunuchs while criticizing the governing elite. The play is set in the lifetime of a young Shah ‘Abbās (1588-1629), when a court astrologer reports that in two weeks’ time, a serious calamity will hit the Safavid court and king. After some deliberation, the court decides that it will “trick” the stars: Shah ‘Abbās will abdicate the throne and disguise himself as a beggar, and until the calamity comes to pass, the court will appoint an

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209 In addition to the pieces mentioned here, Akhundzadeh also faulted Muslims for buying castrated boys from Meccan markets. In one of his works, two characters, Prince Kamal al-Dawlih and Prince Jamal al-Dawlih wrote letters to each other complaining about the horrifying practice of castrating young boys and selling the ones who survived. See Afary, Sexual Politics of Modern Iran, 114-115.
unsuspecting local as shah. Ultimately, they settle on Yusuf, a peasant in Qazvin, who has little understanding of court functions.

For the majority of the play, Agha Mubarak, the head eunuch, plays an unassuming role. The play opens with Agha Mubarak raising the curtain and announcing introductions, a reminder of the court’s dependence on him. When Yusuf Shah is crowned, however, he dismisses all members of court, with the exception of Agha Mubarak. Having heard no explanation of how or why he was crowned, Yusuf Shah turns to Agha Mubarak for clarification.

‘From your color, I can see that you must be a good person. I swear by God, tell me what is the root of this issue? You have always been in Shah ‘Abbas’ andarūn, so it would be impossible for you to not know of the matter.’

Agha Mubarak, who always stood behind the door of Shah ‘Abbas’ room, ready for service, knew everything about what had passed yesterday, and knew about the cabinet’s consultations. And he really was an honest person. He thought that it wasn’t permitted to hide the truth in questions from the qibla of the cosmos. He gave a report from the beginning to the end to Yusuf Shah.211

Despite Yusuf Shah’s ignorance about court, he understood enough to know that the eunuch could help him best. In this passage, Akhundzadeh depicts Agha Mubarak as both all-knowing and the only trustworthy member of court who chooses to follow orders from his temporary master, Yusuf Shah. Although one could argue that Agha Mubarak’s report to Yusuf Shah was one of rejecting his allegiance to Shah ‘Abbas, Akhundzadeh attributes Agha Mubarak’s decision to one of sincere honesty. In the following pages of

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210 Also translated as “pivot of the universe” by Abbas Amanat, this is one of the Shah’s titles. Amanat, Pivot of the Universe, XVI.
the novella, Agha Mubarak leads Yusuf Shah through the various rooms and halls of the harem compound, familiarizing him with his new abode.

Yusuf Shah’s plot comes to a climax when he announces a series of reformed edicts: no public hangings or torture, hospitals in every province, pensions for the poor, no nepotism, wider roads. The people of Qazvin are shocked – how could they live under such circumstances? The court that crowned him decides that he has gone too far, and they organize a military operation against Yusuf Shah. After three and a half hours of fighting and six thousand lives lost, Shah ‘Abbas claims his place on the throne again. The chief astrologer announces that the calamity has passed, and all is deemed well.

Akhundzadeh’s criticisms of Iranian society are two-fold: first, the governing elite who blindly follow astrologers and rule by force, and second, the Iranian constituents who reject progressive reforms and prefer oppressive rule. His satirical novella required characters who engaged each other in a realistic dynamic, for example Yusuf Shah’s reliance on Agha Mubarak for navigating the court. Embarrassed by his lack of knowledge of the court and perplexed by the situation at large, Yusuf Shah dismisses all others and trusts Agha Mubarak, a slave who is obligated to help him and untainted by the misplaced priorities of the Iranian ruling elites. He does not trust the viziers or other court officials, at first questioning even their sobriety or sanity for appointing him as king. Instead, he turns to the eunuch, who lacked the agency to have been involved with the plot, and is therefore deemed a more trustworthy person. Agha Mubarak’s presence represented the key to proper reform and rule, and enabled respect for the black members of society.
In another play, Vazīr Khān-i Lankarān, Akhundzadeh used the eunuch’s character to expose the brutish quality of Iranian masters, who were often government officials as well. The plot involves the family life of a vizier who prizes his younger wife over his older one. His older wife, Ziba Khanum, suspects that the younger wife, Shulih Khanum, is cheating on their husband. Through a series of events, it is revealed that Shulih Khanum was not cheating on the vizier, but rather chaperoning her sister’s lover and her sister away from the public eye. The suspicious encounters, however, frustrate and anger the vizier. His eunuch, Agha Mas’ud-i Siyah or the Black Agha Mas’ud, bears the brunt of this anger. Agha Mas’ud first appears in the second act of the play, when the vizier asks him to bring coffee. In the time between his request of coffee and the arrival of coffee, the vizier finds the suspected “other man” and his first wife both hiding in his second wife’s bedroom, which angers him.

At this moment, the eunuch Mas’ud has brought coffee and poured it into a mug.

Agha Mas’ud: Sir, please have some coffee.
The Vizier turns, hits the coffee, and spills it on the eunuch Mas’ud’s head.
Vizier: Get lost you half-burnt donkey, I have no patience for this, what kind of place is this for drinking coffee? I am going to go see Khidmat Khan, and it will be clear!
Agha Mas’ud pulls back and attempts to wipe the spilt coffee off his head.
Vizier: Quickly, go and ask them to bring my red horse and ready my chestnut cloak, bring them out quickly!
Agha Mas’ud: yes, yes, Sir, of course, I will go and make ready them as you have ordered.

Unable to process what had passed, the vizier spills coffee and then insults the eunuch for being burnt. The double—and racialized—meaning here is found in the Persian, where

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sūkhtih, burnt, was also a slur used for black slaves.\textsuperscript{214} Agha Mas’ud remains a minor role in the play, appearing again in Act IV to warn Shulih Khanum about the vizier’s whereabouts. Like Agha Mubarak in Yusuf Shah, Agha Mas’ud could report on of court life due to his access as a slave. Translations of Akhundzadeh’s writings were popular in Iran, with multiple publication runs.\textsuperscript{215} Because European-styled theater had not taken root in Iran yet, Akhundzadeh’s plays did not make the stage during this period,\textsuperscript{216} and hence, there are no records of black men participating as actors or white men using blackface. As a result, visualizing the characters was left to the reader. In these examples, Akhundzadeh did not use the eunuchs as comic relief, but rather, as tools to critique the Iranian politics and enslavement.

Despite Akhundzadeh’s attempt to portray slaveholders and slavery in a critical light while depicting the abuses faced by eunuchs in fictional settings, these critical portrayals did not disrupt the dominant image of slavery in late nineteenth century Iran in the long term. Instead, court minstrels and clown troupes would usurp the image of the eunuch, mocking their bodies and creating lasting trope that remains pervasive in Iranian comedy.

Before “Playing Black”: Playing Eunuchs and Other Bodies

\textsuperscript{214} Siyāh sūkhtih translates literally as “burnt black.”
\textsuperscript{215} The first edition of Akhundzadih’s Tamsilat was printed in 1871-1874, and again in 1978. Fat’h ‘Ali Akhundzadih, trans. Muhammad Ja’far Qarachih-Daghi, Tamsīlāt.
Entertainment in Nasir al-Din Shah’s court was not limited to pitting slaves against each other; a formalized court jester and troupe existed as well. Known by his clown title, Intoxicated Karim, Karim Shirih-i’s reputation in Nasir al-Din Shah’s court is widely known, and much of modern Iranian comedy is attributed to him. Born in Isfahan, Karim left his hometown and arrived in Tehran sometime around the mid-to-late nineteenth century, where he rose in prominence and ultimately served as the chief court jester. Nasir al-Din Shah found his humor exceptionally hilarious and gave him a carte blanche to say whatever, whenever, without fear of offending or retribution, in the name of humor. References to him and his troupe continue to circulate through Iranian popular culture, where he is remembered as the father of Iranian comedy. While scholars have written on Karim Shirih-i and his legacy in terms of humor, studies have not properly engaged with the cavalier mimicry of blackness, particularly black eunuchs, in this genre. Although some admire his gall for critiquing members of the court, his style gave rise to later troupes that targeted slaves as well. With a free rein, Karim, along with his all-male troupe, continued their forays in the name of humor. While the exact individuals associated with his troupe alternated, a few remaining photographs shows nine of its members, dressed in tattered and wrinkled clothing, with the central character sporting an oversized turban. The photographs, labeled “a gathering of imitators,” jamā’at-i muqaliddīn, also show Karim in unassuming poses.

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217 “Shīrīḥ-i” implies an opiate addiction.
“A gathering of imitators” reflects, quite literally, what Karim and his colleagues set out to do. They did not act; they imitated and mimicked. In his book, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, William Beeman translates Bahram Beyzai’s definition of *taqlīd* or “imitation” theater:

> Entertainers in *taqlīd* would normally imitate the accents and personal characteristics of well-known people in the towns and villages they performed. These people would be seen meeting and greeting each other. After a short while, they would fall to arguing and making fun of each other’s accents and behavior, and the story would end with two characters fighting and chasing each other.220

The humor of *taqlīd* theater rested on its imitations of people. The more ridiculous, the funnier the outcome. And it seems that no one, not even Nasir al-Din Shah, was safe from imitation. I’timad al-Saltanih wrote in his daily journal that one of the Karim Shirih-i’s acts involved imitating the Austrian military routine that had recently been taught to the Iranian army.221 Both I’timad al-Saltanih and Nasir al-Din Shah disapproved of the act, but the Shah still laughed through it. Their annoyance was secondary to the comedians’ imitation of European imports and routines.

Although scholars agree that *taqlīd* grew out of the nineteenth century and were especially influenced by the court jester Karim Shirih-i, I argue that these theatrical conventions were not as stable as they proclaim them to be. Only in the mid twentieth century did blackface theater, *siyāh-bāzī*, rigidly follow these particular tropes and conventions.

220 Here, Beeman translated Beyzai’s quote from his book *Namāyish dar Iran*. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Theater*, 32
The particular language of imitation, especially across racial lines, becomes blurred when considering the racial profile of Karim’s troupe. Although the majority were non-black Iranians, the few black men who joined occupied a particular space—unlike the others,
they did not need masks to “imitate” eunuchs or other black men. As black men themselves, they were viewed as naturally capable of mocking their enslaved peers.\textsuperscript{222}

Upon Nasir al-Din Shah’s assassination, his son was crowned Muzaffar al-Din as Shah in 1896. Only a few eunuchs survived Nasir al-Din Shah, and all were relocated to Tabriz, with the exception of two who were freed.\textsuperscript{223} Foreign abolition efforts were mounting. After the Brussels Conference in 1890, the Belgians organized their Anti-Slavery Office, beseeching Iranian officials to commit more seriously to abolition.\textsuperscript{224} The British continued to board ships in the Persian Gulf, and British records of enslavement included numbers of black men and women seized from ships headed for Persian ports.\textsuperscript{225} Despite these efforts, eunuchs’ bodies became a central part of freak shows and circus acts, drawing laughter with their awkward posture and strange appearance, often exaggerated by masks and costumes.

The jesters at Muzaffar al-Din Shah’s court performed a variety of acts, ranging from acrobatic dance performances to stilted, turbaned Arab caricatures to masked eunuchs and more.\textsuperscript{226} From the remaining photographs, it is clear that the manipulation of the body served an important role in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Iranian

\textsuperscript{222} It is important to note that the black men in the troupe were not castrated. Album 189: 60, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{223} Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery}, 112.
\textsuperscript{224} The Belgians continued to make these requests through the Constitutional period (1906-1911). File 240-39280, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{225} Mirzai provides a graph showing British numbers of East Africans smuggled into Iran. Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929}, 150.
\textsuperscript{226} Glass plates #3528, #4129, #5389, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran. Shiva Mas‘udi describes the sīyāh as the “original clown” in Iranian traditional performances. Mas‘udi, \textit{Kārnāmiyī Talkhakān}, 213. These photographs, however, demonstrate that the sīyāh emerged out of the same milieu as other clowns, and only later was canonized as its own individual form of theater. This is particularly important for refuting the practice of blackface theater in Iran today, which defends itself as an age-old practice independently of any racial or derogatory history.
humor. It would not be until after the end of the Qajar era when these acts would be categorized as separate genres of theater or clowning.\textsuperscript{227} Until then, any performance that involved manipulating size, shape, and shade were considered within the same category of theatrics.

The more novel the body, the funnier the performance. Different performers presented themselves not only as clowns, acrobats, but also as eunuchs, kings, and even animals. The permutations of the body played a central role in these performances. In one photograph, one man is seen lying on the ground with a few others posing with their hunting rifles around him, as if he had been hunted and dragged into their camp as game.\textsuperscript{228} Two men stood above the “hunted” man; one held propped his leg up while the other held a snake protruding from his pants, a stand-in for his penis. Their facial expressions were serious, as if in the presence of a very large and dangerous animal, which only underscores the vulgar humor peddled in their photographs.

The machismo of mocking the hunted’s oversized penis underscores the overt sexual humor tacitly employed in the troupe’s portrayal of eunuchs. Black men in particular were viewed as sexually deviant, and their emasculated, castrated bodies were mocked in these performances. Their castrations not only served as a point of enslavement, but as their entry point into comedy shows at their expense.\textsuperscript{229}

\textsuperscript{227} In Chapter 4, I discuss how blackface caricatures developed into their own genre, distinct from freak shows and acrobatics.
\textsuperscript{228} Glass plate #1869, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
\textsuperscript{229} In Chapter 1, I discuss the portrayal of black men and women as especially sexual bodies. Black men were depicted as possessors of large penises and sexual threats, as visually articulated in the illustrated manuscript of \textit{1001 Nights}. 

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In a glass-plated photograph, a clown dressed as a eunuch stared back at the camera. At least it appeared that he did—he faced the camera while wearing an oversized papier-mâché mask with no slits to peek through. The mask’s dark finish makes it difficult to discern particular features; his skin, lips, eyebrows, mustache and short beard appear as the same deep hue. The papier-mâché had an uneven texture, with creases and furrows in unnatural areas. To add to the mask’s strange and eerie quality, its eyes were slightly misshapen and asymmetrical, painted in a bright white with black irises at the center. The painted whites of the eyes screamed against the black paint, with no visible eyelids, while the mask was otherwise expressionless.

Glass plate #1475, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.

An interesting choice, since eunuchs were incapable of growing significant facial hair. This was likely an oversight.
This photograph was less than unique. The posture, outfits, and in some cases, expressions mimicked the portraits of court eunuchs, seated, wearing a conical hat and high-collared coat.

The similarities between the photograph of the masked minstrel and those of Nasir al-Din Shah’s eunuchs is not coincidental. This photograph was taken by a Mirza Ibrahim Khan, a court photographer during Muzaffar al-Din Shah’s rule. His father, Mirza Ahmad Akkas, had served as a court photographer during Nasir al-Din Shah’s rule.
and was likely privy to the Shah’s private albums. This shared visual lexicon, however, diverges from the original intentions. Unlike the photographs of the eunuchs which memorialized their existence, this particular photograph was made to taunt their memories. The mask’s grotesque use of details and stark choice of colors evokes a visceral reaction, truly intended to unsettle the viewer. Eric Lott’s discussion of the ambiguities between clowns and minstrels suggests why these various acts and actors went hand in hand,

Quite strikingly, many minstrel performers began their careers in the circus, perhaps even developing American blackface out of clowning (whose present mask in any case is clearly indebted to blackface) and continually found under the big top a vital arena of minstrel performance. Clowning is an uncanny kind of activity, scariest when it is most cheerful, unsettling to an audience even as it unmasks the pretentious ringmaster. Blackface performers, often inspiring a certain terror as well as great affection, relied precisely on this doubleness.

The “doubleness” that Lott here refers to was central to Iranian blackface. The ability to shock audiences while inspiring laughter remained the hallmark of these minstrel shows. This performance blurs the lines between clown acts and freak shows, where the point may not have simply been to make audiences laugh, but rather, to have them look twice or question what they witnessed. It built upon the belief that eunuchs were strange and to be stared at. The limited gaze of seeing and conceptualizing blackness through stereotypes allowed for the depiction of these very scenes shaped for whiteness. This

232 Both Mirza Ahmad and Mirza Ibrahim held the title Sani’ al-Saltanih during their appointments at Nasir al-Din Shah and Muzaffar al-Din Shah’s courts respectively. Mirza Ibrahim accompanied his father during his photography projects at court and was trained to take photographs under him. Muhammad Reza Tahmasbpour, Nasir al-Din, Shāh-i Akkās (Tehran: Nashr-i Tārīkh, 2012), 39.
234 Browne, Dark Matters, 20.
concept is further complicated in the Iranian case, where race was not a duality between black and white, but rather, black, white, and Iranians somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, which I discuss further below.

While later minstrels greased their faces with a black ointment, this clown wore a mask, making his costume easily assembled, ready at any given moment. The deep wrinkles and impressions of the papier-mâché, paired with the inclusion of facial hair, indicate that the mask was not intended to create a realistic or lifelike resemblance, but rather, to surprise or horrify the viewer. For Lott, the black mask “offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them.”

The mask could be removed or manipulated, a metaphor for the servility of blackness.

Minstrel acts featured actors who mimicked eunuchs’ elongated faces and exaggerated wide eyes, encouraging audiences to laugh at uneducated, dim-witted but loyal enslaved bodies. Although Beeman suggests “that black makeup preceded the African designation,” he provides no evidence for such a claim, and it seems more likely that the black makeup was more widely introduced as the presence of black slaves and freedmen gradually diminished in the urban centers of Iran.

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237 Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 137. He also says that Karim engaged in whiteface makeup, where the black clown was quick and agile whereas the white clown was sholi/slow/stupid.
Masks were not always necessary in articulating race—sometimes the black members of the troupe would play off their blackness instead. In one particular photograph, three men sit on a bench, each playing a specific character: a black eunuch, a black king, and a white eunuch. The white eunuch is wearing a papier-mâché mask, similar to the one worn by the black eunuch clown mentioned earlier. His long, thin nose and wide, droopy eyes all represent a caricaturized Caucasian eunuch. The mask was worn by a light-skinned individual, whose exposed hands resembled the color of the mask. The other “eunuch,” however, was not wearing a mask. His own blackness sufficed to play the role of a eunuch. Instead, he held a particular wide-eyed expression, conjuring similar images of American minstrelsy. Coupled with his plain uniform, his

239 In the Iranian case, it is likely that the black actors were freed slaves who had joined the troupe in search of economic opportunity. It seems that after abolition, black individuals ceased joining such troupes as other opportunities became available to them. Elizabeth Dyer examines a similar phenomenon in colonial Kenya, where she argues that black actors joined theaters as both performers and audience members, wielding these social spaces to assert themselves as cultural interpreters while being shut out of formal and institutionalized centers of power. Elizabeth Dyer, “Dramatic license: histories of Kenyan theater, 1895-1964” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017).
240 Glass plate #288, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.
role as eunuch is recognizably clear. In between the two eunuchs was another black man, smiling while wearing a bejeweled crown and embroidered robe. His embellished costume set him apart from the other “eunuchs” and identified him as the king of the court. One can then assume that his presence as a black man in kingly gear was intended for comedic value.

The white eunuch presents some clues as to how Iranians viewed themselves. Although the discourse of Aryanism was steadily gaining traction in Iran, these performers viewed themselves as both racially different and visibly too similar to the Caucasians. An Iranian could not simply perform the role of a white eunuch by manipulating his facial expressions into a wide-eyed look or a blank expression. To prevent the invisibility that erased the presence of Caucasian slaves in court photographs, the Iranian clown needed a white mask to portray his character effectively. The use of the clown’s white mask, despite being similarly light-skinned, demonstrates how Iranians viewed themselves as in between white and black, racially superior and unlike those who were enslaved by the Qajar court. The mask diverges significantly from ‘Azud al-Dawlih and Feuvrier’s descriptions of white eunuchs as beautifully feminine. The strange, elongated mask evoke a slow personality rather than a demure one.

The inversion of race—a black king flanked by a white and black eunuch—indicates the malleable dynamics of race and representation in these minstrel shows. As

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241 See Reza Zia Ebrahimi’s *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* for a thorough discussion Iranian nationalism and its ideological ties to European Aryanism.

242 Later iterations of blackface theater in the mid-twentieth century sometimes include a *shulī* (“loose one”) character. Although it seems to have developed from the portrayal of white eunuchs, the *shulī* did not wear a mask and was played by non-black Iranians with exaggerated stupidity in their actions. Here, “loose” does not have a sexualized connotation, but rather, refers to a person who cannot maintain proper posture or speaks informally. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 137.
Saidiya Hartman has commented, “within the confines of the tolerable, particularly since this transgression of order occurred by reproducing the abject status of blackness.”243 Here, the inclusion of a black man as king may seem beyond the “confines of the tolerable,” but because his blackness renders him incompetent as king, the abrogation of the racial hierarchy is overlooked in the name of comedy.

The court minstrels memorialized eunuchs’ bodies as abnormal and worthy of mockery. These acts and freak shows consigned eunuchs and their counterparts to an undying periphery of society, one that could be recalibrated and remembered with excessively wide eyes or a mask. Iranian circus acts, which sometimes took on the characteristics of a freak show, were responsible for bringing physical abnormalities as well as foreign physiques to the fore of late nineteenth century humor and entertainment.

This same individual was photographed later in life, still performing in courtly performances. Likely a freed slave, this man transgressed the boundaries between clown, minstrel and freak in his various appearances. Here, he relied on the juxtaposition of his near-naked body alongside that of an obese man and a dwarf. A few years had passed between the earlier “kingly” act and this one, as demonstrated by his sunken cheeks and thinned out frame. His role, however, had shifted entirely. No longer dressed in an embroidered robe, he appears wearing a loincloth alongside a little person and obese individual, completing a trifecta of abnormal bodies. At once their bodies were rejected and consumed, confirming their supposedly strange status in society. The black body,
however, is deemed the strangest, as both the obese and little man are turned towards him. Photographs, like those discussed in Chapter 1, illustrate how obesity and blackness were ubiquitous characteristics at Nasir al-Din Shah’s court. The inclusion of these bodies as a central act of the troupe, however, otherized them and placed them beyond the scope of the “normal.”

These freakshows would come to define the boundaries between normal and abnormal throughout the twentieth century. As the black bodies grew more scarce in Iranian society, their inclusion in these comedic circus acts only became more common, even as the audience stopped recognizing or remembering the original objects of the mockery.

The Ghosts of the Past

When compiling his memoir in 1886, ‘Azud al-Dawlih contemplated the very real possibility of history forgetting the court eunuchs. In many ways, his anxiety was prescient. Studies on modern Iranian history have, until recently, largely ignored the East African and Caucasian men of the Qajar court whose qualities were reduced to their mutilated bodies. Despite ‘Azud al-Dawlih’s efforts, the legacy of eunuchs in Iran was largely overshadowed by the caricatures that mocked them. As they grew closer to death and finally passed their memories, too, went with them. Instead, clown acts used mangled imitations of eunuchs to develop a genre of theater that centered crude caricatures as the major focus of their performances. The paradox of the eunuch’s sexualized and
desexualized presence became a trope that remains in Iranian cultural discourse through vulgar and crude humor, and the realism of the brutality dissipated into the past. While court performances originally mocked both white and black eunuchs, it was the image of the black eunuch that would endure in twentieth century extensions of the theater. Divorced from their historical context, these clowns later served as primary conduit for carrying a historical trace of slavery in the early century.
CHAPTER 3: THE BLACK KING AND THE MODERN FAMILY, 1896-1925

Figure 17: “Agha Shazdih and His Young Ghulam.” Private family collection, Kerman, Iran.
A young Agha Suleiman Mirza, affectionately called *Agha Shazdih* or “Sir Prince,” perched on a low bench, while his unnamed male slave, a *ghulām*, a younger boy, stood to his left. Taken in Kerman, a desert city in southern Iran, the studio photograph was meticulously staged to highlight the differences between the boys: the “young prince” sat, while the little *ghulām* stood. Shazdih held a paper and pen, poised to write, while the unnamed *ghulām* held his pencil case for him. Shazdih wore clean, ironed collared shirt and overcoat, while the slave boy wore wrinkled clothing. Shazdih also wore starch white socks and leather shoes. From what is left of the photograph, the slave boy’s ankles seem bare. Together, these differences visually segregated these two young boys as slaveholder and slave.

The photograph presents competing tensions in the household unit, many of which came to the fore during the late Qajar period. Many of the wealthier, slave-owning families used photography to confirm their immaculately curated images of themselves. As pressures to abolish slavery increased, these families faced a particular social dilemma: appear moneyed or progressive—but not both. With slaves, they could display their wealth prominently. Privileged families presented their households as elite, and family photographs with slaves served as proof. The inclusion of the slaves also justified their status, as slaves were photographed to highlight their gentility found through enslavement. The intellectual class, however, began pushing for nationalist ideals of Iranian citizen families without slaves, whom they viewed as uncivilized intrusions. On the one hand, slaves in the family were a point of prestige. Reformists, however, argued

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245 “Agha Shazdih and His Young Ghulam.” Private family collection, Kerman, Iran.
that families should be comprised of immediate family members, and that slaves/servants detracted from family intimacy. Slaves were caught in the middle of this tension, cast at once as objects of status as symbols of the most successful families while also as foreign intrusions. The same people initially forced into wealthy households as slaves would be forced out.

In this chapter, I argue that the Constitutional Revolution and surrounding conversations raised significant questions about the role of the domestic slaves and their place in the Iranian household. As in other regions, slave roles and maternal roles were highly collapsed during this period, and the maternal presence of an enslaved, foreign woman was cast an obstacle in raising an upstanding citizenry.\footnote{Beth Baron, \textit{Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17-39.} Beth Baron examines these questions in the Egyptian context, where she outlines similar concerns and grievances with the presence of Circassian slave mothers in the family. In this case, the abolition of slavery allowed for the creation of an Egyptian family and resulted in the absorption of Circassian mothers. Though the majority of slaves in Egypt were African, Baron describes the Circassian slaves as a “linchpin in the elite social system.” The Iranian case differs, as the Caucasian slaves had already disappeared from most elite families, leaving the African slaves as the only faces to contend with. The expulsion of the domestic slave, however, required mothers to take an active part in the upbringing of their children. Until the Constitutional Revolution, elite mothers had established their status on the backs of other enslaved women who abolitionists came to view as marginal members of the household unit. Slave owners, however, attempted to portray their slaves
as embedded within the family, complicating the simple assertion that slaves were intrusions in the family. This chapter explores the domestic sphere and the family unit during this period of immense political upheaval.

Muzaffar al-Din Shah ascended the throne in 1896 in the midst of political turmoil. His father, Nasir al-Din Shah, had just been assassinated by Mirza Reza Kermani, a follower of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who viewed the Shah as corrupt and unfit to rule.247 Other members of the royal family felt similarly about Muzaffar al-Din’s competence or deservedness of wearing the Iranian crown as well.248 Despite their concerns, the newly minted Shah moved into the palace grounds with his harem and retinue, ready to build upon his father’s legacy of extravagant living. Following his father’s footsteps, Muzaffar al-Din Shah signed numerous concessions to Europeans to fund his excesses and to increase government revenue.249 His political and personal rivals extended beyond the Qajar court, as political dissent against the monarchy fomented in the public. Political progressives advocated for limits on what they saw as despotic rule and protested against government transgressions.250 Internationally, foreign abolition efforts were also mounting. Following the Brussels Conference in 1890, the Belgians joined the British in putting political pressures on the Iranians and organized their Anti-

247 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 16.
250 Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions 81-92.
Slavery Office, beseeching Iranian officials to commit more seriously to abolition. In keeping with their earlier treaties, the British continued to board ships in the Persian Gulf in search of smuggled slaves, challenging Iranian sovereignty in their coastal region. British and Russian interests had ongoing tensions in the Great Game, extending their influence in the southern and northern regions of Iran respectively. The convergence of these different political dynamics and interactions resulted in the revision of political and social structures.

Within a decade of Muzaffar al-Din becoming Shah, reformists pressures resulted in the Constitutional Revolution. On August 5, 1906, Muzaffar al-Din agreed to the creation of Majlis, or parliament. Majlis elections were held that fall, and the Shah signed the first Iranian constitution in December of the same year. In less than a week, Muzaffar al-Din Shah’s death in early January of 1907 threw the country into more political turmoil, as his son and successor, Muhammad ‘Ali Shah Qajar (1907-1909), abhorred the limitations on his monarchical power. Within the next year, he moved to revoke the constitution and destroy Majlis with Russian and British support. Again, constitutionalists channeled their collective power against these violations of their political rights, ultimately succeeding in the abdication of Muhammad Ali Shah Qajar in 1909. His son, Ahmad Shah Qajar (1909-1925), ascended the throne and ratified the constitution once again. The constitution remained in effect until 1925, when Reza Pahlavi had garnered

251 Following the Brussels Conference of 1890, the Belgians continued to make these requests through the Constitutional period. File 240-39280, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
252 Mirzai, A History of Slavery, 145-158.
253 Elena Andreeva, Russia and Iran in the Great Game: Travelogues and Orientalism (New York: Routledge, 2007).
254 Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, 92-101.
enough power to carry out his coup and revise the constitution to recognize the Pahlavi dynasty as the sovereign rulers of Iran. Reza Shah crowned himself king the following year.\textsuperscript{255}

The turmoil of the Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath was not bound to the explicitly political spaces of Iranian society, posing significant questions for Iranians and their day-to-day lives, especially with regards to gender and race. Scholars of gender and womanhood in twentieth century Iran, including Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Afsaneh Najmabadi and Janet Afary, have all described various factors that restructuring Iranian gender roles during the early twentieth century, including Western influence, an increasingly medicalized approach to maternity, and broader discourses of scientific domesticity.\textsuperscript{256} The Constitutional Revolution, with its symbolic importance for the creation of an Iranian citizenry deserving of elected representation, raised concerns about slavery and its implications for the Iranian identity.

\textbf{Slaves Intruding on the Family}

As Constitutionalism grew in popularity, enslavement proved to be a paradox for slave-owners. Despite the efforts in forcibly bringing enslaved men and women to one’s home, slaves were often cast as unwanted intrusions on the family. As discourses around the ideal mother and housewife grew more sophisticated, the position of slaves within the family grew more precarious, a sentiment which was true across the Middle East in this

\textsuperscript{255} Abrahamian, \textit{Iran Between Two Revolutions}, 120.
period. Constitutionalists were highly concerned with the creation of the family, or *tashkīl-i khānivadīh*. Iranians actively redefined the *khānivadīh* from the stoic operation of a “household” to the more intimate concept of a “family.” The *khānivadīh* had served as the major backdrop of slavery in Iran, since most of those enslaved engaged in domestic or sexual labor.

Until the Constitutional period, urban Iranians regarded the ideal household as that one included multiple wives with numerous servants, with the husband at the center of power and control in the household. The changing sentiments towards the *family* is best encapsulated in Taj al-Saltanih’s memoir and contemporary newspapers.

Written in 1914, Taj al-Saltanih’s content speaks to the tensions and questions raised during the Constitutional Era, many of which remained unresolved until legal manumission in 1929.257

Taj al-Saltanih wrote about her close relationship with her African nanny, whom she refers to as *dearest nanny, my nanny, or Lady Nanny*, but never by name.258 When recounting, her father’s death in 1896 and looming arranged marriage, Taj al-Saltanih wrote that her nanny served as her supreme source of comfort.259 Unlike children raised primarily by their mothers, Taj al-Saltanih only knew to respect her mother, but not necessarily to love her.

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258 Dadih-yih aẓīz-i man, dadih-am, dadih khānum. “Dadih khānum” seems to have been her proper title and most common form of address. Taj al-Saltanih, *Khātirāt*, 9.
She made me so used to her that, despite her horrifying looks and formidable figure, if a day she was separated from me for some reason, I cried until dinner and nothing could calm me down. I never left her arms, and nothing could cure me from her separation...But if only I could have had all of this love that I had for my nanny and have described here for my venerable mother instead. Instead of [telling you about] an unworthy black, I could have told you stories about my mother instead.  

Though she repeatedly emphasizes her love for her nanny, it is clear that Taj al-Saltanih also blames her nanny for how much she loved her. As an adult, Taj al-Saltanih felt a clear cognitive dissonance, as she believed her mother should have been her main priority. But she loved her nanny in such a way that it crowded memories of her childhood, preventing her from providing more stories about her mother in her memoir. Although she claimed to have an affinity towards “olive-faced individuals,” Taj al-Saltanih repeatedly emphasized the value of a mother’s love towards her children, a love that she was deprived of having. This love, she argued, should not be replaced with that of a nanny’s. 

She blames her internal conflict on her nanny’s very existence. Her presence deprived her of the maternal relationship she so desired. Despite having what she describes as an immense love for her African nanny, she described her as an “unworthy black.” No matter how much Taj al-Saltanih may have loved her nanny as a child, she loathed how much she loved her as an adult. Taj al-Saltanih, however, was not alone in viewing her nanny and other slaves, as intrusions on the household and the expressed

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260 This is my translation. Taj al-Saltanih, Khātirāt, 9.
261 Ashkhās-i sabzih chihrīh. Earlier in the paragraph, Taj al-Saltanih described her nanny as “very black in the face” or chihrīh-yih khaylī sīyāh. Taj al-Saltanih, Khātirāt, 9.
mother-child relationship, as newspapers across the Middle East emerged as significant site for negotiating motherhood at this time.\textsuperscript{262}

Iran’s first women’s newspaper, \textit{Dānish}, or “Knowledge,” took the question of nannies and their intrusion on the family very seriously when it began printing in 1910.\textsuperscript{263} Written by and for elite, educated women, \textit{Dānish} published numerous articles not only for educating mother’s on how to care for their children personally, but also on the evils of allowing nannies to take on these responsibilities. At this time, elite Iranian families either kept slaves or employed poorer local women\textsuperscript{264} as their nannies. Regardless of these specifics, Danish was very clear—hire a nanny at your own risk. If you must use a nanny, make sure to hire an educated woman with the child’s best interest at heart. Slave women were typically viewed as neither.

Slaves and servants were not members of the household, but rather nuisances to be regulated. \textit{Dānish} seized upon the constitutional fervor and encouraged women to

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\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{263} Muhammad Sadr-i Hashim, \textit{Tārīkh-i jārā’id va majallat-i Iran} (Isfahan: Intishārāt-i Kamal, 1984-85) 265-266. Later, \textit{Dānish} was renamed \textit{Shikufah} in 1913 and continued printing until 1917. Monica Ringer, “Rethinking Religion: Progress and Morality in the Early Twentieth Century Iranian Women’s Press,” \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia and the Middle East} 24, no. 1, 48. Danish’s editor, Dr. Kahhal, emphasized education for all women, even advocating for men to read the journal to women who cannot read. Kashani-Sabet, \textit{Conceiving Citizens}, 127.
\item \textsuperscript{264} One should note that although Taj al-Saltanîh’s nanny was black, this was often only true of families who could afford black slaves. Many other families took on poorer local or village women as their children’s nannies. Examples of these women are found on Women’s World in Qajar Iran, for example “Mahdi Quli Khan’s wet-nurse,” Ali Khan Vali’s Album, \textit{Women’s World in Qajar Iran}, Harvard Library, \url{http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/1257A80.html} (accessed 10 November 2016) or Mah Mah Khanum, Qasim Khan Vali’s nurse, Ali Khan Vali’s Album, \textit{Women’s World in Qajar Iran}, Harvard Library, \url{http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/1257A75.html} (accessed 10 November 2016).
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assert themselves as housewives, matriarchs, and mothers, and take a more active role in
regulating their households. After all, homes had become microcosms of the nation at
large. Mothers were expected to raise productive, patriotic citizens of Iranian society, and
inefficient, lazy or stupid domestics could intrude on proper parenting.\textsuperscript{265} The family
home had become a central ground for negotiating the new family and the new nation,
both without slavery. \textit{Dānish}’s goals in shaping the proper mother cum household
manager appears in almost every issue, wherein articles describe how a woman must take
charge of the household, make appropriate critiques to a \textit{kulfat}, a female
domestic/servant, organize a weekly calendar of housekeeping, manage domestic
finances.\textsuperscript{266} One issue in particular focused on the threat wet nurses (\textit{dāyyih}) posed to
proper notions of motherhood. \textit{Dānish} editors were simultaneously concerned with wet
nurses neglecting children or growing too close to them. Above all, they warned against
wet nurses replacing the mother’s roles. Although a wet nurse may be modest, chaste,
healthy, warm, and clean, one article commented, mothers must realize that nurses may
not be competent.\textsuperscript{267} Scare tactics included running stories about inept wet nurses, like
one who fed crying children vodka instead of giving them food.\textsuperscript{268}

How-to guides instructed mothers to avoid nurses at all cost. If a family was
forced to have a wet nurse, the newspaper provided guidelines for hiring one. Wet nurses
should be young and healthy, her milk should be fresh, other babies with the same nurse
should be healthy, and she should not be pregnant. Additionally, \textit{Dānish} recommended

\textsuperscript{265} See Najmabadi’s \textit{Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards}, 97-131, 181-207; and Kashani-
Sabet’s \textit{Conceiving Citizens}, 121-146.
\textsuperscript{266} \textit{Dānish}, no.1 (1910), 9-10; \textit{Dānish}, no.7 (1910), 4-7.
\textsuperscript{267} \textit{Dānish}, no.5 (1910), 2.
\textsuperscript{268} \textit{Dānish}, no.5 (1910), 2.
beautiful and attractive wet nurses—wet nurses should not be ugly in face or figure, they wrote. Wet nurses should be happy as well, as the milk of sad women sours quickly.\textsuperscript{269} These precautions reveal the bias that wet nurses could pass on characteristics, even physical, to the children they breastfed.

In critiquing maternal relationships in an effort to expand maternal roles, the emotional and physical labor of the nanny was undermined. While Dānish writers and editors attempted to create larger roles for women as heads of the household, Ella Sykes, much like Taj al-Saltanih, described mothers as removed from the family realm. Sykes, a British woman who spent almost three years in Iran over the course of two trips, wrote two books about her observations and experiences, \textit{Through Persia on a Side-Saddle}, and \textit{Persia and its People}.\textsuperscript{270} In her writings, she described mothers as emotionally and practically distant from their family, which allowed them to take extended journeys away from them. In her travelogue, Sykes described women’s religious pilgrimages, either to Mecca, Karbala, or Mashhad. Most, she wrote, opted for a smaller pilgrimage to Imam Ridha’s shrine in Mashhad. Even though Mashhad was the closest destination for those in Iran, the trip remained an arduous and dangerous one. According to Sykes, women were often strapped to mules for the uncomfortable journey. Many died en route, but if they arrived, they stayed in Mashhad for months, making their supplications and meeting friends. She describes this journey as one that did not disrupt family life, as women were already removed from household affairs.

\textsuperscript{269} Dānish, no.5 (1910), 3.

As her husband has practically managed the house, paying the servants and engaging or dismissing them, and as her children are either grown up or in the charge of some attached slave, there is no need for her to hurry back to her duties, for she is not greatly missed in her home.\textsuperscript{271}

Sykes described the very kind of relationship \textit{Dānish} and Taj al-Saltanih clamored against between children and “some attached slave.” Sykes saw Iranian mothers as unencumbered by maternal duties, free to leave home for prolonged periods without lasting consequences. \textit{Dānish}, however, identified this practice of leaving children with their nurses and nannies as strange. Indeed,

\begin{quote}
Mercy from wet nurses! A wet nurse is a strange thing!\textsuperscript{272}
\end{quote}

The newspaper’s forceful declaration immediately identified wet nurses as outsiders. The word \textit{gharīb} can refer to a stranger, but here, even the wording denies the personhood of nurses. \textit{Chīz-i gharībī} – a strange thing! – the newspaper shouts, reminding mothers not to hand their children over to someone, or rather, an object, other than themselves. Blaming the nannies for the shortcomings in the maternal relationship delegitimized the nanny’s work in raising a child.

The Constitutional period represented a pivotal moment for the newly developed Iranian press.\textsuperscript{273} The relative freedom of press allowed intellectuals like ‘Ali Akbar Dehkhoda to lampoon Iranian society in thinly veiled satirical essays. Dehkhoda, hailed for his secular liberalism and political participation during the Constitutional Revolution,

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\textsuperscript{271} Ella Sykes, \textit{Persia and its People}, 207.  \\
\textsuperscript{272} \textit{Dānish}, no.5 (1910), 3.  \\
\textsuperscript{273} For more on the development of the press and their role in furthering progressive ideals in Iran, see Janet Afary, \textit{The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 116-142.
\end{flushright}
edited and wrote for Mirza Jahangir Khan’s newspaper Šūr-i Įsrāfil. Dehkhoda’s column Charand o Parand, with wide support from secularists and the Social Democratic party. Known for his vernacular writing style, Dehkhoda used the comedic devices to critique the Qajar shahs and their style of governance, where he compared life under a despot to a form of enslavement. Using phrases including, “let us not be slaves” or “it is as if you have freed a slave in the path of God,” Dehkhoda discussed lofty political questions – the economy, despotism, even international encroachment, in terms of the ownership of himself and his fellow citizens. By employing such dramatic phrasing, Dehkhoda attempted to rouse his audience by diminishing their status in society to that of a slave. Iranians, like slaves, he argued, lacked rights, and were slaves to the Shah and government at large. Dehkhoda was not alone in his rhetorical use of slavery. Majlis debates on the “Daughters of Quchan,” Iranian women and children who had been enslaved by Turkmen raiders, compared the girls to all of Iran, creating a gendered metaphor for Iranian nationalism. These girls, violated by foreign peoples, represented the honor of the Iranian nation, depending on her male citizens to rise and defend her rights against foreign enslavement. In both examples, the association of otherwise free Iranians to slaves was intended to move forward a political conversation about nation-

274 Hassan Taqizadeh, the Social Democratic representative in Majlis was the main backer of the paper. Mirza Jahangir Khan had Azali Babi sympathies. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, Charand-o Parand: Revolutionary Satire from Iran, 1907-1909, trans. Janet Afary and John R. Perry. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 29-31. The Moderates, on the other hand, were not opposed to clerics, and many of them were clerics or came from conservative Muslim backgrounds, including Seyyed Abdullah Bihbahani, whose life and legacy I discuss later in this chapter.
276 Jahangir Khan, Qasim Khan, Ali Akbar Dihkhuda, Šūr-i Įsrāfil, 33.
277 The word for “daughter” and “girl” is the same in Persian, dukhtar.
building, not engage in a humanitarian abolitionist discourse to free those enslaved by
Iranians.

In one discussion on the building of civil society, Dehkhoda identified the family as the main unit in constructing a nation. Dehkhoda reasoned that the birth of children created families, individual families would then social and form a larger group together, these larger groups would then come together to create tribes, and the alliance of various tribes ultimately created a nation. 279 Dehkhoda’s nation was reproductive, which allowed it to grow naturally from a solid family unit. Slaves remained absent from Dehkhoda’s discussion of the family. Without slaves, they encapsulated a new kind of family, with active parenting at the core of the nuclear family. Through this tension, slaves became a marker of the past, a symbol of an incompetent household, a metonym of what later became a stereotype for the entire Qajar empire—impotent and wholly dependent on others. 280

Nannies and other slaves, however, remained a fixture in Iranian elite homes. Because of their emotional proximity to children, they served as a metaphor for refuge. In a handwritten poem for her nurse, an upper class educated woman wrote about her marital problems. Having left her childhood home, the author addresses her nurse, complaining about her difficult transition to her new stage in life. 281 Meant as a comedic and exaggerated piece, the poem reflects social norms and values of upper class and

279 Jahangir Khan, Qasim Khan, ‘Ali Akbar Dihkhuda, Sūr-i Isrāfil, 35
280 Beyond criticizing the Qajars, Dehkhoda also painted the Ottomans in an unfavorable light. Dehkhoda, Charand-o Parand, 140-146.
educated women. The irony in complaining about one’s plight to her nurse, who had limited resources, added to the humorous effect, creating a dramatic expression of married life with no viable resolution. The newlywed’s poem did not confess her problems to her mother, but rather her nurse, an unintimidating figure who was obligated to listen.

The attachment to wet nurses was an intimate one that persisted beyond childhood. Some remembered their nurses in their wills and testaments, either providing for them financially with a monthly stipend,282 or asking that others pray for their nurses who had passed on before them.283 The inclusion of nannies in the wills highlights their unique status in the household – not quite family, but not quite the strangers that Dānish had cast them as either. This becomes especially apparent when considering Islamic opinions on the presence of a nanny in the household. In Shi’i fiqh, the wet nurse created a special relationship with the children she breastfed, and carried a similar status to a mother. Children nursed by anyone besides their mother were immediately considered close family or mahram284 to their nurse, and children nursed by the same woman shared

284 *Marham* laws denote who is legally marriageable. Those who are *mahram* cannot be married—immediate families, for example (parents and children, siblings, aunts/uncles and nieces/nephews) are all *mahram* to each other. Cousins, however, are not mahram, and can marry. The word is derived from *haram*, or forbidden.
sibling status.\textsuperscript{285} Despite the special religious status, writers encouraged women to abandon using wet nurses on nationalist, hygienic, and medical grounds.\textsuperscript{286}

In her memoir, Taj al-Saltanih openly blamed household slaves as major factor in preventing a proper marriage in aristocratic society. Discussing constitutionalism and progress, Taj al-Saltanih highlighted marriage as the primary institution for change and embraced a monogamy-only, no frills perspective – and one that removed slaves from the domestic sphere. For people to find their spouses individually, women needed to remove their veils and bare their faces in public.\textsuperscript{287} If individuals could meet and get to know their spouses, they would be better companions to one another. Taj al-Saltanih’s critiques of Persian marital customs stemmed from not only her progressivist attitudes, but also from her failed marriage. Despite a plenitude of suitors, she married her husband, who she suspected appreciated male companionship more than her own. Taj al-Saltanih wrote that if individuals met their spouses prior to marriage, they would have a higher chance of fostering a successful marriage. Both parties, but especially women, she argued, would care less for domestic servants and would take more active parts in their children’s lives.\textsuperscript{288} She viewed the problem of domestic servants and slaves in Iranian households as a problem of national importance, which could only be remedied by adopting European attitudes and norms.

\textsuperscript{285} This becomes significant in delineating marriage laws. For example, an individual cannot marry anyone who shared their same wet nurse, nor can they marry their wet nurse.
\textsuperscript{286} Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet discusses some of the debates surrounding wet nurses during this period. Kashani-Sabet, \textit{Conceiving Citizens}, 100-103.
\textsuperscript{287} Here, \textit{ruy-i bāz kardih} is translated as “unveiled.” Tāj al-Saltanih, \textit{Khāṭirāt}, 101.
\textsuperscript{288} Taj Al-Saltana, \textit{Crowning Anguish}, 289; Tāj al-Saltanih, \textit{Khāṭirāt}, 100.
If they lived like the aristocrats and nobility in Europe—without harems and armies of menservants and maidservants and excessive, unnecessary expenses—would that not be nobler? This husband and wife who have chosen one another out of love, these two companions who hearts are the surest guarantee of their fidelity and chastity and union—are they not worthy of commendation and praise? Yes, they are!

For Taj al-Saltanih, domestic workers impeded elite couples from acheiving the noblest forms of love. We can attribute this, in part, to her marital experiences, as she hinted to her husband’s various affairs and flirtations with their domestic slaves in her memoir.

The visuality of slaves as intrusions in loving or lustful relationships had also long been depicted in paintings of the Qajar court. The risqué visual depictions of heterosexual lovers fondling, kissing, or engaging in other illicit sexual acts was often paired with members of the slave and servant class angrily intervening on behalf of the woman. As Mira Schwerda has noted, components of this image – voyeuristic slaves interrupting romantic lovers – remained wildly popular during the late Qajar period, and a number of different versions had been replicated and circulated as pencil sketches, watercolors, and oil paintings. The popularity of the portraits indicates not only the commonality of illicit affairs, but also the degree to which slaves were seen as nuisances, getting in the way of their masters. While intended as an amusing commentary on the realities of court life, it hinted at Taj al-Saltanih’s fear that she had been deprived of a fulfilling sexual experience because of the intruding presence of slaves. The difference, however, lay in the activity and passivity of the slaves – while the painting shows the slaves as actively

intruding, Taj al-Saltanih’s memoir painted their mere presence as enough of an intrusion. Their presence alone allowed couples and families to rely on them instead of each other, which caused an unresolvable distance between them. Taj al-Saltanih’s anti-slavery stance underscores how rapidly the social landscape was changing, that a princess born into the riches of Qajar court life would reject such a lifestyle and be an advocate for abolition.

Figure 18: “Embracing Lovers Caught by Housemaids,” Photo from Sotheby’s, Arts of the Islamic World. Reprinted in Taj al-Saltana, Crowning Anguish, trans. by Abbas Amanat, 259.
Slaves as Passive Pawns and Props

It seems that where slave women did not intrude, Iranian families brought them to the fore, in an effort to showcase their own wealth and superiority. Another American woman, Clara Colliver Rice published her travelogue to Iran in 1923, where she wrote women’s “Occupations and Amusements,” and the “dullness” of their days. Rice, a missionary whose first book focused on Mary Bird and medical missionary work in Iran, focused her second book on her own observations as an outsider. She described catty Iranian women sometimes employed their slaves as pawns in their petty revenge schemes.

Ladies have often complained to me of the dullness of their own entertainments. Nothing but drinking tea and eating sweets and nuts, and smoking the kalyān, and gossip!...there is a great deal of rivalry in their own dress and in that of their servants and slaves, whose clothes they supply. A lady may go to a party wearing a new or rather gorgeous dress or chadar, of which she is evidently proud and conscious. A fellow guest who owes her a grudge will send someone to search the bazar the next day for material of the same kind. Then she will arrange a party, and ask the specially grandly dressed lady to come, and array one of her slave-women in garments of the same material, and enjoy the agitation of her guest.293

According to Rice, women filled their days with tea, hookah, and dressing up their slaves in some gorgeous fabric to tick off their social nemeses. Dressing one’s slave in a beautiful dress to trouble someone else was particularly cruel and rooted in demonstrations of outrageous wealth. It signaled that not only was the woman’s outfit fit for a slave, but she too was comparable to the status of a black slave. Rice included the

gesture, which involved a fair amount of effort for a tacit insult, to highlight how bored Iranian women were in their gendered spaces.

By the twentieth century, the visibility of slaves allowed them to serve as clear status markers. Their blackness became synonymous with their servility such that even hiring an individual of African ancestry could serve as an optical illusion of wealth and nobility:

Her housekeeping was of great interest: she had a man-servant who did the shopping and any business matters for her, a woman cook, and a girl, who had some African blood, as her personal maid. This girl added distinction to the establishment, as she was very like the slaves owned by many wealthy people. She was not a slave, however, but merely a servant, who was free to leave at any time. 294

Because this family could not afford a black slave, they employed a free woman of African ancestry instead, hoping to fool people into thinking that, they too, were noble slave owners. While some clamored for the removal of slaves from the household in favor of a European modernity, others feigned their slave ownership, in pursuit of the status and prestige it carried.

The inclusion of black slaves in family photographs served a similar purpose: a permanent and portable means of portraying the family’s prestige, as well as an argument for maintaining this system of prestige. In one household portrait, fourteen women, children, and a eunuch stood outdoors, staring skeptically into the camera that captured a stiffly posed scene. All members of the same household, but not the same family: a slave

294 Rice, Persian Women and Their Ways, 47.
girl and eunuch stood at the opposite ends of the photograph, their presence flanking the hierarchical relationships present within the private walls.

While almost all the women were labeled, the eunuch was overlooked, and as a result, he remains nameless in the photograph’s caption. He is undefined by someone’s arbitrary method of remembering identities and associations. Most of the reported names included lofty and regal titles, such as “al-Saltanih,” “Baygum,” or “Taj;” stark contrasts to Suski, the moniker given to the young girl with black braids. Suski is not a proper name, but rather, a racial epithet shrouded in child-like language. Sūsk translates to “cockroach,” and the –i suffix operates as an endearing diminutive. Together, this amalgamation of seemingly incompatible terms evokes filth and youth as central to this little girl’s supposed offensive presence. The dehumanizing language of comparing slaves to cockroaches operated beyond the confines of the Persian language: in Turkish, cockroaches are “karafatma,” or “Black Fatima,” a reference to the common label for African slave nannies.

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296 al-Saltanih translates as “of the government,” Baygum as “lady,” and Taj as “crown.”
Though the archival caption labels her as a *mustakhdamih*, an ambiguous term for a paid or unpaid servant, her “name” betrays her status as slave. Such degrading racial language could not refer to anyone but a female slave who entered the household at a young age.\(^{297}\)

\(^{297}\) Due to her young age and the difficulty of importing slaves at this time, it is likely that she was a *khāniḥ-zūd*, a slave born in the master family’s home, though this would be difficult to prove.
With the exception of two much younger children, Suski was the only girl with her hair showing, tightly pulled into two braids behind her head. Her wrinkled clothing and altogether disheveled appearance reinforced the unclean claims of her name, especially in comparison to her neighbors, all portrayed in a prim white scarves pinned under their chins. At first glance, one might see a family portrait, but the details scaffold those pictured as within or beyond the frames of the family.

A later photograph of Suski shows her wearing a chador with stylized bangs, more similar to the dresses of the other young girls of the household. Viewed in tandem, these photographs make an argument for the civilizing mission of slavery – a disheveled young girl became a genteel young woman. At a time when slavery was visibly on the decline, photography could demonstrate a family’s status and benefits of slavery. As Barbara Krauthamer and Deborah Willis have noted, “Working together, white photographers and slaveholders produced images that aimed to present slavery as an appropriate, beneficial, and benign institution based on natural racial hierarchy.”

Suski’s inclusion not only echoes this argument, but also charts the passage of time through her gradual assimilation into standard Iranian norms.

Names, it seems, operated more as labels than as identity markers, fluid titles that were subject to change. Although archival entry remembers as Suski, a little mustakhdamih who stands to the side, a separate edited collection of Constitutional Era

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298 She is not shown wearing a starch white scarf, however, which distinguished the free girls from her.
299 Willis and Krauthamer, Envisioning Emancipation, 8.
documents, a different creaturely name—*Juju, a kulfat*—marks her presence.\(^{301}\) A stark contrast, as Juju means “chick,” and *kulfat* here refers to a “female servant,” the edited collection represents a far more benevolent read on this young girl’s status in the household.\(^{302}\) Two contradictory terms, on opposite spectrums of the animal world, a cockroach and a chick. Perhaps different family members used the different labels, or maybe they were interchanged at different points in her life. Or perhaps, the names indicate her trajectory into assimilating within the household: while a dirty child, she was likened to a cockroach, but after adapting to the family’s standards, she grew to fuzzy chick. Regardless of the connotation, both names create a diminutive impression and deny her a human name in a historical record.\(^{303}\)

While some have labeled these as family portraits, they seem to be more of a household portrait, where slaves are identified as outsiders who gradually adapt to the family’s way of living. The photographs not only marked the affluence of the family, but justified them as well, as the proper caretakers of these young slaves. When considered against the backdrop of the Constitutional Press, these photographs push back against the abolitionist rhetoric. Contrary to the articles that clamored for slaveholders to not allow slaves to care for the family, these photographs presented the family as caretakers of the slaves, arguing that their practice of slavery was a noble effort.


\(^{302}\) Not only do researchers have to grapple with contradictory names, as in the case with Suski and Juju, we also grapple with archives who are hesitant to release sensitive documents, or, re-label texts to prevent any associations with slavery. Slaves become “servants” or “household members,” and so on.

\(^{303}\) In her discussion of naming practices surrounding slaves, Mirzai contends “that there is no evidence that naming practices carried pejorative connotations.” Mirzai, *A History of Slavery*, 101. “Suski,” however, evokes a clear negative sentiment, cloaked in a cutesy diminutive form.
Another household portrait makes a similar argument, though in one photograph rather than two. Taken in Tabriz around this same time, the photograph shows two generations of slave holders and slaves alongside each other. The slave holder, Shazdih Galin, or “Princess Bride,” sits to the left of the photograph, posing with her manual sewing machine, a sign of her prestige. Other objects decorate the scene, a small trunk and painted hookah to the left of Shazdih Galin, an iron in front of her. Two of her

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304 “Shazdih Jan,” Private family collection, Kerman, Iran.
daughters are also in the photograph. One, dressed in patterned tights, black polished shoes and a floral hat, and the other, a young baby, who sat in the lap of a black slave woman. The slave woman’s own daughter was also in the photograph, standing in the middle between Shazdih Galin and her older daughter. Based on proximity in age between the slave child and the free baby, it is possible that the slave woman was also the baby’s wet nurse.

Though the photo seems like a quasi-candid photograph, it was meticulously posed and framed to highlight the family’s genteel femininity and domestic prowess. The alternating arrangement of slaveholders and slaves in the photograph presents their racial harmony as a family unit. As Krauthamer and Willis describe, “such images create a visual narrative of the romantic myth of the mutual obligation and affection, captured in that rhetorical image favored by slaveholders of the ‘family, white and black.’” Similar to the first photo of Juju/Suski, the young slave girl is presented as unkempt, almost unbridled as she defiantly stands for the photo. By contrast, Shazdih Galin’s older daughter oozed refinement and femininity. The inclusion of young slave girls as so visibly different from their pristine peers visually articulates their ripeness and intrinsic need for enslavement, where Shazdih Galin’s family would train her to become as much of a refined woman as possible, as Yamin al-Saltanih’s family had trained Juju/Suski. By including a slave mother and daughter pair in this photograph, it articulates not only the family’s wealth, but also served as a reminder of the potential of slaves to grow into

305 Willis and Krauthamer, Envisioning Emancipation, 8.
productive and more refined members of the household, and the responsibility of the slave holding family to take up such a cause.

Shazdih Galin sat on the left, her hand casually rested on the crank of the sewing machine, as if to say the photographer interrupted her mid-stitch, while the slave woman cared for Shazdih Galin’s baby on the right. Two opposing images of raced femininity in the home, their positions moored the family with their harmonious balance.

306 To stage the scene, Shazdih Galin had folded a large piece of fabric under the sewing machine, instead of laying it flat, rendering it inoperable. The many layers of fabric would have either broken the needle, or the fabric would have been sewn together in a jagged, unseemly fashion. “Shazdih Jan,” Private family collection, Kerman, Iran.
Figure 22: “Shazdih Galin’s older daughter accompanied by a slave girl,” Private family collection, Kerman, Iran. This is the last remaining photograph of Shazdih Galin’s daughter.

In a later photograph, Shazdih Galin’s older daughter, the young girl in tights, appears in another photograph, seated next to a young slave. Years had passed, and she had outgrown taking photographs with her hair showing. Here, she wore a pinned scarf.

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I believe approximately 10 years have passed between Figures 21 and 22. This is the last known photograph of Shazdih Galin’s daughter, who died in her early 20s. I was told this photo was taken shortly before her death. In Figure 21, she appears to be approaching about 10 years in age. Due to these calculations, despite the similarities in the appearances between the slave girls in Figure 21 and 22, I am not certain they are the same person. “Shazdih Galin’s older daughter accompanied by a slave girl,” Private family collection, Kerman, Iran.
and chador. A young slave girl, also wearing a pinned scarf and floral chador, held a tray with a bowl for Shazdih Galin’s daughter. The defiance of her expression, from the furrowed brow to the puffed cheeks and narrowed eyes visibly communicated her frustration with having to hold up an item for the woman. By contrast, a beacon of femininity, Shazdih Galin’s daughter looked calm and unperturbed, if not totally peaceful. Similar to the earlier photograph, she had flowers pinned to her scarf, and she remained seated, as relaxed as the younger girl was frustrated. Like her childhood photo, Shazdih Galin’s daughter appears wearing a floral crown of sorts, further highlighting her femininity. Whereas Wexler discusses the iconic references to the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus in photographs of adult slave women holding their master’s children, this photograph inverts that relationship, instead highlighting the refinement of the slaveholder. In photos focusing on the sentimentality of nurse-child relationships, black women and children dressed in prim outfits visually demonstrated their gentility and purity, as imparted by their white caretakers or masters. The camera had focused on Shazdih Galin’s daughter’s calm expression, blurring the young girl’s defiance as almost an indication that with time, she too will have the inelegance wiped away from her.

The similarities between this photograph and that of Agha Shazdih and his slave are remarkable. Beyond the superficial similarities of their names (‘Sir Prince’ and ‘Princess Bride’), the photographs are linked by their obvious use of slaves as a side prop, carrying an essential item for conveying their identity and status. For Agha Shazdih, his young slave held up his pencil case, a visual reminder of his education,

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308 Wexler, Tender Violence, 65.
whereas in this photograph, her young slave clutched a tray, a reminder of her feminine gentility. Portraits from this period often depicted the subject with a pencil case as an indication of their erudition. The decision to have the young ghulām carry the pencil case was intended to add another layer of sophistication. In contrast to photographs of white women educating black children in the late nineteenth century U.S., this photograph shows how a young slave boy might aid in the education of his master. The young ghulām, who likely remained illiterate throughout his life, served as a conduit for his master’s education.

The extreme youth of these slave children is also worth noting—despite being no more than ten years old, their masters’ tasked them with playing the role of a table or a stand in the photograph, physically replacing an inanimate object with their bodies. Repeated family photographs, in the case of Juju/Suski’s photograph’s, chart the growth and gradual maturity of the household’s slaves, similar to the photographs Nasir al-Din Shah’s aging eunuchs. Though these photographs, taken in the early twentieth century, seem to only chart the youth of these slaves for a short period. Photographs charting the growth of these children into adulthood remain to be found, perhaps due in part to the Manumission Law of 1929, which may have ensured the freedom of these slaves in their adolescence or young adulthood.

Each of the photographs carry a particular significance for their respective families. Shazdih Galin’s daughter passed away in her early twenties, and this was the

311 See Chapter 2.
last photograph of her. The family had preserved the photograph to the best of their ability with only the smallest of wrinkles at the corners of the photograph. The left end of the photograph had peeled away in some areas, and because the photographer had slightly cut the young slave girl out of the frame, the edges of her chador seem more speckled than they should.

Agha Shazdih’s photograph, however, has degenerated to a more significant degree. Although this is one of the oldest photographs held in the family, his children and grandchildren stored it in such a way that only one edge of the photograph is well preserved. The other three sides of the photograph have been severely torn, due to both neglect and poor preservation practices, in addition to the generic passage of the time. The left side of the photograph, where Agha Shazdih posed, remains in good condition, but the right side has been destroyed. Creases and wrinkles from the right side have destroyed the photograph of the ghulām. His eyes metaphorically gouged by the wrinkles of time and his ankles torn at the edges. His skin and coiled hair, however, signal his African ancestry clearly through the photograph. His name has been long forgotten, and Agha Shazdih’s grandchildren explained his young age as the product of a local slave marriage. As Wexler has argued, the sentimentality of the portrait was for the benefit of the slaver, not the nursemaid or slave.\footnote{Wexler, \textit{Tender Violence}, 60.} In this case, the young ghulām’s presence ceased to benefit the slaver, and he was ultimately forgotten by the slaveowning family.

Though they were not able to provide details specific to their grandfather’s slave, the family made sure to emphasize Agha Shazdih’s redeeming qualities and remarkable
slave ownership. “He was very kind to his slave,” they said, “not like those other slave owners you heard about.” Agha Shazdih’s grandson, Akbar,\(^{313}\) mentioned another wealthy Kermani family whose patriarch had been known to resort to particularly cruel punishments to their slaves. “One of their slaves, she talked back to [her master]. He had her lips sewn shut as punishment.”\(^{314}\)

Despite being unable to tell even the smallest of anecdotes contextualizing Agha Shazdih’s relationship with his unnamed child slave, the family remained certain in their patriarch’s benevolent treatment of their slave. Both the young African child and Agha Shazdih look young enough to be playmates, but the family could not recall specific stories about their joint games or pastimes. Their photograph distinctly depicts the younger child as a prop, patiently holding his master’s tools to visually highlight his education. He served as a plaything rather than a playmate.

These staged studio portraits evoke similar sentiments as Paul Mak’s painting from 1923. Mak, a Russian artist who spent some time in Iran, illustrated a black slave propping a mirror for a wealthy woman. Similar to the two coupled portraits, he also affirms the woman’s identity—this time, more literally, as he shows her reflection and affirms her existence. Mak’s piece features five individuals, each representing the different social classes in Iran: a young, wealthy Iranian woman, a young black male slave, an older black female slave, an older Iranian woman, and another Iranian woman whose back is shown. The image looks like the two Iranian women in the foreground are

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\(^{313}\) Name has been changed.

\(^{314}\) Conversation with Akbar in Kerman, January 2016. This story is a common one in Kerman, and other Kermanis often referred to this family when learning about my research. “Oh you work on slavery? Have you heard of the khan who sewed his slave’s mouth for being cheeky?” Kerman, January 2016.
peering out at the wealthy Iranian woman and her entourage, almost scowling at her and her young male slave. At the center of the painting, the wealthy Iranian woman fixed her makeup as a young black slave held up a mirror for her. Surrounded by two Iranian women and another black female slave, the wealthy Iranian woman’s billowing black chador occupied the most space in the painting. She stands in the middle, flanked by her male slave holding her mirror, and her female slave holding her fan. In his painting, Mak included only one small piece of furniture, which he placed directly in front of the young black slave—inventing the viewer to associate the low table with him, or even, view the slave as an extension of the table.  

315 Illustration Page Depicting a Woman with Servant,” Photographed by Antoin Sevruguin, 1923-1930s. Black and White, 12.8cm x 17.9cm. FSA_A.4_2.12.GN.25.12, Freer and Sackler Galleries. Washington, D.C.
Figure 23: “Illustration Page Depicting a Woman with Servant,” Held at the Freer and Sackler Galleries.

Both black slaves in the painting are caricatured, while the two Iranian women whose faces are shown – one looking in the mirror and the other staring at her – both have detailed expressions. The black slaves, however, are more abstracted. Their eyes, large, round and without eyelids, their lips excessively extended beyond their jaws. Mak painted their faces in such a way that they seem to reflect light. While Mak’s pieces generally incorporate various Orientalist themes and tropes, a few of his illustrations provide distinct commentary on Iranian social norms. In other pieces, he critiqued corrupt religious authorities and bloody Shi’i rituals. Here, Mak’s portrait satirizes what may have been the final moments of getting ready to leave the house before stepping outside

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in a critique of both slavery and the excessive obsession with one’s appearance and reputation.

Mak’s illustration drew upon the common and recognizable sight of women accompanied by male domestics in urban spaces. At a time when public dress for women was incredibly uniform – either solid black chadors with a white face veil, or floral chadors held in such a way to hide the face – women’s identities in public spaces were obscured. The presence of a male slave may not have indicated their identity per se, but it would have served as a public marker of their wealth, gentility, distinct from women venturing out of their homes alone. Their joint presence would have indicated to passers-by that this woman is deserving of one’s respect, lest anyone may think otherwise. In a photograph of Tehran’s Maydan-i Tupkhanih, or “Artillery Square,” a woman and her
male domestic appear in front of a series of cannons and exercising equipment intended for the Iranian military. Though the proximity of an elite woman to military equipment may be jarring, the presence of her domestic – who is relegated to the far right of the photograph – serves as a reminder to the viewer as if to say, don’t worry, this woman is guarded by a trustworthy ghulām.\footnote{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Maydān-i Tūpkhānīh,\textquoteright\textquoteright Album # Unknown, Gulistan Palace Archives, Tehran, Iran.} Another photograph, “Persian Ladies Leave Public Bath-House Preceded by a Domestic Servant” attributed to Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Heinicke and published in the National Geographic Magazine in 1921, depicts a similar scene.\footnote{Alfred Heinicke, \textit{National Geographic}, vol. XXXIX, no. 4. April 1921, 373. For a history of the magazine’s success in the early twentieth century, see Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, \textit{Reading National Geographic} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 15-46.} Heinicke’s photograph, which also depicts the ghulām to the right of the photograph, sends a similar message. As two women exit the bathhouse, their ghulām is ready to escort them home. He waited for them with his back to the bathhouse, an indication of not only his modesty and respect to the women entering and leaving this public but very intimate space, but also his attention to any pedestrians who might have had less modest motives. The intended message here is the same – an indication that the women, protected by their male ghulām, are safe.
Beyond the Family

As abolitionist discourses developed and more slaves were freed or were able to purchase their freedom, it grew more common to see free black individuals, particularly men, in

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public spaces as well. Some of these men joined other dervishes in pursuit of a social network, a sight that was visually intriguing for travelers to Iran. British writer and anthropologist Arnold Henry Savage Landor was an avid traveler who wrote books about each of his travels. Like others, he was also fascinated by the demeanor of a black dervish who used a club to maintain order and discourage people from harassing foreigners:

At last the hotel was reached, and here another row arose with profusion of blows among a crowd of beggars who had at once collected and disputed among themselves the right of unloading my luggage.

A strange figure appeared on the scene. A powerful, half-naked African, as black as coal, and no less than six foot two in height. He sported a huge wooden club in his hand, which he whirled around in a most dangerous manner, occasionally landing it on people’s skulls and backs in a sonorous fashion. The crowd vanished, and he, now as gently as possible, removed the luggage from the fourgon and conveyed it into the hotel.

The obnoxious man now hastily descended from his seat and demanded a backshish. 318

“‘What for?’”

“‘Oh, sir,’” intervened the Persian gentleman present, “this man says he has annoyed you all the way, but he could not make you angry. He must have backshish! He makes a living by annoying travellers!”

In contrast to this low, depraved parasite, the African black seemed quite a striking figure—a scamp, if you like, yet full of character. He was a dervish, with drunken habits and a fierce nature when under drink, but with many good points when sober. On one occasion, and Englishman was attacked by a crowd of Persians, and was in danger of losing his life, when this man, with considerable bravery (not to speak of his inseparable mallet which he used freely), went to the rescue of the sahib and succeeded in saving him. For this act of courage he has since been supported by the charity of foreigners in Teheran. He unfortunately spends all his earnings in drink, and can be very coarse indeed, in his songs and imitations, which he delights in giving when under the influence of liquor. He hangs round the hotel, crying out “Yahu! Yahu!” when hungry—a cry quite pathetic and weird, especially in the stillness of the night. 319

Although Landor’s text clearly identifies him as a dervish, Mirzai describes the man in the aforementioned passage as an “itinerant eager for work” and a “beggar,” but lists it

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318 A tip.
under a section titled “Enslaved People in Public Service.” These categories are incongruous, as enslaved people were not armed or itinerant. His cry, *Ya Hu*, is the common Sufi refrain, “O’ He,” calling upon the name of God and likening divine omnipresence to an onomatopoetic deep breath—*yahu*. His friend, who Landor described as a “low, depraved parasite,” was likely a fellow dervish. Although blackness was usually a marker of enslavement, it was not always, and these social networks provided a life outside of servitude.

Landor’s passage evokes a sense of wonder at the black dervish, and Antoin Sevruguin sought to capture that wonder in his photographs to sell to tourists. Sevruguin, a Georgian-Armenian court and commercial photographer of the late Qajar period, was known for his type photography that served as a visual ethnography. It was in this context that Sevruguin photographed several dervishes in a distinct visual presentation, stylized to appeal to those interested in collecting ethnographic images of people in Iran. Their appearance and belongings, such as large staffs, a *kashkūl* or begging bowls, and pipes readily identified them as dervishes. Sevruguin, who had a background in painting, created an aesthetic that appealed to individuals like Landor.

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321 Mira Schwerda has documented how widely popular Sevruguin’s dervish photographs were among Europeans and Americans, as evidenced by their existence in various archives and family collections outside of Iran. Mira Schwerda, “Seen and Unseen: Imagery of Africans and its Circulation in Qajar Iran,” Association for Iranian Studies, August 5, 2016.
322 Schwerda has also pointed out how the backgrounds of these photographs were painted white, in an attempt to highlight the subject for the viewer.
Although dervishes belonged to Sufi orders with particular social networks of their own, Sevruguin presented them as nomadic, independent, and reliant on begging. This series of photographs each featured an activity that further identified their position in society – either walking, to visually represent their itinerancy, or smoking opium, to signal their languid lifestyles. Sevruguin’s series of dervish photographs depicted them as uniformly disheveled, unkempt, somewhat strange and other worldly. To emphasize this other worldliness, Sevruguin focused on black dervishes, who were likely freedmen who had joined a Sufi order in pursuit of a distinct social networks that emphasized servitude in the way of God, not other men. Sevruguin’s camera captured them as strange, unattached to a biological family, uncivilized by social norms, and general pariahs of society.

323 Myron Bement Smith Collection, Iran in Photographs, Freer and Sackler Galleries.
324 “Portrait of Two Dervishes Carrying a Kashkul, or Beggar's Bowl,” Sevruguin, Antoin, 1880-1930; 17.9 cm. x 23.9 cm. FSA_A.4_2.12.GN.39.01, Freer and Sackler Galleries.
Figure 26: “Portrait of Two Dervishes,” Held at the Freer and Sackler Galleries.

The Black King and Mixed Families

The sexual vulnerability of enslaved African women to their Iranian masters also resulted in free children who inherited their father’s status. Despite inheriting their father’s freedom, these children still carried the stigma of enslavement and blackness.

Sayyid ‘Abdullah Bihbahani served as one of the foremost influential clerics of the Constitutional Revolution. Credited with fostering alliances and supporting the protests that led to the revolution in 1906, Bihbahani crafted strategic relationships with
members of court, the British legation, and reform-minded clerics and led the Moderates in Parliament. His rise to power was due, in part, to his father’s powerful connections with Nasir al-Din Shah’s court, but also to his own ambitions and charismatic character. At his peak, however, he became popularly known as Shah Siyah, or “the Black King.” While at first glance this may seem like a complimentary epithet, it was not, and was primarily used by his detractors.

Born to a family of distinguished clerics in 1840, Sayyid ‘Abdullah Bihbahani spent the first part of his life in Najaf, where he studied under his father and other local clerics. His father, Sayyid Isma‘il Bihbahani, carried a notable amount of power within the religious community of Najaf. His mother, Fatima, was a habashī woman purchased by his father during a pilgrimage to Mecca. In 1870, during Nasir al-Din Shah’s visit to Najaf, his father met with the Shah, who recognized his clout and recruited him to serve as a consulting religious authority at the Qajar court. Upon Nasir al-Din Shah’s request, Isma‘il Bihbahani moved his family to Tehran and maintained close ties with the court. It was in this milieu that his son, ‘Abdullah Bihbahani, became acquainted with the Persian political system and the workings of the capital. Upon his father’s death in 1878, ‘Abdullah Bihbahani took his father’s place as an influential cleric in the Persian capital.\(^\text{325}\)

Bihbahani actively participated in the political scene, earning what Abrahamian has called the “unsavory reputation of being pro-British” for publicly smoking tobacco in

support of the Shah and the British during the Tobacco Protest in 1891.\textsuperscript{326} By the early
twentieth century, however, Bihbahani was an active constitutionalist, advocating for
limits on themonarchicalpower. In 1906, Bihbahani allied with another mujtahid,
Muhammad Tabataba’i and led the pivotal Qom protests of clerics clamoring for a
constitution.\textsuperscript{327} After the establishment of Majlis, he remained participatory in
parliamentary debates in support of the Moderates, though he was not actually an elected
representative.\textsuperscript{328} In the unrest of the 1908-1909, when Ahmad Shah Qajar bombarded
parliament, the Shah identified Bihbahani as a key constitutionalist and placed him under
house arrest.\textsuperscript{329} Finally, with the reopening of Majlis in 1909, Bihbahani was selected as
the mujtahid leader of the Moderates party, alongside Tabataba’i, the main rival to the
more secular Democrat party, lead by Hassan Taqizadeh.

Bihbahani is said to have garnered so much power that he often held official
meetings in the convenience of his own home, excluding those who disagreed with him.
These power moves, coupled with his egotistical reputation, earned him the title \textit{Shah}
‘Abdullah, or, more commonly, \textit{Shah Siyah}, “the Black King.” Combining the title \textit{Shah}
with the blackness of his skin, his detractors attempted to label him as an unfit despot.
The \textit{Black King} constituted a direct reference to his skin and his autocratic, and at times,
authoritarian decisions that his opponents viewed as unfair or undemocratic. While
Bihbahani served as a moderate – curbing any laws that conflicted with his understanding

\textsuperscript{326} Abrahamian, \textit{Between Two Revolutions}, 80. Nikki R. Keddie, \textit{Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The
\textsuperscript{327} Ahmad Kasravi, \textit{Tārīkh-i Mashrūṭī-yi Iran}, (Tehran: Majid, 1999), 48. Abrahamian, \textit{Between Two
Revolutions}, 83.
\textsuperscript{328} Tabataba’i is said to have done the same as well. Abrahamian, \textit{Between Two Revolutions}, 88.
\textsuperscript{329} Abrahamian, \textit{Between Two Revolutions}, 96-97.
of Islamic law, while also maintaining a positive relationship with the court – many viewed his actions as exemplary of his ambition for gaining more power. The label resonates with the blackface performances discussed in Chapter 2, where a black man dressed as a king merited derision and laughter. Here, however, the title was not meant for humorous (however misplaced) purposes, but to rather shame Bihbahani for accumulating favor amongst his peers and the public. The title labeled Bihbahani a hypocrite, who, despite claiming to want limits on the Shah’s power, was not opposed to cultivating a cultish following for himself. At some junctures, it was also abbreviated to Sha-Siya, perhaps out of convenience or mocking the slurred speech of foreigners in Iran. The inclusion of sīyāh, however, is unmistakable. By highlighting Bihbahani’s skin color, they insulted him for inheriting his slave mother’s blackness. Bihbahani’s participation in the political sphere was cut short on July 14, 1909, when followers of his main rival attacked and assassinated him.

Others who did not inherit their mother’s blackness, however, escaped this stigmatization. Like Sayyid Isma’il Bihbahani and many others during the early twentieth century, a Daylami man named Mustafayi had set out for pilgrimage to Mecca on camel. When he arrived in Mecca, he purchased a habashi slave woman to complete his chores while he was away from home, who he brought with him upon his return six months later. Mustafayi affectionately called her Mama, and to the disappointment of his two

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331 Moderates promptly attributed the murder to Taqizadeh. Abrahamian, Between Two Revolutions, 106-107.
other wives, married her in an official capacity. Together, they had three sons and three daughters. The sons took after their mother’s complexion, while the daughters inherited their father’s skin tone.

This story is not particularly significant, except in its transmission (or lack thereof). One woman, Touba, was born to one of the daughters from this union in the 1950s and was Mama and Mustafayi’s granddaughter. In an effort to erase the tainted family history, her family never spoke much about Mama or her status amongst the three wives. Her cousins had pieced together the family history and assumed that Touba had also known. But because these relationships had never been articulated openly, Touba had not considered the possibility that her grandmother may have been a slave, especially due to her mother’s fair skin. Since her mother inherited her grandfather’s free status and fairness, which allowed her to move through society freely.

Inheriting an African mother’s skin tone, however, could have led to a very different trajectory. In her memoir, Munis al-Dawlih narrated the story of a prominent merchant who bought a “raisin-colored” slave named Nargis for his wife in 1906. Upon her arrival to their home, she begged them to be let go.

For three days and nights, she wept, crying that my mother was a nanny, but my father was a free man, and I am not a slave. After that, she placed a Qur’an in the arms of the Haji and his wife, saying, don’t buy me, I am not a slave girl. The Haji’s wife, who felt badly for Nargis, said, tomorrow when Umm Ja’far arrives, we will go give you to her.

It is certain that Mustafayi purchased Touba’s grandmother in the early decades of the twentieth century, but it remains unclear if Mustafayi married her as a full wife before or after the Manumission Law of 1929. Touba’s cousins had originally suggested that I speak to Touba about her grandmother. But her cousins did not realize that Touba did not know about her grandfather’s purchase of her as a slave, and she learned about her grandmother’s arrival in Iran the same day I did.

The word used is dadih, referring to a slave nanny or nurse.
and get our eighty tuman back. But in the alley, Umm Ja’far will go forward, but you hang back so that you can slip into the female quarters of the home next to ours, a mullah’s home, whose word carries weight. Say “I have come here to sit bast, I am not a nanny, I am free. They want to sell me, but my father was white. Here today and tomorrow on the Day of Judgement, I beg of you—don’t let them sell me like a dadih!” Of course, no one can drag you out of that mullah’s home, you just stay there and sit bast.

According to Munis al-Dawlih, instead of advocating for her freedom herself, the Haji’s wife advised Nargis to sit bast at the local mullah’s home, recognized as a reliable ally here. Taking bast, a hallmark of Constitutional protests, protected Nargis’ safety temporarily. Nargis listened to the Haji’s wife, and after her sly escape, the mullah agreed to provide her a safe refuge. Nargis could stay in the mullah’s home until she was ready to leave.

Recognizing the situation, Umm Ja’far realized that she could not force Nargis to leave a private home, especially a home of someone with such a prominent reputation. She tried to bribe Nargis with various presents, cooing that she would never sell her again, but Nargis stayed with the mullah and his wife. Umm Jamar’s empty promises, however, did not last long, for she found another buyer, the wife of a Parliamentary official. The official’s wife agreed to buy Nargis and so, another eighty tuman was exchanged. This time, the official and his wife went to the mullah, asking him to release Nargis. And again, he replied that Nargis had to be convinced to leave on her own terms.

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336 Munis al-Dawlih, Khātirāt, 300.
337 Protestors sat bast in the British embassy during the Constitutional Period, in mosques, and in other venues where Iranian government officials did not have the authority to arrest people or force them to leave. Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, 84-91
338 Munis al-Dawlih, Khātirāt, 302.
The official’s wife went to Nargis, promising her that she is like a daughter to them, that she would be taken care of, and if she would please leave with them. Nargis declined.

After some pleading and more plotting, the official’s wife convinced the mullah’s wife to help her ensnare Nargis in return for a few golden bangles. Even the mullah abandoned his moral position for his wife’s new baubles, and advised to the official’s wife to ambush Nargis en route to the public bathhouse. As a result, a carefully orchestrated outing resulted in kidnapping Nargis. The official’s wife returned home with her new slave. This arrangement lasted for a few days, until Nargis finally managed to escape and ran away to Haji Nanih, a freed black woman who had served in the Shah’s harem until Nasir al-Din Shah’s assassination. Although the official and his wife reported her missing to the local police force, Nargis’ network proved strong. Haji Nanih’s home had become a safe haven for freed slaves, where she took Nargis in and sought her freedom. With Haji Nanih’s help, Nargis went to the head of Parliament, who deemed the trade of slaves illegal and granted Nargis her free papers.

One might question whether the head of parliament provided Nargis her papers on account of the illegality of the slave trade, or, on the more common reasoning that her father was free. While the details of Nargis’ escape may vary, her story was not unique. Various reports of runaway slave girls highlight similar stories. But Nargis’ ability to fend off enslavement by virtue of her freed father and alliance with a freed black woman

339 Munis al-Dawlih, Khāṭirāt, 303.
340 Munis al-Dawlih, Khāṭirāt, 303-304.
demonstrates the degree to which skin tone indicated one’s vulnerability to enslavement and the importance of social networks in finding freedom. While Nargis was able to guarantee her freedom, others would have to wait until 1929.

Remembering Slavery from the Constitutional Period

Akbar’s discussion of his grandfather’s slaves, including Agha Shazdi and the young ghulām raised questions of benevolence and guilt. Grappling with the reality of slave-ownership caused a cognitive dissonance; he wanted to condemn the practice of slavery without faulting his family. Privately, he equivocated between these viewpoints: he defined slaves as peoples that had been trafficked from East Africa, forcibly brought to Iran against their own will. It was not good, he said. He condemned the severe punishments as diktāturī – dictatorial – in an effort to recognize the power dynamics between a cruel master and his slave. But after some pause, Akbar defended them: sometimes the slaves deserved their punishments. Sometimes they were petty thieves, other times they were untrustworthy. Akbar went further, explaining that even today, poor people cannot be trusted.

I met with Akbar again a few days later, this time with surrounded by the rest of his cousins. Where he had previously equivocated, he took a clear benevolent view of domestic slavery. These slaves often came to the ports of Iran voluntarily, he said. They were escaping poverty, disease and general savagery in Africa. Living as a slave in Iran was better than living free in Africa. His niece chimed in agreement, explaining at length
that slaves ate better than middle class Iranians. “After all,” she said, “they ate whatever was left-over from the meals. Other Iranians could not afford to live like the slaves. If that wasn’t enough, they could pick fruit from our trees.” Plus, she added, they learned to be civilized.342

There, in their living room, Akbar and his family unknowingly repeated defenses similar to those discussed on the parliamentary floor in 1929, when representatives argued the benefits to slavery and abolition. Ultimately, the representatives, like Akbar, agreed with abolition, but not without absolving themselves from the sins of slavery.

342 January 2016, Kerman.
Reza Shah’s legacy continues to be overwhelmingly entangled with his projects of modernizing Iran. Most remember him for his commitment to progress – Westernizing people’s dress, creating European-styled urban centers, and other examples of changing the outer appearance of Iran and her people. In the southern city of Daylam, however, Reza Shah is remembered for a particularly specific encounter. During his tour of Khuzestan in 1925, Reza Shah arrived in Daylam, where he stayed for one night. As is tradition, upon Reza Shah’s arrival in every city, hosting families would sacrifice a small animal – a goat or sheep – for the royal’s health and safety. Upon his arrival to Daylam, however, the hosting family insisted on sacrificing “a member of their household” – a black man named Karbalayi Hassan Bihbahani. As the story goes, only the Shah himself was able to stop the family from executing their plans. The story leaves little room for analysis: the life of a human was debased to the same level as an animal killed for its meat, simply based on status and race. The ability to sacrifice an animal is, in some respects, a show of wealth, since the meat then is redistributed between families, neighbors, and the poor. The ability to offer an enslaved human for sacrifice emphasizes the family’s wealth while also demonstrating their callous behavior.

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343 Reza Shah includes mentions of these traditional animal sacrifices, called qurbani, at various points of his travelogue to Khuzestan.
344 “bastigān” here served as a euphemism for a slave.
345 Karbalayi is a title of respective given to someone who has performed pilgrimage at Karbala.
346 Conversations with Bashiri, Bushehr, December 2015.
towards the value of human life out of supposed respect for the Shah. The story remains a common one, told and retold by Daylami families.³⁴⁷

Four years later, Reza Shah’s government would pass the manumission bill rendering all slaves free. Reza Shah never mentioned this encounter in Daylam, and he is not often remembered for his efforts in abolishing the slave trade, partially because most people do not remember that slavery remained legal in Iran until 1929. This undoing of his legacy is due, in part, to his own government’s attempts at erasing any reminders of slavery, from physical monuments to newspaper narratives. This chapter examines the concerted efforts that led to the abolition and erasure of slavery and its footprints in Iran.

In this chapter, I argue that lawmakers and others were not motivated by humanitarian notions, but rather, invested in presenting Iran as a modern country bereft of outdated practices. Lawmakers and other government officials were well aware that western foreigners viewed the ongoing legality of slavery as an indicator of societal backwardness. As a result, the process of abolition was one of erasure, where different footprints of slavery were removed to prevent further tarnishing of Iran’s public image. Consequently, intellectuals and politicians, as well as urban planners and architects, tacitly rewrote Iran’s recent past and complicity in enslaving people, unraveling the institution that marked high status for centuries.

³⁴⁷ Reza Shah did not refer to this episode in his travelogue. Reza Shah Pahlavi, Safarnamih Khuzistan; Safarnamih Mazandaran (Tehran: Talāsh, 1974). It is possible that the story is exaggerated, entirely untrue or that Reza Shah found the entire episode too jarring with his imagined modern nation. Regardless, the story retains a quality of horror. Perhaps it continues to be recounted for its shock value rather than its proximity to reality.
In this chapter, I discuss how the dismantling of slavery affected portrayals of race and racialization. Racial categories no longer informed an individual’s vulnerability to enslavement. Re-entry to society was uneven for freed people, though all earned citizenship within the early 1930s. But the racial hierarchies that crystallized during the last decades of legal enslavement persisted even after visual, textual, and spatial remnants of slavery were reworked to dismiss any associated memories. The visuality of blackness – especially in light of the growing popularity of blackface actors – was not easily forgotten. As such, blackface theater continued to thrive as a popular form of entertainment while growing increasingly distant from its original context.

This chapter traces the consequences of the manumission law in 1929, the narrative around it, and the significant cultural changes that it launched in the absence of slavery. The chapter begins with the legal discussions that informed Parliament’s decision to ban slavery and the early steps taken to implement the law and broadcast its importance both domestically and internationally. The chapter then moves on to questions of social and cultural changes that accommodated the new legal landscape, including the changing importance of photography as a status marker, the spatial reorganization of modern homes, and finally, the persistence of anti-blackness in blackface theater and caricatures. This chapter examines the intellectual, linguistic, cultural, spatial, and racial consequences of abolition in Iran. 

Absent from my discussion is a clear examination of what happened to the slaves who eventually received their freedom. I was not able to adequately research the social lives of slaves as they entered society as full persons and Iranian citizens, due to a variety of factors, including the continued stigmatization of acknowledging slavery in Iran.
The First Step towards Modernity: Abolition of Slavery

Almost immediately after his coronation in 1925, Reza Shah prioritized abolition as a definitive move to demonstrate the modernity of Iran as compatible with Western values. Ever since the original 1848 Perso-British treaty banning the import of slaves via the Persian Gulf, the manumission of individual slaves had been granted extremely unevenly, usually involving the escape of a slave to either local government offices or the British residency.\textsuperscript{349} Testimonials recorded at the Ministry of the Interior from as late as 1927 indicate the enslavement of individuals and entire families who escaped for freedom.\textsuperscript{350} Despite the numerous agreements between the Qajars and the British outlawing the slave trade, enslavement remained a viable practice amongst wealthy Iranians. The Manumission Law of 1929 represented the first and only piece of internal legislation that granted freedom to all enslaved peoples in Iran.

Though the scholarship on the Pahlavi period has overwhelmingly focused on progressivism in terms of women’s rights and the centralization of the government, the Pahlavi government used the abolition of slavery as an early milestone to prove itself a modern nation and to assert its sovereignty. To signal its commitment on an international stage, Mirza Riza Khan ‘Arfa al-Dawlih, known as Prince ‘Arfa, signed onto the 1926 Slavery Convention in Geneva and declared slavery to have been long abolished Iran. Given the Iranian commitment to anti-slavery efforts, he argued that the British need not

\textsuperscript{349} Behnaz Mirzai traces some of the irregular efforts to free and resettle slaves in the final chapter of her book. Mirzai, \textit{A History of Slavery}, 180-205.
\textsuperscript{350} File 293-1105, dated May of 1927, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
continue their ongoing naval searches of Iranian boats in the Persian Gulf. In 1927, the Ministry of Interior publicly affirmed its commitment to international agreements banning the slave trade. In the following year, the Minister of Justice, ‘Ali Akbar Davar, went to parliament with two pieces of legislation – one, a budgetary bill, and second, a rush bill on the abolition of slavery.

Those in favor of the bill described slavery as a rare phenomenon in Iran, but deemed its ban necessary to prevent travelers from bringing their slaves onto Iranian soil. Davar read the following explanation for the bill:

The practice of selling slaves has been abandoned for years in Iran, however, because it is seen that some people enter Iran from abroad with slaves who are unaware that Iran is bound to international obligations that no one can be recognized as a slave…the government sees it necessary to clarify the legal standing of slavery, that it has been done away with once and for all.

He then followed by reading the text of the concise bill:

In the country of Iran, no one will be known as a slave, and any slave who enters Iranian soil or the coastal waters of Iran will be hitherto recognized as free. Whoever buys and sells humans as slaves or treats another human in a proprietary manner or is involved in the trafficking slaves will be disciplinarily imprisoned for one to three years.

The legislation focuses on the freedom of slaves and punishments for those involved in the slave trade, and the Ministry’s rationale openly states that this law is directed at foreigners who continue to enslave people and enter Iran. After reading the text, Davar

352 Ibid., 212.
emphasized the urgency of the bill and asked if anyone was opposed. One parliamentary representative, Sayyid Riza Firuzabadi immediately announced his opposition. His defense of slavery in Iran rested on two assertions. First, he defended slavery in Islamic contexts as a logical and respectful institution that civilized the slaves. Second, he emphasized the relative rarity of slavery in Iran.

Firuzabadi’s defense of slavery devolves into stereotypes and broad assumptions on the institution. He identifies enslavement as a practical solution for dealing with prisoners of war and others deemed “savage or of the jungle,” *ashkhās-i vahshī va jangalī*. He stressed the importance of benevolent role of Islam in this respect: all slaves were educated, female and male slaves were married respectfully, and overall all slaves were civilized to assimilate into Iranian Muslim culture. It is important to note that Firuzabadi reified Islam into a single entity, an absolute truth bereft of diversity. A cleric, Firuzabadi elaborated on the Islamic aspects of slavery – that slavery was not just the mindless enslavement of another person to do one’s bidding, but rather, an opportunity for a slaver to civilize and free his slaves. In the Parliamentary minutes, other representatives are noted to have agreed with him, though their names have been exempt from the record.

Firuzabadi elaborated that slavery represented a form of salvation for not only the enslaved, but also the enslaving, who could free a slave to absolve their sins. If an individual found himself in a severe transgression – either murdering an individual, or

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355 *Muzākirāt-i Majlis*, 399.
356 *Muzākirāt-i Majlis*, 399.
357 *Muzākirāt-i Majlis*, 399. This concept comes from Qur’an 4:92.

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breaking his fast improperly, or breaking a **nazr**,\(^{358}\) or lied under oath – he must then free a slave. By abolishing slavery and manumitting all slaves, the government would be eliminating an important instrument for society’s moral exchanges. Further, he argued, the amount of good associated with abolishing slavery in Islam has ensured that no slaves remain within society. “And in Iran, there is not one **ghulām,**” he said, illustrating his point with an anecdote about his own inability to find a slave to free two years prior.\(^{359}\) His experience led him to conclude that not only is Islamic law equipped with its own mechanisms to deal with the enslavement and manumission, but that the proposed legislation was misled in its understanding of slavery. As the discussion continued, the Parliamentarians continued to characterize slavery as a fringe practice, associated with a tribal Iranians along the Persian Gulf coast, or non-Iranians, particularly Arabs, who brought slaves with them onto Iranian soil. Most significantly, however, his defenses of slavery as a civilizing mission for “**savages** or **people of the jungle**” revealed how imagined slavery – however far from the lived experience of it – remained very much a racialized institution in the late 1920s.

Parliamentary representatives in support of the bill outnumbered Firuzabadi and those in agreement with him, and by the end of the assembly, Parliament had declared the bill as law. Ultimately, slavery was not ruled as antithetical to Islam, but rather, as antithetical to modernity and early twentieth century notions of progress; antithetical to a new idea of Iranian-ness. By outlawing slavery, the parliamentarians would succeed in

\(^{358}\) A promise or vow made to God with the hope that a prayer is answered.

\(^{359}\) “**Va dar Iran, yik nafar ghulām nīst.**” *Muzākirāt-i Majlis*, 399.
sending a national and international message that Iran was a progressive country with similar values as those of the West.

The manumission law was short, printed at the end of the assembly’s minutes. The bill was passed the same day it was introduced, in part because it was presented as more of a formality rather than an actual attempt to eradicate slavery from within Iranian borders.360 By passing a law on the abolition of slavery, the Iranian parliament had reiterated their commitment to modernity in yet another decree.

The abolition law distanced Iranians from slavery. By emphasizing “anyone who enters Iranian soil,” and characterizing slave traders and owners as foreigners, particularly Arabs, the law added another dimension to the characterization of slavery as a non-Iranian and foreign. This association was not limited to legal discussions in Tehran – in Kerman, oft-repeated stories about a particularly draconian slave-owning family continue to describe them as an Arab family as well.361 The relegating of bad or horrific examples of slavery to non-Iranians reflected two major shifts concerning slavery and nationalism during this period. Not only does it demonstrate to what extent abolition was a project of distancing Iranians from slavery, but also, how slavery came to identify the

361 During my research year in Kerman, multiple individuals recounted stories about an Arab family that meted out unusually harsh punishments to their slaves. In the United States, however, I heard the same story – again from an individual of Kermani ancestry – who assured me that they were not actually Arab, but rather, Naini, from central Iran. The layers of assertions behind these statements reveal not only a kind of city-pride that informs discussions about people’s hometowns today. Tellingly, the harsh treatment of slaves was enough to cast the owners as foreign Arabs, antithetical to “Persians.” Here, the Arab label tacitly indicates values of barbarism and lacking civility, nationalistic prejudices that Reza Zia Ebrahimi explores in his book. Zia Ebrahimi, The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism.
contours of an Iranian identity, casting Arabs as un-Iranian, despite the presence of communities of Arabs within Iranian borders.

Before delving into the efficacy and implementation of the law, the legal language deserves some consideration. The manumission law used bardih, a catch-all term for any slaves irrespective of gender or status, in its wording. The decision to use bardih seems innocuous, except that the term had not appeared in legally binding or socially relevant documents prior to the legislation. “No one will be known as a bardih,” may have seemed like a strange announcement, as Persian speakers did not usually call their slaves bardih in the first place. Other terms were far more ubiquitous - kaniz, ghulām, zar kharid, khadamih. Even the Majlis debates used kaniz and ghulām to discuss their views of slaves. So why did the Ministry use bardih instead? A few possibilities emerge as potential explanations. Many of the terms commonly used to describe slaves did not strictly indicate enslavement. For example, the gendered terms for female and male slaves, kaniz and ghulām, respectively, change meanings based on context. A woman might be named Kaniz-i Fatimih or a man Ghulam Ridha, either of which would indicate the person’s devotion to the members of the Prophet’s family, not literal servitude. Or, a woman might simply be called kaniz, not necessarily indicating her enslavement, but just a lower status in general. Bardih, on the other hand, specifically referred to enslavement of any kind, any gender. It carried a clear connotation. But kaniz and ghulām were not so vague – they had, up until abolition, been used as the prime terms for describing the enslaved in a myriad of legal documents. Even Persian versions of British records from the 1910s used kaniz instead of bardih to describe a slave woman, Saeedeh bint
Mabrook. The context sufficed in indicating one’s enslavement. *Bardih* and *bardih-furūshī*, had, however, been used in international legal settings with Europeans, for example the 1882 treaty with the British and the 1890 Brussels Conference.

Like the English term “slave,” *bardih* served as a catch all term that referred to any and all enslaved persons, and did not distinguish based on status or gender.

Further, *bardih* neatly corresponded with *bardih-dārī* (“the holding of slaves”), the closest word to *slavery* in Persian, and *bardih-furūshī* (“the selling of slaves”) the closest term to *slave trade*. *Kanīz* and *ghulām*, however, the most commonly used terms for identifying female and male slaves, did not fit neatly into similarly all-encompassing terms. There was no such corresponding term to describe the overarching system in which they existed. Their presence was a foregone conclusion in the society they were enslaved in. The implementation of *bardih* and *bardih-dārī* on a state level reflected the adoption of a new concept, that the presence of slaves was not integral to society, but rather a subsystem of society that could be added or removed through legal action. I will return to the fate of *bardih* and its role in the Persian language again later in this chapter, but at this juncture it is important to acknowledge that the use of *bardih* publicly redefined the Iranian understanding of slavery in 1929.

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362 “Case concerning a slave woman named Saeedeh bint Mabrook,” file 1(86), 1913, Iran Shināsī, Bushehr, Iran.
364 One could also argue that the use of *bardih* reflected the trajectory of nationalism in Iran, much of which was rooted in the de-Arabization and Westernization of the language. People like Akhundzadeh and Kermani had suggested language reforms for Persian for decades, but Reza Pahlavi’s government implementing the active purging of Arabic words from Persian. *Kanīz* and *ghulām*, both derived from Arabic for “treasure” and “young boy,” respectively, were cast aside in favor of *bardih*. The Ministry’s language and the Parliament’s approval of it reflected a turn towards a Western-styled understanding of slavery. See Zia Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 41-72.
365 Though there is some precedent for the phrase *kanizak-furūshī* (“the selling of female slaves”), it did not serve as an all-encompassing term in the way *bardih-furūshī* did.
Announcing [and Implementing] the Law

Announcements about the new manumission law were quickly dispatched across Iran. The Parliamentary minutes were typed up, printed, and sold for a single qirān on the same day of the meeting. Ittilāʿat, Iran’s oldest running daily in Persian, also reported the ratification of the new law later that afternoon. The first column on the newspaper’s front page announced the new law with the title, Bardih-furūshī, or “The Slave Trade.” The article repeated the same framework that the Parliamentary minutes described – that slavery had been “abandoned” for quite a while now, and that this law was merely passed as a formality. One wonders why a rush bill and a column on the front page of a popular newspaper would be devoted to an institution that both decry as all but completely disappeared from the Iranian landscape. After all, Parliament had also voted on another law pertaining to taxes on butchered meat, whose implementation would have been more immediately relevant to the population. But the newspaper did not feature the new taxes on its front page. It reported on the manumission law.

Why devote so much energy to dismantling an institution that allegedly has not existed for years? The Ittilāʿat article offers a clue. After praising Parliament for its important step in banning the slave trade and alluding to the Geneva convention, “The Slave Trade” included a line, “our government has been in support of [abolition] and was

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367 Muzākirāt-i Maṭlis, 410.
368 For starters, one can argue that it was because slavery still had a real presence in Iran at this time.
not interested in the slightest possibility that in any corner of the world, someone could say that slaves were still being sold in Iran.”369 The law was passed to prevent discussions of Iranian slavery that might cast the country as “backwards” or lacking “modern” values.370 The concern of how Iranian slavery appeared – or that it appeared at all – to the rest of the world was of prime importance.371

In the days, months and years that followed, foreign newspapers also made note of the new parliamentary ruling. Within two days after the manumission law, the Times printed a two-sentence announcement of the new law, attributed to Reuter.372 In April of 1929, the New York Times reported on Iranian manumission in an article: “Slavery That Still Lingers in Countries of the East: Persia Takes the Lead in Abolishing Human Bondage and Other Lands Discourage It.” The article begins,

Slavery, which still exists in many Asiatic and African countries, has been abolished by Majlis, the Persian National Assembly. The Majlis acted on the appeal of the Persian people, many of whom objected to this ancient custom. It is hoped that the action of the Majlis will influence other Oriental countries to do away with slavery.373

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369 “Bardih Fūrūshi,” Ittilāʿāt, 18 Bahman 1307 [7 February 1929], 1.
370 This understanding that foreigners reported on Iranian social norms appeared in Munis al-Dawla’s memoir, where she recounted European and American news outlets reporting on the buying and selling of the Quchan girls to afford their taxes during the Constitutional Revolution. Munis al-Dawla, Khāṭīrāt, 335. See also Najmabadi, Daughters of Quchan.
371 This concern was not unfounded. The popularity of books and plays, including translations of Arabian Nights, Morier’s Hajji Baba of Isfahan, and comic-opera, The Rose of Persia, or, The Story-Teller and the Slave, presented Iranian society as marked by buffoonery, deceit and vapidity to the English-speaking world. As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, numerous English- and French- language travelogues described the presence of slaves in Iran to their countrymen, delineating detailed examples from the lives of Iranians and their slaves.
373 “Slavery That Still Lingers in the Countries of the East: Persia Takes the Lead in Abolishing Human Bondage and Other Lands Discourage It,” New York Times, April 21, 1929, 149.
In three short sentences, the *New York Times* report on Iranian manumission established Iran as a democratic country, with a mindful citizenry concerned with moving forward, and as a leader in its region. Never mind that the Parliament did not act “on the appeal of the Persian people,” but rather, that it voted on a rush bill introduced by a government office out of obligation, or that it was faced with a fierce defense of slavery in the lead-up to the vote. The *New York Times* article, instead, paints a picture of Iran as a distinguished and progressive country, unlike its other “Oriental” countries that continued slavery. This kind of coverage is exactly what the Iranians invested in abolition, including Davar, had hoped for. In 1931, *the Times* published a similar article on Iranian history and geography, including a section on the slave trade, detailing efforts to halt the trafficking, including British involvement.\(^{374}\) That same year, Iran reaffirmed its pledge to the abolition of slavery at the League of Nations Slavery Convention in 1931.\(^{375}\) In September of 1931, the Office of the Interior announced Iran’s commitment to the Slavery Convention, reasserting the government’s stance on slavery.\(^{376}\) Iranians were aware that their history of slavery had entered a common parlance, and that their perceived modernity hinged on erasing this history. Announcing the abolition of slavery within Iranian borders would demonstrate to the world powers that the Pahlavi government was serious about modernizing, and no longer belonged to the legion of countries that had not yet declared slavery illegal.

But the abolition law was not only a public relations campaign, it was part of a


\(^{376}\) File 290-8034, dated September 8 and October 22, 1931, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran.
concerted effort to demonstrating the sovereignty of the Iranian coastal borderlands. The British had long used nineteenth century treaties aimed at abolishing slavery to search Iranian ships in the Gulf. Iran’s new law, which declared slavery illegal and all slaves as free, negated the need for the British to oversee this process.

The British received notice of the Iranian manumission law with mixed reactions. In telegrams and other missives sent in the months following the February 7, 1929 law, British anxieties over Iranian assertions of strength that would tip the balance of power, especially in the Persian Gulf, became clear. For decades since the 1882 treaty, the British had justified their ability to station ships and board other vessels in the Persian Gulf under the pretense that they were the only vested power in the abolition of the slave trade. Now, with the bold public commitment to eradicating slavery in Iranian dominions, the British had to justify their activities in the Persian Gulf otherwise. Within days, communications between R. Clive, an official based in Tehran, the India Office, and others, discussed the political consequences of the manumission law for the British. One telegram to Clive begins, “I agree that Persia cannot be given right of search on the High Seas.” It continues, urging Clive to convince the Shah’s government that as long as slave traffic exists, they must continue to abide by the 1882 agreement. Similarly, in confidential minutes sent on April 4, 1929, British officials in the India Office noted that the passage of the law would “stiffen Persian resistance” to the modification of the

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Slavery Convention and “weaken our position internationally.”378 The British were primarily concerned with whether the new law would undermine the 1882 treaty that granted them the ability to board vessels under the pretense of preventing the import of slaves in the Persian Gulf.

While the British debated how they would maintain their post in the Persian Gulf, they continued to receive former slaves seeking their help.379 The British Residency and Consulate-General in Bushehr had dealt with individuals seeking their freedom for decades prior to the manumission law of 1929, where they would receive slaves and write to local officials on their behalf.380 Following manumission, the British maintained their operations in the Residency, continuing to intervene in cases where slaves had been denied their freedom. As the number of cases of African slaves had been reduced, the British turned their focus on enslaved Baluchis.381 The British referred to the “powerlessness of the [Iranian] government” repeatedly throughout their documents, underscoring the burdens on their offices in guaranteeing manumission to former slaves. The British Consul-General in Bushehr also reported the unwillingness of the Iranian government in stopping the slave trade, as well as the power of the slave traders across

378 Anglo-Persian Slavery Convention, 4 April 1929, L/PS/10/1278, British Library, London, United Kingdom.
379 The British Residency remained in Bushehr until 1946, when it was then moved to Bahrain. James Onley, “The Raj Reconsidered: British India’s Informal Empire and Spheres of Influence in Asia and Africa,” Asian Affairs (2009), 40:1, 44-62.
380 “Case concerning a slave woman named Saeedeh bint Mabrook,” document 1(86), 1913, Iran Shināsī, Bushehr, Iran. “Case concerning Du’ala bin Hasan, Somali and native of Aden,” document 1(61), 1914, Iran Shināsī, Bushehr.
British records described changes following the manumission law as superficial, continually rejecting the Iranian claim that slaves did not exist. But because the manumission law declared all slaves free, former slaves no longer required manumission papers to prove their freedom. Without manumission papers to promise slaves, much of the British role in abolition in Iran had been reduced.  

Because of this power struggle, Iranian government agencies were keen to control the public narrative on slavery. In November of 1929, only a few months after the abolition law, Shafaq-i Surkh newspaper printed a short article based on a report given to the Ministry of Finance on continued human trafficking along the Makran coast in southern Iran. The article, titled “For the Prevention of Smuggling,” identified the buying and selling of bardih, as well as the transport of kanīz and ghulām in the coastal regions of Rudbar, Bashakard, and Baluchistan. The article describes how people were hidden among loads of tobacco and smuggled along the coast to be sold as slaves illegally.  

Among the reports that have been submitted, recently a boy and girl named Pirghulam, the niece and nephew of Mir Barakat Khan were smuggled by Yusuf Abdullah Khan to the aforementioned points, and because Arab buyers saw their injuries, they realized they are not slaves and refrained from buying them. The people of this region are generally poor, and although there are all sorts of things available for smuggling, because of their poverty they are not able to partake in big smuggling operations. But, in the absence of preventing the expansion of this aforementioned trade, in addition to the foreign gaze, this has negative effects on the country’s dignity and will have broad damages to the

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382 Letter from British Residency & Consulate-General, 15 October, 1929, Cases in Persian Balochistan file 277, British Legation (Tehran), Public Records Office, the National Archives, London, United Kingdom, 2.
384 The British government’s fixation on slavery as a particular social ill in Iran, however, did not necessarily ensure their respect for the enslaved and their descendants. In the 1922 military report on Fars, Gulf Ports, and Yazd and Laristan, the author used terms including, “coolies,” “Sidis, descendants of slaves,” “degenerate and cowardly race,” to refer to communities of East African ancestry. Confidential Military Report on Fars, Gulf Ports, and Yazd and Laristan, vol. IV, part II, 1922, 49, R/15/5/371, British Library, London, United Kingdom.
government’s treasury. And so, there are requests of urgent attention for its prevention…

The article, which petitioned the Iranian government to direct its attention to the impoverished coastal regions and prevent the trafficking of people, recalls the same concerns printed in the constitutional period newspapers about the Daughters of Quchan, the political crisis surrounding the enslavement of Iranian girls by Turkoman raiders during the Constitutional Revolution. Evoking the foreign gaze and the national dignity struck a sensitive nerve with the Ministry of Finance. Upon the publication of the article, ministry wrote letters to different agencies, asserting they had sent out a representative to research the situation, followed by the question, “where did the newspaper receive this information?” As the Ministry of Finance pressed Shafaq-i Surkh for its sources and requested that they retract the article, the newspaper petitioned other agencies, including the police, to intervene and prevent their censorship.

The political debacle revealed several flashpoints concerning slavery after abolition. First, the reference to the Makran Coast and the government’s inattention to the trafficking represented an embarrassing and politically detrimental reality. The British had monitored the slave trade with growing agency in the last years of legal slavery in

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386 Najmabadi, The Daughters of Quchan.
387 240-34788, Sāzmān-i Asnād, Tehran, Iran.
Iran, and continued to report on them after abolition. 388 Though described in few numbers, the presence of slaves was enough to justify the continued British presence.

Although the article provides identifying information about the trafficked children, the government missives from the Ministry of Finance fail to indicate any particular interest in the children and their wellbeing. Rather, the focus remained entirely on controlling the public narrative, preventing other articles from being printed, and pursuing a retraction.

Despite these efforts, however, the manumission law was not merely a formality or a public relations campaign. Many wealthy families, especially those in cosmopolitan centers located in central and southern Iran, had enslaved peoples in their households. Abolition freed them from their bondage. The implementation of the Manumission Law of 1929, however, moved slowly. Though various offices and agencies announced the passage of the law, its implementation remained uneven. 389 Some families resettled their former slaves in the outskirts of their cities, providing them with some kind of spatial independence while continuing to maintain ties with them for decades to come. Akbar’s family, for example, whose history I discuss in Chapter 3, found homes for their slaves in Bam, a city located outside of Kerman. His family maintained connections with their former slaves, having them serve tea and other treats at their annual commemorations.

389 Telegrams, posters, and other forms of communication were used to announce the law in addition to the aforementioned newspaper articles and parliamentary minutes. Files 293-32691, 293-6931, 293-4517, 290-8034, Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī, Tehran, Iran. The Parliamentary Senate also drafted reports on the consequences of the law and the different agencies involved. File Q19/35/2/1/222, Majlis Library Archives, Tehran, Iran. Future studies on abolition in Iran should explore how many people were punished or imprisoned for participating in the slave trade or owning slaves after the 1929 law.
during Ashura. Others avoided freeing their slaves entirely, putting female slaves in another precarious position. Already sexually vulnerable to their masters, female slaves were forcibly taken as “wives” without full access to the rights of a properly free woman. The sexual vulnerability of these women, their integration into free families, and the stigmatization of slave lineage today makes these cases particularly difficult to study.

Although the individual lives of freedpeople and their entrance into society as free has not been properly studied, the 1930 and 1932 name and citizenship laws rendered freedpeople as Iranian citizens who received birth certificates with new surnames. As Mirzai notes, some families of African ancestry had names that directly reflected their African ancestry or their former slave status. For example, Zangoi or Zangbari, “of Zanzibar,” –azadi, “free,” –ghulam, “a male slave.” Mirzai also references another name held by families of African descent, Kakai. Despite Kakai’s derivation from a slur used for enslaved black men, she defines the name simply as “brother.” Mirzai then

390 Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, every year during Ashura. Shia host prayer gatherings, inviting tens of hundreds of people to stop by their homes for tea, sweets, or other foods that have been blessed by the prayers given for Husayn. Conversation with Akbar, Kerman, January 2016.

391 In Chapter 3, I discuss an Abyssinian woman who was married as a slave, whose granddaughter had no recollection of her slave lineage.

392 This was not specifically done for freedpeople, but rather, any subject on Iranian soil was mandated to register their identities.

393 Mirzai, A History of Slavery, 204.

394 Kākā is a colloquial term most closely translated as “brother” or “bro” when used between individuals of equal social standing in the Shirazi dialect. Importantly, though, it was also a slur for black male slaves across Iran. Kākā was paired with the enslaved’s first name to assert one’s intimate access and power over them especially in areas outside of Shiraz, where dādā referred to brothers and kākā referred exclusively to enslaved black men. The plural kākā-hā was also used to describe a group of enslaved black men. Had kākā bestowed equality, as Mirzai suggests, then the term dādā would have also been used for slaves outside of Shiraz, or black slaves would have referred to their masters as kākā as well, but records do not indicate either of these possibilities. For example, in his memoir, Zill al-Sultan referred to black eunuchs as kākā, but only records the eunuchs referring to him as “my sir” or other honorific titles. Mas’ud Mirza Zill al-Sultan, Khātirāt-i Zill al-Sultan, vol. 2 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Asafīr, 1995), 474–475. Kākā was synonymous with a black male slave, and gradually became imbued with vulgar connotations. In the 1950s-
describes the processes behind having names that reflect their enslavement, saying “it is not surprising that words often change meaning over time,” arguing that they adapted “traditional terminologies to new social and legal realities.”395 Her analysis, however, neglects the very real possibility that some people may not have chosen their names themselves. A government official could have readily provided a newly-freed person with a less desirable name – such as a slur, instead of the lofty names non-black Iranians picked for themselves that exalted their qualities.396

Mediating Family Life without Slaves

In major central cities, the aftermath of manumission proved to be a project of erasure rather than a reckoning with enslavement. Different spatial and visual media, including government buildings, residential homes, and photographs reconstructed an image of society without slaves. The Pahlavi government did not want to only abolish slavery, but also to abolish tangible footprints that connected Iranian society with this unsightly past. The visual landscape of Iran had to change to reflect this new modernity and power. Although multiple scholars have studied the massive urban change in Iran during Reza Shah’s reign, including Talinn Grigor, Pamela Karimi, Eckart Ehlers, and Willem

1970s, the term was most commonly associated with Kākā Tawfīq, a caricature of a black man and the mascot of the popular satirical weekly Tawfīq. The character had a hyper-sexualized wife and monkey for a child. See Tawfīq (Tehran). Today, the term kākā sīyāḥ refers to plush dolls of blackface caricatures, complete with oversize heads, large eyes, and voluptuous lips. Kākā sīyāḥ doll, seen in private homes and bazaars (Tehran, September 2014).

395 Mirzai, A History of Slavery, 204.
396 It is entirely possible that when people arrived at the registry to choose their name, the official managing the records would have suggested or even determined their name for them. For more on the process of naming during the Reza Pahlavi period, see Houchang Chehabi, “The Reform of Iranian Nomenclature and Titulature in the Fifth Majles,” in Converging Zones: Persian Literary Tradition and the Writing of History: Studies in Honor of Amin Banani (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publications, 2012).
Floor,\textsuperscript{397} analyzing this modernization program in light of the new manumission law proves useful for understanding how critical the absence of slavery was to the ideal sense of society. During Reza Shah’s rule, a number of initiatives from the Ministry of Interior and Parliament promised to revamp the urban aesthetic in Iran with wide promenades and new government buildings.\textsuperscript{398}

New and old government buildings were the focus of these early urban revitalization projects. Karimi writes about the tabloid magazine stories about Fat’h ‘Ali Shah and Nasir al-Din Shah’s harems and their desired effect in creating an exoticized distant past, rather than recollections on recent history.\textsuperscript{399} The Pahlavi court attempted to distance itself from the Qajars, painting them as incompetent and sexually lascivious rulers.\textsuperscript{400} In these stories, the Gulistan Palace harem served as the major backdrop for their sexual exploits. This particular spatial remnant of the Qajar era served as a physical reminder for this supposedly ancient past. Built in 1881, Nasir al-Din’s harem had individualized units for each of his wives.\textsuperscript{401} The harem, however, was more than simply the site of Nasir al-Din Shah’s sexual merriment. It served as the central node for enslaved women and eunuchs. As Karimi writes, the newspaper \textit{Sharaf} published an article on its construction with particular reference to the comforts afforded to the

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\textsuperscript{398} The Street Widening Act, passed on November 13, 1933 (22 Aban 1312) proved controversial, as it required the destruction of homes and other private structures to make room for the wide European-style streets. Karimi, \textit{Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran}, 52.
\textsuperscript{399} Karimi, \textit{Domesticity and Consumer Culture}, 52.
\textsuperscript{400} This trope remains particularly salient in Iran today, with only recent public interest in Qajar aesthetics pushing back on this.
\textsuperscript{401} Amanat, \textit{Pivot of the Universe}, 436.
\end{flushright}
khuddām, or servants, of the harem in 1881. The harem was, after all, their primary home as well.

Reza Shah began renovations on Gulistan Palace in the 1920s. By the 1930s, three-fourths of the structure had been destroyed, including the harem building and other living spaces of the court. The harem building, usually associated with the polygamous traditions of the Iranian kings, once housed the many individuals enslaved at the Qajar court – both the women taken as concubines, as well as the eunuchs charged with guarding them. Royal spaces that accommodated slavery could eventually serve as reminders of the government’s participation in the slave trade. Although some have connected the destruction of the harem to the government’s distaste for polygamous sexual relationships, one must note that the Pahlavi government’s embrace of monogamy may have been overstated in the literature. The Marriage Law of 1931 did not ban polygamy – impossible, since Reza Shah himself had multiple wives as queen consort. Rather, the law encouraged monogamous relationships and required their registration in state registries. The destruction of the harem can best be understood as a destruction of physical reminders of slavery. Not only did Reza Shah abolish slavery, but he destroyed the spaces that indicted the government for its participation in slavery. Combined with the tabloid stories which cast the Qajars as ancient history, the physical erasure of the harem made the Qajar kings and their slaves a problem of the past.

403 Grigor, Talinn. Building Iran, 132.
404 Karimi, Domesticity and Consumer Culture, 63.
After the demolition of various older structures in Gulistan Palace, the government erected the Ministry of Finance in place of the older harem structures, an interesting nod to the reorganization of the economy after the abolition of slavery.\textsuperscript{405} The Ministry of Finance building continues to tower over the rest of Gulistan Palace, a visual conquering for anyone comparing the strength of the two competing dynasties in their spatial representations. Contrary to the Qajar government, the strength of the Pahlavi government was no longer determined by the number of concubines and slaves in its harem. Rather, Iran’s government was to be distinguished by its modernity. By destroying these buildings, in particular the harem, where slaves would have been the most concentrated, the history of slavery was physically removed from the country’s official history. By 1977, the Iranian government had listed Gulistan Palace as a state museum\textsuperscript{406} and was admitted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2013.\textsuperscript{407} These preservation efforts have successfully maintained a stripped historical view as promoted by Reza Shah, giving his demolitions longevity in the forgotten history of slavery in Iran.

Similarly, slaves began to disappear from within the walls of the home as well. Iranian architects had long designed elite Iranian homes with separated gendered spaces connected by slave quarters. The former domestic spaces were not only structured to house its occupants, but many doubled as the sites for slave trading, as most slaves were bought and sold in residential spaces, not in open markets.\textsuperscript{408} Within years after abolition,

\textsuperscript{405} Mina Marefat, “Building to Power: architecture of Tehran, 1921-1941,” (Ph.D. diss. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Architecture, 1988), 76.
\textsuperscript{406} Grigor, Building Iran, 139.
\textsuperscript{408} See Chapter 3.
families that once lived in the sprawling complexes, like the Kashani mansions, abandoned them and let the homes fall into disrepair. Without extensive unpaid labor to help maintain the structure and the lifestyle that came with it, the homes were unwieldy and out of touch with the new directions of society. Abolition negated the possibility for these kinds of homes, and instead, single family units served as the new standard of modernity, where the nuclear family could raise healthy children as future citizens came into mode.

Iranian architects in urban centers adopted more Western residential floorplans, replacing the gendered female and male quarters (endaruni and biruni) with European-styled living room, bedrooms, and entertaining areas (mihmankhani). Karimi describes how older characteristics of Iranian homes were incorporated into modern units with a Bauhaus aesthetic which prioritized practicality over prestige. The emphasis on practicality over prestige can be directly traced to abolitionist arguments that described slaves as excessive status symbols who infringed on the ideal family relationships – be it the mother-child bond or the intimacy of a husband-wife. Living spaces were similarly conceived – the extra spaces did little to help situate the families in their new, romantic, monogamous relationships.

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409 See Introduction.  
410 It is important to note that although these rooms and characteristics were found in larger pre-abolition Iranian homes across the plateau, different cities had their own distinctive features. In the desert city of Kashan, for example, the lower floor of the home was built underground to make use of the cooler temperatures. In the port city of Bushehr, these homes tended to be narrower and taller. The distinction between pre- and post-abolition homes is not that they were all made uniform (though that trend begins later), but rather that the characteristics and spaces of the home that accommodated slaves were done away with.  
411 Karimi, Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran, 61-62.  
412 See Chapter 3.
The removal of slaves, intimate strangers in the home,\footnote{In much of the literature on Iranian domestic slaves, an intimacy between the slaves and slave-owners is implied. Despite the physical closeness of the slaves, however, rigid social barriers prevailed, demarcating status and “strange-ness” within the home, especially according to Islamic law. A male slave would not be the mahram of the women of the household. Separate spaces ensured the properness of the relations.} strict gender boundaries were no longer practical between members of the nuclear family.\footnote{Karimi notes that the desire to accommodate the nuclear family in an individual unit began as early as the 1930s, but was not fully realized till later in the century. Karimi, Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran, 195.} Marefat attributes the consolidation of separate gendered areas into spaces for the entire family in part to the kashf-i hijāb decree of 1936, which declared public veiling by women as illegal. Marefat argued that the decree rendered rigid gender segregation in private spaces unnecessary since women were already uncovered in public.\footnote{Marefat, “Building to Power,” 193.} While this may have been true, the removal of slaves and servants made these spaces unwieldy. Without a degraded person to serve as the go-between in these distinctly separate spaces, the family would have been scattered and isolated from one another. The new social norms allowed for a more fluid consolidation.\footnote{Marefat describes this consolidation of gendered spaces into one essentially shared space as incomplete. Spaces, however, still remained gendered—for example, the men of the family still used the mihmānkānhī to entertain their guests, much like the birūnī. Marefat, “Building to Power,” 199.} Functionally, Iranian homes began to include innovations that eventually replaced the need for slaves. With the addition of electricity and regular delivery of drinking water, the legacy of slavery was erased not only spatially, but in their roles as well.\footnote{Marefat, Mina. “Building to Power,” 197.}

The influence of abolition on urban planning is particularly apparent in the southern port city of Bushehr. A longtime home for the British Residency, Bushehr had also served as a significant port city along the Persian Gulf since Nadir Shah’s rule,

\footnote{Marefat, “Building to Power,” 193.}
eventually declining around World War I.\footnote{Xavier de Planhol, “Busehr, the City,” Encyclopedia Iranica. 1990, \url{http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bushehr-01-city} (accessed 10 January 2018).} In the old quarters of the city, the Bihbahani district, established by wealthy merchant families, grew in importance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The neighborhood was located along the coastline – in close proximity to the Persian Gulf for the merchant families who lived there with their servants and slaves of African ancestry.

After abolition, these upper class families left their homes in the established Bihbahani district and moved elsewhere.\footnote{For more information on the migrations of economically-able Bushehreis and where they went during the 1930s and after, see chapter 3 of Lindsey Stephenson’s dissertation, \textit{Rerouting the Persian Gulf: Transnationalization of Iranian Networks, c. 1900-1940}, (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2018).} Black freedpeople and their families stayed, living in the homes once owned by wealthy merchants who relied on slaves and servants to manage the household. Although a few homes were renovated into museums, boutique restaurants, or cultural institutional buildings in recent decades, the area came to be associated with black Iranians.\footnote{The Bushehr branch of the \textit{Iran-Shināsī} archives occupies one of these older homes in the Bihbahani district. Formerly owned by a doctor, the house has been renovated to house the regional archive’s documents, books, and other media. The space originally used as slave/servant quarters has also been incorporated into the archive building, and currently is an office.} The Bihbahani district remains home to an eponymous mosque that still retains its original entrances on either side of the mosque for “whites” and “blacks,” spatial divisions of the recent past.\footnote{The Bihbahani Mosque, a landmark for its affiliation with Jahanbakhsh Kurdizadigh in the 1970s, remains a popular center for religious processions today. The names of the separate entrances remain, although people use them independently of their racial appearance. Research trip to Bushehr, December 2015.}

The Bihbahani Mosque has a small side room for storing for the \textit{dammām}, an East African drum used in Bushehri religious services and in musical performances around the
Gulf. Bushehr commemorative rituals for Muharram and Safar\textsuperscript{422} involve movement and music in a style unique to itself. The services open with the beating of the drums, where drummers enter from the two aforementioned entrances, followed by recitations of eulogies, where participants link together in concentric circles and follow the rhythm of the reciters. Different leaders participate in every phase of the mourning – from coordinating the drumming, to leading the eulogies, to organizing the concentric circles. Photographs of these individuals and processions from different generations hang above the drums. These photographs, some of individuals who passed away prior to the 1979 revolution, narrate a tangible and physical communal history of the mosque after the 1930s. Some of the photographs depict multiple generations from the same family. For example, in Figure 1, the third from the left is the father of the third from the right.

\textsuperscript{422} Shia Muslims mourn the martyrdom of Husayn during the Islamic calendar months of Muharram and Safar.
This is not to imply that any photographs of Black Iranians must be of freedmen or their descendants. In a port city like Bushehr, the veracity of such an assertion would be difficult to ascertain, as the centuries of exchange with the East African coast has ensured a steady stream of migrant workers, in addition to enslaved peoples. But such a visual display of identity and personhood was rare prior to abolition. Despite the presence of free Africans in Bushehr prior to 1929, the only recorded photographs depict them in subservient positions to their slavers.

Unlike in Tehran and other central cities where the presence of African freedpeople was severely diminished after abolition, Bushehr and other coastal cities retained their black populations, bolstered by the numbers of Africans who had also arrived in Iran as free laborers or merchants.
Abolition represented a visual break from these oppressive norms, where freedom meant the ability to document one’s own identity and family.

In non-black families, abolition also affected their norms of photography as well. During the late Qajar period, a wife and mother’s control over the domestic realm
indicated full status as a woman, where staged photographs of matriarchs with their slaves identified them as ideal wives and mothers in elite Iranian households. A woman’s fulfillment as a proper wife or mother rested on her ability to depend on a female slave to take care of the children, while she partook in more complicated matters of managing a household. As slaves began to disappear from households, they disappeared from the frames of household photographs as well, changing the nature of photography during this period. While I refer to Qajar-era photographs of women and their slaves as “household photographs,” where the slave’s outsider status is visually conveyed, the Pahlavi-era ushered in “family photographs.” Most notably, however, Pahlavi-era photographs that conveyed a woman’s full status were typically couples portraits, radically different than the posed photos featuring the matriarch with her female slave. Couples-styled portraits, often taken at professional studios, came to serve as visual announcements for a progressive and modern family. True domesticity was defined by monogamy, excluding those extraneous members of the households – slaves or second wives, or cases when the slave was the second wife.

After abolition, however, photographs like those displayed in Bihbahani mosque documented individual and community history, a palpable shift away from these staged photographs for the benefit of the slaver. Other photographs from Dabīristān-i Saʿādat, one of the local high schools, provide another portrayal of life in Bushehr post 1929.

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424 See photograph and discussion of Shahzdih Galin, Chapter 3.
425 See Chapter 3.
The Saʿādat school, one of the oldest high schools in Bushehr, regularly photographed their sport teams and athletes. Here, their team was photographed in their uniforms, with a basketball and a trophy; the sign behind them identifies them as winners.⁴²⁷ In the second row, on the far right, Salman Bihbahani sits respectfully next to his peers. Though a common last name throughout Iran, associated with large transnational Shiʿi clerical families and the city Bihbahan,⁴²⁸ his name calls upon the same district now commonly associated with black Iranians. Only a few years after

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⁴²⁷ Photo 35, Iranian Studies Archive - Bushehr Branch, Bushehr, Iran. Also printed in Abdulkarim Mashayekhi, Yād-i Abū Shahr: Aks-hāyī Qadīm-i Bushehr (Bushehr: Iran-Shināsī, 2015), 89.
⁴²⁸ See Chapter 3 on Seyyed Abdullah Behbahani.
abolition, he remains a minority amongst his peers, with only one or two other visibly black student athletes. Other photographs show the members of the club with their equipment or posing with for team photos.429

Figure 31: Sa’adat High School’s Sport Club, posing with their equipment on June 23, 1934, held at the Iranian Studies Archive – Bushehr Branch, Bushehr, Iran.

429 “Sa’adat High School’s Sport Club,” June 23, 1934. Photo 36, Iranian Studies Archive – Bushehr Branch, Bushehr, Iran; “Team Photo,” Photo 37, Iranian Studies Archive – Bushehr Branch, Bushehr, Iran.
Unlike the Bihbahani Mosque photographs, which were framed and hung mostly for black Iranians themselves, these photographs depict Salman and his peers as the pride of Sa’adat school, photographs which have been entered into Bushehr’s official history in archival and published works.430

Non-black Iranians, however, continued to other black Iranians while still interacting with them in their daily lives. One woman, Zahra, told me about her childhood memories of her grandfather’s dhow worker.

My grandfather had a black worker who sailed from Bushehr to Zanzibar with him. He lived with our family, but he slept [on the ground] outside the house…He consumed a lot of opium and would eat a finger’s worth every day. Scorpions would gather around him

430 The Sa’adat school is revered as an important society-building modern institution of Bushehr. Mashayekhi’s Yād-i Abu Shahr traces the history of the school alongside Bushehr’s development through photographs from the twentieth century. Abdulkarim Mashayekhi, Yād-i Abū Shahr: Aks-hāyī Qadīm-i Bushehr (Bushehr: Iran-Shināsī, 2015), 83-89.
at night, but he would wake up the next morning surrounded by dead scorpions who had collapsed and died from the overdose.\footnote{Conversations with Zahra, Bushehr, January 2016.}

Though she could not recall his name, Zahra vividly remembered this worker whom her memories had imbued with superhuman powers. His high consumption of opium, his ability to survive scorpion bites and to kill them with a different kind of venom – the elevated concentration of opium in his blood – all link back to his uniquely different physicality. Somehow, his blackness protected him in ways that justified her family’s decision to have him sleep outdoors, where he would be vulnerable to the fatal bite of scorpions. Despite the close proximity and regular encounters, his blackness still led her to believe that his physicality was different than other members of her family.

In cities situated further from the Gulf coast, however, abolition led to a palpably diminished black presence in urban centers. As discussed in Chapter 3, enslaved peoples accompanied their slaveholders in public spaces, a public display of their status and wealth. Slaves embodied, literally, their slaveholder’s wealth and status. The public nature of enslavement, then, ensured that even those who did not own slaves would have encountered them in the streets, in the bazaars, as a perpetual reminder of their own status as well. The manumission of slaves, however, ended this practice, as slaves were either freed or hidden after the 1929 law. People were less likely to encounter slaves, and in turn, people of African descent.

As a result, representations of blackness changed. By the 1920s, several non-black actors developed a reputation as blackface actors, transforming the style into a full-
fledged genre of Iranian theater and comedy. At this time, *siyāh-bāzī*, “playing-black” theater developed into a more rigid genre what was performed in the Qajar court. In the Qajar court, court jesters included both white and black actors, some of whom used masks while others used their very own skin to depict themselves as the black character. After manumission, however, the black actors left the genre completely.

Instead, non-black actors took over the performance style and developed it into what would become known as a major traditional form of Iranian theater and entertainment in a variety of times and spaces. In any space, however, they maintained several characteristics that made them easily identifiable. Actors appeared in blackface rather than masks, their faces greased with a black layer. They purposely fumbled the syllables of Iranian words, speaking in an artificially high-pitched voice. They wore plain clothes, in bright colors, especially red, and played the role of a servant to a merchant or a king. Blackfaced entertainers also worked at weddings and other celebratory events. During Nowruz, the spring equinox and new year, one particular character, Haji Firuz, came to be known as the herald of spring. In theater, the blackface actor usually had the most zingers in the show, delivering laser sharp criticisms of their superiors while presenting themselves as entirely stupid and ignorant of the broader situation. *Siyāh-bāzī* plays came to be regarded as a subversive genre, satirizing Iranian society and its ills. Some have hailed the blackface character as the only honest character of the show, quick to point out his master’s hypocrisy or thievery. But the delivery rests so intimately on an ignorant presentation, that the audience never knows whether the blackface character is actually intelligent and feigning stupidity, or stupid and only accidentally revealing the
dishonesty around him. The plot lines remained fairly limited as well, featuring some level of shenanigans caused by the black character’s inepitude.

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sīyah-bāzī theater has developed into its own genre, where the blackfaced character is called the sīyah, or “the black.” The most famous of these “sīyah” was Sa’di Afshar (1934-2013), who reached the pinnacle of success in Iranian theater, even touring his blackface performances in France. Afshar, whose legal name was Sa’d’Allah Rahmatkhah, details the history of sīyah-bāzī theater in his memoir, providing the names and relations to key individuals in an effort to create a canonical history of the genre. In his memoir, Sa’di Afshar describes Mahiri’s role in the development of sīyah-bāzī, or “playing black” theater.

If you want to know about the history of sīyah-bāzī in Iran, then I have to tell you that sīyah-bāzī in Iran has a three-hundred-year old history…But with the arrival of Zabih’Allah Mahiri, the trajectory of sīyah-bāzī changed [from court jesters] and in reality, became more full and complete. From that point on, the sīyah became a pivotal role. The Late Mahiri, who was known as “Mahiri the Goldsmith” had connections with the Qajar court and would come and go there regularly. He was extremely smart and excitable, and would commit everything he saw to memory.

He was witness to the mannerisms of the Black servants who worked there. In a distant past, they used to bring African and Abyssinian Blacks as servants at the royal court…After some time, these servants would learn Persian, but they couldn’t pronounce the words correctly and would sometimes stutter. So for example, they would say sandalī as safdarī or bādimjān as bāmanjān. Whatever Zabih saw at the Qajar court, he would describe for the Mu’ayad brothers Hussayn Agha and Ahmad Agha, both of whom were actors and directors…Hussayn Agha and Ahmad Agha-yi Mu’ayad, along with Zabih’Allah came to set the framework for sīyah-bāzī in Iran.432

Here Sa’di Afshar directly linked the performance of blackface to the African slaves at the Qajar court. While Karim Shirih’i is credited as the father of taqlīd theater and Iranian

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comedy, Zabih’allah Mahiri is remembered as the fathers of *sīyāh-bāzī* theater.\(^{433}\)

Though the mocking of Black eunuchs and other slaves likely predated Zabih’Allah’s visits to the court, as discussed in Chapter 2, Afshar’s remembrance of Zabih’Allah have immortalized his contributions to the grotesque genre. His description of this process, with its roots in the enslavement and mockery of Africans, was unemotional. For Afshar, this was merely a fact, not a condemnation. If anything, it was positive. Afshar continued, describing the different links to individuals in the theater world, ultimately providing a genealogy for his own influences in donning black makeup and imitating Black slaves.

The entry of Mahdi Misri to *sīyāh-bāzī* was based on a different series of factors…Zabih’Allah Mahiri saw Mahdi Misri at a performance in Varamin…and he recognized his potential for acting. He [Zabih] asked Akbar Nayib Javad, another one of the famous *sīyāh-bāzī* actors of that time, to teach the foundations of the craft to Misri.\(^{434}\)

The individual roles in identifying potential and recruiting them for this particular acting provides a sense of the small networks in blackface theater at this time. The same person credited with drawing inspiration from black bodies at the Qajar court was involved in training the next generation of actors. In doing so, the genre moved away from the traditional kind of *taqlīd* theater that Karim Shirih-i had pioneered in the late nineteenth century. *Taqlīd*, or “imitation” theater, which I discuss in Chapter 2, involved a mockery of individuals that both the actors and the audience would have also been familiar with. According to Afshar, however, by this point Mahiri was involved in training actors who had never interacted with slaves, and continued to train them as such even after abolition.

In 1947, Sa’di Afshar played his first informal show at the age of 13, when he greased his


\(^{434}\) Afshar, *‘Āli Jināb Sīyāh*, 48.
face with soot from the heater pipes to entertain guests at a holiday party. By that point, Mahdi Misri had risen to fame and appeared regularly on stage at Shahin Theater, where Afshar would try to see him perform.

As these actors became established in their reputations as blackface actors, they became known as “ṣīyāh,” a complete repurposing of a term that had been so recently used to racialize black slaves. As actors such as Misri, Afshar and others continued to present themselves in blackface in Tehran, the backdrop of slavery had been removed. Even though Afshar was only born five years after abolition, he described the enslavement of Africans as a part of the “distant past.”

The presentation of the blackface theater as linked to an old and distant form of slavery, however, has yielded confusing narratives. In her book on the history of clowns and jesters in Iran, Shiva Mas’udi writes,

Some have attributed this [genre] to the nature of black servants, asserting that they are linked to African slaves. In this narration, there is no clear precedent for the comedy or uplifting quality [of the acting]. Perhaps the incongruity of slaves/foreign servants with elements of Iranian culture, such as language, can inadvertently serve as the backdrop for this comedy.

The mockery of slaves seems to be an unlikely source of comedy for Mas’udi. She then considers Sa’di Afshar’s narrative about Zabih’Allah Misri drawing inspiration from the slaves of the Qajar court. Mas’udi dismisses Afshar’s narrative, saying there is no evidence for such claims, and that it simply shows how much the public likes to social

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436 Afshar, ‘Āli Jināb Siyāh, 45.
437 See Chapter 1.
438 Mas’udi, Kārnāmih-yi Talkhagān, 174.
histories for a sīyāh.\textsuperscript{439} Other blackface actors who entered the profession after Afshar echo Mas’udi’s denial, arguing that the practice of blackface theater is traced back thousands of years to a pre-Islamic Iranian past.\textsuperscript{440} The process of abolition as an erasure, rather than a reckoning with the recent past, has shrouded even intellectual discussions on blackface in Iran.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure33.png}
\caption{Haji Firuz on the cover of Tawfiq magazine, Nowruz 1953.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{439} Mas’udi, \textit{Kārnamīh-yī Talkhagān}, 175.
The popularity of sīyāh-bāzī theater dovetailed with that of Haji Firuz, who played the role of a jester to the general Iranian public arrived annually at the spring equinox to celebrate the new year. Similar to sīyāh-bāzī theater, Haji Firuz was played by a man wearing a black ointment and red clothing, singing tunes encouraging his master’s happiness and heralding the new year. Mahdi Akhavan-Salis, a poet from Mashhad in northeastern Iran, addressed Haji Firuz’s newfound popularity in his collection of poetry, Arghanūn. His collection, which was published in 1951, included “The Holiday Arrived,” a poem on Nowruz, which “I saw that Nowruz arrival in a costume of good luck,” which he footnoted to prevent any confusion among readers. He wrote saying this is not about the practice of the blackface herald called Haji Firuz, and that he has a hatred, nifrat, for this almost exclusively Tehrani practice that mocked slaves. He continued, saying his dislike is not for the people in blackface, who do it out of hunger and lack of options, but rather for the entire practice, a reference to the Haji Firuz street performers.

The image of Haji Firuz as a street performer, busking for spare change proved useful for social commentary on the nationalization of Iranian oil. Tawfīq magazine, the most popular satirical publication of the Pahlavi era, ran Haji Firuz on the cover of its Nowruz issue in response to the recent Venice Court ruling that deemed Iran’s nationalization of oil legal, subverting the British blockade on oil. Shown dancing next to a begging Britain, Haji Firuz sings a modified version of his most popular jingle:

My master, salāmu ‘alaykum

441 Mahdi Akhavan-Salis, Arghanūn: Majmu’ih Sh’ir (Tehran: Murvārid, 1951), 77.
My master, hold your head up high!
My master, like a bouquet of flowers
The Venice Court has tied up his hands and feet!
My master why don’t you laugh?
You’re looking like a billy goat!\textsuperscript{443}

Wielding a joyful symbol of the holidays, the \textit{Tawfiq} magazine cover demonstrates how \textit{sīyāh-bāzī} characters, including Haji Firuz, would come to be seen as a stand-in for Iranians in their performances. Haji Firuz is labeled as \textit{the nation} (“millat”), wearing a Pahlavi crown, rejoicing in a victory for Iranians. The popularity of blackface characters making social commentaries would lead \textit{Tawfiq} to eventually develop it's a blackface mascot, which was soon included on nearly every page of the magazine.\textsuperscript{444} Akhavan-Salis’ negative opinion of Haji Firuz remained a minority view, as Haji Firuz grew in popularity and pervasiveness during the late Pahlavi era.

The Afterlife of Slavery

The legacy of slavery is entangled both in its erasure and in the thriving nature of blackface theater. In the 1930s, ‘Ali Akbar Dehkhoda embarked on a new project: compiling the first and most comprehensive modern dictionary of Persian, the \textit{Lughat-Nāmih}. The \textit{Lughat-Nāmih} remains a useful reference for the Persian Language, as it

\textsuperscript{443} \textit{Tawfiq} Magazine, 28 Esfand 1331.
\textsuperscript{444} Kākā \textit{Tawfiq}’s character mimicked the kind of zingers and comments made by a \textit{sīyāh} in blackface theater. Contrary to Haji Firuz, who \textit{Tawfiq} labeled as “the nation,” Kākā \textit{Tawfiq} was never labeled as such, though he expressed sentiments that resonated with many Iranians.
pairs dictionary definitions with quotes, lines of poetry, and other textual examples of each word’s application.

In 1958, two years after Dehkhoda’s death, his intellectual partner, Muhammad Mo’in released a new volume of the dictionary, with a detailed definition for *bardigî*, the catch-all term for slavery in Persian. Although the entries in the *Lughat-Nāmith* were often accompanied by historical examples of the term’s employment, the definition accompanying *bardigî* is uniquely extensive. After providing a number of single word synonyms for slavery, such as bondage, enslavement, captivity, the definition cites *Dā’irat al-Ma’ârif* or *the Persian Encyclopedia* in its following information:

A tradition that in ancient times was commonly practiced in almost all societies, not only did agricultural societies use slaves but even nomadic or tribal societies also used slaves. Fundamentally, the ownership of people, like the ownership of land, water, and home, was one kind of proprietorship that exist even in prehistory in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In ancient Greece, a large portion of the urban population lived their lives as slaves. In the time of the Romans, a particular type of agricultural slavery became common. These slaves were only involved in agricultural labor, and in addition to them, personal and domestic slaves were extremely common in Roman cities. In the Middle Ages, slavery was common in European and Asian countries, but the number of slaves and the intensity of their labor had diminished. The discovery of new land in America and the aptitude of African Blacks to work on plantations in the warm climates of the American South led to a boom in the slave trade which developed into a wide and imperial market, which began in 1619. The Blacks who were taken to America as slaves were mostly put to work on farms in the southern states and were not found in many numbers in the North, and the slave trade was not established there. The French and American revolutions, both of which were based on ideals of equality and freedom, shook the foundations of slavery. In 1804, slaves in Haiti revolted and drove out their rulers and masters, presenting their country as an independent and free one. Many Latin American countries have since abolished slavery in their countries. In England, humanitarian movements made it necessary to ban the slave trade in 1807. In the united countries of America, anti-slavery sentiments began in the North, and those who wanted to abolish slavery made this one of their prioritized goals in their political struggles. The majority of the clashes between the north and the south in 1820-1860 were struggles between those in favor of freeing the slaves versus those in favor of the slave trade, but the practice of slavery continued in the united countries of America until 1863. Abraham Lincoln’s

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445 The excerpt used “states” and “countries” when referring to “the United States” interchangeably. Instead of translating them all as “states,” I translated it literally to reflect how it sounds in the original Persian.
Emancipation Proclamation of slaves was published, and the northern states triumphed over the south and this tradition in America was abolished and slaves were freed. After Brazil declared the freedom of slaves in 1888, slavery was abolished in the entirety of the American continent. The Berlin Conference (1885), Brussels Conference Act (1890), and the efforts of the international community, especially the Treaty of 1926, brought slavery in all countries, particularly those in Asia and Africa, to an end.\footnote{This is my translation of Dehkhoda’s definition. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, completed by Muhammad Mo’in, \emph{Lughat-Nāmih} (Tehran: Chāpkhānī-yi Dawlatī-yi Iran, 1958), 865-866.}

While the dictionary cites the \emph{Persian Encyclopedia}, the original source was the 1953 edition of the \emph{Columbia Viking Desk Encyclopedia}. In the single most authoritative source on the Persian language today, slavery was defined as a global phenomenon that existed nearly everywhere, and yet, Iran’s complex history of slavery was completely elided. Publish by the Iranian Government Press, the editor refrained from implicating Iran resulted in a broader intellectual erasure despite the government’s use of the same word \emph{bardih} in 1929 to manumit all slaves on Iranian soil. Slavery came to be known as an American phenomenon, an American problem, an American history. The \emph{Lughat-Nāmih}’s definition reinforced what Iranians had seen in \textit{Gone with the Wind} and what they had read in \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}.

Many in Iran recoil at the use of \emph{bardih}, despite its straightforward definition as “slave.” \emph{Bardih} invokes an insidious history, with strong associations with American plantation slavery, and especially its reputation for corporeal punishment. Instead of disappearing, however, \emph{bardih} now evokes a foreign, un-Iranian master-slave relationship which many Iranians continue to deny today. Slavery in Iran bred a gendered and racial lexicon with embedded hierarchies of difference.
The abolition of slavery became law in 1929, when the Iranian Parliament declared slavery illegal and all slaves as free. This declaration of full emancipation within the country’s borders represented a pivotal moment in the inception of its undoing as a significant collective memory. If we consider erasure as the top priority of abolition, then we can easily describe abolition in Iran as successful. Pahlavi era textbooks never referenced Iranian slavery, never describing Iran’s complicity or participation in the transnational slave trade. Nor did freedmen receive compensation or reparations for their stolen lives. Instead, they received citizenship, which was sometimes marred by the permanent naming of racial slurs.

The clearest legacy of Iranian slavery, however, went largely uncontrolled by the Pahlavi government. Blackface theater thrived after abolition. Although the early participants of blackface theater were aware of their complicity in mocking the enslaved, they remained indifferent towards it. Their indifference, along with broader projects of erasure, has ensured the longevity of blackface in Iranian entertainment. To this day, Haji Firuz arrives every Nowruz, reminding Iranians to smile in blackface.
EPILOGUE

In 2002, Beaussant-Lefèvre, a Parisian auction house for fine antiques, listed Her Imperial Royal Highness Princess Soraya’s collection of belongings for sale shortly after her death in 2001. Soraya Esfandiary Bakhtiyari, Mohammad Reza Shah’s second wife whose eight years of marriage was marred by infertility, had lived as a celebrity royal divorcée in Europe. Her brother and sole inheritor, Bijan died a few days after she did, leaving the estate to the German state.⁴⁴⁷ Although the auction house had estimated her possessions to be worth about three million euros, the entire collection sold for €6,592,482.⁴⁴⁸

Among the extensive collection of jewelry, art, clothing, furniture and other items was a set of Venetian furniture from Soraya’s life in Rome.⁴⁴⁹ Marked by their detailed gilded style, in golds, reds, and blacks, each piece featured black individuals proudly supporting the furniture. The lamps – and the wooden statues that held them – stood between six and seven feet tall,⁴⁵⁰ creating the illusion that real, live people were relentlessly holding up the lights. The black figures, identified as Nubians in the auction

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⁴⁵⁰ Lot 846 was 210cm, Lot 861 was 187cm. Beaussant-Lefèvre, Sucession, 309-311.
house’s catalog, are wooden, painted slaves, true commodities owned and controlled in the name of opulence. Not all of the figurines towered as the lamps did. Young children held up the table console. Indeed, the princess’s furniture physically rested on the backs of an entire family. The optics of life-sized black figures receding into the margins of a room recalls the very kind of harem imagery that Soraya’s former father-in-law, Reza Shah, had sought to destroy. Instead, objects served as literal stand-ins for real slaves.

The commodification of black bodies maintained the racism slavery engendered long after abolition, converging with a visual language of disdain legible in the Western world as well. At the 2002 auction, the lamps and table fetched €12,800, about four thousand euros above the original estimates. A small percentage of the total sales, the furniture – their very inclusion among Soraya’s notable belongings along with their subsequent purchase – represents an enduring material and visual legacy of slavery that exists not only in Iran, but extends worldwide. The pieces speak to the transnationality of racism, especially in the last century, where an Iranian princess could own an Italian set of furniture featuring Nubian slaves, have it be sold in France to the benefit of the German government. Despite Reza Shah’s limited efforts to disentangle Iran’s royal family and spaces from the stain of slavery, Soraya’s personal belongings indicate that this entanglement went deeper than a piece of legislation, a legacy that could survive a generation and resurface in the private home of an exiled princess. Princess Soraya’s furniture remains but one example of how a racism intelligible to Iranians (and non-Iranians) moves beyond borders.
Other remnants of this racist past have also crossed countries and continents with the Iranian diaspora. Iranians around the world don blackface and a red costume to celebrate Nowruz in the image of Haji Firuz. Various theater groups organize siyāh-bāzī shows, vaguely describing it as classic form of theater. Alangoo Shop, an Iranian-themed digital marketplace that featuring European and American-based vendors, sells Haji Firuz plush dolls, painted eggs, and cake toppers with black skin and googly eyes to capitalize off that Nowruz cheer.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Los Angeles based Iranian pop singer Faramarz Assef produced a series of songs called Haji, which featured conversations between Haji, a master and his slave, Mubarak. In these songs, Assef manipulates his voice to aurally play the different characters. In one, “Haji (Telephone),” Mubarak makes an international

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451 Though some Iranians and Iranian organizations have made a concerted effort to not include rely on blackface to portray Haji Firuz or have invited people to dress up as the elderly character “Amoo Nowruz” (Uncle Nowruz) instead, the inclusion of Haji Firuz in its most basic and vulgar form remains common. A number of Iranians have questioned Haji Firuz’s presence at Nowruz in diasporic contexts in online articles and forums – some of these criticisms maintain that Haji Firuz is not racist at its core, but does promote racism in a global context. See Abbas Jamali, “The Problem With Haji Firuz” the Tehran Times, 15 March 2015. http://thetehrantimes.com/the-problem-with-haji-firouz/ (accessed 21 July 2017).

452 Shirazi, “A Review of Tarabnameh,” Ajam Media Collective. See also the event description for “Sogoli” from MajSam & Najva Productions, “It’s a modern twist to the classical “Ro-Hozî” which we have fond memories.”


phone call from Los Angeles to Tehran to speak with Haji.\textsuperscript{454} Assef plays four different characters in the song, in which Haji scolds Mubarak for leaving him and moving to “Tehrangeles.” A repentant Mubarak admits his mistakes and apologizes for not listening to Haji, all while singing, dancing, and blinking excessively in front of a green screen projection of the LAX Theme Building.\textsuperscript{455} The song’s appeal relies on the commodification of the black body, here reduced to Mubarak. Presenting Mubarak’s character and relationship with Haji in these short songs created a bite-sized version of the longer sīyāh-bāzī plays, which were (and continue to be) circulated on diasporic radio and satellite television channels.\textsuperscript{456} Intended as a comedic piece, Mubarak carries the burden of lifting the audience’s spirits, just as Soraya’s wooden figures carried her lamps. Both involve hypothetical black slaves working for their masters’ benefit.

Though the 1929 manumission law freed the slaves and ultimately granted them Iranian citizenship, it did nothing to prevent this imagery from being recycled and repackaged around the world. It is, in part, these images which drove me to the urgency of my research. The pervasive quality of anti-blackness in diaspora, the cries that defended these forms of minstrelsy and dehumanization as qualitatively different from


\textsuperscript{455} The LAX Theme Building, which resembles a spaceship on four legs, is the first iconic piece of Los Angeles architecture immigrants arriving at the international airport see. Designed by a small team of architects, including African-American Paul Revere Williams, the LAX Theme Building is reduced to a backdrop for a blackface minstrel. “Los Angeles International Airport,” Paul Revere Williams, American Architect, http://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/gallery/1960s-transportation/ (accessed 16 April 2018).

their American counterparts, remains in part because of the efforts to erase the connections between these cultural forms and their roots in slavery.

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