



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## AN ELONGATED SHRIEKING SONG THAT ENVISIONS GLIMPSES OF LIBERATION THROUGH OVERWHELM

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I greet you in the soft fire of the guts  
I greet you in the solidity of freedom dreams woven into the skeleton  
I greet you in the fluorescent red of blood uselessly shed  
I greet you in the tender soft black lying gently in the corner  
what haunts us or what lingers in this space,  
what needs our greeting?  
before we can attempt a moaning dance with one another

I started writing this text right after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, in the first days of the heinous successive bombing of Gaza by the Israeli forces, aided by the West. My heart deeply shaken by the amount of dead bodies that were enshrouding my phone and this was just the beginning, before the Israeli Occupation Forces started its precise and genocidal attacks on hospitals, refugee camps and UNWRA schools. My beloved partner, a Jerusalemite, is glued to his phone, a blankness veiling his face masking the unimaginable disastrous tumult plunging through his body. Each time I lean in close to him, my body responds with shivering sighs as if a cold breeze swept from her flesh into mine. And on top of all of that hurt, the news of Afghanistan being hit by a disastrous earthquake was sitting like a heavy wet blanket on top of my heart, a heart numb and too familiar with the suffering of my own people.

Since my practice of moaning is intertwined with both the personal and the inter-communal urgencies striking onto our flesh, onto our bodies and our subject-hoods, it felt only right to start with firstly addressing the status quo of my immediate lived experience. It is from this spirited place that I will try to retrace how the moan, like a gentle elder, is present these days hushing me to come closer to the pounding ache of the heart. During the times when our collective wound opens wider and further, it is crucial to attune ourselves to the practice of moaning, to listening, hearing and receiving the shrieks of maddened hearts. It has become clear to me that moaning is my way of witnessing the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the onslaught of massacres live-streamed on our phone screens, without letting that cold numbness take over my heart, the kind of non-feeling that inevitably leads to normalisation of mass killing and destruction. Moaning has also become my elder in refusing respectability politics and grounding myself in a rage-fueled love for an unknown future on this beautiful blue globe.

In this text I will explore my artistic practice of moaning through the lens of “traumatophilia” and “overwhelm” as proposed by Avgi Saketopoulou, a Greek psycho-analyst practicing in New York. I also want to do this in conversation with Saidiya Hartman’s question in “Venus in Two Acts” that has been delightfully haunting me, which is: “What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song?” (Hartman 2008, 4).

### Lashes’ Endless Moaning Performance

I stumbled on the moan as a performance practice at a pivotal moment in my life six years ago. While in my third year of a bachelor’s degree in Choreography at SNDO (School voor Nieuwe Dans Ontwikkeling in Amsterdam) I had just started taking testosterone and was transitioning slowly from “female” to “male.”<sup>1</sup> My relationship with my parents and siblings was already waning at that time and the decision to start hormones and undergo top-surgery stained me as the wayward that I have always been perceived to be. My family used to call me عجيب و غريب, which in Dari reads as *ajib wa gharib* and translates as strange and wondrous. With my decision to become “male” I had fully accepted my destiny as this weird and wondrous creature devoted to bringing misfortune to fascist logic. Choosing to transition meant the end of these blood ties, and that end left me swimming in a sea of grief. Everything was marked by a two-fold loss; on the one hand, I consciously entered an overwhelmingly tough yet deliciously joyful process of transforming years and layers of socialisation as a Hazara woman in order to become someone and somebody whom I could not fully envision yet. And, on the other hand, those who taught me courage and loved me in the ways they could, the two people who gave up their land and all their dreams to safeguard a future for their children, stubbornly held onto ideas and projections of me and rejected this transformative process.



*Fig. 1. Performance Whining Wailing Lashes as part of Simon Wald-Lasowski's background evening performances at 1646 Experimental Art Space. Photo taken by Helena Roig.*

In this period, I carried my broken heartedness, as if a seed, in my hands everywhere I went. My heart was an open wound and I planted the seeds of my grief in the form of moaning prayers at bodies of water or in the corners of the parks. The dance studio became the estuary where the moan guided me through the hard labor of birthing another self, transforming memories of my past self into new visions of a future self. Choreography became the medium and the art-form through which I attempted to find soil for these bemoaning seeds as an ongoing performance practice. In one of my studio sessions, a character came into vision. She was dressed all in white, with dramatic nails protruding from her gloves and there were tears in the form of strips of hair draping from her cheeks. I decided to call her Lashes, as a way of honouring my birth-name in Dari. Lashes kept appearing in my daily life everywhere with a nagging presence. She constantly demanded my body and my voice as a site to come into existence. In the beginning Lashes did not have any words, she simply moaned: *uhhhh uuuuuuhhhhh uuuuuuaawwwhhh* When I tended to the nagging in Lashes' voice I was struck by the depth of grief pouring into the world through my own voice. Through her nagging grief I heard the song that needed to be sung and when I meditated with Lashes' moaning, I was struck by how this moaning song held many stories of dispossession. As Lashes, my body seemed to be hypersensitive to grief. The moan confirmed itself as a sonic membrane connecting the song of my open wounded heart with that of (imagined) others. I started to hear the moan as a grieving song in the howling wind, I read it in the folds of an

elderly man walking down the street and I would feel the grief present in my lover's moaning orgasm. And as I learned to lean into the presence of the moan around me, it was Lashes who offered herself as a guide, a mentor, and taught me how to listen to the subtleties of the ancient songs of grief.

To be held in the mob's embrace, in the wound and blessing of their shared, accursed sensorium, is to be made unaware of one's own invisibility—to feel, to feel more, to feel more than, to feel more than I feel, I feel. Can you hold one another tonight in the blur, so that one and another are no more? (Moten 2017, 218)

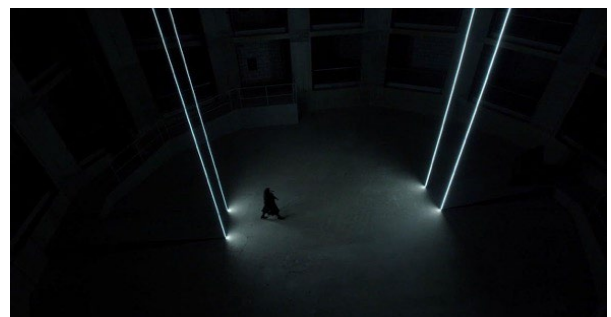
Cloaked as Lashes, dressed in the white layered garment that is beaded with plastic pearls and strands of hair flowing down my cheeks, I lent my voice to the moan as an elongated mourning song on repeat that treats the performative space as a palpable space of loss. It is through Lashes' performance, swaying in an unbalanced way while repeatedly hitting the chest, that I aim to honour and preserve this dying tradition of professional mourning. By using the transformative capacities of the performance space, my body activates the loss that is naturally present in the space. As Lashes, my body moves ambiguously between spectator and performer. Dressed as Lashes I lent my body and my voice to an improvised moaning song on repeat that filled the space with an affective load and dragged both spectator and performer into the immediacy of feeling more than one feels capable of, "to feel more than I feel, I feel."

### To Attune to an Aching Beyond the Self

As I embarked on a journey with the moan, with Lashes as my mentor, I soon touched upon the global tradition of professional mourners, who in many cultures serve as choreographers of grief in times of loss. For example, in southern India and in Sri Lanka it is the role of the Oppari who sing in an improvised manner, wailing eulogies to honour the dead (see Grover 2015). It is important to emphasise that the professional mourners do not perform these bemoaning songs as a way of fixing the grief in the community or to grieve for the bereaved. Instead, it is the role of the professional mourner to make the loss palpable and experiential for the bereaved. As Taryn Simon notes in her published interview with Homi K. Bhabha (Simon 2017) on her work *An Occupation of Loss* (Simon 2018), where professional mourners from multiple cultures perform their mourning



Screenshot of Oppari practitioner  
▶ <https://youtu.be/lqrf3LKwwXc>



Screenshot of Taryn Simon's *An Occupation of Loss*  
▶ <https://youtu.be/kbmNdqwVSNg>

songs in the giant columns of the work, professional mourners embody the abstract space that opens up after loss. Through high-pitched shrieks and dramatic gestures such as pulling of the hair, throwing the body on the ground and beating the chest, professional mourners embody this abstract space that one is submerged in after loss. By dramatising, exaggerating, and repeating these performative and sonic gestures, the professional mourners enact a grieving state and guide their public through the opaque but visceral state of grief.

I spent my early childhood in Peshawar, Pakistan, as a religious and ethnic minority, namely Shi'a Hazara amongst the majority Sunni Pashtun refugee communities. Each year when the first month of the Islamic calendar, the month of Muharram, arrived on our doorsteps we, as Shi'a, would mark our difference by gathering in public squares dressed all in black, performing lamenting melodies in the hundreds.<sup>2</sup> During this month Shi'as commemorate the heroes of the historical battle of Karbala that stands for resistance: political, ideological, embodied. It was at Karbala where Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of prophet Mohammed, and his party consisting of children, men and women and the elderly, were starved, captured, dismembered and brutally murdered because they resisted the rule of the caliph Yazid. These ten days are spent consecutively in a collective state of mourning through various ceremonies, processions and gatherings in designated spaces of mourning called *takiya-khana* and finds its culmination on the tenth day called Ashura. In Shi'a tradition, the public lament, which is rehearsed and fine-tuned over more than thousand years, is a form of resistance against oppression (see [Ahwaz Media 2](#)). Gathering collectively in hundreds while swaying on the melodies of the repetitive wailing songs is a magnificently powerful charging experience. To be amidst a huge mass of people whose chest and head have become a collective drum and whose voices resound with dramatic elegies that have a heart shattering effect, can be incredibly transformative.

In "The Distance from Karbala and Gaza: Collective, connected grief. 20th of Safar, day 322 of the genocide in Gaza", Aleeha Ali (2024) writes about the Shi'a collective gatherings called *majalis*: "I truly learnt the contours of collective grief from Shi'a epistemology, and the practices my mother would take us to when we were young. Majalis were spaces of storytelling and social mourning, textured with uninhibited emotional arousal and come-downs." My own memories of the annual rituals during the month of Muharram and Ashura also marked me with the "emotional arousal and come-downs" that Ali accurately describes. My yearning to be immersed in the lamenting songs of the collective was lit up during the global uprising that followed after the brutal killing of George Floyd. I proposed to practice moaning by way of being together through collective gatherings framed as "Mourning Sociality," initiating a togetherness that holds space for personal and communal grief through the practice of moaning. It was my attempt to give back to the inheritance of knowledge that comes from the legacy of black, anti-colonial liberation struggles. I wanted to create a space where we found strength and guidance through the differences of our suffering. As a social space, "Mourning Sociality" centered the sorrow, rage, and despair that comes with being subjected to the brutality of the settler colonial psyche. In this space, wailing and lamenting rhythms are encouraged by other trembling voices so that we do not have to suffer in loneliness and numbness. We perform a wailing call and response with one another through which we practice listening to the moan with sustained attention. During the "Mourning Sociality" we

become a groaning mob that unitedly carries the responsibility for the task of weaving together a whining nagging sonic web. Each time one of us gives expression to an elongated moan through their personalised *call*, the rest of the mob embraces the individual's call through a collective wailing *response*.

### Moaning as Language and Moaning as Storytelling

truthspitters are crazy talkers  
offenders of public amnesia

truthspitters they bounce their chest up and down  
on the melodies transmitted only to them from faraway lands

truthspitters dance and sing until dawn  
they bundle together and speak in strange tongues  
twisted tongues  
words not meant for the average joe

truthspitters see with their hearts on their tongues  
licking the air sensitively for wisdom that's hidden

truthspitters have a furious taste for work  
for sweating and swaying in truths

truthspitters smile when the sun sets  
it's time for them to get to work

In my practice I play with the moan as a sonic membrane which connects the performer's guts to the audience's guts, back and forth, weaving affective threads that plunge everyone into feeling, sensing and imagining possibilities of the unimaginable. In my ongoing study, with the moan guiding me as would a patient elder, I've become infatuated with moaning as a way of storytelling. I consider the moan's way of sensorially interweaving from gut to gut as a form of speech. That is to say, each moan is a sonic poem weaving the wailer's voice and body into the fabric of the world. When we learn to listen to the moaning song of another, it might speak back to us a revolutionary thought about how our hearts' suffering and our hearts' joy can put us into radical poetic relations with one another.<sup>3</sup> How is our imagination about ourselves, about the other and about another world challenged, nourished and extended through the whimpers expressed in what Moten calls "the mob's embrace"?



## TYPES OF MOANING

- Sigh
- whimper
- wail
- heavy breathing repetitive
- stutter in back of throat (guttural)
- high pitched wail
- sexual
- laughing moan
- moaning crying
- scraping the throat
- nagging moan
- gagging moan
- squeaking
- low growling
- ghost moan
- rumbling moan
- demon groan
- nagging moan #2
- stretching sighing moan
- angry throat moan
- expressing physical pain (adw)
- singing wail
- bratty moan

## AFFECT?

release

broken sounds low crying  
express pain (dogs)  
release of grief

release weight off  
shoulders / hyperventilate  
sustaining moan in throat

self-pity  
wetting / lubricating  
sense of hysteria

resistance

self-pity

makes eyes tear, vomiting  
lubricating mouth

witchy

expressing effort / low  
voice coming  
cartoonish / cynical

low belly monsterlike  
unpredictable / big eyes  
childlike

relaxing / relief  
release of anger  
express physical pain release

lament grief

bratty

WHAT'S THE SPECIFICITY OF MY MOANING?

Fig. 2. Types of moaning and their affect.

When I speak about moaning as a form of storytelling, I mean that attuning ourselves to the moaning songs in ourselves and in our surroundings can bring us closer to the stories of suffering, of madness, of pleasure and of stories of liberation that is carried through the flesh and bones of another. Each time we express the hidden textures of our internal landscape through our moaning we gift the world a piece of ourselves. When we extend ourselves through our moaning, a piece of our affective membrane trembles within the flesh of the listener. This is the gift of the moan. And in daring to let go of control and let our hearts shatter as an aftereffect of listening to the wailing of another, we show the courage to be present with the shrieking of a mother screaming for her dead child. It is attending to these wild screams longing to be heard that we become revolutionised.

The moan is the soundscape that connects us to our living environment and can therefore teach us how to live more fully. Everything that is alive, everything that carries the breath of Life moans, wails, groans, shrieks, sighs and whimpers.<sup>4</sup> If we listen carefully we can hear the wails of the sea crashing against the shore and perhaps it tells us the tales of black and brown bodies that lie at the bottom of the Mediterranean sea, pushed into death by the border guards of Fortress Europe. In [this YouTube video](#) (Banna 2012, from 12:20 onwards), the belated Palestinian singer Rim Banna performs a song that Palestinian mothers sang when they would visit their kin in prison. This song would send a message to those imprisoned that the youth in resistance would free them in the night. They would add a shrieking kind of lelele-sound before the words to confuse the prison guards and ensure their misunderstanding of the lyrics. I propose that if we attune our listening to the wind, then perhaps we can hear in its howling the words of solace that a mother sung, as a prayer, released into the wind in the hope that it reaches her kin turned fugitive, forced into hiding from the clutches of the Occupation.

With moaning as a form of storytelling, I'm proposing that if we attend to the wind's howling, perhaps we can hear the howling elation of Gazans breaking free on 7 October 2023 through the fences of the open air prison and [touching for the first time with bare feet their ancestral land](#) (Al Quds Al Bawsala 2023)? In "The Principle of Return: the repressed ruptures of Zionist time", Adam Hajyahia (2024) describes this moment as an image of return that ruptures the settler colonial capture of time by the Zionist State. Hajyahia writes:

The Gazan man's words reach us through his mobile phone. He pants, his voice cracks, muffled, he cries, reiterating: "These are our occupied lands, these are our occupied lands." Around him, a flock of Gazans appeared to be scattering, seizing the moment to roam without limits, while others kneeled to kiss the soil that birthed them.

With a cracking voice, this man repeatedly whimpers: "Beer el Sabe 'oh my homeland, it is within you where the falcon sang," calling out the name of the historically largest town Beer el Sabe in the Naqab desert that was captured and occupied in 1948. Leaning in closely to the soft wailing in the man's voice, I can almost see the historic town of Beer el Sabe coming alive through the emptied wilderness. While listening to the wind's howling, perhaps we can wail along the prayer "Beer el Sabe, it is within you where the falcon sang" and reinforce this temporary moment of return, of land being kissed by her loving custodians.



The moan as a storyteller urges the listener towards the provocation that sharing one's mourning with others through moaning songs and daring to surrender oneself to the unknown in the other's mourning, is a radical form of solidarity and camaraderie. To give expression to the heaviness and the joyfulness of our lived experiences through the moan makes one more perceptive to the wailing in the hearts of others. I want to live in a world where solidarity is practiced through fondness, through listening, through pushing against what is presented as fixed or stable. I want to lend my voice, my shrieks, my moans, as a way of amplifying the voices of all of us who are brutalised on the daily.

to make such painful sounds that the stones want to weep

to practice hearing the weeping in everything *uuhhhmmmm*  
the wind weeps. the lake weeps. the flags weep *oeheoeheoeoe*  
the dutch boy delivering food weeps *mehhemehemehhhmm*  
listening to this common weeping is to move away from atrophy and apathy  
from de-pression *aaarrghghghghg*  
from a state of dis-attachment *neeehheeneehhhneehhhh*  
a state of being, from which one can no longer hear the weeping of  
whales/winds  
how those groaning whales and howling winds tell the tale of another future  
*yuuwahhwuaahh*  
a thundering noise of whining so deep, so disastrous, that by producing  
such sounds *aaaarruuuaaghhhh* future stones *UUUGGHHHAHAUAHH* in  
future hearts are prevented

Imagine one's comrade sighing deeply and offering a challenging afterthought as they breathe out. What does it mean exactly to offer one's breath as a form of solidarity? In cultures that lack embodied knowledge on ways of dealing with conflict, discomfort or tension, breath that expresses a complaint of the status quo, is interpreted as a threat to social comfort and therefore often received with rejection, refusal or neglect. For example, in Dutch culture the word *gezellig*, loosely translated as "cosy," is at the heart of the dominant culture. Every gathering concludes by affirming how *gezellig* it was. On the other hand, the word *gezellig* can also be used to silence conversations that feel uncomfortable. When for example one complains about the racist, anti-black Dutch cultural tradition of "Zwarte Piet," a way of silencing that protest is by framing it as *ongezellig* or not-cosy. The inability and unwillingness to be present with social discomfort or conflict by rejecting, hushing, or neglecting and thus finally rendering the complaint nonexistent, is at the heart of Dutch *gezelligheid* culture. So to embrace the social tension that a sigh or a moan may produce, is to offer one's comrade an exchange of breath. How can we learn to listen to a mother shriek when the Israeli soldier kills her child in front of his classmates as a way of setting an example for any resistance? What of "the self" does one have to destroy in order to let the wild shrieking of another enter the body, rattle the bones and offer back a wailing song?

"To make such painful sounds that the stones want to weep" is a sentence by Martín Prechtel, a spiritual practitioner from New-Mexico who served for more than twenty five years as a spiritual guide of the Tuzutujil people in Lake Atitlán, Guatamala. In a live lecture on YouTube entitled "Grief

and Praise” (Prechtel 2015), he engages the listeners with the Mayan cosmological understanding that grief and praise are two limbs of the same body. Prechtel speaks about how in order to truly honour our loss we ought to make sounds that make the stones weep. Martín explains that when we are grieving by way of wailing loudly, pulling the hair, thrashing the body on the ground, we are actually praising the life that was lost. Hence, when we are truly praising someone or something, we are struck by the mortality of life, and therefore our praise becomes the expression of our grief. Weaving my practice with the Mayan cosmology on the inextricable relationship between grief and praise, I’m proposing that each moan is an extension of our grief *and* praise. Each moan, as a sonic symbol, transmits data about our lived reality in order to claim a witness. When this wailing inner space is shared with others, through a sonic utterance, the room thickens with the multilayered fabric of grief. So, to speak of a space that honours grief is to speak of a space that does not shy away or is not fearful of the heart-wrenching materiality of praise.

### The Task is to Train Ourselves to be with Overwhelm

squirmy notes  
the scooping out  
of micro/macro sufferings  
what landscapes, hidden by neglect, need watering?  
what textures, stained with pain, need greeting?  
what of our chaos do we offer back to the chaos?  
my guts are here to be taken  
take these testimonial guts  
may these bowels be an offering to the altar of liberation

The idea to surrender to “the overwhelm” as a psychic experience is inspired by New York-based psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou, which I’ll explain further below. The task is to train ourselves personally and collectively with “ego-shattering” processes, so that we may become creatures not afraid of overwhelm and the schizo-frantic energy produced by expanding into the unknown. The task is to continuously lean into feeling the edges of the psychic fabrics that define us as individuals and as a collective. The task is to become invested in training that muscle of expanding into the edges of what and whom we think we are and the transformations we are capable of.

Traumatophobia, we’ll see, is concerned principally with an unconscious that warehouses repressed memories, painful inscriptions, and intergenerationally transmitted trauma, whereas traumatophilia is hospitable to conceiving of the unconscious as an enduring opacity that cannot be organised by memory or symbolisation. (Saketopoulou 2023, 1075)

By thinking about moaning through Saketopoulou’s lens of “traumatophilia,” I want to speculate how moaning can undo the immobility of symbols and meanings aroused by one’s traumatic experiences and perhaps support one to transform the physical realities of our wounds. By moaning, one is attuning to the psychosomatic body. Through imagery and or imaginative narration, one can learn how to somatically retrace the hurt (the micro/macro suffering) of the

singular and collective experiences. Saketopoulou writes that a “traumatophobic” attitude in the field of psychoanalysis considers the unconscious as a warehouse for the symbols of our wounds and applies psychoanalytic tools as a way to “understand” or “grasp” the symbols that lead us to our traumas. Saketopoulou juxtaposes this norm within psychoanalysis with the idea of “traumatophilia.” That is, she refuses that the unconscious can be understood and organized, and introduces, instead, an approach to the unconscious through Glissant’s concept of opacity ([1990] 1997), the refusal to “grasp” the experience by pressuring the understanding of it and therefore undermining the poëntial (poetic potential) of the unconscious.

it is madness to let ourselves be so close to the edges of falling apart  
but I've always thought of myself as someone fond of edge-play  
the no-go-zones that are the peripheries  
reaching for Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieu*  
playing in / with / around the edges produces emotional highs  
that excessive excitement that arouses from the banlieu  
strengthens the cardiac metabolism

When tending to an open wound of trauma by way of moaning, it can guide us closer and even help in touching the wound without attempting to “know” it. We do not need to organize the meaning of our wounds by categorising our memories into neatly branded identities in order to give expression to the sonic textures of the wail that is wrapped in the sensations of the flesh. Tracing the moan inside one’s own internal landscape and folding it into the sound of the howling wind, is a somatic way of activating and expanding the imagery of our suffering through an improvised song in collaboration with our living surrounding. When professional mourners wail, their moaning songs do not only speak about a particular loss, even if the lyrics of their song refer to one specific instance. It is the opaque nature of the mourner’s improvised song that touches the moaner and the public beyond the specificity of loss that the community has gathered around. As a matter of fact, attempts to solidify the meaning and or origin of our open wounds can distract us from the energetic power of the poëntial of the moan. That is, the fixation of explaining the mytho-symbols of our open wounds through consequential logic is based both on the simplification of our traumas and also on the premise that they can be solved or “fully healed.” As Martín Prechtel wisely notes: “There’s nothing to fix, you just have to let it [it being the grief] rock.”

Attending to a specific kind of image and/or feeling, whose pain holds a threatening tension, and then translating this psychosomatic touching of the open hurt into a long slow wailing exhalation, leads to the experience of a traumatophilic repetition. Saketopoulou writes:

Traumatophilic repetitions can effect a psychic blow (a traumatism) that, working like the second coup in the psychic mechanism of the *après-coup*, stands to unfreeze the meanings originally engraved in traumatic experience (translations). Such blows are often misread as retraumatizing, but what they may sometimes effect, instead, is a *rebooting of psychic energies*, putting in motion forces that can be psychically transformative. That such kindling is not anodyne and may even be painful or court abjection does not mean that it is necessarily traumatic: such

traumatism may motor psychically transformative work enlarging the field of experience. (Saketopoulou 2023, 1071)

Each moaning utterance is the poetic, sonic translation of the attempt to touch the wound. Each moaning utterance is charged with the energetic potential of the open hurt. Listening to wailing utterances of others can for some be extremely unsettling when having been raised in a culture deeply saturated in emotional apathy or repression. For example, after I had performed a lecture in which the moan was woven into the talk, an audience member asked me: "Why did you have to do that to us? Why did you have to make us so uncomfortable?" I was grateful for these questions because these questions reflected precisely upon the unsettling nature of the moan. That there is something at risk for our ego's so-called stability when we become passable or permeable to our neighbours' disastrous shrieks. That by listening to the raging groans of a mob gathered to oppose an ongoing genocide, orchestrated by our governments, we open ourselves up to that affective world and become undone by the reverberations of the mob's raging chants. To dare to sit in the overwhelm while we listen to the screams of people who are being chased like cockroaches by U.S.-made bombs, fired by the Zionists, to dare to sit and lean into the shrieks that come bursting through our screens, we become affectively stained, coloured, or dirtied by the wild bemoaning utterances of humanity.



*Figs. 3 and 4. These are images of the Moaning Choir research residency I did in 2020, at WORM, Rotterdam, programmed by James Arnell. Photos taken by Julia Gat.*

## To Bear Witness to the Ongoing Nakba by Way of Moaning

ooooooooehhhhhhhhhhhh  
ooooeehhh ooooooooooeuuuuuuwwwwwhhh  
aaaaaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhuuahahahauuuu  
uuwwagahhh uuwwagagagahhh uuwwwwwwwwagagagagahhhhh

We live in unprecedented times wherein we witness the slow but certain collapse of the Western hegemony in the global community. The leaders of the West can no longer hide the intrinsic brutal nature of their so-called “civilisations” behind a veil of morality and continue to impose its death-



driven mania upon the Global Majority without the massive uprising and armed backlash from the global community.

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence? Is the "terrible beauty" that resides in such a scene something akin to remedy as Fred Moten would seem to suggest? (Hartman 2008, 4)

During the course of this year, I have continuously engaged with “the stories that are told by those who live in such an intimate relationship to death” by frantically tracing “shrieks that find their way into speech and song” in the stories and video fragments of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. I have been using my practice as a way of bearing witness to these stories, these images of mass destruction, these horrifying scenes of genocide. On the duty and dilemma of bearing witness to the mass slaughter of her people, Sarah Aziza published an online text called “The Work of the Witness” (Aziza 2024). In it she explains that the Arabic word for witnessing shares the same root as the word martyr شهيد, *shahid*, namely شهد. The martyr is the one whose death is marked, touched and stained by bearing witness to oppression. Aziza remarks that: “To be a witness is to make contact, to be touched, and to bear the marks of this touch.” For me the protocol for bearing witness to the shrieks of Palestinians live-streaming the onslaught of their people, is through a continuous practice of the moan. In order to “revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence,” I turn to translating my witnessing into an ambiguous but affective wailing speech that refuses to grasp at the piercing imagery of death.

For example, I notice the moan in [a small fragment on Instagram](#) (Middle East Eye 2024) of a 1973 documentary, *Scenes from Under Occupation in Gaza*, by Mustafa Abu Ali, that shows a Palestinian woman throwing her hands frantically towards the camera. She is standing in front of her house that has been struck by an Israeli bomb as she looks at the rubbles that was once her life. She repeatedly pulls her arms towards her head, to throw them back into the air in the viewer's direction. Her hands become a raging mantra, her face twisting and pulling into deep groans that express her desperation over the destruction of her life and that of her people. This repeated choreography of thrashing arms, hands and contorted facial gestures becomes a curse, a seething curse. A curse enacted onto every person who watches such a devastation with a sense of apathy and disinterest. A stretched-out groan dances through her face translated by each facial muscle that shrieks and reflects the pain and suffering she feels inside her body. We see a woman whose whole body becomes the wailing utterances of her heart. Her body's gesturing is totally in sync with that deep groaning wound inflicted by the Zionist airstrike on her house.

*uuuuuaaaaarrrrrrghhhhhh  
uuuuaaaaawwwwwwrrrrgggghhgghhh*



## The Moan as the Shared Thread of our Collective Grief

a shattering moan dismembers everything fixed  
a shrieking moan ruptures the tightness of the skin  
a singing wail becomes the undoing of fear  
a sighing whimper collaborates with the denseness of the flesh  
a thunderous roar spreads wings of furious metal  
a wet silent sigh slips into the cracks of your crevices

Interweaving the holy battle of Karbala with the genocide unfolding in Gaza, the brilliant Aleeha asks a vital question: “What is our grief, if it isn’t collective?” What is our grief, if we don’t braid our cries and our shaking guts with the stories and songs of others in suffering? What happens to the power in the shared experience of oppression, if we fail to listen to a mass groaning for liberation and fail to perceive the poetics of this collective call? To say that our grief is collective is to join with our voices the wailing calls of those deemed “less than human” or simply as “human-animals” and to show up to this comradeship with an undeterred and anchored stamina. Embodied practices of grief that invoke the collective nature of grief unambiguously push one’s solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle and that of All Peoples who fight for liberty from sadistic and narcissistic tyranny. Needless to say, an individualistic world ruled by apathy and disinterest is a disastrous threat to the future of our kind on this beautiful earth. I am dumbstruck by how many people continue to look away from atrocities, remaining silent in the face of a genocide and settler violence, and devilishly ignoring how each of our singular lives is complicit in a war industry that gleefully sacrifices the sacred bodies of innocent civilians. I am flabbergasted that many people are bringing up all kinds of reasons to excuse their lack of engagement with what happens “over there.” The mass destruction of precious life is one thing, but to observe non-feeling and the non-affectedness and the catering towards individual needs above collective liberation is extremely terrifying.

Now at last I want to make a return to the sound of حق, *haqq*, the justice principle, that Hajyahia brilliantly writes about. I want to lean in closely to the sound of images of freedom and return that he draws for us. I want to listen to the excessive sounds produced by Palestinians, the occupied, as they continue to tug, tear, scratch, slit and rupture the Zionist settler grip that aims to encapture Palestine in a death-driven mania. Hajyahia writes how the principle of return for Palestinians has to do with a justice principle where Palestinians continuously choose how to live instead of surrendering to capture. I want to lean in and listen to these acts of living through which Palestinians envision a future time, a free time, their own time. Hajyahia writes:

With every shattered fence in Gaza, bombarded checkpoint in Jerusalem, clandestine escape from Tulkarm, surreptitious break out of the Gilboa prison, stealthy act of smuggling out of Jenin, and annual activations of *Iqrith* or *Bir'im*—physical, literal returns to places of dispossession despite military, legal and carceral prohibitions—we have been returning time and again, accumulating negative spells of time, no matter how short or fleeting they are, as returned beings. (Hajyahia 2024)

I come closer in order to listen to the deep exhalations that the dispossessed make when outsmarting the so-called “most advanced military in the world” with just a spoon. I close my eyes and imagine the groaning whispers of a clandestine escape, and how the earth momentarily held her breath in an act of solidarity with the escaped. I focus and hear the moaning in these accumulated negative spells of time and listen to the musical piece that is composed by a dignified people who dream up liberation within every act.

As I braid together the last thoughts in this piece, I want to whisper in some words of Hartman’s from *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Trans Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) that I have memorised almost as holy scripture.

Freedom is the kind of thing that required you to leave your bones on the hills at Brimsbay, or to burn the cane fields, or to live in a garret for seven years, or to stage a general strike, or to create a new republic. It is won and lost, again and again. It is a glimpse of possibility, an opening, a solicitation without any guarantee of duration before it flickers and then is extinguished. (Hartman 2007, 169–170)

Freedom is won and lost. Again and again, freedom is won and lost. Freedom cannot be given; freedom has to be taken. Each time we let out an elongated shriek as our singular and collective refusal of death-driven culture, each moment we listen to our siblings’ bemoaning bodies sacrificed on the altar of extractivist and colonial logic, each delirious and utopic gesture we manifest into the world, through our bodies and voices, is a glimpse of a possibility for liberation. It is through these daily attempts of feeling, feeling more, feeling more than, feeling more than we think we can feel, that we crack open the normalization of atrophy and apathy-ridden societies. And when we experience that glimpse of an opening, may we be able to hear the spirits in the wind’s howling, the earth’s sighing, the waters wailing and the mountains’ singing, rejoicing and celebrating alongside us this momentary gift of liberation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I don’t believe in gender, just like I refuse that there is a logic called race, caste, class etc. Yet our material realities, our sense of belonging or non-belonging, our identities and our livelihoods are defined by these social constructs. This is my way of acknowledging that. As much as I refuse the logic of these identifiers, they are also constantly projected onto us and therefore mould our sense of self and relations.

<sup>2</sup> A good resource to start from is Wikipedia. And also Dabashi (2011).

<sup>3</sup> In my practice, the politics and spiritual urgencies of this is a way of honouring and braiding onto Édouard Glissant’s cosmological understanding which was generously proposed to us in *The Poetics of Relation* ([1990] 1997).

<sup>4</sup> I like to think of the moan as an umbrella sonic expression for these other sounds that express the affective state of grief.



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## Biography

Raoni/Muzho Saleh is a Hazara Afghan artist using performance, installation and the sound of mourning moaning to twist and reshape narratives of (cultural) becoming. His work's focus is to play with fugitivity, by not settling on a rigid form. Applying movement and sound as a transformational kind of poetry, he searches for how to continuously be something else, something strange. His practice is engaged with the entanglement of body, spirit, politics and love within art. Through the use of materials such as movement, voice, text and textile he makes works that temporarily immerse both audience and performers in otherworldly thinking, feeling and relating.

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