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The Decolonial Aesthetics of Failure in Ali Hatami's *Haji Washington* (1982)

Amirhossein Vafa 

Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Iran
Email: a.vafa@shirazu.ac.ir

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Abstract

Based freely on the writings of Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri, Persia's first ambassador to the United States (1888–1889), *Haji Washington* (1982) was Ali Hatami's first feature film following the Islamic Revolution. This article explores Hatami's departure from historical record in light of his aesthetic and political appropriation of Nuri's image as a failure. Viewing the film through a methodology that recasts failure as decolonial praxis beyond post/colonial mastery, I argue that Haji's embrace of failure, and his ultimate adoption of relationality as a mode of worldliness, constitute a “decolonial aesthetics of failure” with broad implications for both the world of the narrative and the moment of the film's production in postrevolutionary Iran.

Keywords: Ali Hatami; *Haji Washington*; Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri; failure; decoloniality

There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which *failure* is feasible. Honourable. Sometimes even worth striving for. Worlds in which recognition is not the only barometer of brilliance or human worth.

– Arundhati Roy

A hajj to Washington

In late September 1888, Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri (1849–1937), Persia's first ambassador to the United States, was crossing the Atlantic aboard RMS Servia. The English ocean liner, Nuri wrote with great enthusiasm, was burning “*pānsad kharvār zoghāl*,” a whopping 150 tons of coal per day on its way to New York harbor.¹ Yet it was not only the ship's carbon footprint that intrigued Nuri, but the “one-thousand-four-hundred” souls on board, nearly all of whom were Europeans fleeing poverty in what was a growing influx of migration to North America during the 19th century. Nuri found the Irish, “whom having not yet landed ashore called themselves American,” the most interesting lot perhaps because, as an Iranian, he shared their grievances against “the iniquities” of the British Empire.²

¹ Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri, quoted in Homāyun Shahidi, introduction to *Safar Nāmeḥ-ye Chicago: Khāterāt-e Hāj Mirzā Mohammadali Mo'in al-Saltaneh beh Orupā va Āmrīka*, ed. Shahidi (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Elmi, 1363 [1984]), 107. Since Nuri's travelogue has not been separately published, scholars cite him either directly via the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives or via historians of early US-Iranian relations. The primary source I have chosen for this paper, Shahidi's introduction to *Safar Nāmeḥ-ye Chicago*, is (in my view) the most coherent and comprehensive collocation of Nuri's writings in print. All translations are mine.

² Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 108. See also “Immigration to the United States, 1851–1900,” Library of Congress, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/rise-of-industrial-america-1876-1900/immigration-to-united-states-1851-1900/>.

Nuri – as per his pejorative epithet “Haji Washington” – was on a proverbial pilgrimage to the US capital. In the course of his year-long embassy, he established the first Iranian delegation in Washington and formally met with President Grover Cleveland. He also wrote a short memoir and series of letters to his sovereign Nāser al-Din Shāh, which address the beauties of American democracy and its inherent contradictions, the melting pot of refugee cultures that inspired the union and the indigenous genocide that enabled it: “Refugees from foreign lands have gathered in America and formed these United States, the foundations of which are more formidable than the Gates of Alexander and whose stature is higher than the vault of heaven.” And yet, he added with rhetorical hyperbole, “Not even one indigene of this New World could be found for observation. Like an eagle in search of prey, they devoured them all!”³ Nuri’s other-oriented imagination was also self-reflexive, as he reflected on the advancements made in the United States and relayed his views to the shah in didactic terms. He described the Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, and attributed its engineering marvels to the welfare of the masses, the education of women, and the freedom of former slaves.⁴ His apparent naivety notwithstanding, Nuri was earnestly promoting the US as a new ally that, like Persia, resented European empires as “foreign intruders” (*Ajnabi*), but which, unlike Persia, held its “public functionaries” (*omanā-ye dolat*) accountable before the law.⁵

In 1982, the Iranian filmmaker Ali Hatami adapted Nuri’s memoir and correspondences into his first feature film following the Islamic Revolution (1979). *Haji Washington*, which, as Hamid Naficy describes, “dealt squarely with the selfing and othering discourses of modernity,” is a creative retelling of Nuri’s Washington travelogue in postrevolutionary Iran.⁶ Produced shortly after the Hostage Crisis at the American embassy in Tehran (1979–1981), the film returns to the 19th-century inception of US-Iranian relations at a moment of postcolonial crisis: the escalation of hostilities between the two nations that continues to this day. Hatami, who regularly worked with “historical characters and events as the basis of his work,” produced “elaborate” representations that were not necessarily “accurate,” but which, as Shahla Mirbakhtyar notes, were rewritten to “appear and talk as though they are poets and philosophers” addressing the audience today.⁷ *Haji Washington*, for instance, is based on the complexities of Nuri’s writing and the eccentricities of his career. Yet it chooses, deliberately rather than pejoratively, to portray him as a *failure*. In a dramatic monologue and one of the film’s iconic scenes, Nuri’s character, simply known as Haji, describes himself as “*sakht*” (awkward), “*dodel*” (ambivalent), “*moraddad*” (hesitant), “*mariz*” (sickly), “*mofsed*” (corrupt), “*rosvā*” (disgraced), “*doru*” (a hypocrite), “*daghal*” (an imposter), and “*motemallegh*” (a flatterer).⁸

This article is a reflection on Hatami’s departure from historical record in light of his aesthetic and political appropriation of Nuri’s image as a failure. I begin with the roots of the schism, in modern Iranian historiography, between “Nuri” the historical figure and “Haji Washington” the fictional representation. The latter has been the subject of ridicule among detractors who characterize Nuri, Persia’s first ambassador to the United States, as the defeatist Other to the defiant self-image of modern Iranian nationalism, particularly with regard to the contemporary geopolitics of US-Iranian relations. In his adaptation of

³ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 126.

⁴ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 120–121.

⁵ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 120.

⁶ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1, *The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 305–306.

⁷ Shahla Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006), 85–86.

⁸ *Haji Washington*, directed by Ali Hatami (Tehran: I.R.I.B. Channel 1, 1361 [1982]), VHS, 00:55:40–00:55:54. See also Ali Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār-e Ali Hātami*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 1376 [1997]), 749. In this article, I cite the film when analyzing its visual composition and cite the screenplay when closely reading the characters’ verbal expression.

Nuri's travelogue, Hatami, who is not among Nuri's detractors, nevertheless conceived a blend of fact and fiction that may seem obscure or pathetic at first blush. I, however, propose that a methodical reading of the film reveals an alternative portrait of failure in which, by refusing normativity within the established political frameworks, the Haji character conceives new ways of being, becoming, and relating. Viewing *Haji Washington* through an eclectic methodology that recasts failure as decolonial praxis, I argue that Haji's embrace of failure beyond mastery, and his ultimate adoption of relationality as a mode of worldliness, constitute a "decolonial aesthetics of failure" with broad implications for both the world of the narrative and the moment of the film's production in postrevolutionary Iran.

The myth of "Haji Washington"

The cultural inscription of "Haji Washington" as a disgraced Qajar emissary occurred immediately upon Nuri's departure from the US. Before he left Washington in the summer of 1889, the *Los Angeles Times* published a satirical piece, "Mr. Ghooly Gets Mad," deriding Nuri for taking offence at the negative press coverage of Nāser al-Din Shāh's forthcoming visit to Europe. Nuri, according to the report, even attributed his departure to "the unkind, ungenerous things that had been written about him and his sovereign in the American newspapers." Mocking the ambassador's grievances, and rhyming with his name Hoseyn Qoli Khān, the reporter sneered, "Ghooly Khan't scare us worth a cent" since American strategic interests in Persia "are chiefly confined to cats, rugs, and insect powder."⁹

Back in Iran, the orientalist jibe "Mr. Ghooly" mutated into a local counterpart, "Haji Washington." Nuri's chief detractor at home, the court chronicler and confidant of the shah E'temād al-Saltaneh (1843–1896), brought charges of "madness" against Nuri and, on at least three occasions, called him "*divāneh*" (mad) in a chain of insults exposing the author's "personal animus."¹⁰ Nevertheless, E'temād al-Saltaneh's canonical memoir registered a disparaging tone that continues to shape popular opinions of Nuri as a historical figure. In his polemical history of US-Iranian relations in the wake of the Islamic Revolution, Eskandar Deldam argues that the neocolonial state of 20th-century US foreign policy towards Iran finds its roots in the compromises made by early "Americophiles" such as Nuri.¹¹ Informed by the hostile reception and subsequent banning of the *Haji Washington* film by state media, which similarly charged Hatami with treason until the ban was lifted in 1998, Deldam further claims that Nāser al-Din Shāh coined and gave the epithet "Haji Washington" to Nuri in gest, humiliating both the ambassador and his sovereign for their lack of personal and national dignity.¹²

It goes without saying that serious historians of the Qajar era (1789–1925), who refuse to view the period as the backward Other to the presentism of Iranian modernity, simply reject such caricatures.¹³ Hossein Kamaly views Nuri as an illustrious member of the "career bureaucrats consolidated in the late Qajar period," whose "eventual siding with the Constitutional Revolution [1905–1911]" demonstrated "his commitment, not as a courtier

⁹ "Mr. Ghooly Gets Mad," *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1889. I am indebted to John Ghazvinian, *America and Iran: A History 1720 to the Present* (London: OneWorld, 2020), chap. 3, for his overview of US press coverage of Nuri's sojourn in Washington.

¹⁰ Hossein Kamaly, "ĤĀJI VĀŠANGTON," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haji-vasangton>. See also E'temād al-Saltaneh, *Ruznāmeḥ-ye Khāterāt-e E'temād al-Saltaneh*, ed. Iraj Afshār (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Amir Kabir, 1350 [1971]), 751, 756, and 961.

¹¹ Eskandar Deldam, *Haji Washington* (Tehran: Beh Āfarin, 1390 [2011]), 123.

¹² Deldam, *Haji Washington*, 108. For a thorough overview of the official reception of Hatami's *Haji Washington*, see Ramin S. Khanjani, *Animating Eroded Landscapes: The Cinema of Ali Hatami* (H&S Media, 2014), chap. 3. For original excerpts of the reviews, see also "Gozideh Naqda-ye 'Haji Washington' dar Zamān-e Sākht," *E'temād*, Mehr 24, 1391 (October 15, 2012), <https://www.magiran.com/article/2603059>.

¹³ For critiques of modernist historiography of the Qajar era, see Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 7; and Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir Al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831–1896* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xiv.

but as a bureaucrat, to the advancement of Persia.”¹⁴ More recently, John Ghazvinian has argued that the appointment of a seasoned diplomat like Nuri, who had already served as Persia’s General Consul in India, reveals “the mood of optimism and possibility” that impelled the Qajars to look for a new ally in the United States. Ghazvinian, who correctly draws the line between the historicity and fictionality of Nuri, still views Hatami’s film as one that “savagely” perpetuated the myth of the “lunatic” and depicted Nuri as “a self-important, bloviating ass who made a fool of himself and his country.”¹⁵

My contention, however, is that Hatami’s representation of Haji Washington should be read as a work of speculative history – a retrospective look at the inception of US-Iranian relations before the dawn of American global hegemony and the advent of modern Iranian nationalism – in order to transcend what Ervand Abrahamian calls their “deadly embrace” since the 20th century.¹⁶ I do not, of course, intend to demystify the myth of “Haji Washington” or rehistoricize “Nuri” as a successful diplomat. As a writer, he was articulate enough to be accessible to the impartial reader; and as an emissary, he was too privileged with wealth and global mobility to be regarded as a subaltern in need of restorative justice. Without conflating Nuri with Haji Washington, for the latter is Hatami’s representation recasting a grandiose politician as a precarious figure no longer representative of power politics, I look for moments of personal and political failure when the Haji character aspires, but fails, to claim national sovereignty and metropolitan recognition but instead learns new modes of being and relating. By sketching yet another caricature, Hatami has not legitimized Nuri’s orientalist and self-orientalizing detractors, but instead envisioned a decolonial aesthetics that transcend both the discourse of mastery at the heart of Iranian modernity and the postrevolutionary moment of the film’s production.¹⁷

Failure as decolonial praxis

Previous scholars of Hatami’s cinema have interpreted Haji’s failure as abject and politically moot. Hamid Naficy views Haji as an “overwrought delusional” character whose nostalgia for

¹⁴ Kamaly, “HĀJĪ VĀŠANGTON.”

¹⁵ Ghazvinian, *Iran and America*, chap. 3.

¹⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 1.

¹⁷ A synopsis of the film is imperative before laying out my analytical framework. At the outset of *Haji Washington*, the camera blinks to a late summer day in 1888, when Haji (‘Ezatollāh Entezāmi) and his entourage are leaving Tehran with a skeptical crowd bidding them adieu. Arriving in Washington, he first marvels at the industrial advancement of the US capital, but soon retires to his quarters to prepare his letter of credence. Failing to render it in English due to his translator Mirzā Mahmud Khān’s (Ludovico Della Jojo) incompetence, they end up plagiarizing the Ottoman ambassador, replacing any reference to the Turks with the Persians. Their ineptitude continues the next day at the State Department and the day after at the White House, where Haji meets with President Cleveland (Richard Harrison) and recites a bombastic speech followed by a handful of pistachios as souvenir. Afterwards, just outside the White House, Haji has the first of his two epileptic seizures. He soon sets up the Iranian embassy, but finds the establishment in disarray. There are no visitors, no business to run, and with the embassy funds drying up, he is forced to dismiss his staff and servants before long. Even his translator Mirzā leaves to study medicine, and the period of Haji’s isolation begins. Two major events mark these lonely days: Haji’s observance of Eid al-Adha, when he sacrifices a lamb while delivering a dramatic monologue on his personal and political failures, and Grover Cleveland’s surprise visit, which borders on hallucination, at the end of which Haji realizes that Cleveland is no longer president and only needs the pistachio seeds he was first given. Disillusioned, Haji shuts down the embassy until one day, he grants refuge to a Native American fugitive named Crazy Horse (Russel Case). Haji first anoints Crazy Horse as a souvenir for the shah, but his masterful attitude soon changes. When an envoy from the State Department visits to negotiate extradition, Haji does not give in to pressure; and after his translator Mirzā returns to confront him over the refugee crisis, Haji succumbs to his second epileptic episode. During this seizure, the Native American risks his life, leaving the embassy to seek help, but, targeted by the police, he is fatally shot. The death of the refugee also seals Haji Washington’s fate. In the epilogue, Haji is chastised for his weakness of character and the failure of his embassy. Having been recalled to Tehran, Haji boards a boat and, in the closing shot, fades into the Atlantic.

“his country’s importance” makes him overlook its “impotence” in the real world.¹⁸ Negar Mottahedeh similarly sees Haji as a tragic figure desperate “to recall and then to balance” his national identity in his encounter with modernity, but instead “withers away in exile” having failed to achieve “a new configuration of selfhood.”¹⁹ In a more rigorous examination, Kamran Rastegar interprets “the multiple layers of mistranslation, miscommunication, and misconception” between Haji and his American hosts as Hatami’s critique of Iranian modernity, “when its narrative is disturbed by points of contact across linguistic, social, historical regions.”²⁰ All three scholars correctly recognize the significance of Haji’s failures. However, because they exclusively approach Iranian modernity as a narrative of development or lack thereof – namely, for the Iranian self to materialize and thrive, or collapse in defeat, in the face of Western modernity – they gloss over the possibility that Haji’s failure may be read as his rejection of normative subjectivity, and as Hatami’s search for an alternative, decolonized selfhood.

In their introduction to a roundtable on the decolonial turn in Middle East Studies, Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua argue that despite “decades of engagement with nationalism and its postcolonial critique,” we have yet to tell “the story of decolonization as a constructive revolutionary endeavor that sought to radically and holistically transform all aspects of life within an ethical global context.”²¹ By rethinking decolonization beyond anticolonial nationalism, Schayegh and Di-Capua approach the process not merely “as a historical era” that began in 1945, but “as a broader human condition whose manifestations, while anchored in the postwar era, transcend it in significant ways.”²² Associating decolonization with the “human condition” invokes Walter D. Mignolo’s call for “an-other order of thinking” beyond what he (translating the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano) calls the “colonial matrix of power,” or the coloniality of being shaped by the modern world order.²³

Within Iranian Studies, Hamid Dabashi’s scholarship parallels Mignolo’s search for “an-other” worldliness. Concerned with the hegemony of the Islam-West dichotomy in modern Iran, Dabashi calls for a “critical geography” in postcolonial discourse that does not upend the world in such “cross-essentializing terms,” replacing the dominance of “the West” with that of “Islam.”²⁴ Rather, he searches for a “defiant subject” for whom resistance to coloniality is not limited to the “revolutionary theorization of violence,” but also embedded in the “cosmopolitan worldliness” of Iranian literature and cinema.²⁵ Studying the filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, for instance, Dabashi argues that the trajectory of Makhmalbaf’s career, and his transformation from a “militant activist” in the 1970s to a “visionary filmmaker” since the 1980s, demonstrates “the creative crafting of a defiant subject” who de-centers the grand Eurocentric narratives of Iranian modernity by not essentializing the West as his only “interlocutor” on the global stage.²⁶ Following Dabashi, I look at Ali Hatami as another Iranian filmmaker whose postrevolutionary film *Haji Washington* decolonizes our political imagination vis-à-vis the West. Yet I maintain that Hatami’s protagonist is

¹⁸ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 306.

¹⁹ Negar Mottahedeh, review of *Missing Persians: Discovering Voices in Iranian Cultural History*, by Nasrin Rahimieh, *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 1 (March 2003): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021086200001432>.

²⁰ Kamran Rastegar, “Literary Modernity before Novel and Nation: Transaction and Circulation between Nineteenth-century Arabic, Persian and English Literatures” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005), 1–4.

²¹ Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua, “Why Decolonization?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819001107>.

²² Schayegh and Di-Capua, “Why Decolonization?,” 142.

²³ Mignolo, “On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?,” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, eds. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 101–103.

²⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 138–9.

²⁵ Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism*, 171; Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 40.

²⁶ Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism*, 172–5.

not a subject of defiance, but one who chooses failure as “an-other” means to recast his post-colonial identity.

In a “critique of static models of success and failure,” Jack Halberstam argues that to transcend the epistemic violence inherent to the cultures of capitalist and colonial modernity, practicing failure could “offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”²⁷ Halberstam re-defines “failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline,” which, as both theory and praxis, “exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.”²⁸ Whereas the “[h]eteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement” under the conditions of modern capitalism, the “subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonproductive life styles, negativity, and critique.”²⁹ In his treatment of “art without markets, drama without a script, [and] narrative without progress,” Halberstam views failure “as a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle.” He also points to its potential “as a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming.”³⁰

The concept of “queer failure” has, in recent years, gained broad currency in critical theory as a counter-normative mode of resistance. “Queerness, blackness, brownness, minoritarian becoming, and the utopian imaginary,” queer theorists maintain, “resonate with each other as they all cohere around a certain ‘failure to be normal,’ unwilling or unable to submit to the pragmatic dictates of majoritarian being.”³¹ In a direct examination of failure as decolonial praxis, which is my point of entry into the storyworld of Hatami’s *Haji Washington*, J. Daniel Elam argues that, in contrast to the hegemonic postcolonial discourse that espouses “national independence, sovereignty, and authority,” there is a marginal yet significant brand of anticolonial thought that seeks “a political aesthetics centered on commitment to ‘inconsequence’ as a way of refusing future mastery and expertise.”³² In *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, Elam studies a selection of early 20th-century South Asian thinkers who, alarmed by the masterful logic of British imperialism, European fascism, and the specter of both over postcolonial nationalism, chose “modes of refusal, nonproductivity, inconsequence, inexpertise, and nonauthority” in their reading and writing practices.³³ The “recalcitrant ideals” of such thinkers advocated “a radical egalitarianism rooted in communal reading and collective textual criticism” that embraced what Elam calls “antiauthoritarian anticolonialism.”³⁴ That is, rather than “seeking recognition or self-mastery in order to demonstrate sovereignty” in the national and global arenas, “anticolonial antiauthoritarianism” pleads for the “relinquishment” and “disavowal” of mastery in order to remain “a perpetual novice,” a utopian subject position committed to open-ended learning “in the service of a world after colonial rule.”³⁵

If the embassy of Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri was a disgrace according to his historical detractors, as they did not deem his mission worthy of national recognition, Hatami reappropriates *Haji Washington* as a “perpetual novice.” Although he was more than capable of writing a

²⁷ Jack [Judith] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2. I am indebted to Julietta Singh’s *Unthinking Mastery*, cited in the following paragraphs, for discovering Halberstam’s work on failure and its extension to decoloniality.

²⁸ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

²⁹ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 89.

³⁰ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

³¹ Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong’o, and Ann Pellegrini, foreword to José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), xiv.

³² J. Daniel Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 5.

³³ Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, x. The thinkers Elam scrutinizes are Lala Har Dayal, B. R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi, and Bhagat Singh.

³⁴ Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, x.

³⁵ Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, 4, xiv.

faithful portrayal of Nuri's ambition and seriousness as a diplomat, Hatami's fictional representation of failure is a narrative strategy to critique and transcend the discourse of mastery in modern Iran. By "mastery," I am referring to the discourses of alterity and practices of domination that persist in the Global South (where colonialism was formally experienced) as the most enduring legacy of Western imperialism and/or the encounter with Euro-American modernity (in countries such as Iran, that were never fully colonized). Reflecting on the postcolonial condition in particular, Singh contends that "in their effort to decolonize, anticolonial thinkers in turn advocated practices of mastery—corporeal, linguistic, and intellectual—toward their own liberation" that reproduced the selfsame power imbalance between the self and its internal and external Others.³⁶ "In the anticolonial moment," Singh argues,

mastery largely assumed a Hegelian form [of master-slave dialectic] in which anticolonial actors were working through a desire or demand for recognition by another. The mastery at work in this project was one whose political resonance resided in national sovereignty and the legal principle of self-determination, one that approached the dismantling of mastery through an inverted binary that aimed to defeat colonial mastery through other masterful forms.³⁷

Take, for instance, the historical backdrop against which Hatami wrote and directed *Haji Washington*, the hostile geopolitics of modern US-Iranian relations, as a prime and poignant example of what Singh calls the defiance of "colonial mastery through other masterful forms."³⁸ On the one hand, the anticolonial backlash against the United States in revolutionary Iran was foreseeable, given that supporting the shah, as a solid regional ally, was integral to American foreign policy during the Cold War, overlooking human rights violations within Iran. On the other hand, as Arshin Adib-Moghaddam demonstrates, the postrevolutionary formation of anti-Americanism as an ideological pillar of the state relied on the "discursive dependency" of the Islamist self on its American Other, "in relation to and in vigorous cross-fertilisation with the concept of the 'West'."³⁹ The irony behind this new conception of Iranianness, in light of Singh's critique of postcolonialism, was the extension of colonial mastery into the postcolonial pursuit of national self-determination, best evident in the 444-day hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran (1979–1981).

Adapting Nuri's travelogue to film, Hatami made the provocative choice of returning to the more amicable, 1880s inception of US-Iranian relations rather than remaining in the turbulent moment of the film's 1980s production. Hatami, therefore, tapped into the possibilities that a precolonial encounter with the United States could provide, and which might (in retrospect of the event) decolonize the masterful ethos of anti-Americanism in Iran.⁴⁰ Adib-Moghaddam argues that the "hyphen" in-between the adjective "US-Iranian" is not

³⁶ Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

³⁷ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 3. On the replication of colonial epistemology in, and its extension into, the postcolony, see also Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); and David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁸ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 3.

³⁹ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Discourse and Violence: The Friend-Enemy Conjunction in Contemporary Iranian-American Relations," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 2, no. 3 (2009): 523, 519, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17539150903306238>.

⁴⁰ My reflections on Hatami's precolonial narrative in postcolonial times, and his conscious recourse to the inception of US-Iranian relations in the 1880s, are instructed by Nile Green's "ethnography of amity" in his reading of Mirzā Sāleh Shirazi's 1815 travelogue to Britain. Set before the emergence of British imperialism in West Asia, Green argues that Mirzā Sāleh's precolonial cultural transactions in England help the postcolonial reader today recast the future of Anglo-Iranian relations in more egalitarian terms. Nile Green, *The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen's London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 16–17.

mere a particle, but a sign that registers “the interdependence of radically exclusive concepts”: the postcolonial nation-state of Iran, on one end of the spectrum, opposing but in effect legitimizing the power of US imperialism on the other.⁴¹ Given the contradiction between this conscious defiance of coloniality and the unconscious replication of its inherent mastery, it is imperative to decolonize the “hyphen” in the US-Iranian divide and its endemic crisis of subjectivity. Hatami’s *Haji Washington* does just that through the decolonial aesthetics of failure embedded within, and beyond, the narrative.

“In order to loosen the hold of mastery,” Singh proposes, “we must learn to *read* for it” and explore representations of “vulnerability” that inspire the formation of “other less masterful subjectivities.”⁴² Singh conceives “vulnerable reading” as a decolonial methodology that approaches “mastery’s recurring failures in postcolonial literature as promising, hopeful, even utopian.”⁴³ The two pillars of Singh’s methodology, also the guiding principles of my own study, are failure and relationality. The former, which means “failing to master” for Singh, and which I theorized in dialogue with Halberstam and Elam, renders us “vulnerable to other possibilities for living, for being together in common, for *feeling* injustice and refusing it without the need to engage it through forms of conquest.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, by asking us to seek iterations of “vulnerability” that reveal “relations of dependency” instead of “mastery,” of being *with* and *for* the Other, Singh informs my conception of relational worldliness by proposing “vulnerable reading as an open, continuous practice that resists foreclosures by remaining unremittingly susceptible to new world configurations that reading texts—literary, artistic, philosophical, and political—can begin to produce.”⁴⁵ In sum,

The practice of vulnerable reading can move us “beyond” mastery, not in the sense of exceeding it but in the sense of *surviving* it in order to envision being otherwise in and for the world. By reading literature vulnerably—with a willingness toward undoing the very logic that constitute our own subjectivities—postcolonial literary texts can open us to other earthly relations and assemblages.⁴⁶

In my “vulnerable reading” of *Haji Washington*, I follow the trajectory of Haji’s unbecoming and regeneration as routes of worldmaking beyond mastery.⁴⁷ In an adaptation playfully cognizant of the source material, there are two sites of intertextuality whereby Hatami rewrites the calculated figure of Nuri into the precarious character of Haji Washington, marking an epistemic shift from mastery to relationality. Firstly, by distorting the facts around Nuri’s credentials, Hatami portrays Haji as the insecure emissary of a despotic monarchy nostalgic for glory, desperate to please his sovereign, the shah, as well as his host, the US president. Secondly, as the inconsequence of his mission increasingly looms large, Haji learns to accept his failure and returns to the relational ethics of Nuri’s writing, namely, his awareness of the Native American plight as the source of inspiration for the film’s denouement. Abandoning his previous pursuit of national sovereignty and metropolitan recognition, Haji finally embraces failure as a mode of counterhegemonic refusal, and risks his political future by

⁴¹ Adib-Moghaddam, “Discourse and Violence,” 525.

⁴² Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 7, 5.

⁴³ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 21.

⁴⁴ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 21.

⁴⁵ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 22–23.

⁴⁶ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 23.

⁴⁷ My analysis of *Haji Washington* centers on four key episodes, or cinematic sequences, which complete the main plotline: Haji’s visit to the White House upon his arrival, his observance of Eid al-Adha at his embassy, Grover Cleveland’s late-night visit to Haji, and the Native American (Crazy Horse) refugee crisis at the Iranian embassy, leading to Haji’s recall and departure from the United States. I will not, however, address two major sets of scenes that fall outside the scope of this study: scenes that reveal Tehran’s residents’ fascination with Haji’s American sojourn and scenes about Haji’s longing for his daughter, which become increasingly painful the more Haji loses his wits in exile.

granting refuge to a Native American fugitive at the Iranian embassy. As we then recall the actual hostage crisis of 1979–1981 at the American embassy in Tehran and hark back to the fictional refugee crisis at Haji’s embassy in Washington, Hatami’s decolonial aesthetics of failure inspires us to unlearn and rethink the normative assumptions of mastery in postrevolutionary Iran.

An audience with President Cleveland

There are two encounters with President Cleveland in *Haji Washington*, the first of which is historical and the second fictional. Nuri’s original account of his only meeting with the US president recalls a professional exchange of diplomatic niceties that, in contrast to Hatami’s adaptation, reveals no sign of subservience. Nuri opens with the Persian imperial government’s declaration to establish diplomatic relations with all “the great and civilized nations of the world,” and then celebrates the fledgling “bond of friendship” between “the great and ancient government of Iran” and “[your] venerable and newly-formed nation.”⁴⁸ President Cleveland, who has made note of Nuri’s equal footing, responds by welcoming him as the first ambassador of the “historic [Persian] empire” to the “capital of this Western republic,” and declares his government’s commitment to peaceful diplomacy “with our brethren in the great family of humanity.”⁴⁹ This sense of mutual respect and recognition, with an inevitable touch of civic rivalry, is also evident in the *New York Times* profile of Nuri published on his arrival in October 1888. After describing him as a well-bred gentleman, the article acknowledges Nuri’s admiration for “the enterprise, the liberality, and the progressive spirit of your Yankee Nation,” and further quotes him as boasting – with “pardonable pride” – that “[t]he Persians are the oldest people on the earth [sic]” and, due to their foresight, “take a lively interest in the United States.”⁵⁰

In Hatami’s rendition, however, Haji Washington is a far cry from Nuri’s diplomatic deliberations. Seated in the Oval Office while Cleveland is perusing his letter of credence, Haji takes a long look around as the camera’s movements over the portraits of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln strike the onlooker with awe.⁵¹ As Haji then rises to recite his letter, a shock cut to the portrait of George Washington establishes Haji under the gaze of the first US president, and the rest of the scene unfolds from Cleveland’s viewpoint.⁵² Haji’s speech, a bombastic panegyric in prose and verse, heaps praise on Nāser al-Din Shāh and President Cleveland as “two monarchs” united under divine providence.⁵³ Despite Nuri’s awareness of the political differences between the two nations, the fictional Haji hails his host as “the President of Paradise,” stammering in fear to pronounce the name “King ... Cleveland” (*Kilivland ... Shahriyār*).⁵⁴ As Cleveland proceeds to respond, Haji’s voice-over narration mistranslates him beyond comprehension. Where Cleveland is grateful for “the kindly greetings of His Majesty the Shah of Persia,” Haji envisions a “crownless emperor” in tears, yearning for “his crowned brother,” the shah. And where Cleveland acknowledges his commitment to “ties of mutual advantages” between the two nations, Haji describes him as “transfixed, his entire body trembling” to “pledge eternal allegiance” to the shah.⁵⁵

Haji is thus represented as an amateur diplomat who is willing to bend over backwards to please the shah and his American surrogate, the US president. Haji’s subservience is further exaggerated in a second, albeit fictional, encounter. Months after their official meeting, Cleveland pays Haji an unannounced visit at the embassy. As in the White House before,

⁴⁸ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 111.

⁴⁹ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 112.

⁵⁰ “Likes the Yankee Nation,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1888.

⁵¹ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 00:19:47–00:20:55.

⁵² Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 00:21:01–00:21:06

⁵³ Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār*, 736.

⁵⁴ Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār*, 736.

⁵⁵ Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār*, 737.

Haji is still vying for recognition, only to realize, much to his embarrassment, that Cleveland has recently lost the election to Benjamin Harrison and is only visiting to collect some pistachio seeds for his farm. Haji had already introduced Cleveland, and almost every other American character in the film, to Persian pistachios by giving away handfuls as a token of appreciation, and more often as a sign of his servility, at the end of every social function. To further signpost Haji's desperation during Cleveland's second visit, Hatami filmed the sequence in a manner that makes the viewer question the reality of certain scenes, and Haji's sanity in general. After first greeting Cleveland in the foyer, a jump cut to Haji's private chamber finds him all alone, frantically changing into his ceremonial clothes. "Haji," he says into the mirror, "Are you awake, dead or alive, drunk or stoned? Haji! You *are* awake, all present, conscious and sane!"⁵⁶ These remarks immediately sound ironic, for instead of returning him to Cleveland as anticipated, Hatami disrupts the scene's continuity and takes us to Haji's office, where he is all alone, writing a letter to the shah.

As the camera zooms out from a close up of Haji behind his desk towards a long shot of the office, we are struck by the image of a dimly-lit room in disarray, whose only occupant is utterly disoriented.⁵⁷ Against this backdrop, Haji writes an account of the Cleveland visit and narrates the rest of the sequence almost shot by shot. By first depicting the *mise-en-scène* as a measure of Haji's disorientation and then relaying the next ten minutes through his letter, Hatami casts doubt on the realism of the sequence. While Cleveland may or may not be downstairs, Haji is in his office writing an "authentic hourly report" of the delicacies already served – the "tea" Cleveland enjoyed, the "syrup" that refreshed him, the "hookah" that delighted him, and the "arrack" that intoxicated him.⁵⁸ It is only then that we finally return to Cleveland, a figment of Haji's imagination, with his legs outstretched on a Persian carpet next to a multi-course banquet that keeps piling up with every tray of food and confectionary that Haji brings to the hall.⁵⁹

This farcical enactment of Haji's hospitality strips the character of his last shreds of dignity, casting him as a scathing satire of colonial relations. Haji, who has gone out of his way to serve Cleveland, assumes the self-denigrating position of a willfully colonized subject who seeks the validation of the US president at any cost; even performing a minstrel show to entertain his inebriated guest in one particularly disturbing shot.⁶⁰ The more bizarre the revelry, the more bewildered Haji looks back in his office, a scene to which Hatami returns at regular intervals to remind us of the juxtaposition of reality (Haji's lonesome desire for recognition) and hallucination (the state dinner with the US president). At the end of the illusory banquet, Haji walks back to the mirror, looking more dispirited and disoriented than ever, and dubiously declares: "Although the walls of this house stand as my witness, I wish there was a camera to photograph the occasion." Unaware that Hatami has already called his bluff, Haji adds his most ironic statement: "Thank God that Haji has thus far been in charge of his mental faculties."⁶¹

Hatami's overdramatization of Haji's loneliness is not an end but the means to critique grand schemes of success and sovereignty within the broader arc of the narrative. While Haji is depicted in positions of sheer subservience, even as a court jester, in the two above sequences, his ultimate failure to obtain validation from figures of authority paves the way for new modes of being and becoming. In the aftermath of his first meeting with Cleveland, for instance, Haji succumbs to the first of his two epileptic seizures. In what is the beginning of his corporeal resistance against intellectual submission beyond the ableism of Nuri's detractors, who charged him with lunacy, Haji writhes in agony in a scene that

⁵⁶ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:02:25–01:02:37; Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 753.

⁵⁷ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:02:57–01:03:20.

⁵⁸ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 1:03:10; Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 754.

⁵⁹ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 1:05:32.

⁶⁰ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 1:09:40–1:09:56.

⁶¹ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:10:52–01:11:23; Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 756.

opens with a long shot of the White House's exterior followed by an overhead shot of his body fallen on the perrons.⁶² From this moment, when he falls in the corridors of power, to his next seizure at the end of the film, where he falls into solidarity with a Native American refugee, Haji fulfills a journey of self-discovery and other-orientation that began with the frustration of his ambition and the failure of his embassy.

Eid al-Adha in Washington

Prior to Haji's fateful encounter with the Native American fugitive, one particular sequence is definitive to Hatami's aesthetics of failure: Haji's observance of Eid al-Adha. 'Eyd-e Qorbān in Persian, Eid al-Adha is the Islamic ceremony commemorating Abraham's unwavering obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son. The holiday also marks the culmination of the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca through the ritual sacrifice of animals and the distribution of meat among the needy. Haji's observance of the holiday in Washington is significant on three interlocking layers. On the surface, his slaughtering of a lamb at the embassy is the conclusion of his proverbial pilgrimage to the US capital, adding an ironic twist on the pejorative epithet "Haji Washington." Furthermore, in a monologue during the ritual, Haji contemplates the question of authority, challenges his obedience to royal commands in a scathing critique of the Qajar dynasty, and even casts doubt on his diplomatic mission to the US. Finally, and to bring his observance of the ritual to its ethical conclusion, Haji proceeds to distribute the sacrificial meat among the poor and impoverished of Washington, a prelude to his ultimate kinship with the Native American refugee.

By Eid al-Adha, Haji has realized that his ambassadorial duties, including his grandiose visit to the White House, were much ado about nothing. He had started with lofty aspirations, renting a neoclassical mansion near the Capitol with a personal butler, servant, and coachman. In his office, right above his desk, hangs a copy of Kamāl al-Mulk's famous painting of the royal Gulestān Palace, *Mirror Hall* (1876), into which Haji would peer to pledge allegiance to the shah. But, in the absence of any diplomatic or consular business, the embassy has become vacant and irrelevant, and the only letter the establishment ever receives is a misdelivery for the Ottoman delegation. The staff and servants have been dismissed, and cobwebs now stretch from one chandelier to another. With his dodgy translator Mirzā gone to medical school, Haji is increasingly isolated and melancholic.

At the outset of the ritual sequence, Haji shaves his head as tradition requires of hajj pilgrims as a sign of respect and obedience. He then takes the designated lamb to the fountain to water the animal before sacrifice. "I am deeply dejected," he says, opening his heart to the lamb, "I cannot rely on any ear, and thus I place my trust in you, my companion."⁶³ He then proceeds with a dramatic monologue of the details of his biography and the watersheds of his career. Born into infamy due to the controversial political career of his father, Mirzā Aqā Khān Nuri (1807–1865), Haji spent his life under the shadow of a man "cursed by God and hated by people" for conspiring to assassinate the popular premier Amir Kabir.⁶⁴ Paying for the sins of his father, Haji has come to internalize the innuendo his opponents have used against him, a mad "epileptic" (*ghashi*), at which point in the monologue he begins to sob, confessing that he still chose to reclaim his hereditary seat at the Qajar court and begin a diplomatic career that took him to India and, now, the United States. In Delhi, as in Washington, Haji confides in the lamb that his time as general consul was similarly marked by epileptic seizures and chilling nightmares about the ruthless 18th-century ruler of Iran, Nāder Shāh Afshār (1688–1747), who sacked the Mughal Empire in 1739 and left "piles of decapitated heads and freshly plucked orbs" in his trail.⁶⁵

⁶² On Nuri's detractors' charge of lunacy, see E'temād al-Saltaneh, *Ruznāmeḥ-ye Khāterāt*, 751, 756, and 961.

⁶³ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 748.

⁶⁴ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 748.

⁶⁵ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 749.

On this allegorical note, Haji's observance of Eid al-Adha takes on a subversive turn that shapes the remainder of the film. In stark contrast to the subservient tone of his earlier speech at the White House, Haji's monologue develops into an unsparing rebuttal of the Qajar dynasty. Of course, his disavowal of imperial authority, which paves the way for the film's decolonial resolution, also exposes the limits of Hatami's representation of alterity. That is, rather than extending the moment of vulnerability with the lamb into an interspecies dialogue with the non-human Other, as Singh's "vulnerable reading" of postcolonial literature would ideally seek, Haji proceeds to brutally slaughter the animal, butchering the carcass and bellowing in defiance, his face covered in blood.⁶⁶ With every cut of the knife, which also produces the scene's diegetic sound, Haji questions the purpose of his political career and the dismal fate of his nation.⁶⁷ In a country riddled by drought, disease, poverty, and oppression, what is the point of a "trying and rewardless" journey such as his mission to Washington, asks Haji, in what is now a soliloquy in the absence of the lamb: "Executioners outnumber the barbers, and beheadings outweigh circumcisions." What more can one expect of the degenerate Qajar dynasty, Haji concludes in a self-reflexive acknowledgement of failure, when "I am neither competent to serve nor bold enough to be treasonous."⁶⁸

Asking himself sarcastically, "To what Kaaba did you just offer a sacrifice," Haji finally questions his own faith and abandons his political allegiances in the resounding statement that began this article: "I, Haj Hoseyn Qoli" am "sakht" (awkward), "dodel" (ambivalent), "moraddad" (hesitant), "mariz" (sickly), "mofsed" (corrupt), "rosvā" (disgraced), "doru" (a hypocrite), "daghal" (an imposter), and "motemallegh" (a flatterer).⁶⁹ This brings us back to the occasion of his observing of Eid al-Adha in Washington. Rather than simply expressing his obedience to God's command according to Islamic tradition, Haji turns the ritual into a secular event, disobeys the shah's royal authority, and speaks truth to power by associating his personal failure with "nonconformity" and the inconsequence of his career with "anti-authoritarianism."⁷⁰ After completing the first part of the ritual, he walks out of the residence with a large tray and distributes the sacrificial meat among a group of impoverished black and white folk seated on the embassy perrons. As Haji breaks bread with the urban poor, their shared vulnerability inspires a process of unlearning that transforms his existence from the exertion of mastery to the expression of relationality, a bracing mode of being and relating that shapes Haji's most significant relationship at the end of the film.

Unlearning mastery with the Native American

At the outset of the penultimate sequence, a medium close up reveals Haji gazing into the camera with distended eyes while the milky curtains of his chamber wave to blur our view against the backdrop of a non-diegetic daf drumming in anticipation of the following scene.⁷¹ In his failure to run the embassy within expected norms, Haji has impressed neither his sovereign nor the Americans, and certainly not Hatami's audience in postrevolutionary Iran. And yet, Haji's abject state registers a critical humanism that manifests through failure and controversy. Thus, as the opening shot shows him lost in reverie, a sudden burst of gunfire jolts him to the embassy gates, where a Native American fugitive is seeking asylum.⁷²

I began this article with Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri's comparative outlook of the American sociopolitical landscape. The historical figure was aware of both the underpinnings of American democracy and its contradictions, the "refugees from foreign lands"

⁶⁶ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 23.

⁶⁷ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 00:54:00–00:55:13.

⁶⁸ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 749.

⁶⁹ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 749.

⁷⁰ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 89; Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, x.

⁷¹ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:13:29–01:13:43.

⁷² Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:13:45–01:13:50.

(*gorikhtegān-e mamālek-e khārejeh*) who conceived these united states in strength and harmony, and the “indigene of the New World” (*bumi va yangi donyay-i qadim*) whom they eradicated in the process.⁷³ Nuri, who judiciously observed his American hosts, counseled the shah in careful diplomacy (“My task here is silence and patience to strengthen the foundations of friendship”), while also advising him on the necessity of domestic reform to avoid imperialist encroachment (“The outcome of friendship with a formidable rival, without us first pursuing the rule of law, learning the new sciences, and granting freedom to the educated youth, is absolute defeat”).⁷⁴ In fact, the political unconscious of Nuri’s writing, also at the heart of Hatami’s adaptation, is self-reflexive and other-oriented. Whereas he first picked up Nuri’s travelogue as a precolonial encounter with the United States, an alternative to the oppositional geopolitics of modern US-Iranian relations, Hatami further draws inspiration from Nuri’s awareness of the injustices inflicted on the indigenous population to write his film’s relational denouement. As Haji grants the Native American fugitive asylum, risking his diplomatic mission, he also finds in the refugee a significant other with whom to unlearn mastery beyond the aura of recognition he was promised and sought during his stay in Washington.

In a rhetorical paradox, the Native American sequence begins on a masterful register. As the refugee lies down in the guesthouse under the host’s piercing gaze, Haji renames him “Goli Khān” and anoints him as an exotic souvenir, “*gholām-e khasseh*” (bondsmen), for the shah.⁷⁵ Domineering over the bed and tying the Native American up, Haji even stamps the refugee’s entire body with the royal seal and, in his voice-over narration of the scene, declares “I personally hunted this monster from the American prairies.”⁷⁶ Renaming and racializing his guest in colonial fashion, Haji is for one last time entrapped in a self-caricature that simultaneously exposes the absurdity of his ambition and the depravity of the indigenous genocide in America.

But once the refugee wakes up the following morning, unshackling himself with an ease that mocks his bondage the previous evening, Haji undergoes a moral awakening, relieving him of his past hubris and illusions of grandeur from the double bind of being an imperial subject of Persia on the one hand, and seeking recognition from another, more modern empire on the other. As such, the Native American, who has chosen to leave and continue his flight, is stopped in his tracks by Haji, who invites him to stay. The subsequent scene, a startling plot twist, reveals the refugee naked in the bathtub, beside whom Haji, out of his own ceremonial clothes, is at work gently scrubbing the marks of the royal seal off the man’s body.⁷⁷ This intimate, if not queer, encounter is a counter-normative occasion in which Haji abdicates mastery over the refugee and conceives a relational bond that recasts his attitude at the end of the film. The smooth transition to the next scene, therefore, finds Haji seated on a chair in the corner of his chamber, next to a window open to the US Capitol dome in the skyline, while drafting a letter to the shah citing one of Nuri’s original letters verbatim: “Like an eagle in search of prey, they devoured them all!” Referring to the Native American genocide, Nuri and Haji, the historical figure and fictional representation, who can be viewed as identical for the first time in the film, compare Manifest Destiny to a westward spread of contagion: “Like leprosy, they [the American colonists] emerge in friendship and then, like Lucifer, they possess the souls.”⁷⁸ In a final twist that concludes the scene, Haji shreds the letter he just wrote and, in a clear departure from his old disposition, refuses to address the shah anymore. This is a decidedly personal act of defiance between Haji and the refugee – the vulnerable self recasting his identity *with* and *for* the precarious Other.

⁷³ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 126.

⁷⁴ Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 122–123.

⁷⁵ Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār*, 758.

⁷⁶ Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār*, 758; *Haji Washington*, 01:14:14–01:15:4.

⁷⁷ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:17:15–01:17:43.

⁷⁸ Hatami, *Haji Washington* 01:17:44–01:18:12; Hatami, *Majmu’eh Āsār*, 759; Shahidi, *Safar Nāmeḥ*, 126.

Of course, as I previously noted, Hatami's representation of alterity is generally problematic. The Native American is a voiceless character whose warbonnet and buckskin attire hark back to the generic "Indian" of Hollywood Westerns despite the cultural diversity of indigenous communities. However, what redeems the narrative, if not its mode of representation, is Haji's growing awareness of the Native American plight. Soon an envoy from the State Department arrives to negotiate the extradition of the refugee, granting Haji the recognition that he had for long desired. But in a scene thoroughly enacted in pantomime, Haji's irreverence for the US official is comically exaggerated. In the same office where Haji used to write desperate and imaginary accounts of President Cleveland's visit, the envoy is now on his knees first begging the ambassador, then chasing him around the room, and finally wrestling him to the ground, all to no avail.⁷⁹ The humor at play is not absurd but subversive, and Haji's refusal to betray the refugee is an epistemic shift from mastery to relationality, from vying for recognition at the US capital to seeking vulnerability within its margins.

Towards the end of the sequence, Haji's former translator, Mirzā Mahmud Khān, now a haughty medical student at an American university, returns to handle the situation. In an iconic shot, Haji is seen standing at the center of a low-angle view of the roof terrace. To the right is the Native American by his white horse, and to the left enters the translator on his high wheel bicycle. Haji then introduces the duo: "My deputy, Mirzā Mahmud Khān. My companion, Crazy Horse."⁸⁰ By first drawing the line between his "deputy" (*dastyār-e man*) and his "companion" (*yār-e man*), Haji articulates which side of the crisis he has chosen to embrace, revealing the above juxtaposition of visual elements as not between modernity and tradition, as one might readily assume, but rather between mastery and relationality. In then referring to the refugee as "Crazy Horse," which might be his original name shared in private, rather than "Goli Khān," the name given to him out of imperial hubris, Haji declares his solidarity with a fictional fugitive named after a real historical character: Tasunke Witco or Crazy Horse (c. 1840–1877) was a Sioux warrior of the Oglala Lakota tribe who led an armed rebellion against the US government over Lakota territory in present-day South Dakota. Regarded as a symbol of resistance against white settler colonialism, Crazy Horse surrendered to the US military and was killed in custody in September 1887.⁸¹

Back to *Haji Washington*, Mirzā, who has assumed the position of a rational intermediary to restore mastery to US-Iranian relations, derides his introduction to Crazy Horse: "This is an embassy, not a madhouse!" In a heated argument that sheds the comedic overtones of the American envoy's visit the previous scene, Mirzā confronts the "insane" Haji for harboring this "half-naked" savage and jeopardizing "relations" between the two nations.⁸² Outraged, the refugee rushes to intervene and, in a meteoric chain of events that conclude the sequence, grabs Mirzā by the throat and throws him out the window.⁸³ Out of horror and shock, Haji immediately gives in to epilepsy and falls writhing on the floor. Haji's second epileptic seizure in the film is the narrative extension of the first. Where he initially fell on the White House perrons, his body resisting a mind that desperately sought recognition from the US president, he falls a second time inside his own chamber trying to protect the Native American refugee under his tutelage. Yet, this time around, it is the refugee who comes to the rescue. Turning back to find Haji in violent seizure, he abruptly leaves the embassy to seek help. But targeted by the police while mounting his horse, the refugee is shot in the back and falls dead on the ground.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:18:15–01:22:34.

⁸⁰ Hatami, *Haji Washington* 01:25:07–01:25:36; Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 761.

⁸¹ See "Crazy Horse: Tasunke Witco," Crazy Horse Memorial, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://crazyhorsememorial.org/story/the-history/about-crazy-horse-the-man>.

⁸² Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 761.

⁸³ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:26:56–01:27:29.

⁸⁴ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:27:30–01:29:26.

As the tragedy unfolds under Haji's mournful gaze from the terrace, it would be a mistake to decry his failure to protect the refugee; nor is it helpful to expect a concrete resolution to the diplomatic crisis at hand. It is, rather, the film's decolonial aesthetics of failure that shed light on the trajectory of Haji's unbecoming and regeneration. Just as the death of the Sioux rebel Crazy Horse was not the end of indigenous resistance to white oppression in 19th-century America, the death of the Native American refugee does not determine the afterlife of the *Haji Washington* characters. I would like to think that in death, the refugee, who chooses his own fate despite the limits of Hatami's representation, rescued Haji from the racist implications of being a savior. The refugee crisis does not unfold in any way as to categorize Haji as an emissary of imperial Persia vying to rescue an indigenous subaltern from white oppression, alleviating the viewer's guilt over Persia's past colonial pursuits. Not only did Hatami mock Haji's illusions of mastery the morning after the refugee's arrival, and even before, during the Eid al-Adha sequence in which Haji decries his allegiance to the Qajar dynasty, but Crazy Horse is also the arbiter of his own fate in every course of action he takes, from his desperate arrival to his dismal departure. Ultimately, in his failure to be a savior thanks to Crazy Horse's autonomy and agency, Haji envisions a new world, in kinship and solidarity, that takes him far beyond the trappings of mastery over oneself and the Other.

Epilogue: beyond post/colonial mastery

Haji Washington is a work of historical parallels in which fictional events seek their counterparts in the outside world. At the center of the plot is the first Iranian embassy to the United States and the refugee crisis that closed it, juxtaposed with the closure of the last (as of writing) American embassy in Iran following the hostage crisis of 1979–1981. In this article, I argued that Ali Hatami's cinematic adaptation of Hoseyn Qoli Khān Nuri's travelogue – Hatami's first feature film after the Islamic Revolution – is a precolonial encounter in post-colonial times. It revisits a world before the dawn of American global hegemony and modern Iranian nationalism, finding a decolonial alternative to the oppositional geopolitics of US-Iranian relations today; an alternative based on relationality, or what Julietta Singh terms “unmasterful vulnerability” with the Other.⁸⁵

I further argued that, by learning to embrace failure in non-normative fashion, *Haji Washington* transcends mastery: the discourses of domination and alterity molding the formation of modern subjectivity in strict entanglement with the Other.⁸⁶ Hatami's decolonial aesthetics of failure (above normative temporalities of success) and relational worldliness (beyond post/colonial mastery) finally reckon with the real and fictional crises at the close of the narrative. If, as we noted, modern US-Iranian relations betray a “discursive dependency” whereby a postcolonial nation recasts its self-image by simultaneously opposing and legitimizing a modern empire, then Haji's failure and refusal to seek and secure recognition from the metropole reveals what Elam terms “anticolonial antiauthoritarianism,” which, despite the sheer inconsequence of his embassy, is open-ended and utopian.⁸⁷ In contrast to the hostage crisis in Tehran, during which the Iranian revolutionaries replicated colonial mastery by opposing it, Haji relishes a relational and reciprocal solidarity with the Native American refugee by simply ignoring the prospects of national sovereignty and global recognition in the corridors of hegemonic power. Inspired by their historical counterparts Nuri and Crazy Horse, Haji and the Native American refugee both embrace failure as another mode of being, becoming, and relating. Together, they unlearn mastery.

In the film's epilogue, Mirzā Mahmud Khān, in bandages after his skirmish with the refugee, informs Haji of the closure of the Iranian embassy and the ambassador's recall to

⁸⁵ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 23.

⁸⁶ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 3.

⁸⁷ Adib-Moghaddam, “Discourse and Violence,” 523; Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, 4.

Tehran. While at it, Mirzā also delivers a diatribe encapsulating Haji's patrons' view of his failure to behave in the interest of power: "There was an opportunity to endear yourself to the Americans, make the Pivot of the Universe [the shah] wealthy, smooth the road to my success, enrich your posterity, and even elevate the masses."⁸⁸ Because Haji has failed to be a proper diplomat, a venture requiring the exertion of mastery over himself and the Other for a normative conception of modern Iranianness to materialize on the global stage, Mirzā delivers the final verdict on the character: "One might say you were less treacherous because of your cowardice rather than courage. You are neither good nor bad, just inadequate, an emasculated official occupying lowly offices ... now returning from an arduous, inconsequential journey."⁸⁹

Haji Washington's decolonial embrace of failure, however, is worlds apart from his detractor's normative understanding of success. At the end of the film, Haji, who has absentmindedly been listening to Mirzā's tirade, staggers to the edge of the veranda, unwraps a silver armor he acquired for the shah, and throws it away along with the Persian flag in which it was wrapped.⁹⁰ By relinquishing his pursuit of sovereignty in such a provocative manner, Haji is not assuming an insular position to defy national belonging and global engagement; rather, he performs an act of "epistemic disobedience," a term borrowed from Mignolo to underline Hatami's leap beyond the coloniality of being, the hubris that mastery over the Other is integral to the project of modernity in its colonial and postcolonial iterations.⁹¹ As Haji finally recedes from view, lonesome on a boat into the Atlantic, he provides the viewer with a new, relational worldliness through which to address the sociopolitical challenges ahead. This is what Hatami's audience needed in 1982, as we do today.⁹²

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⁸⁸ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 762.

⁸⁹ Hatami, *Majmu'eh Āsār*, 762.

⁹⁰ Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:31:00–01:32:20.

⁹¹ Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2010): 160–161.

⁹² Hatami, *Haji Washington*, 01:32:21–01:33:30.

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