

A Flash of Green, a Slip of the Dress, and a Mother's Embrace: the Gendered Aesthetic  
in the 2009 Iranian Green Movement

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to all the mothers in Iran, past, present, and future who nurture and care, resist and protect in support of future generations.

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## ABSTRACT

A FLASH OF GREEN, A SLIP OF THE DRESS, AND A MOTHER'S EMBRACE:  
THE GENDERED AESTHETIC IN THE 2009 IRANIAN GREEN MOVEMENT

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In June 2009 following a contentious presidential election, a cycle of anti-government protests took place in major cities throughout Iran. Garnering the attention of the transnational community, this uprising was branded the “Iranian Green Movement” and came to be represented by images of young, well made-up women seen “posing” for the camera leading transnational media to ask, “Are women the face of this movement?” Engaging with this transnational discourse about Iranian women’s political participation, this research examines the nature of women’s participation in the Iranian Green Movement and the construction of a gendered aesthetic. There are three research questions in this study: *how did women’s participation in Green Movement protest actions shape the gendered aesthetic of the movement; does the overrepresentation of one method of women’s participation dominate the gendered aesthetic marginalizing the representation of all other methods of women’s participation; and did the transnational curation of the Green Movement’s digital street aesthetic shift the dominant*

*representation of gender towards a specific representation of women that is more often associated with the global North?*

There are two methods of data collection in this research and multiple methods of data analysis. The primary data used to answer these research questions are 190 sample photographs posted to the online photo management and sharing app, Flickr. Generated from the results of 3 key search terms, the photographs in this study represent a comprehensive sample of images from Green Movement protests collected from various users, albums, dates/times, and locations. I also spent time at many Green Movement rallies as an autoethnographic participant collecting thorough notes from the field documenting my experience. Qualitative analysis of these images uncovers the gendered methods of participation visible in the digital street aesthetic such as women's use of movement symbols and men's proximity to violent imagery.

Treating protest aesthetics as performative, I discovered that the representations of women that came to dominate this protest aesthetic—young, thin, attractive women seen standing alone—are embodying movement politics through the amalgamation of their daily performances of patriarchal womanhood with the political performance of collective protest. These images are curated by a transnational advocacy network of Green Movement participants with greater access to these digital networks swaying the dominant gendered aesthetic towards representations of women most associated with the global North. This narrowing of the lens overlooks the crucial participation of older women and the “Mourning Mothers” who enact gendered identities in protest to leverage

social change. These findings serve as an example of how a global South movement can lose control of its aesthetic image when pursuing transnational support.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

For observers of the present situation in Iran, especially those in the United States where media coverage and scholarship on Iran since the Revolution has been severely limited, this very public presence of women has been a surprise. For those of us who have been able to travel back and forth to Iran and interact with individuals and civil society groups, during the past ten years, it is not surprising (Moruzzi 2009: 10).

As a young Iranian migrant growing up in Southern California, I have always had a complicated relationship with traditional articulations of “home” and nationalism in my self-formation. Like many other diasporic children, I grew up with two, sometimes conflicting, cultures influencing the formation of identities around gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. When I discovered W.E.B. DuBois’ articulation of black Americans experience of double consciousness as an internal struggle between “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (1990: 8), I thought it spoke to the “dueling” identities struggling within me as well. This was the first time I pondered a transnational double consciousness.

I inadvertently learned that I was not the only member of the diaspora struggling with these dueling identities during a Personal Narrative I was asked to present as part of a Global Knowledge Conference about Afghan and Iranian Diaspora Cultures and Communities in the Bay Area. As part of the host committee, I had many responsibilities at this conference leaving me minimal time to prepare this presentation. So, I spoke about

what I was thinking and feeling at that moment in time in October 2009 after a full day of presentations about Iranian and Afghan identities and while Green Movement protests raged on in Iran. I spent most of my speaking time penning a verbal love letter to Iranian women within and outside of the state.

I heard myself nervously laugh at my own shaking voice. I looked down at my notes and took a deep breath to calm myself before I could continue. When I looked up at the audience, I saw their tears reflecting my own; my sisters in the crowd who were clinging on to every word. I noticed their nonverbal cues in agreement to my critiques about the (mis)representations women like us live with, resist, and sometimes conform to. It was when I began reviewing the challenges facing our collective sisters and mothers in Iran and transnationally that those tears began to flow. I offered a comforting smile to crowd as I continued, ‘My work as a sociologist has always been dedicated to these women who are so much more than the sexist, colonialist tropes Western media uses to define them.’ I briefly described the ‘oppressed Islamic woman’ trope before I continued, ‘but that’s not any Iranian woman I know’ I said like a punchline that was met with scattered laughter. ‘I come from a line of fierce mothers; matriarchs leading their families within and outside of the home. In the past few months, through images of Green Movement protests, the global community was finally introduced to these women I so love and admire. For the first time that I can remember, I saw myself and so many of the women I love portrayed in a positive light.

For the rest of the conference, young Iranian and Afghani women approached me about my personal narrative thanking me for calling out our shared diasporic double consciousness. I hugged women I didn’t know but had shed collective tears with from our shared experiences of gendered and transnational violence and oppression. As DuBois had articulated about the development of a double consciousness in Black Americans, who are compelled to “always look at one’s self through the eyes” of institutions rooted in white supremacy (1990), so has much of the global South been compelled to see ourselves through a white supremacist colonial lens. Recognized as a transnational double consciousness, scholars have expanded on DuBois’ conceptualization of double

consciousness to experiences of the “doubling of the self” (Lynne 2021) created by oppressions of our social identities such as racialized gender identities (Falcon 2008) or transnational or non-Western identities (Gilroy 1993; Bell 2004; Lynne 2021). As Alyssa Lynne states in the article, “Paired Double Consciousness: A Du Boisian Approach to Gender and Transnational Double Consciousness in Thai *Kathoey* Self-Formation”, transnational oppressions are rooted in colonial hierarchies between the global North, which is centered and normalized, and the global South, which is marginalized to the periphery (2021: 252). These hierarchical postcolonial structures recreate unequal power relationships that construct the social meaning of identities like gender and race (Fanon 2008(1952); Mohanty 1988; Said 1978). It is this marginalization, sometimes experienced as invisibility, which relegates Iranian women to a self-formation rooted in colonial hierarchies.

However, women throughout the global South have been resisting these colonial hierarchies since their inception, often waging a losing battle due to their peripheral position to the meaning making process taking place in the core. In 2009, at the time of the above narrative, Iranian women were propelled into the discourse taking place in the core and with the support of new digital forms of communication, Iranians, including Iranian women, appeared to have more involvement in communicating their identities and transnational desires to the global community. Utilizing cellphone and Internet technologies, participants of post-election protests, labelled as the Iranian Green Movement, disseminated text and visual messages directly to the transnational

community. The visual pull of these images surrounded the presence of women in the movement. Iranian feminist scholar Golbarg Bashi observes,

As pictures of women, young and old, religious and non-religious, have plastered our Internet and TV screens, chanting and bleeding for a recount in what many Iranians believe has been a fraudulent presidential election, their extraordinary heroism and sheer numbers have awakened the international media to the sizeable female presence in the Iranian Green Movement (2010: 37).

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran held a much-anticipated Presidential Election. Not since the 1979 Iranian Revolution had there been so much participation in public life (Bahari 2011). A fragmented society rallied behind incumbent Conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the leading Reformist candidates Mir-Hosseini Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. There was not just national interest in this election; international interest in Iranian politics has been around since the establishment of the Islamic state. President Ahmadinejad had agitated much of the international community with his controversial statements about the Holocaust, homosexuality, and September 11<sup>th</sup>. With all this vigor leading up to this monumental election, the haste by which the results were announced in favor of Ahmadinejad garnered much skepticism and spontaneous protests by civilians demanding to know, “Where is my vote?” Decorated in green, a symbolic color in Islam adopted by the Mousavi campaign, thousands of Iranians poured out into the major cities of Iran where they were met with brutal repression against their right to assemble.

Prompted by a violation of their democratic rights, the Iranian Green Movement has enduring roots to other struggles for civil and human rights in this repressive state (Bayat 2009, Bashi 2010, Dabashi 2010). In the last century, Iran's civil society has demonstrated a commitment to challenging political, civil, economic, and social injustices while governed by both the Islamic Republic and the preceding regime. This long history of protest has always included women's participation and a movement in support of women's rights. Bashi describes this rich movement history crediting women for their significant contributions to many "iconic events" stemming from the "Babi movement of the mid-nineteenth century" to the "struggles for the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry in the 1950s and ultimately the Islamic revolution of 1978-79" (2010: 39). However, it was the passing of a series of gender-specific laws instated in 1979 which cultivated the Iranian women's movement we know today. Since 1979, the growing woman's movement has tirelessly fought for an end to gender discrimination within the state while connecting transnationally to other womanist movements as part of a global feminist network (Moghadam 2005). As Bashi concludes, "The women we see marching in the streets of Tehran, Shiraz, and elsewhere did not grow like mushrooms out of nowhere. They are the robust children of decades of sustained grassroots struggle" (2010: 37).

Bashi continues to reference the power of visual images of women participating in Green Movement protests emphasizing the visibility of protesting bodies made possible by recent telecommunication technologies. Quickly expelling international journalists from reporting on these post-election protests, the Islamic Republic tried to restrict



knowledge about what was happening on the streets, but their efforts were thwarted by the technologically savvy civilians who used their cellphones and social media applications to “share scenes of defiance, courage, and violence, bloody faces and burning cars, to other Iranians and to people around the world” (Esfandiari 2010). Iranians embraced the responsibility to document protest actions, especially at the exclusion of independent journalists (2010). This digitally transmitted aesthetic accelerated and expanded the documentation of Green Movement protests and became the primary source of photographic documentation of the movement. As Kuzman (2010) states, there are “thousands, perhaps millions, of photographs (that) now reside in file-sharing websites that will be used to write the history of this period” (12). It was this developing digital collection of photographs that the mainstream international news media relied on for their own reporting of events.

Iran’s 2009 Green Movement protests became one of the most popular international news stories ranking first in the Huffington Post’s “Top 10 World Stories You Need to Know From This Summer”. In a report titled, “Iran Dominates as the Media are the Message”, Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism declared the disputed Iranian elections as the biggest international news story for the week of June 15-21, 2009, and the “biggest international story—other than Iraq—in more than two years” (Jurkowitz 2009). As the name of the report suggests, much of the reporting on the events taking place in Iran were more focused on the status of the media within this conflict, than the status of Iranian citizens. News reporting on Green Movement participants often sensationalized their participation, especially the presence of women.

Stories titled, “Women and Protest” (Shabad 2009), “Iran: Women Speak Out” (Saeedi 2009), and “Women in Iran’s protests: head scarves and rocks” (Santana 2009) continuously redirected their viewers’ attention back to the presence of Iranian women through the deployment of visual images of gendered bodies in protest constructing a dominant aesthetic of the movement.

With both new and old media zooming in on the visual presence of women in the movement, my curiosities about the gendered representation of women’s participation in Green Movement protest actions peaked. I wanted to know how women’s participation in protest actions is being reflected in the movement’s aesthetic. My primary research question is, *how did women’s participation in Green Movement protest actions shape the gendered aesthetic of the movement?* To answer this question, I will first need to describe the nature of women’s participation. Where are women most often seen? Under what conditions? What types of interactions are women participating in? What methods of participation are women engaging in (chanting, sign holding, gestures, physical altercations, etc.)? This primary research question aims to provide a thorough description of women’s participation in the movement as seen through the images of women on the streets of Tehran during this time.

The second research question seeks to examine patterns of representation in the Green Movement’s gendered aesthetic by looking at which types of bodies and methods of participation are most often exhibited. I ask, *does the over representation of one method of women’s participation dominate the gendered aesthetic marginalizing the representation of all other methods of women’s participation?* Which methods of

women's participation are more visible in the curated representation of the movement, and which are not? Also, why are some methods of gendered participation more visible than others? The emphasis on women's participation in the Green Movement's visual representation was met with trepidation from some observers who suggest there is an "over-representation" of attractive young women in the movement's aesthetic (Dabashi 2010; Kuzman 2010; Fayyaz and Shirazi 2013; Maza 2018). To answer these questions, I will describe the dominant features recurring in the digital aesthetic and connect them to their social and cultural origins. I will then describe the methods of participation that appear far less frequently in the digital aesthetic but are referenced in personal narratives based on experiences at these street protests.

An important feature of this movement in relation to previous social movements in the state is the transnational flow of information and communication across an advocacy network formed in support of Green Movement efforts. For decades now, Iran has produced one of the most consistent and politically active diasporas in the world. There is an estimated 3-4 million Iranians currently living outside of Iran representing one of the world's largest "brain drains" (Golnaz 2004). In 2009, social networks connecting members of the diaspora to communities in Iran were activated in support of the Green Movement's efforts for increased democracy, transparency, and human rights conditions in the state. This activated network held solidarity rallies, founded organizations, and called on powerful agents in the international community to support Iran's civil society movement efforts. Modeling the movement tactics of protest participants in Iran, participants attending Green Movement solidarity rallies also

digitally documented and shared images of transnational protest actions. These images quickly became intertwined with images of street protests in Iran. My final research question explores the nature of the transnational relationship within an advocacy network by examining the photographic representation of digital images in the movement asking; *did the transnational curation of the Green Movement's digital street aesthetic shift the dominant representation of gender towards a specific representation of womanhood that is more often associated with the global North?*

## FRAMING THE PROBLEM

This study is rooted in a feminist understanding of the aesthetics of transnational social movements. I will ground my analysis of research questions in a theoretical understanding of aesthetics and transnational social movements paying close attention to feminist protest aesthetics and transnational solidarity networks.

### *The Study of Aesthetics*

Aesthetics, as an area of study, originates as a philosophical examination of the “nature of beauty and (judgements of) taste” based on feelings and sensations (Scruton 2021; Shelley 2017). This definition treats aesthetics as a cultural structure that can be studied through a type of object (artifact), an experience, or an attitude. While closely related with the philosophy of art, the philosophical study of aesthetics is rooted in perceptions of sense responses more so than the practice of constructing aesthetic objects.

Aesthetic forms are created out of the social world and reflect the cultural, political, and economic values of the period of history from which they are sprung.

One notable philosopher contributing to the study of aesthetics is Immanuel Kant. Kant's theory of aesthetics pays close attention to what is considered beautiful or pleasing to the eye as a feeling more than an experience (2022). Kant believed in both the subjectivity and universality in judgements of beauty. Describing Kant's theoretical framing of aesthetic beauty, philosophy professor, Hannah Ginsborg states,

On the one hand, they are "subjectively grounded" in a feeling of pleasure, which means that they do not amount to cognition of an objective feature of the thing judged to be beautiful. On the other hand, however, they are universally valid, in that someone who judges that a thing is beautiful is entitled to demand agreement from everyone else (1997: 37).

One foundation to Kant's theory of aesthetics is his concept of "free play" as a source of "imagination and understanding" (38). Free play allows for the removal of conceptual constraints permitting imagination to "harmonize freely" with understanding. The result of this free play is that we subjectively feel pleasure in an object instead of cognitively knowing an objective feature of the object. To remove our conceptual constraints, we must approach an object with "disinterest" denying any preconceived feelings or judgements from entering the aesthetic critique (Boczar 2021). This free play allows us to see objects as "beautiful" and according to Kant, we all feel pleasure in the beauty of an object through this process. To elucidate his theory, Kant points to *nature* as the primary example of beauty that all people universally feel pleasure in. The beauty of nature is a powerful example of aesthetics that is not relegated to a generated product but exists in the social world as part of everyday life.

Kant's philosophical articulation of aesthetics provides many valuable insights for the study of aesthetics today. For example, George Simmel and other postmodern and symbolic interactionists continued the study of aesthetics as a feeling based, sensual experience. However, his theoretical framing has also faced criticism for its positivist approach. Kant believes that what we feel to be beautiful is a rational pursuit of our cognitive faculties when allowed to "play" without the restrictions of prior judgements. As a systems theory, positivism has been criticized for its reductionist qualities minimizing all social processes to (rational) "rules of law" established through universal procedures. Sociologists and other cultural critics insistently challenged the lack of non-white, non-male voices contributing to this implied universalism, "the test of the universalizability of aesthetic judgements, that is, the seemingly cosmopolitan attitude of thinking from the perspective of everybody else, turns out to be a privilege of the favoured few" (Sonderegger and Kleesattel 2021). Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement removes preconceived concepts but only the nonwhite, nonmale concepts essentially "eliminating" any lived experience outside of this dominant group. In response, alternative theories of aesthetic beauty emerged arguing that our lived experience directly shapes our aesthetic judgements and the cognitive processes we employ to make these judgements.

Most concerning for sociologists responding to the Kantian definition of aesthetic judgement is the under-lying class-based value system of aesthetics. The most significant critique comes from the pivotal work *Distinction* by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). In his sociological analysis of the "judgement of taste", Bourdieu explains how "taste", or

aesthetic judgement, is “an acquired disposition” as something that we develop but don’t always recognize. Bourdieu describes this unconscious conditioning in the following way,

The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will. Orienting practices practically, they embed what some would mistakenly call values in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body (466).

Thus, for Bourdieu, individual aesthetic judgement stems from what we know and are most familiar with, which is much more reflective of social position than any universal standard or typology of aesthetic judgement. Speaking directly to the positivism’s approach to the study of aesthetics, Bourdieu specifies that taste, is “not universal forms and categories but a system of internalized, embodied schemes” (476). These embodied schemes are based on unequal social positions granting some the economic, social, and cultural capital to influence what is aesthetically valued in a society. Social groups with greater levels of capital dominate the knowledge production of aesthetic judgements reproducing the internalized schemes of their dominant class.

Bourdieu’s work is powerful for demonstrating how the lived experience of inequality reveals itself in our daily rituals including judgements of taste. The internalized embodied schemes work to not only shape an individual’s aesthetic judgement, but also the production of aesthetic forms; “Although each art form may be an individualistic depiction that may even influence public taste, no person conceives it in a vacuum. Society influences the artist/artisan, providing the filter through which

aesthetic expression finds its voice” (Parrillo 2022). Most often, aesthetic expressions are regularly produced by the dominant group, or must be aligned with the aesthetic of the dominant group, in order to maintain group dominance.

### *Protest and other forms of political aesthetics*

While classical Kantian aesthetics privileges notions of beauty and of judgement, other aesthetic theories link aesthetics to politics and history. Frankfurt School critical theory is one important tradition in this regard, yet my research is more indebted to postmodern conceptions of aesthetics that center the media as an integral part of society. In postmodern society, there is a “rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society” (Featherstone 1991: 67). These signs and images are a “constitutive part of people’s ‘realities’” and are used to actively construct individual identities often through a playful or creative engagement with these media images (Thompson 2019). Sensory media messages are everywhere, around us always, now widely available for everyone in society to engage in, not just a select few deemed culture experts of the “high-class”.

George Simmel was one of the first sociologists to identify the expansion of aesthetic images into our everyday lives. Observing aesthetics in all aspects of social life, Simmel was less interested in examining aesthetic beauty in cultural objects than the social reception of these objects. Social theory and Simmel scholar, David Frisby, explains Simmel’s views, “beauty does not lie in the objective existence of things”, instead it is the social experience that constitutes a social object aesthetically pleasing



based on our “*subjective* reaction which the latter (the object) arouses in us” (1991: 74). Experiencing aesthetic forms collectively is a crucial component of socialization and helps to explain why societal arrangements, such as political and economic arrangements (not just cultural ones), have an aesthetic character. Simmel describes the potential “aesthetic threshold” of sociability and social arrangements as the separation of the collective sensation from the “service of life that originally produced them” (Simmel 1950: 42). In other words, the aestheticization of the object has the potential to produce and sustain a collective sensation even when separated from the object.

In Simmel’s analysis, the role of the spectator, or audience, is an essential and fascinating component of aesthetics. It is this theoretical foundation which leads political scientist Crispin Sartwell (2011) to declare, “all politics is aesthetic” underlining the way modern political movements form unifying identities through aesthetic representations such as Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalism movement forging “a sense of national identity out of romantic aesthetic representations of a people” (2011). French philosopher and cultural critic, Jacques Ranciere, reinforces the role of the audience as participatory in the development of political aesthetics. Ranciere says, “emancipation begins...when we understand the viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts...She observes, selects, compares, interprets (2009:13 found in “Aesthetics and Politics”). For Ranciere, aesthetics is a political category such that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time” (2004: 8).

In recognizing that aesthetic images exist around us, always, and are incorporated into our construction of our identities and the world around us, postmodern theories of aesthetics support the observation of imagination, creativity, and art in shaping public, political identities (Tucker 2010). The public sphere becomes a “social stage” (Foster 2003) or “political theater” (Tucker 2010) where aesthetic performance is used to convey a political identity. One exemplary case of this social stage/ political theater that both Foster and Tucker point to is the 1999 global justice protests in opposition to neoliberal institutions, in this case, the World Trade Organization. Focusing on the imagination and playfulness of global justice activists, Tucker describes the street performance of participant activists as modeling “scenes from a carnival” (Tucker 2010: 172), while Foster introduces this theoretical protest as “a new kind of disruption of the status quo” (Foster 2003: 411).

Treating political aesthetics as performative is a valuable theoretical framing for the study of political aesthetics in social movement actions; “activists are not just making verbal claims but claims through bodily actions, “thus the aesthetics of protest reveals how democracy is constituted through performance of images” (McGarry 2017: 2). Grounded in Judith Butler’s work on gender as performative, performativity is a powerful concept for explaining how norms are comprised/ reinforced, AND how they are challenged and resisted (McCarry et. al 2019: 23). These aesthetic performances incorporate the material landscape of a city to “create an embodied public” (Butler 2015: 71). Butler argues,

when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other public (including virtual) space, they exercise a plural and performative right to appear and instate the body amid the political field, which delivers a bodily demand for a liveable set of economic, social and political conditions against induced forms of precarity (2015: 11).

Embodied protest actions project a living realness that does not exist in many other aesthetic forms. Incorporating real, contemporary bodies into the visual meaning making process of political claims has the power to transform political processes by introducing “new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world” (Mirzoeff 2015: 297 found in McCarry et al).

Observing political movement aesthetics through a lens of performativity is exceptionally useful when considering the role of modern technologies in amplifying embodied visual protest actions. These technologies are now being engaged to produce, and therefore construct, the aesthetics of protest through visual and verbal communicative channels (Butler 2015). Digital technologies “amplify” protest aesthetics beyond the space from which they originate. Butler uses the term “photographic amplification” to describe the dissemination of photographs (and reuse of photographs) taken at protest sites (159). This amplification extends the visibility of a scene or protest action. As political street art (murals, posters, etc.) and performative actions (flash mob, sit in, etc.) are “photographed, shared, and circulated through social media infrastructure, these interventions also came to resonate beyond their immediate context as part of a mobile, transnational political aesthetics” (Tulke 2019: 122). A performative understanding of aesthetics provides valuable insights for the analysis of embodied gendered performances within a performative political aesthetic.

The concept of feminist aesthetics also developed in the philosophical study of aesthetics by feminists who recognized that despite claims of neutrality, all areas of scholarly discipline transmit gendered undertones. This begins with an understanding of how gender shapes how we think about art, produce art, and come to appreciate the aesthetic form. In this way, feminist aesthetics are

attuned to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity: the ways that art both reflects and perpetuates the social formation of gender, sexuality, and identity and the extent to which all of those features are framed by factors such as race, national origin, social position, and historical situation (Korsmeyer and Weiser 2021).

Feminist aesthetics began with an understanding that gender impacts aesthetic taste but has evolved to include an acknowledgment that gender also impacts an aesthetic performance and feminist aesthetics considers the gendered ways women learn to engage with politics and construct an aesthetic form.

A different approach to feminist aesthetics moves away from aesthetic judgements of art towards the study of aesthetic features in the everyday lived experience. This knowledge perspective reminds us that “aesthetic norms are not limited to art but extend into virtually all aspects of life, including dress, personal adornment, and comportment” (2021). Labelled “everyday aesthetics”, this perspective recognizes that many of our everyday pursuits have aesthetic features with a “sensuous character” that might not be traditionally designated as beautiful, but that possess rhythmic patterns that reveal socially structured ritualistic actions which can be examined as a cultural structure more privately constructed that come to shape social behavior.

## *Contemporary Social Movements*

The sociological inquiry of social movements began as an effort to understand crowd mind (LeBon 1885) and collective behavior (Blumer 1939) as the loss of rational control of one's behavior leading to deviant actions. Before long, sociologists began to recognize these seemingly deviant behaviors as a response to unmet needs or violations of rights experienced by the collective (Davies 1962). In this sense, the collective demands for rights are a rational response to deprivation or inequality. By treating social movements as a rational response to inequality, sociologists could operationalize movements as organized and intentional entities focused on some type of resource allocation whether material, legal, economic, etc. This structural articulation of social movements helped to map out the political opportunity structures social movements attempt to permeate. Yet, a solely structural analysis misses the more complex cultural and symbolic processes taking place in social movement organizing. The edited book *Passionate Politics*, by Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) endorses the study of emotions into the analysis of social movement actions evoked by both the performers of political theater and the observing audience.

However, incorporating a cultural dimension into the study of social movements does not cancel out the structural component of social movements, instead incorporating a cultural structural analysis of social movement participation and protest actions. Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) provide a "*sympathetic critique*" of network analysis for its "inadequate conceptualizations of human agency on the one hand, and of culture on the other" (1413). Intending to fill in the gaps that exist in network analysis of social

movements, the authors provide alternative approaches that “encompass both social structural and cultural perspectives on social action” (1414). To do so is to treat “cultural narratives, idioms, and discourses as symbolic patterns possessing their own inner logic which both “constrain and enable historical actors, in much the same way as do network structures themselves” (1440).

Cultural structures enable social movement participants in many ways. We rely on cultural formations to make sense of our social world and apply this understanding to the construction of individual and group identities, as well as ordering the goals, priorities, and intentions of individuals and groups. This brings us back to the work of Bourdieu and other cultural theorists who demonstrate the value judgements embedded in cultural structures so that, “certain identities, interests, and courses of action come to be more valued than others, to the point where individuals and groups often prefer to sacrifice their own material interests out of a deep-seated commitment toward them” (1441). This leads to one consideration for how culture structures also work to constrain social action by pulling on these value judgements to prioritize a public agenda denying certain claims entry to be articulated in public discourse (1440). While cultural structures actively shape individuals, they are neither static nor deterministic. Individuals retain their agency and can use it to resist dominant culture structures shaping their lives. When these individual claims become collective claims, social movements can emerge to challenge the normalized social order.

Like all other facets of social life, contemporary social movements have been transformed by the new spaces, connections and institutions that have been made possible

by technological advancements. This technology allows for the “sustained contentious interactions with opponents by a network of actors that have common purposes linked across nation-state boundaries” (Dale 2011: 9). Prior to this period, social movement theory followed a methodological nationalist perspective which situates movements within the bounds of the nation-state prioritizing the state as the unit of analysis (Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Chernilo 2008; Mosley 2005). Observing the multi-layered shifts taking place under this period of heightened global relations, many social movement theorists began to view this state-centered analysis of social movements as inadequate for capturing the growing interconnectivity between local and global communities. As John Dale explicates about his transnationalist approach to studying the “Free Burma” movement,

This discourse does not treat the nation-state and these transnational practices and processes as mutually exclusive social phenomena nor even as binary conceptual categories. The transnationalist discourse depicts nation-states and transnational practices and processes as contributing to the constitution of each other (2011: 27).

Transnationalist discourse provides a more comprehensive lens to study the multifaceted relationships that exist across a network of assorted institutions (states, multi-national corporations, international nongovernment organizations) and participants. Increased interactions between the local and the global contributes to the fluidity of social positions and identities within this highly connected, visual, and mobile society. Experiences of inequality are no longer isolated to the “local” and “global” but exist within cross-cutting networks where people can inhabit multiple positions at one time. In a book entitled, *Resisting Global Toxics*, David Pellow examines the industry of toxic

disposal as it “goes transnational” from low-income, black communities in Philadelphia to impoverished African states in what Pellow describes as “toxic colonialism” (2007: 13). Identifying the intersection between class and race as a determinant for the dumping of global toxins, Pellow clarifies that while poor, African American communities in the U.S. are at risk of toxic dumping, economically privileged Africans connected to an elite transnational network of other economically privileged individuals can avoid the dumping of toxins in their communities. Recognizing the multiple social positions people inhabit, Pellow states, “while I sometimes use the terms *global North nations* and *global South nations*, I also include communities of color and poor communities in industrialized nations within the ‘South’ designation and privileged communities in poor nations within the ‘North’ designation” (2-3, emphasis in original text). As capital, labor, culture, and bodies flow through transnational networks, they create new opportunities and challenges in people’s lives that cannot be explained by the either/or binary making up distinctions of East/West, local/global, privileged/oppressed, and other dichotomous frames constructing our social world.

This study applies a feminist, transnationalist analysis to the production of visual representations of Iran’s Green Movement protests. Recognizing the movement’s transnational and digital qualities, I will consider how social and culture structures enable and constrain transnational actions, in this case, the construction of a visual representation of the movement through images of bodies in protest. I will pull from historical explanations to illuminate the social and culture structures impacting the relationships and symbols that come to define the movement. Below, I begin with a



historical description of transnational feminist networks focusing heavily on global South and Islamic networks.

*Transnational feminist networks*

Social movements have been able to tap into these increased opportunity structures expanding the “arena of activity” used to challenge injustices and demand accountability. One movement that has gained a lot of support by expanding the arena of movement activity transnationally is the Feminist/ Women’s movements. At the turn of the century, the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women included the largest convergence of women than any prior event. This conference offered a collective of women a space to gather and share their experiences of gender oppression and the resistance practices they use to counter this oppression (Okin 2000; Moghadam 2005). The interactions that took place during this activity serve as a form of subjective knowledge production defined by Black feminist sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, as the development of “alternative knowledge claims” based on “a dialectical relationship linking Black women’s oppression and activism” (1990: 22). The dialectic relationship that began among women at these international conferences were sustained through transnational networks of exchange and contentious politics. Feminist philosopher, Nancy Fraser, views these transnational feminist networks as a transformation of the women’s movement itself (2009) and a powerful structure from which to challenge limiting representations of womanhood.

However, women's social positions and specific patriarchal challenges faced differ greatly in the global landscape. In the book, *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, Afkhami and Friedl (1997) highlight Islamic women's participation in political institutions, including protests against these institutions, has been consistently overlooked in much of the literature on these movements. These findings have been endorsed by others including Ray and Korteweg (1999) who describe "third world" Islamic women's marginal position within transnational feminist networks. Although Islamic women's contributions to the transnational women's movement has been powerful, they remain relegated to the periphery overshadowed by the participation of white women in the global North.

Iranian women have long participated in movement actions in support of their rights within the state, though these actions became much more profound after 1979 when the Islamic state passed a series of gender discriminatory laws. This women's rights movement in Iran is recognized as one of the "most dynamic" and "unparalleled" women's movements in the region (Esfandiari 2010; Keddie 2007; Tohidi 2001; Moghadam 2000). These transformed patriarchal challenges aligned closely with challenges faced by other Islamic women in the region. Bringing with them a tremendous amount of experiential knowledge, Iranian women have made significant contributions to a regional Islamic feminist network. The visibility of Iranian women's participation in public life has been an encouraging model in the region.

Reporting on the "invisible" lives of Islamic women, Geraldine Brooks describes the powerful influence of Iranian women in the region; "Speaking about this influence, a

24-year-old Lebanese woman described Iranian women as ‘our Superwomen’” stating that she and other women in the region “struggle to be as strong as they are” (1995: 224-225). This sentiment was reiterated in a presentation made by Nobel Laureate Tawakkol Karman while addressing students and faculty at George Mason University in October 2011. Karman described witnessing women’s participation in social movements around the world as both informative and inspiring for how she and other Yemenis women would participate in the uprisings taking place in their state. Specifically, Karman described witnessing Iranian women’s participation in Green Movement protests as highly influential.

One notable figure supporting Islamic feminist movements is former Iranian judge turned human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi. In 2003, Ebadi became the first Islamic woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and has spent much of the rest of her life in exile supporting transnational efforts in support of women’s rights. Speaking directly to women like Karman participating in revolutionary movements throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa in 2011, Ebadi offers her experiential knowledge,

The best way to prevent what happened to women in the aftermath of the Iran revolution is to call for women’s rights during the struggle. Don’t wait for the victory. Choose your allies. Dictate these conditions before the alliance. Look at Iran: do not repeat our mistakes. Did anyone say we are against polygamy? That we want divorce rights? You are making the same mistake Iranian women made. We thought we could demand women’s rights after the revolution (de Alwis 2012: 7).

Women’s transnational networks offer a space for women to develop both universal and culturally relative definitions of womanhood outside of the patriarchal, colonialist structures that have assigned limiting definitions of womanhood. As the experiential

knowledge of resistance flowed through local and transnational networks, between different generations of participants, a culture of resistance emerged contributing to the visible participation of women in the Iranian Green Movement.

## CONCLUSION

This research emerged from an interest in the transnational curiosity with the visual images produced from the 2009 Iranian Green Movement protests. Challenging the results of the Presidential Election, a spontaneous series of protests ensued and was met with violent state repression. Absent of any formal, independent reporting on these protests, protest participants became citizen photojournalists documenting the movement and disseminating those images across digital media platforms first, and mainstream news outlets second. Across all these medias, there is a consistent focus on women which became the root of my research questions.

There are three research questions in this study: 1) *how did women's participation in Green Movement protest actions shape the gendered aesthetic of the movement;* 2) *does the over representation of one method of women's participation dominate the gendered aesthetic marginalizing the representation of all other methods of women's participation;* and 3) *did the transnational curation of the Green Movement's digital street aesthetic shift the dominant representation of gender towards a representation of womanhood more often associated with the global North?*

The findings in this study contribute to a transnationalist discourse of protest aesthetics as a performative symbolic form reflecting both the networked structure of collective action and the culture structure of everyday gender performances. Contributing to the sociological understanding of social movements, this study demonstrates the fluidity of identities and power of influence across a transnational network. Studying photographs as a cultural symbol, this study offers insights into on how gendered cultural performances birthed by local structures are endorsed, ignored, and rejected to produce a dominant representation of the movement. This transnationalist approach provides insights on the fluidity of identity (individual and group) in a transnational network and offers an empirical model for studying the flexible, yet fixed, positions social movement participants find themselves in social movement organizations. These varied positions in a transnational advocacy network can shift access to communicative channels privileging one group locale's frames over another even if they are not the group experiencing and initiating a cultural frame. The empirical research methods used in this study are outlined in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative study centers on visible images of bodies in protest as both cultural product in the form of documentation of the movement, and culture producer through the iconography, symbols, and media depiction of the movement (Bogdan and Biklen 1999: 191). As a communicative form, visual images convey information through ocular cues including signs, gestures, costumes, and other types of visual cues. Visual representations serve as cultural artifacts that can be studied independently, or more often, as overlapping, complementary or contradictory sources. However, many types of visual representations, such as photographs, are more dynamic than that of an artifact. As a robust, communicative source, photographs do not just capture a static phenomenon, but can provide a foundation for what came before and after that moment (Finn 2012; Chen, Sherren, Smit, and Lee 2021). There is also a “documentary nature” to photographs with the mutual understanding that they reflect an “‘accurate’ representation of reality” through a visual “reproduction of social life” (Ferreira and Serpa 2020: 66).

### RESEARCH DESIGN

Human beings are known to be highly visual creatures learning and processing visual cues to make sense of the world around us (Kaas and Balaram 2014). Having learned to use visual cues to make sense of our world, “our brains have evolved to absorb, manipulate, and react to visual information in increasingly effective ways” (2014: 1). In contemporary society, advancements in visual technologies have facilitated the

visualization of our social world as a meaning making process. We have seen tremendous advancements in visual communication technologies primarily through the digitalization of media including more participatory methods of digital communication.

The most participatory and culture generating of these advancements is social media. Social media functions as a space for users to generate and share their own content, as well as a space for people to interact with one another's content. With the capacity to store and share text, visual, and verbal forms of communication, social media platforms retain an abundance of information making it an ideal space for observations on social and cultural conditions. This is demonstrated by the increase in the number of social science research publications incorporating social media data and other forms of Web 2.0 technologies. A study by Li, Wei, and Xiong (2017) found that the number of scholarly articles with social media data included increased from 716 in 2008 to 2509 in 2014 (384). However, as Chen et. al illuminate, analysis of social media continues to favor text analysis over the analysis of visual data (2020).

Despite the preference of text analysis, the rise of social media has in part been spurred by the visual component of digital photography and advancements in cellphone technology to include digital cameras and social media applications. People are now able to document their everyday lived experience as evidence of their subjective reality. As Ferreira and Serpa articulate, "The role of photography can then be central in (re)defining a given reality (true, false, or undefined, highlighting only some aspects of a reality that is, itself, always complex), for political, social and/or ideological reasons" (2020: 64). This has made photography a valuable tool during times of political conflict as civilians

are now able to use photography to help “(re)define” claims made by the state through photographic documentation. This has become crucial for movement activists who have come to rely on photographic documentation and digital technologies to counter the dominant claims of the state and commercial enterprises. Jurgenson (2019) emphasizes, as a communicative tool, visual images can help to bridge geographic and language barriers. As movement activists discovered in Iran in 2009, photographic documentation of protest actions communicated through social media platforms has become a powerful tool for countering the dominant narrative of powerful institutions. The participatory diffusion of photography as an everyday resource has made it a valuable tool to document and call out violations of the state including the violent repression of peaceful protestors.

There is no definitive guide for how social scientists should study social media and digital photography but there are some shared strategies. There are countless research publications focused on the role of social media in Iran’s 2009 Green Movement uprising primarily through text and network analysis (see Khonsari et. al 2010; Morozov 2011; Ketabchi, Asadpour, and Tabatabaei 2013). These studies have provided a powerful understanding for how Green Movement activists use digital technologies to facilitate offline protests and articulate their claims, goals, challenges, and overall movement identity. However, Green Movement activists did not always communicate through text-based messages instead favoring the ocular sensationalism of visual protest actions. While slower than other areas of social media research, Chen, et. al. discovered a substantial increase in the number of published social science research papers “utilizing social media image data” from “22 in 2015 to 61 in 2019” (2021: 6). Researchers who



have analyzed the visual images of Green Movement protests concentrate on digital protest art not digital photographs of the protest aesthetic (see Khosronejad 2013 and Lotfalian 2013). Photographs posted on social media sites have become a more utilized and accepted method for contextualizing contemporary relationships understanding that these interactions are producing culture as much as they are reflecting culture.

As the study of social media has increased in the social sciences, so has the sociological study of social media's relationship with social movements. Much of the focus on social media's role in contemporary movements can best be described as a *mechanism* for connecting people and relaying information. This understanding of social media pulls from Castells (1996) theory of network society as a globalized society consisting of widespread networks (and new types of relationships) made possible by advancements in information and communication technologies. Understood as a mechanism for facilitating communication, social media has been studied primarily through text analysis of social media messages and network analysis of the relationships developed and sustained through the movement's network. However, sociologists have been among the first and most frequent disciplines to incorporate the study of visual images posted to social media especially covering topics on gender (Xu and Armstrong 2019; Chen, Sherren, Smit, and Lee 2021). In the article, "Why Images? The Role of Visual Media in Protest Movement Research," art and media scientist, Dorna Safaian (2019) recognizes that "visual material is often treated as mere illustration rather than a source in its own right." Safaian advocates for the inclusion of visual media in protest

research to enhance understandings of the discourse and emotional regulation of protest collectives (2019).

Photographs from street protests posted to social media websites became the leading source for the transnational community to observe the ongoing political protests taking place within Iran. With only independent and citizen photojournalists allowed to remain inside the state, Web 2.0 became the greatest source of visual information on the budding movement. These photographs were posted and reposted creating a curated aesthetic of the Green Movement in Iran. As actions began taking place across the transnational network, many of these photographs were included in the overall aesthetic of the movement. This study centers the digital aesthetic of the 2009 Iranian Green Movement inquiring; *Is there a gendered aesthetic in the protest photographs of the 2009 Iranian Green Movement?*

## DATA COLLECTION

This study includes two methods of qualitative data collection. The first, social media, is based on visual communication, and the second, autoethnographic field notes, are communicated through narrative text.

### *Social Media Images*

There are many factors to consider when selecting social media sites for sociological inquiry. Chen et al (2021) discovered that “Instagram and Flickr are the most

popular platforms for photographic data extraction for research” published in the social sciences between 2015 and 2019 (9). While Instagram is a more popular resource for studies in sociology, cultural studies, politics, women’s studies, and other social sciences, in 2009, during the height of Green Movement protest actions, Instagram did not yet exist. Instagram was released in October 2010, but Flickr, a leading image hosting site with group chats and other organizational tools, was released in February 2004. Flickr was instantly a space for photographers to share their art and celebrate others’ photographic pieces. By 2007, Flickr was “the most popular dedicated photo-sharing site on the web and growing exponentially in terms of new images uploaded” (Shoam 2021).

This research prioritizes the Green Movement’s protest aesthetic created through the collective participation of human bodies in public demonstrations. The role of digital art in producing a protest aesthetic for the Green Movement has been examined by other scholars (see Lotfalian 2013 and Khosronejad 2013). While both previously mentioned studies would benefit from a more critical analysis of gender representations within this digital art aesthetic, this is not the purpose of this research study. Instead, I am interested in how the presentation of gendered bodies contributes to a gendering of the movement’s curated representation.

In 2007 when Flickr was the dominant photo-sharing site, the Iranian state began “Internet filtering” denying Iranians access to many of their favorite websites including Flickr (Gharbia 2007). Two things happened in response to this Internet filtering. First, through the lead of Iranian Flickr user Hamed Saber who created a workaround extension for Firefox, the Iranian Flickr community resisted this internet repression. Called “Access

Flickr!” Saber made this Firefox extension available to the public (2007) where it remained active and available in 2009 during Green Movement protests in Iran. Second, this Internet filtering and Firefox extension further popularized the platform within Iran. This made Flickr the most popular photo-sharing site during the 2009 Green Movement protest cycle.

I first learned about Hamed Saber, a photographer and Flickr advocate, through exploration of the sample photographs in this study. Hamed is one of a handful of citizen or independent photojournalists whose photographs were widely circulated throughout Flickr (and other new and old media platforms) and appeared in the sample in this study. I learned much about Hamed on his Flickr profile including his participation as a photojournalist in the Green Movement, his arrest, brief imprisonment, and release. Later, I learned of Hamed’s influential role in creating a Flickr extension to fight Internet filtering. I also discovered that Flickr was a monumental source in releasing and identifying the Green Movement martyr, Neda Agha Soltan. As Dijck (2013) identifies in the book *The Culture of Connectivity*, Iranian Flickr members used the site to disperse images and firsthand narratives to traditional news media outside of Iran.

Having concluded that Flickr is the best image hosting site to for data collection on the Iranian Green Movement, I conducted some exploratory research to learn about the site and the information it stores. Upon signing in, Flickr offers a list of Flickr pros under the label “People to follow” with a visual sample of their photographic art. As a user, I can begin to build my profile, a collection of photographs that can be organized in albums and galleries and begin to socially connect with others through groups and other

organizing options. This organization and storage of social content are available as links on the social platform. The platform also includes options for exploring the site's entire content, which is where I began my general search of Green Movement photographs.

Unfamiliar with the content on the site, I began with very general search terms such as "Iran" and "Green". With these searches yielding too broad of results, I refined the search term to "Iran's Green Movement", "Iran election protests", "Iran 2009 protests". I looked across these results and as part of this process, I identified what I refer to as, "Flickr solidarity groups". These are groups formed on the Flickr site organized under the desire to inform and influence support in favor of a more democratic Iran an identified goal of the Green Movement. Examples of these groups include Iran Pres. Election 2009 (72 group members and 581 photographs), Where is My Vote (55 group members and 1,200 photographs), and July 25, 2009: A Global Day of Action (128 group members and 1,200 photographs). Though all these solidarity groups are designed to support the human rights of people living within Iran, some identify as supporting a specific political agenda while others claim political neutrality. I took some general notes on these Green Movementsolidarity groups but concluded that I wanted a broader view of what was occurring in the streets of Tehran than what is included in the photographs in these groups. So, I followed a common technique employed by other social scientists, I searched keywords and manually downloaded a random sample from this population (Chen, Sherren, Smit, and Lee 2021).

### *Sampling technique*

Based on my preliminary examination of search terms, I decided to sample photographs across 3 different keyword searches. These search terms identify photographs based on “tags” which are keywords assigned to each photograph. These tags are meant to be assigned by the artist posting the photograph but may be opened to being tagged by audience or group members as well. I selected the following 3 search terms because they retrieved the greatest number of results across the most varied number of individuals or groups posting photographs: “Iran protests 2009” with 17,031 photographs retrieved; “Iran 2009 election” with 10,483 photographs retrieved; and “United4Iran” with 6,354 photographs retrieved. Prior to eliminating photographs based on the exclusionary criteria for this study, the population of photographs is 33,868.

The sample in this study was randomly selected from the 33,868 total photographs retrieved. Knowing that I had to manually download the samples from this population, I managed these search terms as individual groups and kept them organized as groups on the qualitative software used to analyze these images. When deciding on a sample size and sampling technique, I had to consider several factors, primarily research priorities and limitations. First, manually manipulating and downloading samples make it harder to exclude photographs based on sampling criteria prior to randomly selecting samples. Second, much of the data analysis centers on qualitative narratives of photographs which is a method of analysis best applied to smaller samples (2021). Finally, data saturation will be the indicator to inform the discontinuation of the data collection process. Data saturation is met when incoming data produces no additional

information in support of the research question (Bernard and Ryan 2010; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; Guest, Namey, and Chen 2020). In this study, data saturation is met when multiple repeat photographs are selected or when no additional themes emerge from the data.

With these strategies in place, I began downloading samples, randomly selecting every 100th photograph that was retrieved by one of the three search terms. Prior to downloading the selected photograph, I eliminated samples that did not satisfy the sampling criteria. The sampling criteria in this study are a) timeframe: photograph must be taken between June and December 2009. The timeframe for this study is based on the first and largest Green Movement protest cycle; b) as an extension of the timeframe, samples must come from post-election protests, photographs taken at pre-election rallies will be excluded from the study; c) type of photograph: must be a public demonstration – no photographs of digital protest art NOT exhibited at a street protest; and d) exclude all digitally altered photographs of street protests but include reposted photographs including reposts from traditional online news sources.

During the data collection process, I excluded many photographs based on the above sampling criteria. When a randomly selected photograph was excluded from the study based on sampling criteria, I substituted the photograph with the next qualifying picture (i.e.: 101 or 102). The data collection process was discontinued when data saturation was met by the sampling of repeat photographs. For this study, data saturation was met when at that time, there was a total of 196 photographs in the sample. I reviewed the sample one more time and identified additional photographs to be excluded based on

sampling criteria and repeat photographs. After ensuring all photographs in the sample met the study criteria, I concluded the data collection process with 196 sample photographs.

#### *Data's top contributors*

Once the samples were downloaded, I conducted another round of reviews of the sample data to ensure that all images met the study guidelines for inclusion. During this process, I identified 6 additional photographs that needed to be excluded from this study. Most of these photographs (4) were excluded because they are images from pre-election rallies not Green Movement protests (I will discuss these images further in Chapter 3). The remaining 2 photographs were excluded as replicate images already included in the sample for this study. The remaining 190 photographs are the final sample in this study.

During this review of the visual images, I took extensive analytical notes on what I learned about the photographs from the information linked to the image on Flickr. These analytical notes helped to generate a semi-structured descriptive coding schema discussed further below. This information also helped to verify the location the photograph is taken or posted from, and to potentially gain information on the photojournalist responsible for capturing the image. The positionality of photojournalists in this study is relevant but these individuals can be difficult to identify and including any demographic information not already made public creates the preventable risk for the release of sensitive information. There are a few other points to consider when thinking about how to incorporate photojournalists into this study. First, many of the photographs



that appeared on Flickr and other social media sites are reposted photographs from published transnational digital news outlets or reposts from photographs found in other Flickr groups or social media sites. Also, there is an unequal distribution of information attached to the images in this study. Some images included long captions describing the photograph, providing location, date, and timestamp information, and potentially citing a photojournalist or news source where they retrieved the image.

Therefore, I chose to manage the position of photojournalists in a less direct way in this study. For one thing, the research question seeks to identify a dominant gendered aesthetic produced by a wide range of participants more frequently circulating certain representations of women in Green Movement protests. Answering this question is not reliant on the identification of every photojournalist or participant responsible for posting the image. Instead, I selected to sample from 3 various search terms ensuring a more diverse group of participants contributing to the digital aesthetic. During the sampling process I wanted to ensure that many participants, not just a handful of individuals or organizations are responsible for contributing to this sample. However, I did want to be open and observant to any individual(s) or organization(s) responsible for contributing multiple images in this study. Once again, I took extensive analytical notes and was able to identify some noteworthy people and organizations making greater contributions to this digital representation of the movement.

By far the most revealing, although incomplete, information I discovered while surveying Green Movement photojournalists whose work has been posted to Flickr is that all identifiable photojournalists are men. I was able to identify four citizen

photojournalists who each contributed one or more albums dedicated to Green Movement protest photographs ranging from 14- 101 photographs. What is most relevant about these photojournalists is that their photographs are regularly recirculated on Flickr (and possibly other platforms) by Green Movement digital participants. All four of these citizen photojournalists self-identified as “amateur photographers” and one described being propelled into the role of a citizen photojournalist during Green Movement protests, an effort that led to his imprisonment ([flickr.com/hamed](https://www.flickr.com/photos/hamed/)). While photographs from these photojournalists appeared within the samples in this study, they were not always the artist’s original post but a reposting of the image by someone else. In fact, there is a Flickr page titled “Mousavi1388” which is the handle for Mousavi’s official Facebook and Twitter pages. Many of the photographs that I observed on Flickr, and some which appeared in this sample, are reposted photographs by the Mousavi campaign.

Along with these citizen photojournalists, I also identified a handful of organizations who contributed to the publishing or disseminating of Green Movement protests images on Flickr. The first organization is Gooya News Agency publishing a collection by photojournalist Farhad Rajabali on their Internet site. These photographs were circulated widely on Flickr by Green Movement digital participants and were easily recognizable by the copyright information printed on the picture. Gooya news is a branch of Gooya.com a Farsi website started by an Iranian journalist based out of Belgium. Launched in 2008, Gooya.com was one of the first Farsi-language online portals focused on providing “unbiased news” about Iran including “news and analyses by journalists and civil society activists of all political tendencies and takes content from both the Islamic

Republic's official website and opposition sites" (Reporters Without Borders 2021). As Reporters Without Borders notes, Gooya News played a key role in posting information and photographs about the Green Movement protests that Iranian state media was not publishing at the time (2021). Although Gooya can be translated to English online, it is primarily a Farsi language site centered on news about Iran and thus more of an example of global South media but the case of Gooya news is a beautiful example of the new relationships, identities and "products" emerging from this digital stage of globalization. Gooya exists somewhere outside of both the global North and the global South in this imagined space where diasporic populations connect with home and community.

A second organization with multiple photographs appearing in the sample is the *MEHR* news agency based out of Tehran, Iran. *MEHR* news agency launched in 2003 by the Islamic Propagation Organization (also referred to as the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization) primarily as a Farsi-language publication but is now also available in English, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish and Urdu (Mazrooei, Sabahi, Zanconato 2021). As an Iranian news agency, *MEHR* is one of the few state approved news agencies operating within Iran. As a state sanctioned news agency, *MEHR* has been challenged for their pro-government reporting of events. However, in the initial days of protest before Khamenei declared protesting election results illegal, *MEHR* news agency (as in the case of Gooya news) had their independent photojournalists document the protests. These photographs were published on the Internet where they were copied and reposted by Green Movement digital activists on Flickr.

There was also a transnational group on Flickr named after and in support of the nonprofit organization, United4Iran. This organization was created transnationally in support of the Iranian Green Movement. This organization created a group on Flickr under the name “United4Iran” with a total of 58 group members. Once a part of the group, members could post photographs on the groups page and tag these images with searchable key words. Many of the photographs of transnational solidarity rallies were posted as part of a collective effort under the group United4Iran.

### *Autoethnographic Field Notes*

As a participant observer of the movement, I kept meticulous notes on my experience focusing on what I observed, heard, felt, and of course, participated in. These field notes span multiple locations and types of protest actions but do not represent ALL actions taken in support of the Green Movement. Below is a list of sites and types of actions included in these participatory field notes.

1. Orange County, California (June 2009) – includes two field notes from two different nights of solidarity rallies in support of the Green Movement’s call for political and other human rights.
2. Honolulu, Hawaii (July 25, 2009) – the Global Day of Action in support of the Green Movement protest actions in Iran while I was chaperoning my cousins on a summer vacation. Luckily, I found a solidarity rally near our hotel, and I attended and documented my experience at that this location on the Global Day of Action.

3. East Bay, California (October 2009) – includes a series of field notes spanning the facilitation and execution of a student-led day of actions at the University of California, Berkeley. These organized actions were sponsored by UC Berkeley and the nonprofit organization, NorCal 4 Iran.
4. Tehran, Iran (December 2009) – includes a series of field notes spanning a 3-week period engaging in everyday life and protest actions in Tehran. These notes include the Ashura day of protests in Tehran and participation and observations of other protests in the city.
5. Washington D.C. (December 2010) – 1-year later, a single solidarity rally meant to revive the visibility, goals, and challenges facing Iran’s Green Movement.

These fieldnotes include the planning and prep work I engaged in to prepare for these protest actions as well as post-protest reflections and collective debriefing when completed.

## DATA ANALYSIS

I used multiple methods of qualitative data analysis for the photographic data used in this study. First, I used *descriptive coding* for initial insights on the 190 photographs in this study. I used a minimally structured coding schema developed through my preliminary Flickr research. The minimal structure for this descriptive coding covered substantial themes like photo demographics, symbolic imagery, and violent imagery. I

then used *open coding* to fill in the descriptive themes, such as green symbolism, hand gestures, the presence of weapons, and other emerging themes. Letting the data drive the development of codes, descriptive themes emerged from an inductive coding of the photographs.

The second method of qualitative analysis I applied to the visual data in this study is a *textual narrative* of the 190 images. This narrative describes the scene (what is happening), the scenery (where are they and what is around), the people (who is present and what are they doing), as well as photographic insights (camera angle, zoom, focus, etc.). These narratives translate protest signs when applicable, describe individual presentations of self and a collective aesthetic of bodies working together. Once all narratives were complete, I began the third method of analysis of the visual data by *thematically coding* the text narratives. These thematic codes are generated from an open and inductive method of coding. While there are certain categories I was evaluating, the codes within these categories were entirely data driven. Examples of these data generated thematic codes are age, facial affect, hejab style, portrait/ posed, zoomed, security forces, religious figures/symbols, and many other thematic codes.

I also applied *thematic coding* across the autoethnographic field notes. I applied an open coding technique to the field notes prior to coding the visual images in this study. This initial coding schema included noteworthy themes which reappeared in the inductive coding of the photographic data. Examples include movement symbols, political, cultural, allyship, network relationships, emotions, collective chants, and more descriptive and theoretical codes. Much later in the data analysis process, I recoded the field notes using

the structured set of codes which emerged from the inductive coding of the photographic data. This was a particularly useful practice because it helped to distinguish which themes were visibly communicated across both data sources, and where, and potentially why, some themes appeared only in one data source.

All the qualitative coding for this research study was completed manually with the support of NVivo, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package. NVivo's advanced features allow for the storage and manipulation of large amounts of unstructured data. Thus, NVivo proved to be especially useful working with visual data allowing for image importing directly from social media, the option of incorporating a caption or written narrative, and the ability to code across all types of media including directly on images as advanced text-based code and retrieve options. In this study, I utilized NVivo to store, organize, thematically and hierarchically code, and run advanced forms of data analysis including text search, word frequencies, exploring attributes, cross tabulations, and opportunities to visually display relationships and/or research findings.

## TRIANGULATION

The highly subjective nature of image analysis benefits from additional validity and credibility measures taken in the research design. The concept of triangulation was first introduced to sociological inquiry in 1978 by Norman Denzin as a method of corroborating research findings. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods and/or

sources in the study of a particular phenomenon” (Carter 2014). This study utilizes more than one type of triangulation. I used source triangulation to incorporate first-hand narratives of Green Movement protests with visual images from these protests. I occasionally extended this triangulation of data sources by assessing the presence of sample photographs from this study in global North publications. This study also applies data analysis triangulation by implementing multiple methods of qualitative data analysis including descriptive and thematic coding with narratives of images.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on social media and social movement participation looking directly at digitally produced and disseminated photographs as a source of visual meaning making process used by social movement participants and interested parties to communicate information about the movement. Visual images were collected from Flickr’r, the leading photograph repository and networking site in 2009. Photographs for this study were randomly selected from the retrieved results of three search terms until data saturation was met. In total, there are 190 photographs included in this study. These photographs are supplemented with 6-months of autoethnographic fieldnotes recorded at the height of the Green Movement protest cycle across five different transnational locations.

This study incorporates multiple research questions requiring the use of various methods of data analysis. I began by quantitatively coding for descriptive themes in the



photographic data such as visual cues, movement symbols, and other environmental and social descriptives of the images. I also wrote detailed text narratives for each photograph and coded these narratives thematically. I applied both descriptive and thematic qualitative coding to the ethnographic field notes in this study.

### **CHAPTER 3: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND THE GENDERING OF THE GREEN MOVEMENT AESTHETIC**

Prior to running analysis, I stumbled on to an interesting and relevant finding during the data collection process. Looking through the sample photographs I identified a few images of larger groups of women, adorned in green, joyfully celebrating, linking arms, and gesturing V-victory signs. As I observed these images, I realized that I am observing a gender segregated action. Gender segregation has been a tool of the Islamic Republic for re-establishing the state as a patriarchal, Islamic nation. Most state-run services and institutions in Iran are gender segregated including political rallies. As I looked at these images of all women, I had a moment of recognition that had not occurred to me before. I called on the expertise of my Iranian contacts in Iran and abroad to confirm my suspicions. Everyone I spoke with confirmed that the images I am referring to are indeed from mandated pre-election rallies and not the spontaneous post-election protests that are recognized as part of the Green Movement's efforts.

These mislabeled photographs demonstrate the influence the pre-election rallies had on the Green Movement's aesthetic. The campaigns leading up to the presidential election in 2009 were unprecedented in several ways, many of which had to do with the participation of women during and prior to Green Movement protest actions. The state sanctioned election rallies preceding Green Movement protests initiated many of the participatory actions of women that were replicated in the movement, especially the use of symbolic imagery. Women in Iran participated in these election rallies in greater numbers than previous elections. This increased participation is primarily a result of the

decades long women's movement pushing for women's rights to be in the forefront of political discourse in the state. In 2009, for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, a discussion of the rights of women was required to be incorporated in the presidential debate (Fenton 2009). It is during one of these televised debates that the need for the continued fight for women's rights in this patriarchal state was modeled by the incumbent President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. With the candidate's wives joining their spouses on the campaign trail, Ahmadinejad used his time to question the credentials and participation of a fellow candidate's wife making what many perceived to be an unjust and disrespectful statement. His attacks were directed at Mousavi's wife, Dr. Zahra Rahnavard.

Dr. Rahnavard is a well-known figure, a former professor and college president, she used every opportunity on the campaign trail to challenge Iran's gender discriminatory laws (2009) and ensure that women's position in society remain at the forefront of election discourse. In 2003, Dr. Rahnavard gained notoriety for inviting Nobel Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, to speak at Alzahra University for women where she was college president (Ebadi 2010). She refused to cancel the event despite warnings from the state to intervene and attempted to negotiate with basij members who arrived to shut down the event. Ebadi says of that day, "I may not have spoken in public that day, but I privately celebrated her patience and fortitude" (2010). Dr. Rahnavard's fortitude was again on display in the 90-minute news conference she held in response to Ahmadinejad, where among other things, she accused the president of "debasement of her sex" (Kersten 2009). While campaigning for her husband, Dr. Rhanavard spoke directly to

women urging them to use their political power to demand the concerns of women be addressed as part of every candidate's platform (Fenton 2009). Through her participation in the campaign, Dr. Rahnavard became "an inspiration and role model for millions of Iranian women" (Dabashi 2011: 25). Large groups of women headed Rhanavard's pleas for participation and Mousavi's rallies grew daily with Iranian women practicing their political power. Each candidate had a designated color for the campaigning process and Mousavi's supporters began to adorn themselves in green to show support for their candidate.

The Mousavi campaign and its supporters adopted the color green after Mousavi wore a green shawl at a televised event (Gheytonchi 2009). Believed to be a gift from former president and most well-known reformist, Mohammad Khatami, this shawl represented the relationship to this beloved progressive leader and a symbolic reference to Mousavi's ancestral ties to the prophet (Geytonchi 2009; Milani 2010). Mousavi's supporters, including more and more women, began to adorn their bodies in green to show support for their candidate who represents both an Islamic past and a progressive future. Especially in the days leading up to the election, large groups of women in green adornments were seen campaigning for Mousavi illustrated by image (D01) below.



*Figure 1 EX01*

This photograph (D01) appeared in the sample for this study tagged on Flickr<sup>1</sup> with the label “Iranian Protests 2009”. Accustomed to seeing images like this as representative of the Green Movement, I accepted the framing of these women as “women in protest.” Without my knowledge and resources to learn about Iranian public life, I would not have been able to recognize this photograph as originating from a Mousavi campaign rally. Another reason I was so willing to accept this frame is that I have seen this picture used previously in American news media as an image of Green Movement participants in Iran. A quick Google search of photograph D01 above produced many results linked to articles about either the Green Movement, or women’s rights. The top three results include an NBC news report, “Iranian women fight on the frontlines of protest” (Curtis 2009), a San Diego newspaper story, “Women in Iran’s protests: head scarves and rocks” (Santana 2009), and a Spokane newspaper called the Spokesman-Review, “Iranian women take historic role in protests” (2009). By their titles alone, these articles are designating an erroneous framing of the movement as the women

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<sup>1</sup> Pmkalayeh. 2009. “Iranian Protestors.” Image (JPEG). Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3305/3658553193\\_293b23ce03.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3305/3658553193_293b23ce03.jpg)).

pictured were not engaging in civil unrest but participating in a state-sanctioned event. A general Google search of the image produced hundreds of findings. The top three results include an NBC news report, “Iranian women fight on the frontlines of protest” (Curtis 2009), a San Diego newspaper story, “Women in Iran’s protests: head scarves and rocks” (Santana 2009), and a Spokane newspaper called the Spokesman-Review, “Iranian women take historic role in protests” (Santana 2009). By their titles alone, these articles are designating an erroneous interpretation of the image and by extension, the movement. Since it is representative of pre-election rallies and not Green Movement street protests, I discarded photograph D01 from this study as well as 5 additional photographs that I came to identify as images from pre-election rallies not post-election protests. Five of the six photographs discarded as part of the pre-election collection featured younger women using symbolic imagery (primarily green adornments). Although, pre-election photographs were discarded from this study, the presence of these photographs within the collection of Green Movement images is important as it demonstrates the conflation of women’s pre-election images into the visual representation of the Green Movement.

## MANY AESTHETICS CONSTRUCT A GLOBAL SOUTH MOVEMENT

During my analysis of the photographs in this study, I realized that a digitalized global South movement supported by a transnational advocacy network is not viewed through a singular representative lens but through multiple lenses that retain similar and diverging depictions of the movement. Institutions, collectives, and even individuals can shape the aesthetics of a movement as well as perception, location, and understanding of

events. Therefore, I begin the discussion of results with a categorization of the collectively constructed aesthetics of the Iranian Green Movement, which exist singularly and collectively to create an overall picture of the movement. These include:

- a. **Local street aesthetics** – created by activists collectively participating in public demonstrations. Historically the main, or dominant, movement aesthetic, this visual illustration depends on eyewitness accounts and independent journalism to a non-participatory audience. This aesthetic is rarely available to a broader, transnational audience without the support of a curating source transmitting it (such as international cable news, print media, or social media).
- b. **Transnational aesthetic** – created by activists in the transnational advocacy network through participation in public demonstrations. Operates in the same capacity as the local street aesthetic but from a locale outside of the conflict zone.
- c. **Digital aesthetics** – the virtual aesthetics of a movement where activists work as photojournalists, curators, and artists creating a visible image in support of the movement. This aesthetic exists (and is sometimes created) through online accessible to a transnational population. This aesthetic is heavily influenced by the street aesthetic, often incorporating its images.
  - i. **Digital street aesthetic** – the curation and mass dissemination of photographs documenting local and transnational demonstrations in support of the movement.

- ii. **Digital art aesthetic** – a digital form of protest art. This aesthetic may include an accumulation of images from public demonstrations but edited to include either protest music, text, or additional symbolism. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this aesthetic was not included in this study.
  
- d. **State-sponsored aesthetic** – an aesthetic of the movement created by the state often to discredit the movement. It may focus on a marginalized view of the local or transnational aesthetic and may include digitally altered images. In a transnational social movement, there may be more than one state-sponsored aesthetic. While an important piece to understanding social movement aesthetics, this aesthetic is not present in the data collected for this study.

It is important to note that the multiple aesthetics of a movement do not exist in a vacuum; they overlap and influence one another through a multi-directional flow of images and information.

The photographs in this study are a representative sample of the digital street aesthetic and thus inherently transnational. They incorporate verifiable images from the local street aesthetic and the transnational aesthetic, which are analyzed independently and as part of the digital street aesthetic. The field notes collected as a participant observer of the movement informed my understanding of both the local street aesthetic and the transnational aesthetic. So, while the following chapters focus on the digital street aesthetic, I will also be discussing specific features of the local street and transnational



aesthetics paying close attention to where they overlap or diverge from the digital street aesthetic.

The remainder of this chapter provides general descriptive analysis of the Green Movement's digital street aesthetic through frequency counts of emerging themes in the data. Initial analysis of the data looks at the relationship between gender and emerging themes beginning with *participation*. First, I will describe *participation* through the presence of gendered bodies and look for gendered variations of the theme *participation* based on *location* (within or outside Iran) and *group size*. From there, I will examine the gendered presence of *symbolic* and *violent* imagery in this digital aesthetic.

## DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

I coded for *gender* by evaluating gender dominance for each photograph with the categories, “more women present,” “more men present”, and “both genders present”. Of the 190 photographs in this study, 55 (29%) are focused on pictures of women, 50 (26%) on pictures of men, and 67 (35%) of a mixed gender population. If we equate women's visible presence to participation, then the digital street aesthetic emphasizes women's participation in slightly greater numbers than men. However, these frequency counts do not account for location and are reflecting gendered participation throughout the network, not street protests in Iran.

When *location* is added as a variable, the gendered composition of participation shifts. In the 97 photographs of street protests within Iran, 33 (34%) images are focused on women, 41 (42%) were focused on men, and just 16 (16.5%) with a mixed population

of genders present. This snapshot of the local street aesthetic is suggesting a moderately greater presence of men than women in these protest actions. The gendered composition of *participation* shifts in a different direction for photographs from transnational rallies held outside of Iran. In the 93 photographs from transnational solidarity rallies, 22 (24%) have a greater presence of women, 13 (14%) have a greater presence of men, and 49 (53%) include the presence of both genders. These results reveal differences in which *gender* is more dominantly present in these images based on the *location* of the action. For example, the percentage of images with both genders present differs drastically from street protests in Iran at only 16.5% and the solidarity rallies outside of Iran at 53%. In part, this vast difference is reflecting cultural differences but also the impact of decades of laws requiring gender segregation in Iran.

Since testing for *location* suggests the greater participation of men at street protests in Iran, I moved on to evaluate *group size* in relation to *location* and *gender* at these actions. The number of participants present in each picture ranges drastically between a single or “solo participant” to that of a “massive group” referring to the presence of thousands of participants. I began my analysis of group size by looking at the less frequently pictured group sizes, those labelled “large” and “massive”. Flipping through these photographs, I recognized this to be a space where women are less present. Of the 17 photographs from Iran labeled as “large” (consisting of 40 or more participants), 10 (59%) have a greater presence of men than women. Additionally, the remaining 7 photographs of “large” group protestors in Iran, consist of a mixed gender population, which means there are 0 photographs of “large” groups in Iran with a greater

presence of women. Similarly, there are 10 photographs with a “massive” group of participants and again, 0 of these photographs included a dominant presence of women; 5 (50%) include a mixed gender population and 3 (30%) include a dominant presence of men.

The gendered analysis from large and massive groups confirms a greater presence of men in protest actions in Iran signifying that men’s participation is more frequent than the digital street aesthetic proposes. Accordingly, the greater the number of participants present in a photograph, the greater the visibility of men in the movement. While these findings suggest a greater participation of men in Green Movement street protests in Iran, women’s visible presence continued to pique the attention of the transnational discourse. Since there are 0 images with a greater presence of women in the large and massive group photographs, I considered what group size(s) the images concentrating on women are?

The remaining variables in *group* size are that of “small” groups, referring to groups of 2-39 participants, and “solo” participant, referring to an individual participant or an image focused on a single individual. In total, there are 44 photographs of “solo” participants, 29 (66%) are photographs centering women and 14 (32%) are photographs centering men. Photographs with “small” groups has the highest frequency count with a total of 84 images. A gender analysis of these images reveals no difference in which gender is most dominantly present. The frequency count revealed an even split between majority women present, majority men present, and mixed gender population present (all having an n=26 or 27). With small groups presenting no difference in the frequency of

gendered participation, the group size that women are more dominantly pictured in is that of solo participant groups.

Examining the photographs of solo participants, I noticed what can best be described as portrait style photographs of women. Some of these portrait style photographs are candid but most show women “posing” for the camera. A posed photograph highlights a participant’s acknowledgement of their visibility and may invoke a performative act such as a symbolic hand gesture or display of their green adornment. However, this is quite different to how men are shown in *solo* photographs. Men might also be seen wearing green adornments or making a hand gesture, though they were also regularly accompanied by images of violence. For example, a solo photograph of a man might show him wearing a green head band, or raising his fist in the air, but he will also be seen standing in front of a bus engulfed in flames or holding a bandage to his bleeding head. The presence of fire, and other violent imagery, reoccurred in photographs with a greater presence of men as most evident in the photographs with solo pictures of men.

While images of violence were increasingly associated with photographs featuring men, images including movement symbols appeared to be associated with photographs featuring women. In the subject of semiotics (the study of signs and symbols), “a symbolic image is neither an object nor an independent entity. Instead, it is subject to interpretation grounded in history and past experiences” (Kim 2015). This supports Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) articulation of symbolic politics employed in social movements as “symbols, actions or stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away” (16). The application of symbolic images in social

movements is a “powerful tool used...to sell, convince, and coerce people” to act whether that action is to “buy products, believe ideas, join groups, and support political parties and policies in both the government and the private sector” (Betts 2006: 26). A type of public demonstration, street protests serve as a vital space for movement activists to utilize symbols to not only convince, but also, market the movement to a transnational civil society, powerful actors, and international non-governmental organizations (Bob 2005). As mentioned, the symbolic images from pre-election rallies, specifically Mousavi’s campaign, resurfaced along with cultural and universal protest symbols. The presence of symbolic and violent imagery in the digital street aesthetic proved to be gendered.

#### *The Gendered Presence of Symbols and Violence*

The presence of symbolic imagery is a visible part of the Green Movement’s aesthetic. There was an abundance of symbolism present at local and transnational protest actions that became a part of the digital street aesthetic. I identified 4 types of symbolic images in the digital street aesthetic: *hand gestures*, *green adornments*, *protest signs*, and *national flags*. Beginning with the symbolic use of hand gestures, I identified two categories of hand gestures: the “V-ictory” sign and the “fist up”. The “V-ictory” sign is the act of holding the pointer and middle fingers in a V-shape with the hand pointed out, while keeping the remaining fingers folded down. This same gesture is used transnationally as a peace sign in much of the world and the V-ictory sign could have been mistakenly interpreted as a peace sign by a transnational audience. There are 44 photographs with the presence of a V-ictory gesture; 23 (52%) have a greater presence of

women and only 8 (18%) have a greater presence of men. Remembering a lot of V-ictory gestures in the portrait-style photographs described above, I ran analysis on the 14 photographs featuring a solo participant and a V-ictory gesture to find that 11 (79%) of these photographs include a greater presence of women and 3 (21%) include a greater presence of men. These findings reveal the gendered use of the V-ictory sign in the Green Movement digital aesthetic.

The fist up gesture is a reference to a transnationally recognized symbol of protest opposing all forms of oppressive power. In coding for this gesture, I included images of an open palm held in the air similarly to that of the fist up gesture. Of the 20 total photographs with a fist up gesture, 4 (20%) have a greater presence of women and 9 (45%) have a greater presence of men. The use of the fist up gesture is also gendered, but in this case, men are more likely to be seen using this gesture. Of the two hand gestures, the V-ictory sign, dominantly used by women, appears more frequently, is a more representative symbol of the movement, and an enduring part of the movement aesthetic.

The most extensively used Green Movement symbol is the adornment of *green*, which is present in 126 photographs of the 190 in this study. Both gender groups regularly adorned their bodies with green symbolism; though, women were seen employing green in slightly greater numbers than men. In the photographs containing green imagery, 40 (32%) include a greater presence of women and 30 (24%) include a greater presence of men. There are many photographs including green imagery where both genders are present, and these photographs also reveal women more frequently employing green symbolism as a method of their participation in the movement.

Examining the gendered relationship between green symbolism and group size, I identified 19 photographs of a solo participant with green symbolism present. Of these 19 photographs, 14 (74%) are photographs focused on a woman and 5 (26%) photographs are focused on a man. As I had come to suspect, photographs of solo participants adorning green symbolism emphasized the participation of women more so than men.

While less frequent than the presence of green symbolism, there are a total of 103 photographs including a *protest sign*. The presence of protest signs in the movement's digital street aesthetic also proved to be a gendered method of participation with 29 (28%) of the 103 photographs revealing a greater presence of women, while 15 (15%) include a greater presence of men, and 48 (47%) include the presence of both men and women. The final symbolic image to review is the presence of a national flag. Of the symbols analyzed in this study, the presence of a *national flag* is the least frequent appearing in only 26 photographs. The presence of a national flag did not prove to be gendered in the digital aesthetic of the movement. Of the 26 photographs, 5 flags appeared in photographs with a greater presence of women, 5 appeared in photographs with a greater presence of men, and the majority, 15, appeared in photographs with both genders present.

The adornment of political and cultural symbols, signs, and gestures are not the only type of symbolism to appear in the visual representation of the Green Movement. Photographic documentation of the movement exposes the distinct types of violent imagery present. I identified 3 categories of violent images: the presence of a *wound*, presence of a *weapon*, and the presence of *fire*. Of these, fire is the most frequently

visible image of violence in the movement. As a category, the presence of fire refers to actual flames as well as any smoke in the air including that of tear gas. Based on initial observations, I expected to see a greater presence of men alongside images of fire which was confirmed in the data. There are 23 photographs with the presence of fire; of these, 5 (22%) have a greater presence of women and 18 (78%) have a greater presence of men. There are 7 photographs of solo participants within these 23 photographs of fire with 2 of these 7 (29%) including a greater presence of women and the other 5 (71%) including a greater presence of men. Across all group sizes, men are more frequently seen alongside images of fire than women.

To better analyze the gendered presence of violence in the photographic documentation of Green Movement protests, I performed some additional coding of gender to reflect the gender of the individual engaged with the violent imagery. In other words, instead of code which gender is most present, I coded for the gender of the person injured or wielding a weapon. One theme under violent imagery is the presence of a *weapon* including rocks, batons, police shields, and any other metal, debris, or makeshift weapon. There are 21 photographs with a weapon present, 3 (14%) of these photographs show a woman with a weapon and 15 (71%) show men with a weapon. There were 12 photographs with *wounds* present, 3 (25%) include a wounded woman and 9 (75%) include a wounded man. In all three categories of violent imagery, men are more likely to be seen next to images of violence. While the presence of men dominates photographs with violent imagery, women dominate photographs with symbolic imagery, which appear much more frequently in the Green Movement's digital aesthetic.



### *Replicating the Aesthetic*

Looking at differences between the presence of symbolic imagery in the local street aesthetic versus the transnational aesthetic, almost all symbolic images utilized in the Green Movement are more prevalent in transnational solidarity rallies, although they originate culturally and spatially from the initial days of spontaneous Green Movement protests in Iran. Still, assessing differences in these two groups provides valuable insights on the development and adoption of these symbolic images across the network. This inquiry revealed an abundance of symbolic imagery present at transnational solidarity rallies meant to associate transnational actions with those taking place in Iran.

Of all the non-violent symbolic imagery present within Iran and as part of the transnational network, the only symbol *less* prevalent transnationally than in Iran is the use of hand gestures. Of the 62 photographs with the presence of a hand gesture, 39 (63%) are in Iran and 23 (37%) are located throughout the transnational network. On the opposite end, violent imagery is completely absent from photographs of transnational solidarity rallies *except* for violent imagery that appears on protest signs. It became virtually impossible to code for each image of violence on protest signs, so I did not calculate a frequency count for violence imagery present at transnational solidarity rallies but included descriptions of these signs in the qualitative write up for each picture when necessary. However, protest signs are one of the most frequent to appear transnationally. In the 103 images including protest signs, 27 (26%) are from protests in Iran and 76 (74%) are from transnational solidarity rallies. Similarly, of the 126 photographs with

green symbolism present, 25 (20%) are from Iran and 101 (80%) are from rallies held throughout the transnational advocacy network.

Finally, the symbolic presence of a national flag is almost entirely part of the transnational aesthetic. There are a total of 26 photographs with a national flag; 2 (8%) are from Iran while 24 (92%) are from transnational rallies held outside of Iran. These national flags are mostly versions of Iranian flags, but a few national flags of other nation-states appear in transnational solidarity rallies. Of the versions of Iranian flags present at solidarity rallies, only 2 are the current Islamic Republic flag while 10 are the previous national flag recognized broadly as the flag of the Pahlavi Dynasty. However, the most frequently appearing flag is what I label “future Iranian flags” that include the 3-stripes of both Iranian flags, some of which incorporate a symbolic image in the middle, white stripe of the flag (modeling previous Iranian flags), and some of which incorporate no symbolism. Although these future flags appear almost entirely in transnational images of protest, they are representative of the many conversations taking place in Iran, which have been enhanced by the revolutionary actions of the Green Movement.

In 2009 while conducting preliminary field work in Iran, I had an incredibly enlightening conversation with a cousin. She and I often discussed the socio-political conditions in Iran with both of us seeking a less authoritarian, more rights-based government in the state. While we did not agree on every point, we both agreed that this imaginative new nation should include a new version of the Iranian flag. This was the first time anyone had even introduced the idea of a future flag to me. “Do you have a suggestion for how this flag would look?” I asked my cousin. “Yes!” She proclaimed. “I

talk about this with friends and colleagues. I think Iran's future flag should have the green, white, and red stripes from previous flags but neither the current Islamic, nor previous Pahlavi symbols. I do not think we should include any symbol in the future flag because it might be exclusionary to some members in our society, and I want a more inclusionary Iran." I smiled listening to my cousin and acknowledging the underground, invisible movement work taking place in the state. While this type of movement work is invisible, it subtly appeared in the digital street aesthetic, which I am privy to through my fieldwork and relationship with Iranian citizens.

## CONCLUSION

This descriptive analysis provides valuable insights on how the digital street aesthetic is gendered. I was able to identify several themes characterizing women's participation within this digital street aesthetic including some transnational variations in these themes. As independent categories these themes can only describe so much; but when presented collectively, these themes create an overarching message about women's participation rooted in stereotypical gender tropes. Collectively, women are most often seen alone, sometimes posing towards the camera, and usually seen with symbolic objects or gestures. While these symbolically adorned, portrait style images of women are not the only example of women's participation in the movement, these themes are the most frequent representation of women in the movement. This dominant gendered aesthetic suggests that women's primary contribution to the movement is through their beautified presence and the symbolic ornamenting of their bodies. These findings lead to

the next research question: *Does the over representation of one method of women's participation in the digital street aesthetic contribute to the marginalization of less visible forms of participation?* To answer this question, I will provide a much richer description of this dominant gendered aesthetic. I will look closely at the recurring representations of women within this aesthetic and begin to offer explanations for why these representations came to dominate the movement's digital aesthetic.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE GREEN MOVEMENT'S DOMINANT GENDERED AESTHETIC: YOUNG, BEAUTIFUL, AND 'OPEN'**

While the descriptive analysis in Chapter 3 confirmed the presence of a gendered aesthetic in the photographic documentation of Green Movement protests, the following chapters provide a richer explanation of which women and gendered methods of participation construct the dominant gendered aesthetic and which women and methods of participation are absent from this dominant gendered aesthetic. My analysis suggests that three methods of embodied participation dominate representations of women in the movement. While some of these methods of embodiment include intentional acts of aesthetic building, others represent daily embodied practices that were sustained during times of protest. These three methods of embodiment participation are: 1. embodiment of symbolic images, 2. embodiment through martyrdom, and 3. embodied sexuality.

I approach this discussion on embodiment through Judith Butler's theoretical framing of gender and the body as performative. In her groundbreaking work titled, *Gender Trouble*, Butler provides an understanding of gender as a socially constructed product of the power/knowledge regimes in society (1990). Seeking a deeper understanding of what she refers to as the 'foundational categories of identity' (gender, sex, sexuality, desire, and the body), Butler postulates these categories as "performative in the sense that the categories themselves produce the identity they are deemed to be simply representing" (Jagger 2008: 17). In other words, these foundational categories do not pre-exist the regimes of power/knowledge which define them; instead, they are cultural products that "create the effect of the natural, the original, the inevitable" (Butler

1990: viii) fundamentally instituting these regimes of power/knowledge as also being 'natural and inevitable'. It is through the collective repetitive process of performing gender that gender is inscribed on the body.

Therefore, Butler's understanding of the body as a site where gender and culture are performed, models Foucault's theoretical framing of the body as "a site" of power and discursive struggle (Foucault 1990, Punday 2000). Theoretical analysis of the body as "a site" stems from Foucault's understanding of *normalization* as a set of behaviors (and ideas) generating an idealized norm of conduct by which behavior is judged and rewarded or punished accordingly (1990, 1995). As such, the body becomes a "political field" where "power relations have an immediate hold upon it, they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (1990: 94 found in Punday 2000: 512). Similarly, Butler describes the hegemonic qualities of the *regulatory norms* "that control the performances that constitute it" (Skorzak 2019:3). Explaining Butler's analysis, Jagger says, "It is through these regulatory norms that the body is materialized and sexed and gendered, though these are articulated with other regulatory norms which materialize the body as 'raced', classed, aged, etc." (Jagger 2008: 57). As such, the body does not exist in its material form separate from the political, cultural, or economic structures that collectively produce the regulatory norms that shape our lives. However, the body, as a site of power, also serves as a space for resistance and self-identification.

## THE GREEN WAVE AND CALLS FOR V-ICTORY

In the previous chapter we learned of the high frequency of green adornments as symbolic representations of the movement. As the most utilized symbolic image, green adornments were gendered in their presentation contributing to the movement's gendered aesthetic. Iranian women living under contentious compulsory hijab laws have been conditioned to treat their bodies not just as a site where politics is enforced but also where it is challenged and resisted. Iran's identity as a nation-state has been constructed in part through the forced gendered performativity of national culture including the adornment of politicized cultural symbols. This politicization of women's public appearance reinforced the body as a site of power for the distinct purpose of building a patriarchal Islamic state, but as a site of power, Iranian women have been successful and innovative in their embodied resistance to an oppressive nation-state. This knowledge of resistance was then skillfully translated into the Green Movement participatory actions.

Women's public presentation has been a site for nation building since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Iran's leader, Reza Shah first banned the use of the Islamic *hijab* in public spaces so to represent Iran as a modern, secular state aligned with Western ideals and practices (Hoodfar 1993; Paidar 1995; Majd 2001). Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the newly established Islamic state enacted a series of "hijab laws" geared at establishing a legally bound set of regulatory norms controlling women's public appearance (Milani 1992) to rebuild the nation as a patriarchal Islamic state. This forced embodiment of nation also served to bolster the colonialist trope of the disempowered

“third world” Islamic woman which has long dominated global North representations of Islamic women. Women’s bodies served as the canvas on which a paternalistic government painted symbolic nationalism.



Figure 2- IE37

However, women in Iran recognized their gendered bodies as a site to claim their power beginning with everyday resistance strategies in opposition to the compulsory hijab. Iranian American journalist, Azadeh Moaveni (2005) describes the political challenges and negotiations Iranian women participate in as part of public life, “Every morning, getting dressed had involved a *me vs. the regime* calculus” one in which women “applied war-paint—coats and coats of make up—and aggressively risqué clothes” in opposition to the forced embodiment of piety. (43). These resistance strategies began as

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<sup>2</sup> Saber, Hamed. 2009. “Iran: 5<sup>th</sup> Green Day – 3V.” Image (JPEG). The Green Wave. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2453/3636927440\\_bb560115a9\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2453/3636927440_bb560115a9_b.jpg)).



small acts such as the appearance of open toed shoes with polished toenails or communal knowledge about neighborhoods where limits of dress “could be flouted” (55). By 2009, Iranian women had gained decades of experiential knowledge on how to use their gendered bodies as a site for resistance strategies and symbolic politics. In the above image (IE37), two young women are seen participating in a Green Movement protest action simultaneously resisting the paternalistic state while promoting a political movement that sustains the patriarchy, but within a reformed and more equitably advertised governing body. The women in photograph IE37 are flashing V-victory signs with perfectly manicured and painted fingernails on fingers and wrists adorned in green bands. Both women have stylishly arched eyebrows and a full face of make up; their maghnees are pulled far back on their heads revealing their hair and for one woman, a green head band tied across her forehead.

Women, like the two seen in image IE37, effortlessly incorporated Green Movement symbolism into their daily performance of gender separate from the paternalistic definition of the state, their acts of resistance shifting norms and what is, or is not, institutionally disciplined. As Moavani describes, through these daily performative challenges to gender, women were declaring, “the Islamic Republic does not control me; see it in the layers of makeup I apply to my face, the tightness of my jeans” (83), and all of the other “forbidden” ways I present myself in public life. By the early 2000s, women in Iran “dressed in every color imaginable—veils of bright emerald, violet, buttercup—and in short, coat-like tunics...that hugged their curves, capri pants that exposed long stretches of calf” (70). During Green Movement protest actions, the colorful way Iranian

women presented themselves became political spectacle capturing the gaze of a transnational audience. Image IE37 above is one of the most circulated photographs to appear in this sample. It has and continues to be used in many English publications discussing the Green Movement, women's rights in Iran, or nonviolent movement strategies. Many of these articles were written between 2009- 2011 when the movement was most active but a basic google search revealed this image is included in publications as recent as 2018 following a series of protests in Iran in response to outrageous rates of inflation, including on Iran's greatest natural resource, fuel. These women are participating in creating a visual image and overall aesthetic that has come to not only represent the Green Movement in 2009 but ongoing grievances Iran's civil society voices against the state.



3

*Figure 3- IP35*

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<sup>3</sup> Samuelson, Joan McAninch. 2009. "Iranian Woman Protester 6." Image (JPEG). Women of Iran. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3581/3652411959\\_8a924c0bfc.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3581/3652411959_8a924c0bfc.jpg)).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, green symbolism originated from pre-election presidential rallies for Mousavi and was worn by women and men alike. Still, women, like the one shown in photograph IP35 above, were able to capture the visual curiosities of a transnational audience by incorporating movement related green adornments, like wristbands, to their already politicized everyday compulsory street wear, like shawls. Some women would strategically wear green under their hijab, selectively choosing when to reveal it. By incorporating Green Movement politics (represented by green symbolism) into the gendered politics of the compulsory hijab, Iranian women are weaving the conversation of women's rights into conversations about the Green Movement further gendering the movement's aesthetic. By embodying Green Movement symbols into their embodied resistance against sexist policies of the state, Iranian women are fusing discussions on women's rights into the discussion of political and social rights in the state.

The adornment of green bands became the most consistent symbol to appear in the movement's digital street aesthetic and an important identifying marker for many Green Movement participants. These bands, often referred to as "green bracelets", became an identifying marker for Green Movement supporters within Iran and abroad. For many Iranians and members of the Iranian diaspora, these green bracelets came to represent a more cooperative and inclusive vision for Iran's future. As a popular Iranian blogger, "Lady Plum" describes, the "magic green bracelet has worked wonders with our culture, our feelings, and our hearts. These gatherings in my town, without censorship, exaggeration, trickery and lies... We stand as our true selves" (Alavi 2010). Lady Plum's

message echoes the optimism for change and empowerment experienced through the subtle resistance of collectively embellishing their street wear with these “magic” green bracelets. Women, like those pictured in image IP37 below, were often seen sharing these “magic” green bracelets, an example of the collective participation in constructing the gendered aesthetic of the movement.



*Figure 4- IP37*

Iranian women expanded the adornment of green bands in illuminating ways. Playing on culture and history, hands became a site for symbolic displays. Women displayed these green bands on their fingers as well wrists and could be seen with numerous bands hanging from their hands at one time. Besides being an ideal location for

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<sup>4</sup> Samuelson, Joan McAninch. 2009. “Iranian Women Protesters 2.” Image (JPEG). Women of Iran. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3581/3652411959\\_8a924c0bfc.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3581/3652411959_8a924c0bfc.jpg)).

displaying symbolic adornments, participants' hands are used for other forms of non-verbal language including symbolic gestures like that of the V-ictory sign. Images of hands in Iran have both a revolutionary and cultural symbolic function. Most notably, the "panjah" (five fingered hand) is associated with Fatimah, daughter of the prophet, and has been used visually in Iran as "symbolic iconography grounded in Shi'i expressive modes of opposition and victimhood" (Rauh 2013: 1322). In the Iranian Green Movement, women expanded their use of hands as symbolically important visual markers. Women painted their fingers/ hands green and used those hands to gesture signs of V-ictory as a pre-election visual image that extended to some post-election protests. Women adorned their fingers and hands with green bands continuing to gesture signs of V-ictory or to display these green bands while gesturing other nonverbal messages as shown in photograph IE07 below.



5

*Figure 5- IE07*

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<sup>5</sup> United4Iran. 2009. "Hand Like Heart." Image (JPEG). Iran Photos. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2445/3682390977\\_64a5b0f0c9\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2445/3682390977_64a5b0f0c9_z.jpg)).

By adorning their politicized bodies in green symbolism, women were claiming their bodies as a site to exercise their own political power, not just a site for institutions to demonstrate their disciplinary power. Women in Iran were poised to incorporate Green Movement symbolism into their public presentation of self. This gendered method of participation captured the interest of a transnational audience many of whom emulated these symbolic methods of participation at solidarity rallies in cities around the world.

*Transnational Community Reflects and Reinvents Green Symbolism*

In response to the spontaneous Green Movement protests taking place in Iran, an organized and responsive advocacy network immediately held solidarity rallies in support of the activists fighting for more democratic governing within the state. As an extension of the movement within Iran, these solidarity rallies emulated the symbolic imagery seen in Green Movement street protests within Iran further cementing the gendered use of green imagery as a component of the gendered aesthetic of the movement. Women in the transnational network participated in solidarity rallies through similar embodied practices incorporating green imagery into their clothing, wearing, and distributing “magic” green bracelets, and using their adorned bodies to communicate through nonverbal gestures. Aware of their peripheral position to Iran’s internal struggles, women in the transnational advocacy network were more intentional in their embodiment of Green Movement symbolism.

As a participant at multiple Green Movement transnational solidarity rallies, I embodied Green Movement symbolism as a method of my participation in Green Movement rallies. Just as Lady Plum described of protestors in Iran, I felt hopefully

empowered wearing my “magic” green bracelet as a symbolic gesture communally and politically aligning myself with likeminded Iranians near and far.

I spent much of the day “prepping” for the evening’s action. I wanted to participate in tonight’s rally more than I had the night before, so I went shopping. First, I went to a fabric store and purchased a yard of a deep green fabric. I knew this was much more than I needed but I wanted to make as many green bands as I could. Then I went to the craft store and purchased white posterboard with large black sticker letters. Finally, I purchased a green candle to contribute to the growing vigil at our protest site. After three stores and a hand full of bags, I rushed home to incorporate this symbolic imagery into my presentation of self so that it better reflected my participation and solidarity with the movement. I sat in my room smiling, constructing something so small that felt like something so big.

Thinking back, I can remember this night perfectly. It was the second night of solidarity rallies in Orange County after the fourth day of protests in Iran. For the second night in a row, I convinced my cousin to join me at a Green Movement solidarity rally. Prior to these two nights, my cousin had never attended a protest or political rally. This was an entirely new experience in our relationship with each other and our local community.

“Oh wow!” my cousin said once I jumped in her car. She looked me up and down, paying close attention to the green bands I had hanging from my head, arm, and wrists. “Look at you! You look great.” I was beaming. “Thanks! I wanted to do a little more tonight. I have some extra fabric if you would like a wristband too.”

As I was trying to explain to my cousin, I adorned myself in green bands, made and carried a protest sign, and lit a special green candle because I wanted a more engaged method of participation. My transnational consumer efforts to be engaged in a movement far away is a typical response in an era of commercialized justice movements. For members of the transnational advocacy network seeking to Like many transnational participants of a social movement, embodying the movement's symbolism is a form of branding my support of the movement. Transnationally, these consumer practices made me feel more engaged with the movement, not just a distant advocate. Incorporating symbolism from the Green Movement aesthetic into my individual presentation of self, I was observing what I believed to be a more engaged method of participation.



6

*Figure 6- IE12*

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<sup>6</sup> It Used to be Me. 2009. "Iran Protest DC." Image (JPEG). United4Iran Rally in DC. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr1.com/2636/3756452467\\_3fe0ca5c05\\_c.jpg](https://live.staticflickr1.com/2636/3756452467_3fe0ca5c05_c.jpg)).



From the sample of transnational photographs in this study, it is apparent that I was not alone in modeling the Green Movement's digital street aesthetic I was observing in Iran. Photographs of women adorned in green symbolism were prevalent throughout the transnational images of Green Movement solidarity rallies. The transnational gendered embodiment of green symbolism mirrored the gendered embodiment of this symbolism in Iran. In the photographs below (IE12 and UI06), women participating in transnational solidarity rallies are seen effortlessly weaving green clothing into their everyday garments. The women in image IE12 are both wearing numerous green bracelets and large green face masks; still, the largest display of green imagery comes from a long green dress worn by one of the two women and captured by the full-length view of participants bodies. As was the case with protests in Iran, photographs of women symbolically adorned in green imagery included images of women's bodies and isolated body parts (see photograph IP68).



*Figure 7- UI06*

The focus on women's bodies as a canvas for displaying Green Movement symbolism produced several images of "faceless bodies". Photograph UI06 above focuses on a single participant as seen from behind. She is wearing a green shirt, a green headband, and "magic" green bracelets on both wrists that are holding up a sign on white posterboard with green font. Photographed from behind with only a portion of her handwritten sign visible, this woman's participation is reduced to the physical presence of her symbolically adorned body. This is further demonstrated by the recurring images of women's hands adorned in green making a universal or Green Movement gesture. Just as photograph IE07 taken in Iran shows a woman's adorned hands creating a heart, image UI55 below shows multiple hands raised, all but one making the V-ictory sign.

Captured from behind, photograph UI55 shows multiple hands in the air and the back of some participants' heads. While there are multiple hands and heads visible, it is difficult to distinguish exactly which hands belong to which participants. This photograph also includes some intentional editing that has obscured parts of the photograph into the background and focused on the three hands at the front of the photograph. Two of these hands appear to be from the same person; a woman whose partial head is photographed in between two of these hands. One of her two hands is making a peace sign and the other hand, which is adorned in multiple green bracelets and holding a green paper. There is another hand that appears behind and in between the woman's raised hands which is also adorned in green bands. While I initially assumed this was again a woman's hand, a more thorough examination of the photograph leads me to conclude that this hand is not



7

*Figure 8- UI55*

gendered, but its placement next to the gendered hands and head/ hair of the participant the photograph focuses on, genders the entire image including the nongendered hand.

In the book, *Patterns of Protest*, sociologist Catherine Corrigan-Brown considers individual-level factors influencing participation in protest activities (2011).

Acknowledging the valuable role of shared ideology and social networking, Corrigan-Brown seeks to (re)incorporate individual factors such as resources and biographical availability. On the heels of a presidential election promoting mass participation to legitimize its precarious democracy, women's "biographical availability" to participate in the protest actions that followed lacked many of the usual barriers to public participation that women face in Iran. Additionally, the gendered embodiment of green adornments was an attainable resource to further women's participation in the movement. The women who learned to apply make up like "war paint" used this knowledge to "paint" themselves

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<sup>7</sup> Ihodaei. 2009. "United4Iran\_141.web, Hands Raised in Victory." Image (JPEG). United 4 Iran. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2548/3762774374\\_e40e30363c\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2548/3762774374_e40e30363c_b.jpg)).

into the aesthetics of the movement. Iranian women's gendered performativity of cultural nationalism shapes their methods of participation in social movement activities.



8

*Figure 9- UI21*

While the transnational advocacy network emulated the methods of green embodiment practiced in Iran, they also engaged in innovative methods for incorporating green symbolism outside of what was observed in Iran. For example, photograph UI21 above and IU24 below is one of multiple images from solidarity rallies that include an exhibit made of rows of green shoes placed in pairs and facing the same direction.

Through my research, I came to identify this 'green shoe project' as the "Trail of Green", an art exhibit by a group of "artist activists" calling themselves iGreen. The "Trail of Green" is part of a much larger transnational action known as the *12/12 Arts United 4 Iran* facilitated by the California based organization United4Iran. Described as "a series

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<sup>8</sup> United4Iran. 2010. "4354466823\_97e09780a2[1][1]." Image (JPEG). 22 Bahman – Austin, TX. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/4004/4359676757\\_7cd7d3e293.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/4004/4359676757_7cd7d3e293.jpg)).

of art & culture events around the world meant to highlight the ongoing civil and human rights violations in Iran” (Sahebdivani 2009); the “Trail of Green” is one of many exhibits that were displayed during the week. The meaning behind the long lines of green shoes is to “illuminate across the United States the ongoing struggle, and the ‘Trail of Green’ Iran’s activists are clearly leaving behind” (2009) as they march towards the same destination. A deeply transnational vision, this imaginative walking towards a common destination includes the millions of Iranians now living outside of Iran.



9

*Figure 10- UI24*

As I stared at the multiple images of the “Trail of Green” art exhibit, the many pairs of women’s green shoes began to pop out at me. While I have not been able to determine how, or by whom, these shoes were selected for this exhibit, the presence of so many women’s shoes lead me to believe that women were directly involved in creating

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<sup>9</sup> United4Iran. 2010. “Dallas.” Image (JPEG). 22 Bahman – Dallas, TX. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/4044/4351208805\\_67eca0848d\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/4044/4351208805_67eca0848d_z.jpg)).

these artistic displays. It is important to note that the types of women's shoes selected for this "Trail of Green" art showing are very representative of femininity. These shoes are not just women's sneakers but include all types of heeled shoes and dainty sandals presenting a more stereotypical representation of femininity.

#### EMBODIMENT THROUGH MARTYRDOM: THE CASE OF NEDA

Martyrdom is a reoccurring theme in Iranian political culture and Shi'ite Islamic culture as a means "to celebrate and safeguard the sacred boundaries, sublime values and exalted rituals by which the culture is sanctioned" (Dorraj 1997: 489-490). Originating in theology, martyrdom permeated political discourse beyond rituals of mourning to include more active, willing narratives of participation endorsing martyrdom as "the noblest of all causes" in "the struggle against social injustice and oppression" (494). One of the most significant narratives of martyrdom in Shiite Islam is the death of Imam Hossein (grandson of Prophet Mohammed) whose "sacrifice" was seen as "a desire to jolt the consciences of the Muslims and to reactivate the ethos of the Islamic community" (Momen 1985: 63 in Shirazi 2012: 100). The martyrdom of Imam Hossein is celebrated annually on Ashura, a national holiday in Iran.

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini relied on this cultural history of martyrdom to institute an Islamic-Iranian state characterized as a nation of "pious Muslims" (Shirazi 2012). The young state's national-cultural identity was tested by the Iran-Iraq, which lasted for 8 years and resulted in the massive loss of human life. One method of securing a limitless supply of civilians willing to embark on such a perilous fight was to exalt all

soldiers who died in the war to the status of martyr. “The Islamic Republic refers to each fallen soldier in the Iran-Iraq war as a martyr...no matter how small or large the role played, all soldiers share this honorific title” (101). These martyrs were memorialized on “larger than life” murals, banners, posters, and other media (Kaur 2010, Shirazi 2012). This “staging” (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999) or “visual presentation” (Shirazi 2012) of Iran as a “nation of martyrs” expanded the definition of martyrdom beyond the domain of theology alone. “The incursions of the state into this domain become visible not only in such moments of conflict, they are physically manifested in the way public spaces are organised and adorned in the city” (Kaur 2010: 443).

Historically, women have been excluded from the status of martyrdom within Islam in all cases, EXCEPT for those related to motherhood. The most well-known female martyr in Shiite Islam is Fatemeh Zahra, the lone daughter of the Prophet Mohammad, and mother to the aforementioned Imam Hossein; “She symbolizes the mother of all Muslim martyrs” (Shirazi 2012: 105). Just as men’s position as martyrs for the state was expanded to include every soldier serving in the Iran-Iraq war, women were honored as “the bravest of all by virtue of sacrificing their men (fathers, sons, husbands, or brothers) to the war. Nationalist posters from the 1980s depict a faceless Fatemeh speaking to Iranian women about bravery and patience as their “beloved men were engaged in jihad against the evil Saddam Hussein” (106). This view of women martyrs relegated the sacrifice as solely existent within the domain of the family. Women are not seen as martyrs for their own actions but for the actions of someone they care for.

According to Faegheh Shirazi, professor of “Middle Eastern” Studies, the definition of martyrdom for women was expanded in 2006 with the creation of the International Muslim Women Martyrs floor housed within the Museum of Martyrs. Shirazi describes this floor as including rows of photos “depicting young male and female university students climbing campus walls” in a celebrated effort to “topple the monarchy” (2012: 111). In this example, women, as protesters resisting an oppressive regime in favor of an Islamic state, are presented as martyrs. Shirazi discusses this expansion of the label “‘martyr, is increasingly being used to further political causes and justify sociopolitical agendas” (115). Looking at other significant sociopolitical happenings in Iran in 2006, Shirazi points to the establishment of the One Million Signatures Campaign, a nonviolent movement in support of women’s equal rights within the state. The pressure mounted by this campaign required a response from the state. Shirazi concludes that “the addition of the Muslim Women Martyrs floor is a clever, calculated strategy to demonstrate ‘equal and honorable’ status for Iranian women in accordance with Islamic tradition” (109). So, the deployment of the label “martyr” to include women in roles beyond the domain of family was a strategic effort to appease the demands for women’s equal rights.

It was this expanded definition of Iranian women as martyrs that existed during the 2009 Iranian Green Movement street protests. Martyrdom, when deployed as a tool to combat injustice and oppression, can be allocated by civil society and not just powerful political or theological leaders. In 2009, Iran’s civil society appointed many of the slain Green Movement protestors to the status of martyr, but only one of these martyrs



received the transnational designation as “the most widely witnessed death in human history” (Mahr 2009). Her name is Neda and her image, both in life and death, is a permanent feature of the visual representation of the movement.

Early morning of June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009, I lay in bed in my childhood home in California. CNN is on the television in my room flashing “Breaking News” as the split screen Twitter feed and Facebook page on my computer update instantly with new messages. I look up in time to see the screen change to a choppy cellphone video cutting in and out as the videographer runs toward a woman who is falling back and slowly crumbling to the ground as the two men beside her attempt to catch her before she hits the ground. The video has moved closer now and I can see this woman’s face and the two men next to her now covering her lower neck/ upper chest with their hands. I see blood gushing from under their hands. I am reminded that this is Iran when I hear the screams in Farsi. “Neda! Neda!” A male voice calls. “Where did she get hit?” another voice asks. There is no time or need to reply. The camera is recording the tragedy these civilians are witnessing. People can be heard crying. And pleading with god. Mostly, they are pleading with Neda not to die. But it is too late. We can all see Neda’s eyes look up one last time as she inadvertently makes eye contact with the camera. For just a second, she looks scared and then as the blood cascades from her nose and mouth like a spider web, she looks gone. Deceased. She is lifeless when the video cuts out with one final shot of her now lifeless face painted in blood. The video cuts out as warm tears trickle down my face and I understand that I have witnessed a woman, a sister, take her last breath.

Neda’s murder was played and replayed throughout new and old media outlets and is still available for viewing on YouTube. Immediately, the footage of Neda’s death ‘went viral’ with the hashtag #neda becoming a “trending topic” (CNN 2009). Despite Iran’s efforts to silence and censor the video (and later deny the authenticity of the video), they could not control its spread throughout the Internet or satellite dishes. After its initial release, eyewitness testimony and familial accounts provided additional context to the traumatic video footage. Perceived as ‘nonpolitical’ by those who knew her, Neda was on her way home from a music lesson when she and her instructor decided to stop at a protest site concerned with what was taking place around them (Fathi 2009). The two had only just walked into the crowd when a single gunshot is heard, and Neda can be

seen crumbling to the ground (2009). The simplicity and commonplace narrative only further elevated Neda in the eyes of Iranians and much of the rest of the world. She was not participating in violence or destruction; she was engaged, peacefully protesting her civic responsibility. Neda's innocence and the normalcy of her actions, which led to her state-sanctioned murder, secured Neda as a martyr in the hearts of Iranians and countless others around the world. In her death, Neda became an unwilling martyr, an unintentional leader, and a perpetual symbol of the Green Movement.

In her death, Neda was elevated to a leadership role within the movement and her assassination invoked a similar response as the martyrdom of other revolutionary leaders. Her murder was a rallying cry for human rights in Iran and was a critical part of the shifting identity of the Green Movement from an electoral dispute to an all-out demand for human rights in the state. As a visible instance of gratuitous state violence, Neda's murder generated increased Green Movement participation because of the state's treatment of martyrdom and Neda's embodiment of Green Movement ideology.

In the article, "Kill a Leader, Murder a Movement? Leadership and Assassination in Social Movements," Clifford Bob and Sharon Nepstad articulate the necessary conditions for the assassination of a leader to produce movement growth instead of the state's intended outcome of movement decline (2007). Two of the conditions put forth by Bob and Nepstad prove particularly helpful to understanding Neda's impact on the Green Movement's symbolism. The first centers on the movement's ideology of martyrdom. If a movement "operates in a society in which martyrdom is a familiar cultural motif, an assassinated leader will more easily be converted into a martyr, enhancing the

movement's likelihood of growth" (1376). Post-revolutionary Iran's cultural commitment to elevate martyrs as national heroes produced a cultural climate that elevated Neda's martyrdom to the same heroic status as the soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq war.

The second relevant hypothesis accounts for the martyred leader's "embodiment of a shared group identity" especially with group members overseas. The shared group identity that Neda embodied is that of a nonviolent, curious, and engaged member of civil society. She was not overtly political. In fact, she was overtly common; she could be any young Iranian woman seeking to practice the rights bestowed on her as a human and civilian within her society. Neda's very public murder at the hands of a misogynist state resonated with women inside Iran and throughout transnational networks. Neda, in image and spiritual reference, became a substantial part of the aesthetic of the Green Movement.



*Figure 11- IP13*

Photograph IP13 above was taken at a street protest in Tehran. It shows a woman holding a protest sign over her face and white Gladiolus flowers in each hand. This

woman's body recedes behind her protest sign blending in with the bodies of the men gathered behind her. Her sign, which is the focus of this photograph, is written in Farsi and reads, "Neda jaan, rest in peace. The ancient Simurgh (large mythological bird of Iran) from Pars will spread your actions to the entire world who will be inspired to help our Iranian movement succeed". Appearing throughout Persian mythology, art and culture, the legend of the Simurgh is most widely known through the infamous extended poem written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by one of Iran's greatest poets, Ferdowsi. Depicted as a very large, powerful, and beautifully colored bird, the Simurgh is feminine exemplifying maternal and nurturing qualities when she rescues and raises an abandoned boy as one of her own chicks (Marshall 2021). As demonstrated by this protest sign, the Simurgh remains a cultural symbol in Iran referenced during times of conflict and transformation.

This Iranian protester's tribute to Neda accurately portrays the cultural and national relevance of Neda's martyrdom. Referencing the mythological Simurgh as a protector and messenger for Neda exalted her memory to that of legendary Iranian folklore that existed prior to any contemporary ruling body in the state. Neda's martyrdom embodies this shared imagination of an ancient Iran and serves as a call to action for Iranians around the world. Undeniably, it was Neda's death which helped to spawn a "Global Day of Action" for human rights in Iran, the largest transnational day of action in support of Iran's Green Movement.

#### *The Transnational Community Embraces Neda*

Following Neda's murder and the continued repression of Green Movement protestors, a Global Day of Action for Iran was organized by a newly founded

transnational organization, United4Iran. “On July 25, 2009, tens of thousands of people in 110 cities (80 states) around the world take to the streets in support of Iranian citizens and their quest for rights” (United4Iran 2009). Amnesty International, who helped with the organization and facilitation of the event, called the day a “resounding success” (2009). Accompanying this text is a powerful image, a photograph taken in Paris during the Global Day of Action solidarity rally. The Eiffel Tower is symbolically visible in the background reinforcing the transnational origins of the solidarity movement. Squatted below the Eiffel Tower are hundreds of bodies all holding signs of Neda’s face (in life) and name over their own. This image of Neda was mass produced by the event hosts, United4Iran, and were distributed to cities across the transnational network. By personifying Neda’s image over their own living bodies, protest participants embodied Neda’s martyrdom.



*Figure 12- UI09*

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<sup>10</sup> Deléage, Jean-Rémi. 2009. “United For Iran Paris Rally July 25.” Image (JPEG). United For Iran Paris Rally July 25 #iranelection. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3472/3756445124\\_17ede36375\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3472/3756445124_17ede36375_b.jpg))

The photograph UI09 above is similar to the one described on the United4Iran website. In fact, it appears to be taken on the same day in the same location identified by the Paris landmark, the Eiffel Tower, which is visible in both pictures. The photograph of Neda in sample UI09 is the same photograph that was mass produced and disseminated by event hosts during the Global Day of Action. In image UI09, the photograph of Neda appears to be enlarged, but at second glance, is a close up or zoomed in photograph less focused on documenting protest actions than on contributing to the events aesthetic.

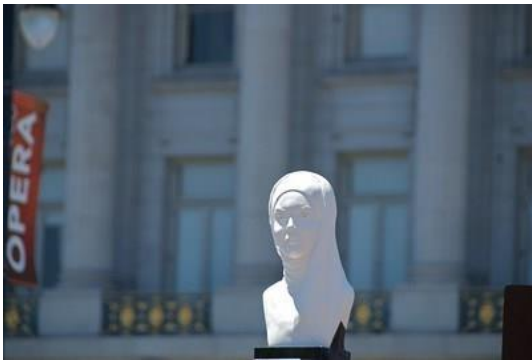
As Iranians in Iran were prohibited from mourning, or even recognizing Neda as a martyr, the transnational community exalted her image. While holding protest signs of Neda's image, transnational protest participants, especially women, regularly embodied Neda's martyrdom by merging her image into their own. Taken at a transnational solidarity rally, photograph IP09 below does just that. Photograph IP09 displays multiple protest signs centering a portrait of Neda (with hejab) held on a wood plank directly over a Green Movement participant's face so that her body and Neda's image become one. She is holding her free arm up in the air gesturing a V-ictory sign and revealing a "magic green bracelet" on her wrist. Hamid Dabashi, sociologist and Professor of Iranian Studies, astutely observes, "There are quite a number of other young men and women who perished in the course of the initial stages of the Green Movement in Iran, but none of them assumed the global attention that Neda Agha-Soltan did" (2016: 148). Depictions of Neda's image is the most frequently recurring image to appear in the sample photographs in this study.



*Figure 13- IP09*

Coded as protest signs, Neda's image appears in 10 of the 87 transnational photographs including protest signs. When Neda's image is not overlaying protest participants' bodies, it appears on theatrical stages as part of a vigil, or presentation. There are also giant size reproductions of Neda's image at transnational solidarity rallies and various depictions of her image incorporated into stage décor. Similar to the "magic" green bracelets symbolically worn by Green Movement participants, Neda's image was promoted by movement participants and entrenched into the gendered aesthetic of the movement. The presentation of Neda's image is the most gendered component of her martyrdom. Except for the violently sensational image of Neda in death, all other replicated photographs of Neda show her smiling, wearing makeup, and representing feminine beauty. The inclusion of stereotypically beautiful images of Neda is meant to invoke pleasurable feelings. Her image was also regularly incorporated into digital art forms and physical art works. Revealed on the Global Day of Action at the San Francisco

location, photograph UI64 below is a sculpture of Neda's head and face (with hejab). Local sculptor, Paula Slater, described "feeling a lot of pain" from the video of Neda's death and needing "to do" something with the pain, "I need to turn this pain that I'm feeling into art and I just wanted to sculpt her portrait and to show my solidarity with the people in Iran" (Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty 2009).



11

*Figure 14- UI64*

"By the end of the tumultuous year of 2009, Neda Agha-Soltan had been transformed into the singularly globalized symbol of the Green Movement" (Dabashi 2016) securing her embodied martyrdom in the Green Movement's dominant gendered aesthetic. In 2015, Time Magazine again highlighted the powerful image of Neda's death

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<sup>11</sup> Rhodes, Steve. 2009. "Unveiling of Neda Sculpture by Paula Slater at San Francisco United for Iran Global Day of Action July 25, 2009." Image (JPEG). San Francisco United for Iran Global Day of Action July 25, 2009. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3480/3756835841\\_dac2e0ef25\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3480/3756835841_dac2e0ef25_b.jpg)).



by asserting that “The Death of Neda” is one of the “100 most influential images of all time” and the only image from Iran to be selected for this collection (Time 100 Photos). The photograph of Neda selected for this influential collection is the “death image” of a bloodied Neda dying on the street taken by a citizen photojournalist. Although Neda’s death image appeared in protest signs in this study, I selected not to include any of these images as examples due to their traumatic nature.

## EMBODIED FEMININITY SEXUALIZES WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE GREEN MOVEMENT

Original Tweet, unknown author, Jan 7, 2020:

We should invade Iran and take their bitches. Persian girls are hot af without the headgear and you know they know how to act right. Makes you think.

Tweet response by Aubrey Huff, professional baseball player, Jan 7, 2020:

Let’s get a flight over and kidnap about 10 each. We can bring them back here as they fan us and feed us grapes, amongst other things....(purple devil face emoji)

Aubrey Huff, in defense of his original tweet, Jan 7, 2020:

Does nobody have a sense of humor anymore!? The way Iranian women are treated over there simply wanted 2 say I’d go there 2 rescue them & bring them back 2 the states. And they would be so thankful 2 escape that hell that they’d fan me & feed me grapes. Never said rape!

And as a follow up:

In light of today’s post about rescuing Iranian women from that shit hole. This is what I would imagine grateful Iranian women would do to show their appreciation to any man who saved them from the assholes that beat them & make them wear a long tunic & scarf in 110 degree heat.

(Included in this final tweet is a troubling stick figure of a man (visible by his penis) laying in a lounge chair with his arms folded behind his head. There are three women standing around him (with visible cleavage). One woman is fanning him, one is feeding him grapes and the other is rubbing his feet. There are also some disturbing talk bubbles including one where he refers to one of the women as “gorgeous” and asks another to apply “A little more pressure on the feet there sweetheart.”)

Since 2001, the dominant image of Iranian women has been that of a subjugated “third world woman” whose “liberation” can only be achieved at the hands of “civilized men” from outside the country (Mohanty, Pratt, and Riley 2008). Accompanying this

narrative was an image of Iranian women dressed in baggy black *chadors* with no makeup or beautifying adornments. These women appeared angry and unapproachable, almost never seen with a smile. In the early 2000s as the global North waged war on Islam masked as the ‘War on Terror’, this image of shrouded Islamic women was weaponized as evidence of their inferior status in society and of the necessity for global North intervention. Through this politicized campaign, “Burqas and veils have come to embody the ultimate in gendered persecution. Bikinis equal freedom: sex is emancipation” (Chew 2008: 82). Framed as passive, controlled and excessively pious, Iranian women were presented to the global North as non-sexual and complacent. Collectively, a media campaign framed Islamic states as violent and threatening.

However, the advancement and accessibility of telecommunication technologies leading up to the 2009 Green Movement protests was believed to have a democratizing effect on representation with more people able to digitally take and share photographs. More people are now able to document their daily lives, activities, and emergent events. In Iran’s Green Movement, the plethora of photographic documentation of street protests provided a new representation of Iranian women. Young, beautiful, and worldly; the “new Iranian woman” is an amalgamation of global beauty standards with local practices. This new Iranian woman symbolizes a more youthful, high-class, educated, and friendly representation of a gendered Iran. Images of Iranian women participating in Green Movement protests are an authentic view of Iranian women as non-homogenous, non-complacent, and sexually desirable in their embodiment of global beauty standards.

The technological era of globalization facilitated transnational exchanges in economics, migration, and culture. Culture, while dual directional, flows more heavily from global North states to the global South primarily through new and old media systems. Rooted in patriarchal, white, heteronormativity, the “ideal” standard of beauty in the global North favors light-skin (eyes and hair), thinness, youthfulness and able bodies with long hair and ‘delicate’ features (Mckay, Moore, and Kubik 2018; Rossini 2015, Kilbourne 2010). The proliferation of globalized media flooded the global South with images of gendered beauty ideals promoting women’s value as dependent on their physical attractiveness (Kilbourne 2010; Newsom 2011; Weitz 2008). A 2004 survey of 3,300 girls and women across 10 countries discovered that 90% of respondents want to change at least one aspect of their physical appearance (Etkoff, Orbach, Scott, and D’Agostino 2005). These results echo previous findings from the global North (see Rodin, Silberstein, and Streigel-Moore 1984; Smolak 2006; and Calogero, Boroughs and Thompson 2007) and more recent findings from global South states (see Edmonds 2009; Thomas 2014; and Rani Jha 2016) demonstrating the role of beauty politics in the lives of women globally.

As women in the global South strive to reach an unattainable beauty ideal, their performance of gender shifts towards this dominant global North representation of femininity (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994; Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson 2007; Rahbari, Dierick, Longman, and Coene 2018). In 1995, feminist philosopher Susan Bordo described this trend as “the spread of normalizing (Western) imagery across race and nationality” (xxii), and while some have pointed to the “cross pollinating” of cultures

and beauty standards (Guterl and Hastings 2003), the dominant influence of global North media is undeniable. This is further evidenced by “Western society’s booming beauty and sex industries” that continue to fuel stereotypical representations of femininity “through hyper-sexualizing and aestheticizing the images of female bodies...as currency and commodities to desire, obtain and perfect in any way possible” (Coy-Dibley 2016: 5). For women living in major cities in Iran, this global influence has seeped into their daily beauty rituals and contributed to the sexualization of their image in the digital aesthetic of the movement.



12

*Figure 15 - IP03*

Appearing in the sample for this study, the above photograph (IP03) is one of the most widely circulated images from Green Movement protests in Iran. This photograph is one of five to be randomly selected twice during the data collection reflecting its frequent

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<sup>12</sup> Ashrafi, Shervin. 2015. “819 – Protesters after Iranian 2009 Presidential Election.” Image (JPEG). History of Iran. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/267/201553296008c58dcb4b4\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/267/201553296008c58dcb4b4_b.jpg)).

recirculation in the digital aesthetic. The image shows a young woman with one fist raised in the air and the other holding the end of a bright pink shawl, which is loosely draped over her head. There are green wristbands on each of her arms revealed by the  $\frac{3}{4}$  length sleeves. Her mouth is open in the middle of a scream/chant. The photograph includes much of this woman's body under her form fitting manteaux. She is facing towards the photographer, while a large group of protestors, many riding motorbikes, are seen behind her moving in the opposite direction. I have also seen edited replications of this photograph isolate this young woman removing the crowd behind her. Her lean figure, colorful and loose shawl, make up, braided bangs, and form fitting manteaux aligns with the mainstream Western notions of female beauty.

As more photographs of women's participation in the Green Movement became available through new and old media systems, the more these photographs favored young, thin, light skinned women posing in feminized postures. This includes young, beautiful women with friendly facial affects seemingly posing for pictures. Young women represented on this manner are intentionally made the focal point of a photograph highlighting her participation and using her femininity to beautify the photograph. In the sample photograph IP22 below, the young woman centered is brightly lit, while the background, including men's bodies, is intentionally out of focus. This camera effect goes one step further by brightening the green roosari she is wearing creating a halo of light around her face bringing the spectator's focus on this women's friendly affect, light green roosari, visible hair, and green head band. The photograph is produced so that all eyes go directly to this young woman. In one hand she is holding a "future flag" of Iran

with the three stripes (green, white, red) and no symbols. With her other hand she is gesturing V-ictory near her face redirecting the spectators' eyes to her.



13

*Figure 16- IP22*

There is a surprising number of photographs in the Iranian Green Movement displaying young women grinning, even joyful, as they celebrate their participation in the movement. Protests are often a space for collective joy and participants are regularly seen with a celebratory affect. I immediately think of the description of the 1999 Seattle anti-neoliberalism protests as that of a “carnival” describing the colorful, party-style, celebratory nature of the street protest. However, the images of women with a joyful affect in the Green Movement’s digital aesthetic are regularly centered on a ‘solo’ participant, whereas images of men (and images of protests in Seattle) with a joyful or

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<sup>13</sup> Xbeta. 2009. “For Freedom – Iranian Protest 2009.” Image (JPEG). For Freedom – Iranian Protest 2009. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3554/3674535984\\_e14c54f800\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3554/3674535984_e14c54f800_b.jpg)).

celebratory affect are seen as part of a collective action involving larger groups of participants. In chapter 3, we learned of the recurring theme of women seen “solo” in the digital street aesthetic. Women in the movement photographed alone and with a friendly affect give the appearance in patriarchal societies that she is approachable, even welcoming to the attention she receives. These recurring representations of women indicate a cultural curation of these images through a literal and figurative “male gaze”.

The term “male gaze” first appeared in the work of feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey (1975) in her pivotal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. Mulvey uses the term “male gaze” to describe the structure of Western filmography as literally and figuratively constructed to center heterosexual men and what they deem pleasurable. Literally, the term refers to men looking at women in film, which they perform as both spectators and characters in the film; figuratively, the male gaze “refers to a way of seeing which takes women as its object” (Devereaux 1990: 337). Mulvey classifies the male gaze by looking at how women are presented in film “with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (1975: 809). Looking at women in film, Mulvey evaluated how their bodies are dressed. How much of their bodies are visible in film frames? How developed women’s characters in these films are? For Mulvey, this object-subject relationship is rooted in “patriarchal ideologies and discourses” which allows the male gaze to project “its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (808). In this formulation, woman is always the “spectacle” while man is the “bearer” of the look as a foundation for a “way of thinking about, and acting in, the world” (Devereaux 1990: 337). Mulvey

would point to the “male gaze” to explain why photograph IP22 is edited so that the woman present is centered and consuming most of the photograph and why her image is lit brightly while the images of men in the background are out of focus and blurry.

In the years since Mulvey first identified the presence of the “male gaze” in film, many feminist scholars representing a diverse set of disciplines have contributed to expanding this theory to mediums outside of film including fashion magazines, advertisements, television, and just about everywhere women’s image is represented. One important expansion of Mulvey’s theory is articulations of the “internalized gaze” women practice internally and the “objectifying gaze” women practice externally on images of other women (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Internalizing the male gaze leads to body shaming practices including unhealthy body surveillance and self-objectification (1997). This internalization of the gaze leads women to develop their own objectifying gaze; “as exposure to media images or objectifying stares heightens women’s awareness of their own bodies, it also might lead to a focus on others’ bodies” (Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, and Jentsch 2012: 222). Women’s internalization and application of a masculine gaze is the result of being exposed to images of women incessantly presented as sexual objects in popular media (Loreck 2016).

Today, the theory of “the male gaze” faces many challenges with modern technologies offering endless space for the advancement of more inclusive representations and alternative cultural claims. However, early research on social media’s impact on girls and women’s self-formation finds that this medium reverts to highly feminized, sexualized representations of women (Crepax 2020; Coy-Dibley 2016). As



digital technology continues to advance, offering more options for the manipulation of images, the more images revert to an ideal standard of beauty. As NAME learns in a study on “digitized dysmorphia”, “while the technology provided to do this (edit their appearance) may appear flexible, in how users consume such apps, this technology frequently emphasizes and perpetuates certain standardizations of femininity” (2016: 7). While this is an individual action, when these individual actions are being performed in highly similar ways collectively, they create a “digitized dysmorphia” of female bodies that serves as yet another extension of the harmful gendered beauty standards and “the difficulty this places on the material body’s ability to resist societal norms” (7). Again, these findings demonstrate that while there may be new spaces for greater representations of beauty, a transnational network of users collectively revert to normalized beauty standards.

The friendly, beautiful presentation of women in the Green Movement is further supported by additional facets of shared culture such as language. Photograph IP66 below shows a young woman centered among a larger group of protestors seen in the background. She is wearing a black manteaux with a maghne pulled back on her head revealing a green headband behind her side swept black bangs that are partially covering one eye. With one hand she is holding a small sign in the form of an 8x11 white printer sheet of paper with English text, which reads, “Where is my VOTE?” Her other hand is held up near her head revealing a green wristband and gesturing the V-ictory sign. While she is not looking directly at the camera, she is looking at an angle adjacent to the camera’s direction with a slight grin on her face. Though she is within a large crowd, this

participant is seen “solo”. Everything about her presentation represents an association with the global North, most notably, her sign written in English, her form fitting attire, the visibility of her hair, and her well-manicured nails and groomed eyebrows. Although this representation of beautified young women in tight clothing presents a “new Iranian woman” to much of the global North, her gendered appearance is part of a rich history of fashion and beautification efforts that exists in metropolitan cities in the state.



14

*Figure 17 - IP66*

The modernization efforts of the Pahlavi dynasty centered on modeling the aesthetics of major cities, including the appearance of civilians navigating these cities. In the 1970s, Tehran’s public life was a bustling cultural mecca (Parks 2012) which was reflected in the city’s aesthetic, especially through the performativity of “modern

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<sup>14</sup> Medusza. 2009. “Unrest Continues After Iranian Presidential Elections.” Image (JPEG). United4iran Frankfurt. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3369/3634765143\\_2d1ccfa157\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3369/3634765143_2d1ccfa157_z.jpg)).

feminine woman”. At the time, Tehran’s public dress appearance was described as following a “hippie trend” (Tap Persia 2021; All That’s Interesting 2014; Farahani 2016) with some women wearing miniskirts and colorful, flowered patterns (Farahani 2016). Before women’s public appearance became the vehicle to publicize an Islamic state, it was used as an advertisement for a modernized, Western-aligned one. At the time, Iran’s civil society was pushed to look outside of the state for examples of modernized culture and to emulate this culture as a representation of their own modernization.

With years of resistance to the dark structureless, government sponsored hejab, many women in Iran were excited to reintroduce color and fashion to the streets of Tehran. The everyday gendered aesthetics visible on the streets of Tehran once again resembled the walkway of a fashion show, but with more Islamic and regional influences mixed in with the dominant influence of the West. In 2012, after studying fashion in Europe, designer Araz Fazaeli returned to his hometown of Tehran and after “marveling” at the everyday street wear of young women he started the website, “The Tehran Times” showcasing the “grace of the way the people of Iran express themselves, by depicting one of the oft-ignored aspects of Iranian life: fashion and art” (The Tehran Times 2016). During an interview with “My Modern Met” a transnational culture site striving to create “one big city” where “visually stunning images” are presented by “incredibly talented artists who are on the pulse of contemporary art” (My Modern Met 2021), Fazaeli describes his observations of women’s public dress in Tehran. He states, “To wear a scarf and long manteaux (overcoat) and still manage to make it look very sophisticated is in itself a fashion trend in my eyes” (Noorata 2013). Having since returned to Paris where

he currently resides, Fazaeli still runs The Tehran Times, which is plastered with images of highly fashioned, young women in Tehran as an example of the “contemporary (Iranian) woman.”

In transitioning Iran to an Islamic state, the governing body (re)weaponized the binary framework of tradition v. modernity, East v. West. For women in Iran opposing the Islamic patriarchal definition of womanhood legally forced on them, incorporating global North beauty and fashion practices into their public presentation of self is one method to demonstrate their opposition. So, while several women are emulating what they have internalized as an ideal standard of beauty, several others are symbolically resisting “traditionalist” frames of womanhood, while others are striving to construct their own definition of feminine beauty.

Whether influenced by an imagined historical Iran, a contemporary ideal of beauty, a desire to resist, or reconstruct, younger Iranian women’s gender performativity includes daily rituals emulating a global North representation of femininity. The women shown in the above samples were not wearing nail polish or make up for the first time; these behaviors have become part of their daily gender rituals as have their form fitting clothing and hair styled as to be visible from within the compulsory hijab. The standard of beauty followed by women in throughout the transnational network, that if not for the presence of a compulsory hejab, it would be almost impossible to discern whether women participating in Green Movement actions are doing so from within Iran or a transnational location.



15

*Figure 18 - IP65*

Taken at a transnational solidarity rally, image IP65 is especially similar to image IP66 above it. Both images are zoomed in on a single participant seen within a much larger crowd. Both women are adorned with a green head band and a “magic” green bracelet gesturing a V-victory sign. Both women are looking in the direction of, but not directly at, the camera’s gaze with a focused, potentially friendly affect (the latter more so for IP66). This is one of many similar transnational images that directly support the commercial sexualization of women’s participation in the Green Movement.

Consequently, women are participating in the construction of this sexualization by performing gender based on a commercialized image of womanhood rooted not only in the transnational flow of media from the global North, but also a culture of consumption focused on selling global North beauty products and procedures. The overwhelming message provided to young women by media and popular culture is that their value

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<sup>15</sup> Gardiner, Kate. 2009. “Chicago Iran Protests – Federal Plaza.” Image (JPEG). Chicago Iran Protest June 16 2009. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3627/3635172340\\_bf3f0d97c5\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3627/3635172340_bf3f0d97c5_b.jpg)).

depends on their physical attractiveness (Kilbourne 2010, Newsom 2011, Weitz 2008). Subjected to these endless objectifying images, women learn to practice “self-objectification” or the “internalization of an observer’s perspective on one’s own body” (Vandenbosch and Eggermont 2012: 869, Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). This self-objectification internalizes prevailing beauty ideals and makes them attainable through the purchase of beauty products, diet schemes, and even plastic surgery (Rossini 2015). All these beauty strategies have become part of Iranian women’s beauty practices the most notable being plastic surgery.

In 2008, while visiting my family in Iran, I was surprised to see my little cousin’s ‘new’ nose. At the time, I was loosely aware of the rising rates of plastic surgery in Tehran; I heard stories, observed the increase in plastic surgeon’s offices, and even passed bandaged civilians on the street, but somehow, I was still surprised to learn that my young cousin (she was in her early 20s at the time) had so casually selected plastic surgery. However, I came to learn that in Iran, “cosmetic surgeries, especially *nose surgeries*, has become common practice and is on the rise” (Lenehan 2011; Rahbari, Dierickx, Longman, and Coene 2018). By 2009, many believed that Iran had the highest rate of nose surgeries in the world (Tait 2005; Zahedi 2008) with over 80% of the candidates for plastic surgery being women (Rahbari, Dierickx, Longman, and Coene 2018). These, mostly facial, surgeries offer Iranian women an opportunity to achieve an “ideal,” more specifically white, standard of beauty as they exchanged their larger, angled-down noses for much smaller and slightly angled-up noses. “You just don’t look that much like us anymore,” I emotionally responded to my younger cousin when she

asked my thoughts about her new nose. A critic of the harmful beauty standards I was subjected to growing up in United States, I held on to a naïve expectation that global North beauty standards were less restrictive for nonwhite societies. In fact, plastic surgery is just the latest tool offered to women globally in an ongoing promotion of white beauty standards that women in Iran, and throughout the global South, are subjected to.

This global North standard of beauty has not solely impacted how women perform gender with beautifying products and procedures but also in the way women think about and train their bodies. In the 2004 transnational survey mentioned above, body weight was the most frequent physical feature that girls and women voiced dissatisfaction about (Etofff, Orbach, Scott, and D’Agostino 2005). These transnational findings align with ongoing findings on body dissatisfaction among girls and women in Western culture (Bordo 1993; Flannery-Schroeder and Chrisler 1996; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, and Zoino 2006). As Susan Bordo describes in the book *Unbearable Weight*, the Western idealization of thin female bodies is a patriarchal construct that when internalized by women, can lead to harmful—though normative—cultural beauty practices including eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia nervosa (1993). Iranian women’s bodies have long been subject to patriarchal definitions of womanhood including the transnational emphasis on thin bodies (Rahbari, Dierickx, Longman, and Coene 2018; Suleymani 2020). This leads to subtle and extreme methods of “policing” the female body to achieve an ideal physical appearance.

*The Exotification of Nonwhite Bodies Persists*

Iranian women's strict adherence to beauty standards is visible throughout the photographic documentation of Green Movement protests, even in images of more heavily shrouded women. Though the woman seen 'solo' in photograph IP34 below is mostly covered by a compulsory black hijab, green facemask, green headband, and large black sunglasses, some of her beautification practices are still visible like her finely styled eyebrows and dyed hair. Only a portion of her upper body is visible in the photograph but the close-up on her lean face and wrist suggests that she is a thin woman. In fact, all the women present in the sample photographs included in this chapter share a visibly lean figure. Some of these examples, such as IP34, demonstrate these thin bodies in elusive ways but other photographs of women captured at Green Movement protests are a more intentional display of women's bodies.





*Figure 19 - IP34*

The following two photographs, IP36 and IE38, show similar representations of women at Green Movement protests. Both women are similarly posed with both arms held in the air above their heads. The woman in photograph IP36 is gesturing a V-ictory sign with each hand which is adorned with green finger and wrist bands. The woman in photograph IE38 is holding a sign in both hands which are also adorned in green wristbands. Both women have their face partially covered by a makeshift mask and one woman's face is further covered by large sunglasses. Their similar postures and tight black mantos help to display their lean bodies starting from the thin arms they are holding up in the air to their narrow midsections visible by the vertical angle of the image. Even when most of the women's bodies are covered by the compulsory hijab and their faces are covered by movement symbols and a desire for anonymity, women's bodies are

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<sup>16</sup> Samuelson, Joan McAninch. 2009. "Iranian Woman Protester 7." Image (JPEG). Women of Iran. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3331/3652416735\\_6574dd1065.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3331/3652416735_6574dd1065.jpg)).

emphasized sustaining this ongoing sexualization of women in the movement. This modern orientalism evokes historical imaginings of women from “the mysterious Orient” (Said 1978: 34) constructed into a more recognizable and relatable image through years



17

*Figure 20 - IP36*

of conditioning and access to modern transnational beautification enhancers. This is the “new Iranian” woman who has been emerging in cosmopolitan cities in Iran for some time and whose public unveiling was made possible by the transnational curiosity in the political and civil unrest within the state. By utilizing modern technologies to document and disseminate women authentically performing gender transnationally within a movement space, a “new Iranian” woman was introduced to a broader transnational audience.

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<sup>17</sup>Kapitall. 2009. “Iran Protests.” Image (JPEG). Iran Tensions: How to Protect Your Portfolio. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2461/4032407200\\_e65d26bba0.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2461/4032407200_e65d26bba0.jpg)).



18

*Figure 21 - IE38*

This “new Iranian” woman is the most recent Orientalist fantasy about woman living in the Orient for consumption by men in the Occident. These women are representative of patriarchy in two ways: the perceived passive piety demanded of women living within an Islamic patriarchal state and the adherence to transnational beauty standards birthed from the global North patriarchal objectification of women’s bodies. This is exemplified through the series of tweets quoted at the beginning of the chapter section. Posted in 2020 during the next large uprising in Iran since the Green Movement protests in 2009 and having gone viral because of a retired athlete’s response (Aubrey Huff), the original tweet by an unknown author reads, “We should invade Iran and take their bitches. Persian girls are hot af without the headgear and you know they know how to act right. Makes you think.” Recognizing Iranian women’s adherence to patriarchal beauty standards, this US based male author references “Persian girls” as “hot

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<sup>18</sup> Saber, Hamed. 2009. “5<sup>th</sup> Day – They Killed My Bro Koz He Asked: ‘Where.s My Vote’.” Image (JPEG). The Green Wave. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3317/3636927422\\_2756e72374\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3317/3636927422_2756e72374_b.jpg)).

af” (without the “headgear”/ hijab of course). Within the same sentence this author goes on to recognize a perception of these women’s adherence to Islamic patriarchy by further stating, “and you know they know how to act”. Finally, we must also recognize this author’s believed white colonial patriarchal dominance insinuated in the statement, “We should *invade* Iran and *take* their *bitches*.” This contemporary exoticification of Iranian women was supported in Huff’s response that they should “kidnap about 10 each” and “bring them back here” so they can “fan us and feed us grapes, amongst other things...” all of which they willingly perform because they are “grateful” for the “rescuing”.

Again, it is important to note that transnational images of women in Green Movement solidarity rallies reinforce this sexualization by producing similar images of women in protest without the “headgear” present in images from within Iran. Photographs centering full-bodied images of beautiful young women are plentiful among transnational images of Green Movement rallies. Photograph UI07 below focuses on a young woman at a solidarity rally somewhere outside of Iran. Zooming in on this young woman, the photograph captures her entire upper body and most of the sign she is holding above her head. Posed similarly to the women in photographs IP36 and IE38 above, the close-up of this woman’s raised arms and form fitting clothing displays her lean, “feminine” figure generating a sexualized representation of her participation. Transnational images displaying women’s thin, sexualized bodies provide a non-Islamic representation of the Green Movement’s gendered aesthetic that exists in the imagination of global North men like Aubrey Huff.



19

*Figure 22 - UI07*

## CONCLUSION

Iranian women's conditioned local and transnational embodiment of gender was made visible to a broad audience through the digital documentation of their participation in Green Movement street protests. The cultural politicization of women's dress and bodies in Iran has also established women's bodies as a space for resistance practices. This experiential knowledge was skillfully applied to the use of symbolic imagery, specifically green adornments, by women in the movement associating the adornment of green imagery with the gendered aesthetic. Neda's embodiment of gender as a beautiful, young, peaceful, and innocent woman murdered (publicly) by the state laminated her as the martyred icon of the movement. The embodiment of Neda's image through posters, t-

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<sup>19</sup> Starbuck77. 2009. "Stop Dictatorship: I'm All for That." Image (JPEG). D.C. July 25 Iran Protest. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2650/3755796143\\_52d65b733a\\_k.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2650/3755796143_52d65b733a_k.jpg)).

shirts, and literal masks worn by women participating in Green Movement solidarity rallies helped to solidify her status as a martyr and her image as a fixture of the movement's gendered aesthetic. Ultimately, it is women's embodiment of gendered beauty standards that proved to be the most common facet of the Green Movement's gendered aesthetic.

What the transnational media is reflecting in the inquiry, "where did these women come from" while observing women's participation in Green Movement protests is, "where did these *sexually attractive* women come from" or ". This commentary, which recognizes the presence of a gendered aesthetic works to further construct said aesthetic by reemphasizing the gaze towards the presence of these transnationally deemed *beautiful* women. This sexualization of women overemphasizes one participatory form for women in Green Movement protests consequently marginalizing the depth and scope of other women's participation. In the next chapter, I review the participation of women that do not conform to this sexualization. I will describe the contribution these differing bodies and participatory methods have on the Green Movement's gendered aesthetic. This insight provides a greater understanding for the transnational emphasis on a sexualized gendered aesthetic in place of a more inclusive representation of the movement.

## **CHAPTER 5: MOURNING MOTHERS AND OTHER LESS VISIBLE METHODS OF PARTICIPATION**

With a much greater understanding about the most recurring images of women in Green Movement protests, the next step was to examine the participation of less visible bodies and methods of participation on the Green Movement's gendered aesthetic. The sexualization of women in the Green Movement marginalized the visual representation of non-sexual bodies. During my fieldwork at Green Movement actions, I observed the participation of women of all ages, sizes, and beauty practices. With this knowledge in hand, I revisited the sample photographs in this study paying close attention to the participation of women outside of these transnational beauty standards.

### **NON-SEXUAL BODIES: EXAMINING THE OVERLOOKED ROLE OF OLDER WOMEN**



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*Figure 23 - IE15*

The prominent Iranian poet and feminist activist, Simin Behbahani, authored a poem titled, “For Neda Agha-Soltan” in 2009 a month before her 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Behbahani writes, “You are neither dead, nor will you die. You will always remain alive. You have an eternal existence. You are the voice of the people of Iran.” Though she penned these words for Neda, they could and have been applied to her own legacy in the hearts and minds of many Iranians. Known as the “Lioness of Iran”, Behbahani is one of many elder women who have for decades led social justice causes and gained the admiration of generations of young Iranians. The leadership of older women, symbolic and actual, appears in nearly all social justice movements in Iran today. Despite their

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<sup>20</sup> Maria1806. 2009. “d2pll347cm1ctdu331.” Image (JPEG). Iran Election Protest. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2577/3677124791\\_6c774d62dd\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2577/3677124791_6c774d62dd_z.jpg)).



marginalized visibility in the digital street aesthetic, older women's participation contributed to the Green Movements gendered aesthetic.

Photograph IE15 above highlights the participation of an elderly woman at a street protest in Iran. It also provides an understanding of the role and respect older women receive in such spaces. The elder woman in the photograph is holding a green band and pictures/posters of Mousavi in one hand while accepting a drink of water from a water bottle with the other hand. A partially visible man is also holding the water bottle and assisting this elderly woman take a drink. This young man's gesture is representative of the respect, love, and care Iranian culture requires of its younger civilians. The older woman is wearing a Black chador over her head, which is tied under her neck and held up by her armpits so that her arms are free to hold her items demonstrating a familiarity with the garment that can only be acquired through years of labor in the uniform. I immediately gravitated towards this picture; it reminds me of my grandmother and her friends in Iran. However, this photograph does not just remind me of my own grandmother but the legacy of women in social movements in Iran, especially the women's movement.

Older women seen at Green Movement street protests garnered the attention of local photojournalists and first-person accounts from younger comrades. While visiting Iran in December 2009, I regularly heard stories from my cousins about their friends who were attending Green Movement protests with their mothers or aunts. As my grandmother's neighbor described to me, "I knew the kids (her children and their peers) were going to the gathering and I felt better being with them." Regardless of their

motivation for participating, older women took part in Green Movement protests in similar ways to that of younger women in the movement. In image IP67 below, we see a “solo” photograph of an older woman wearing a green homemade headband (with illegible Farsi text on it) under a green shawl loosely draped over her head and around her neck. She is looking directly at the photographer as she gestures a V-itcory sign with one hand.



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Figure 24 - IP67

Although the images of older women participating in Green Movement protests received far less consideration than the participation of young, sexualized bodies, their presence and methods of participation helped to shape the movement’s aesthetic. The

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<sup>21</sup> Gardiner, Kate. 2009. “Chicago Iran Protests – Federal Plaza.” Image (JPEG). Chicago Iran Protest June 16 2009. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3650/3634365181\\_78ac760c8c\\_k.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3650/3634365181_78ac760c8c_k.jpg)).

presence of these women and their embodiment of Green Movement symbolism helped to bring a certain authenticity to the movement. Older woman in Green Movement protests, like the one in photograph IP10 below, were revered in Iran and while their participation wasn't broadcast widely in the transnational media, they are an important part of the gendered aesthetic within the state. In photograph IP10, green text has been added to the bottom of the photograph overlaying the elderly woman's black chador. In Farsi the text reads, "Long live this courageous mother". Whether or not this woman is in fact a mother, she is regarded as such by the movement.



Figure 25 - IP10

### *Mothers: Mourning, Protecting, and Pleading for Iran's Youth*

“Heaven is under the feet of mothers”  
Islamic Proverb

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<sup>22</sup> Kamiar22. 2009. “Iran\_Protest (25).” Image (JPEG). Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3483/3892036388\\_32766c8b02\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3483/3892036388_32766c8b02_z.jpg)).

One of the most prominent experiences I had while conducting field work for this study was listening to an acquaintance of my aunt describe her participation in the Ashura holiday protest. I was snacking on pistachios at a casual gathering when I heard one woman say, “I still can’t believe how chaotic everything was.” My ears perked up when I realized she was speaking directly of her experience at a protest the day before. “Did the Basij show up when you were there?” someone asked. “Oh yes!” she answered before recounting a harrowing experience from the previous 24-hours. This narrative comes from informal field work and is a detailed description of what was said instead of a word for word transcription, *except* for quoted sentences.

There were so many people there when (friend’s name) and I showed up. We claimed a spot on the top stair of a stoop to get some space and a better view of the happenings. Suddenly, you could see a rush of people running from one end of the crowd (she gestures her hand from one side to the other). I could see Basij members charging the defenseless kids, hitting them with their fists and batons. As the crowd reached us, some of the people would jump up on the stoops. There were so many people, they needed to hold on to each other to not fall off. A few young men jumped on the stoop we were standing on followed by a Basij officer swinging a baton. I could not just watch him hit the young men; I stepped in and grabbed the baton he tried to swing it. I looked at him and said, “Why are you doing that son? This is your brother. Why are you hitting your brother?” He (the Basij) pulled the baton away and said, “Well, he should not be here. None of you should be here mother.” Then he ran off into the crowd targeting more protestors. The young man standing next to me hugged and kissed me saying, “Thank you mother” before he too ran off.

The room buzzed with small group chatter as the rest of us absorbed the incredible story we were just told. I looked around and noticed the same big smile on my face reflected in

the faces of the other women in the room. This was a moment of collective joy; we were celebrating this woman, and symbolically all Iranian women's, power within their society. This older woman had successfully used her position in society to advocate for the rights and safety of younger generations. As I continued to look around at the other women in the room, I considered another reason for their smiles. Apart from myself, all the women in the room were mothers. This collective joy was not just a celebration of the efficacy of women in Green Movement protests, but specifically the participation of mothers serving as mothers for the movement.



23

*Figure 26 - IP26*

A deep dive into the photographic documentation of Iranian Green Movement protests reveals the presence of groups of older Iranian women using their bodies to shield other, often younger, protestors from enforcement officers. Demonstrated in

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<sup>23</sup> The Takeaway. 2009. "Police Vs People." Image (JPEG). Iran Elections June 24. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3317/3636927422\\_2756e72374\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3317/3636927422_2756e72374_b.jpg)).

photograph IP26 above, older women are seen linking arms, creating a physical barrier between enforcement officers and fellow protestors. Through these types of actions, elder Iranian women were performing a collective ‘mothering’ of their fellow civilians, especially younger protestors who came to symbolize their children. Based on the cultural understanding of motherhood in Iranian society, these women were met with respect, support, and perhaps even compliance from those they encountered during these protests.

A widely quoted verse from the legendary 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Rumi states, “We are born of love; Love is our mother”. This continues to describe how mothers in Iran are seen today, as the embodiment of love. Iranian mothers will most often embody this love through an abundance of nurturing but can also include a fierce willingness to protect younger participants, even physically defending their symbolic children. Constructed within the bounds of a patriarchal state, patriarchal motherhood “assumes (and expects) that all women want to be mothers (essentialization), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalization), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization)” (O’Reilly 2016). Reinforced after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran’s social and cultural messaging of the ideal family presented women as primary caretakers responsible for all aspects of their children’s development (Bainham, Sclater, and Richards 2000; Karami 2020). Mothers in Iran are expected to devote their life to caring for their family and to practice self-sacrifice for the betterment of other family members, especially children (Karami 2020). This patriarchal portrayal of motherhood contributes to gender inequality in the state by relegating women to the

private sphere, denying them selfhood by making them solely responsible for the care work of multiple others, and setting unattainable standards for what constitutes a ‘good’ mother (O’Reilly 2010). Therefore, O’Reilly determines that “motherhood, as it is currently perceived and practiced in patriarchal societies, is disempowering” (2010).

However, women have also learned to use this patriarchal definition of motherhood as a source of power. In the 1970s in Argentina, a group of mothers known as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), were able to capitalize on the respect and esteem designated to them as ‘mothers’ to wield political power in search of their disappeared children (Koepsel 2011, Bouvard and Keeling 1997, Bouvard 2002). Using “motherhood” as a special designation, the Madres were highly successful on a number of fronts. First, the Madres successfully reimagined the disempowering idealization of motherhood into a form of “empowered mothering” or “the *potential* relationship of any women to her powers of reproduction—and children and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (Rich 1986: 14, emphasis in original). Employing empowered mothering, the Madres of the Plaza argued that the human rights violations committed by the military government disrupted their rights as mothers and the “natural processes of family” (Koepsel 2011: 4). Through these claims, the Madres reimagined the disempowering idealization of motherhood into an empowered identity with the agency to exercise political power. Second, the Madres’ public protest defied gender roles and “broke down barriers within both public and private realms and released mothers, generally, from lives that were ‘naturally determined’ so as to enter into lives that were

‘socially determined’, allowing them to be subjects for—not merely the objects of—political action” (5). The Madres of the Plaza are one of the first and most well-known groups of mothers to successfully organize around that identity. The successful efforts of the Madres along with the speed and interconnectivity of modern globalization, ushered in a wave of activist mothers practicing empowered mothering throughout the global South.

Older Iranian women participating in Green Movement protests did so with the cultural authority and political agency of mothers collectively mothering a nation of children. Empowered as mothers, these women are seen physically blocking enforcement officers (IP26 & IP53), pleading with enforcement officers (IP53), and even striking officers (IP54) in support of their fellow, often younger, protestors. Photograph IP53 below is a perfect demonstration of the role of activist mothering in the Green Movement. An older woman wearing a black roosari and manto is seen in the middle of a group of men (10 total) aggressively surrounding her. Taking a closer look, we can see her standing over a young man on the ground. She is taking a defensive position preparing for a potential violent strike while speaking to her assailants. One of the men surrounding her is on a motorbike and has one arm raised prepared for an attack. Two of the men in the group are holding some type of weapon, a metal pipe or baton or something similar. It’s easy to assume that the woman in this photograph is protecting the young man on the ground; she is literally blocking his body with her own. Although she may not be this young man’s mother, she has taken responsibility for his safety the way a “mother” would with her child. This type of collectivist mothering is similar to the



actions of the mother mentioned in the above excerpt from the field notes. The activist mother who described her participation in the Ashura protests mentioned referring to both



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*Figure 27 - IP53*

young men (the protestor and the enforcement officer) as “son” and in return, they both referenced her as “mother.” The collectivist view of family and community in Iran affords older women the authority, respect, and responsibility of a mother by younger members of society. During Green Movement street protests, the nations “mothers” participated by collectively defending protestors and thwarting state violence.

Just like the Madres of the Plaza in Argentina, older Iranian women participated in the Green Movement embodying the gendered identity of mother. By leaning into an empowered womanist definition of motherhood, these women are publicly declaring their collective investment in the safety and security of the nation especially younger

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<sup>24</sup> Mahugo, Sergio M. 2009. “3.” Image (JPEG). Cajon Desastre. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3331/3638515906\\_3dd65e3d71\\_w.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3331/3638515906_3dd65e3d71_w.jpg)).

generations understood to be the “future” of the nation. In an article titled, “Violence and Terrorism: Feminist Observations on Islamist Movements, State, and the International System,” sociologist Valentine Moghadam reminds us that “maternalist politics—the political use of motherhood and feminine values of nurturing and care—has a very long history” (2001: 128). While the Madres are the most well-known politically activate collective of mothers, they are not the only group employing maternalist politics as a source of activism. Feminists have recognized maternalist politics in peaceful protest movements from the antiwar efforts of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILFP) to the Women in Black in Israel fighting the occupation of Palestine’s West Bank and Gaza, to the Saturday Mothers of Turkey protesting the arrests and killings of the Kurdish community (2001). Yet, Moghadam and others identified another model of maternalist politics, “that of women in armed struggles, in liberation movements, and in revolutions” (128). Maternalist politics are not focused solely on peaceful methods of protest but acknowledge when resistance requires women to engage in physically offensive or defensive methods of participation.



25

*Figure 28 - IP54*

While their actions do reflect a desire to ensure the democratic process, the more pressing intent is to ensure the wellbeing of their actual and symbolic children. In the photograph IP54 above, multiple women (5 visible) are running to defend a single protestor who is on the ground covering his face from the baton strikes of Basij officers. As three Basij members remain focused on punishing the protestor on the ground, one maybe two, additional Basij members are preparing for the group running towards them led by a woman with her arm raised ready to strike in defense of the fallen protestor. Repeatedly, older women used the identity of “mother” to afford them the authority to physically protect their fellow protestors in several ways including physically blocking or striking officers who are attempting to harm fellow protestors. While these actions were virtually unknown to many in the transnational community, these symbolic “mothers of the movement” were a part of the movement’s local aesthetic for those living within Iran.

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<sup>25</sup> Case, Amber. 2009. “Iran Election.” Image (JPEG). Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2443/3656153964\\_f0722a55f8\\_c.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2443/3656153964_f0722a55f8_c.jpg)).

These women's tactics are almost identical to that of the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) who resisted the brutal tactics of the Mugabe regime by what is best described as a "tough love" campaign where older women invoke the "moral authority of mother" to scold and shame their repressive leaders (Williams 2018). Well known locally as "mothers of the nation", WOZA sustained a lasting and effective campaign avoiding the need to look outside of their nation-state borders for support.

Although emotions have always been a consideration when analyzing social phenomenon, the sociological study of emotions is a relatively new area of inquiry in the field of sociology and social movements. Originating in the 1970s and 80s, cultural theories of emotions have been prevalent for understanding emotional displays. In the groundbreaking text, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Arlie Hochschild introduces a cultural theory of emotions by analyzing the emotion management required of different service workers (1983). As Hochschild explains, societies have an (racialized and gendered) emotional culture establishing "rules" for what should be felt and expressed based on the situation and each person's social position. Utilizing a cultural theory to better understand the actions of the "mothers" of the Green Movement emphasizes the cultural acceptability of mothers to not just feel, but publicly express emotions in support of their children. In other words, older women deemed as "mothers" are *allowed* to demonstrate sadness and anger when their children are being harmed. In Iran, the cultural acceptability of a mother's emotions can even include the right to physically defend children against an aggressor.

A cultural theory of emotions is helpful for understanding the conditions for emotional experiences and expressions but does not properly account for emotions felt and displayed through social interactions (Bericat 2015). When studying the sociology of emotions in social movements, social interactions are an important factor for motivating participation, retaining participation, and influencing movement tactics. In the book titled, *Passionate Politics*, social movement scholars Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta advocate for a more structural approach to the study of social movement emotions (2011). Structural theories of emotions are based on social relational interactions since “emotions result from real, anticipated, recollected, or imagined outcomes of social relationships” (Kemper 1978: 43 found in Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2011: 59). Within this model there are two relational dimensions: power and status. An individual who gains power in the interaction, experiences positive emotions whereas an individual with less power in the interaction experiences negative emotions. The same goes for status; an individual experiencing a higher level of status during an interaction will feel positive emotions, and vice versa (Kemper 1978; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2011; Bericat 2015). Through their identity as mothers, older Iranian women were able to organize and participate in certain protest actions based on the power relations this status provides them. As mentioned, the status and power assigned to the identity of “mother” provides older women in the Green Movement an elevated status that can be wielded into a higher position of power in their interactions with others at street protests, including officers of the state.

Along with the varying relational outcomes in power and status shifts at social movement actions, there are also relational emotional outcomes because of these interactions. As Goodwin et al discuss, a “result of these interactions is emotion—in both actors” (2011: 62). In the field note narrative at the beginning of this section, the mother described shielding a fellow protestor while blocking an aggressive strike by the young Basij officer. Speaking her status as mother, she referred to the Basij officer as “son” and to the other protestor as his brother (which would also make him her son). Submitting to the power-status relationship, the Basij officer surrenders his aggressive position. He demonstrates shame, and potentially fear, as he blames his own actions on others’ behavior (their participation in an illegal protest) before retreating in the opposite direction. Relationally, the other protestor exhibits joy and gratitude from their relational increase in power through interaction with this mother. Finally, this mother exhibits joy and satisfaction from both social interactions which is likely to increase her participation in these types of protest actions.

The local street aesthetic did not just include symbolic “mothers” of the movement but also a group of actual mothers seeking support for their children who have been punished by the state because of their participation in Green Movement actions. Established in 2009, the “Mourning Mothers of Iran” was spontaneously formed by a group of mothers in support of their imprisoned, killed, or missing children victimized because of their participation in Green Movement actions. Closely replicating the actions of the Madres of the Plaza, the Mourning Mothers of Iran regularly assembled in a public park, Laleh Park, to collectively demand answers about the whereabouts or condition of

their children by the state. I first heard about the Mourning Mothers while conducting fieldwork in Iran during the month of December 2009. Once I became aware of activist mothers in the movement, I became much more inquisitive about the participation of mothers in Green Movement protests. Of the people I asked, all acknowledged the role of older women serving as protective mothers and caretakers for the movement with a few individuals pointing me directly to the Mourning Mothers. I was told of their popularity in Iran, their distinct protest methods, the consistency of their efforts, and the violent attacks currently taking place against the Mourning Mothers. Still, no one confirmed seeing these actions in person; most reports came from word of mouth or through the minimal video coverage.

There is very little photographic documentation of the Mourning Mothers protests in Iran and none in the sample photographs in this study. However, photograph IP14 below, does capture the mourning of a single mother whose son was murdered by enforcement officers in postelection crackdowns of Green Movement protests. This now famous mother, Parvin Fahimi, began her public demonstrations searching for information on her missing son (Esfandiari 2009). After a week, she was informed that her son had died during one of the protests. She received minimal information or recognition of the previous misinformation she had been given. From then on, Parvin continued her protest now mourning her son's death. Her public grief led many to view her not just as "the mother of Sohrab" but as the "voice of other mothers mourning loved ones lost during the unrest that followed the disputed June 12 presidential vote" (2009). Like Neda, Parvin did not seek to be a hero for the movement but was merely performing

the everyday gendered identity of mother amid an extraordinary phenomenon. In the photograph below (IP14), Parvin is seen emotionally speaking (or screaming) out against the murder of her son. Surrounded mostly by young men, this mother stands out as a symbolic leader of the movement.



26

*Figure 29 - IP14*

Mourning is a persistent theme in the maternalist politics of women, especially mothers. Public mourning follows specific rituals and employs distinct symbols throughout history and time often including black clothing, photographs of lost lives, candlelight, and vigils. Established in 1988, the Women in Black movement in Israel was a weekly vigil against the occupation of Palestine. The “only prerequisite for participation in the vigil is the wearing of black clothing that symbolizes the tragedy of the two peoples, Israeli and Palestine” (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003: 384). This

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<sup>26</sup> Mousavi1388. 2009. “30 July – 8.” Image (JPEG). 30 July – 8. Retrieved 3 August 200 (https://live.staticflickr.com/2578/3773603092\_024955da40\_z.jpg).



protest vigil existed in cities throughout Israel with the largest and most symbolic group residing in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem protests included additional symbolic imagery such as a black sign with white text reading “Stop the Occupation,” and the incorporation of a silent protest. “The visual effect of the vigil was fortified by the silent protest. By not shouting slogans and hardly responding to provocation from the public, the women compelled the passersby to ‘listen’ to them” (385). In photograph IP14 above, Sohrab’s mother is in mourning and dressed in all black at a vigil with others also dressed in black. One of the largest Green Movement protest actions in Tehran was a silent protest. Images from this symbolic day of protest helped to construct the Green Movement’s digital aesthetic and appeared in the samples in this study including IP34 and IP36 from the previous chapter.

Besides the video recorded killing of Neda Agha-Soltan, Sohrab’s martyrdom was the most well-known among Iranians. Possibly, Sohrab’s name would have become one of the hundreds of unknown victims of the Iranian state if not for the continued protests of his mother. As reported by the Los Angeles Times’ Beirut office,

public outrage over the teenager’s death has been fueled by accounts of his mother’s ordeal in looking for her son. In a video posted online, Fahimi is seen clutching his photo outside Evin Prison, where authorities had told her that he was probably being held. On the video she pleads for information about Aarabi’s whereabouts (2009).

Though I do not know specifics about Parvin’s selected method of protest, it can be assumed the Madres de la Plaza have had some influence. Just as the Madres held photographs of their missing children during their public protests in Argentina, Parvin first gained local notoriety standing in front of a notorious political prison clutching her

son's picture and demanding information about his whereabouts. Many credit Parvin's methods with influencing the formation and chosen methods of the Mourning Mothers.

Despite minimal video and photographic images of the Mourning Mothers in the broader digital street aesthetic, these women were well known in Iran and by Iranian activist leaders who promoted their efforts transnationally, especially to garner support from state leaders and international governmental organizations. One vocal advocate for the Mourning Mothers was Nobel Peace Prize Laurette Shirin Ebadi who published op eds and focused many interviews on highlighting the Mourning Mothers' efforts in Iran. In one such publication, Ebadi described the increasing desire to protect and support these mothers in Iran, especially by younger women in the movement. Ebadi explains how despite the "excessive violence and repression by the government", younger women have courageously joined the Mourning Mothers' protests often forming a human barricade between enforcement officers and the mothers, both groups of women "defending their human rights and, ultimately, those of women everywhere" (2010: 288; 2011 oral presentation).

Similarly, Susan Tahmasebi, one of the founders of the *Million Signatures Campaign* in Iran and recipient of the Human Rights Watch's 2010 Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism, dedicated her acceptance speech for this honor to spotlighting the brutal incarceration of female activists in Iran. In this statement, Tahmasebi mentions two members of the Mourning Mothers AND their daughters who were arrested for their protesting their son/ brothers' arrests with the group of Mothers at Laleh Park (2010). The work of Iranian women leading from positions of power

transnationally has helped to promote the cause of the Mourning Mothers successfully gaining the support of powerful organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as well as state agencies including the US State Department. Despite their lack of presence in the photographic documentation making up the digital street aesthetic, these movement mothers became a part of the gendered aesthetic of the movement within Iran and throughout some transnational networks. Mothering is an empowered gendered practice that has been very effective in allocating increased levels of status and power to women across national boundaries especially for women in the global South.

#### WOMEN AND VIOLENCE: AN INVISIBLE MIX

The discussion of the Mourning Mothers' participation in the Green Movement leads to a discussion on the presence of violence in the movement's digital street aesthetic. The relationship between violence and social movements is a complicated one as is the role of violence in the Green Movement. For this study, I will be looking at gendered components of the violent imagery within the Green Movement's aesthetic. Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence perpetrated against someone based on the person's gender but more specifically, GBV refers to violence that is "rooted in exploiting unequal power relationships between genders" (NYC Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence 2001). Based on an ability to exploit sexist systems, GBV is primarily violence directed towards women and girls most often in the form of physical or sexual violence but including symbolic violence that can result in psychological, mental, or emotional trauma (Krantz and Garcia-Moreno 2005). There are

two main groups that perpetuate violence against women in social movement spaces; the first is GBV perpetrated by state agents, and the second is GBV perpetuated by civilians such as fellow protestors, public employees/ volunteers, and movement organizers or facilitators. Though many types of GBV take place in most social movements, this study focuses on the visual presentation of this violence in the movements gendered aesthetic.

There are two classifications of gendered violence in visual representations of the Green Movement. The first involves the gendered ways that violence is presented against protestors. The second encompasses the gendered ways that protestors are seen participating in violence. Both the photographic documentation of the Green Movement and the fieldwork for this study revealed no presence of violence towards women by other civilians. This does not mean that there were not incidents of violence against women within the movement but that there is no presence of this type of violence from the data. The violent imagery that is present can seldom be traced to a source. However, any presence of violence inflicted on protestors is presented as state violence. From this point forward, all mention of violence against protestors will be presumed to be state violence.

In chapter 3 I review the descriptive statistics of the gendered participation and emerging themes from the analysis of the photographic documentation of Green Movement protests. The presence of violent imagery was one of the themes to emerge from this initial analysis. One of the subcategories of violent imagery is the presence of a *wound or injury* on a participant, which includes blood, bandages, cuts, and other signs of a recent assault. The analysis of this subcategory revealed a great difference in the

number of wounds present when accounting for gender. In total, there are 12 photographs with the presence of a wound or injury: 11 injured participants (3 women and 9 men) and 1 injured enforcement officer. These numbers are much lower than the perceived violence Green Movement participants faced, which can be attributed to several factors including increased risk to citizen photojournalists, lack of dissemination of photographs with violent imagery, intentionally hiding violent acts, or most likely, the result of multiple factors.

Of the three photographs revealing an injured woman, two promoted the gendered trope of “damsel in distress.” Starting with image IP32 below, women injured in Green Movement protests appear startled, helpless, and in need of “rescue”. In photograph IE32,



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*Figure 30 - IE32*

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<sup>27</sup> Glasco, Alan. 2009. “Mideast Iran Election Protest (June09).” Image (JPEG). Iran Election. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3654/3646550641\\_a2da1ab3d7\\_w.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3654/3646550641_a2da1ab3d7_w.jpg)).

the injured woman is being carried in a cradled position (like one would use to rock a young child) by a single man circled and supported by a second layer of men. The woman is visibly distraught and is bleeding from her head and/or face. She is wearing a beige manto and her roosari has fallen around her neck revealing her long Black-Brown hair. In a state with a compulsory hijab, this image of a woman without a roosari or shawl on the streets of Tehran, is a shocking one. The man carrying her is wearing a red shirt and jeans with a homemade green neckband and white (store bought) facemask. The image gives the impression that this injured woman is being removed from harm by a larger, stronger man who can save her. This image aligns with the enduring patriarchal depiction of “women as harmless victims in need of protection by male protectors” (Puechguirbal 2010: 177). Though there is no longer an immediate threat against this woman, there are more than five men circled around her ready to save her from a future attack.

This paternalistic presentation of violence against women is also visible in the second image of an injured woman to appear in this sample. Photograph IP21 below, shows a single woman on the ground with a startled and pained look on her face. She is wearing jeans with a jean colored manteaux and just like in image IE32 above, this woman’s white shawl has fallen off her head and is hanging around her neck revealing her black hair that is tied up on her head. Surrounding this woman is a minimum of 3 motorbikes holding 2 enforcement officers each. The enforcement officers riding as passengers on the motorbikes are holding batons while staring menacingly at the woman. While there is no blood or wound visible, this woman’s position on the ground and facial

affect suggest she has been injured. The motorbikes of armed enforcement officers surrounding her



28

*Figure 31 - IE21*

indicate that she could be a victim of a state sanctioned assault. Her passive seated position juxtaposed to the very aggressive stance of the enforcement officers implies that she is vulnerable and in need of masculine interventive support.

The final photograph displaying a wounded woman is image UI32-2 below. This photograph is very different than the previous two photographs of wounded women. Instead of showing a snapshot of an action scene, this photograph zooms in on just a portion of a woman's bloodied and bandaged forehead next to a V-ictory gesture she is holding up. This photograph focuses solely on this woman's wound by focusing solely on

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<sup>28</sup>Glasco, Alan. 2009. "Iran Election." Image (JPEG). Iran Elections. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3404/3648013516\\_b8116807c8\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3404/3648013516_b8116807c8_z.jpg)).

minimal portions of her body instead of the whole person. Not photographing this woman's face can be an effort towards anonymity or even to create the illusion of a "faceless crime" or "faceless victim." Nevertheless, the woman's hands in this photograph resemble that of an older, working woman unlike the previous two images of wounded women which featured young, beautiful women and incorporated the woman's entire body in the photograph.



Figure 32 - UI32-2

Research has shown that women and girls endure the most gender-based violence during times of conflict (Ekhtor-Mobayode 2020) and Iranian women participating in Green Movement protests were no different. Yet, much of this violence was intentionally hidden by the state, especially incidents of sexual violence. Besides the apparent violence women were subjected to during street protests, hundreds of women were targeted for

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<sup>29</sup> United4Iran. 2010. "Picture 11." Image (JPEG). Ashura. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/4062/4255022056\\_34ccbb8a89.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/4062/4255022056_34ccbb8a89.jpg)).



arrest and sent to the notorious Evin political prison in Iran where the violence they faced was concealed behind prison walls. The extreme physical, sexual, and psychological violence taking place at Evin prison has become a prevalent part of the discussion on violence against women in Iran, especially state violence (Nemat 2008; Duheume 2018; Esfandiari 2021). In the years following 2009, the violence committed to Green Movement “dissidents” in Evin prison has been widely documented. This discourse, along with the sensationalizing of Neda’s murder, incorporated the presence of state violence against women in the Green Movement, more so than the photographic documentation of the movement.

The efforts of protestors at transnational solidarity rallies are one reason that state violence against women was constantly incorporated into the representation of the Green Movement. One of the symbolic images which was more present in transnational solidarity rallies than street protests in Iran is the use of protest signs. In the previous chapter I described the transnational use of Neda’s image on protest signs as a means to embody her martyrdom. Another theme that many of these transnationally located protest signs included were replications of the state violence against protest participants in Iran. Documented acts of violent repression will often lead to increased participation in street protests, including transnational rallies in support of local rights (Kurtz and Smithey 2012). These efforts helped to ensure that violence against protestors be incorporated into the gm’s transnational aesthetic despite the nearly nonexistent violence at solidarity rallies.

The second type of violence visible in the photographic images of Green Movement is the violence that protest participants employ usually in self-defense or in the defense of another. Measuring this ‘intent to do physical harm’ through the presence of a weapon and/or a physical gesture demonstrating a violent strike, I identified 21 photographs fitting this criterion. Of these 21 photographs, 8 were images of enforcement officers participating in violence (almost always against men). The remaining 13 photographs included 3 images of women participating in violence, 7 images of men participating in violence, and 3 images where both men and women were seen participating in violence. In the photographs where women are seen participating in violence (either solely or as mixed company), the weapons women are seen holding are almost solely rocks. The images below (IP33 and IE29) reveal women holding rocks and demonstrating a willingness to use those rocks violently. The first two images (IP33 & IE29) are very similar. Both photographs show a young woman in a group of men holding a rock over her head in one hand. In both images the woman is dressed in all black (manto and roosari) and is wearing some type of facemask to cover her face.



Figure 33 - IP33

In each of these photographs, the woman is centered. In image IP33, the woman is looking directly at the photographer demonstrating an awareness that she is the subject of the photograph. Photograph IE29 is focus and zoomed in on the single woman in the image. She is wearing a fitted, black manto and rusari with the end of the rusari draped over her nose and mouth serving as a facemask while mysteriously concealing her identity and promoting the sexualized exotification described in the previous chapter.



*Figure 34 - IE29*

Another commonality in these two images is the actual like of violent conflict is visible. Women are photographed holding a rock and even demonstrating a readiness to wield this weapon, but neither photograph displays an imminent threat. Thus, the visibility of a weapon in a woman's hands is a symbolic representation of potential violence than it is the documentation of actual violence. This is further illustrated in photograph IE01 below, which includes only a woman's hand adorned in multiple

friendship style bracelets and holding 4 small rocks. In the background, small piles of burning rubbish, dumpsters and broken cement can be seen as well as a man walking through the piles. The images of women participating in violence are passive examples of violence where women are not participating but symbolically referencing these actions.



30

*Figure 35 - IE01*

This is very different than how men are represented participating in and being subjected to violence within the movement. Men are frequently seen actively engaging in violent interactions with enforcement officers and while the images of beautiful, young women adorned in green and gesturing V-ictory became the viral representation of women in the movement, men swinging batons (IP61 in appendix), grabbing enforcement officers (IP16 in appendix), and climbing government buildings (IP38 in appendix) became the viral representation of men in the movement. Unlike the symbolic examples

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<sup>30</sup> Rosa\_Roshan. 2009. "Iran-Election/." Image (JPEG). Green. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3637/3623074343\\_1083ca13d8\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3637/3623074343_1083ca13d8_z.jpg)).

of women's participation in violence, men are seen directly engaging in violent acts most often against an imminent threat.

Photographs of injured men in the Green Movement were also presented differently than the presentation of injured women. While women are seen disoriented or in need of rescue, injured men are seen in powerful, even victorious poses while injured. Men are regularly seen showing off their wounds in front of a burning bus (IE02) or arm in arm refusing to give up space despite being sprayed by tear gas (IP45). Whereas state violence against women was covert, state violence against men was an overt part of the movement's gendered aesthetic.

#### WOMEN IN THE TRANSNATIONAL NETWORK: CREATORS, CURATORS, AND LIVING ART

The final method of marginalized participation that women in the Green Movement performed is that of creators and presenters of political theater. This method of engagement with the movement existed in both Iran and the transnational network but was a much more visible variable in the transnational aesthetic. Transnationally, events facilitated by non-governmental organizations and university student groups highlighted the human rights crisis in Iran with scholarly discussions, video presentations, art exhibits and various acts of political theater. Such events encompassed much of the transnational method of participation in the movement. In October 2009, I participated in a sequence of events meant to raise awareness and support for the movement. A collaboration between UC

Berkeley student groups, United4Iran NorCal, and the local Iranian community, these events included two noteworthy acts of political theater, a video collage, and an information session.

One of the demonstrations of political theater in this series was that of a human screen, also referred to as a “living screen”. As the name suggests, a ‘human screen’ is a makeshift film screen made up by a group of participants dressed in white jumpsuits using their bodies to reflect the film. Besides reflecting the film, these white suits serve to conceal gendered and racialized bodies. During certain film clips, the human screen collectively gestures. For example, during the human screen at the UC Berkeley event, the ‘screen’ covered our eyes and looked down when President Ahmadinejad appeared collectively refusing to recognize his title or authority. From my experience, the human screen is a powerful demonstration of political theater and method of participation for women transnationally:

We began to break our screen before the curtain was closed. Much of the crowd was already in a standing ovation and the energy in the room was palpable. We began hugging, celebrating, and congratulating each other as some tears of joy flowed down our faces. I don’t know how long it was before the curtain went back up for a final goodbye, but the audience was still applauding our efforts. One of the evenings emcees offered some brief closing words and everyone broke out in small group chatter before transitioning out of the event. I stood with some of my new comrades as groups of audience members praised our human screen. I went home enthused and inspired to participate in future Green Movement actions.

I believe the juxtaposition of a human screen reflecting devastating images of the violence facing our comrades in Iran brought these images to life in a way that a nonliving screen could never achieve.

These types of organized events incorporating speakers, families, cultural and political performances, etc. is a component of the transnational solidarity rallies that were present but not visible in images of street protests in Iran. Photographs from transnational solidarity rallies are documented on stage as speakers, emcees, musicians, and performers. While in these performative stage roles, women embody many of the same themes identified in this study. Women in transnational solidarity rallies can be seen on stage leading discussions while embodying their gendered identity and the movement's green symbolism. The woman in image IE11 below shows a young, thin woman reading off a paper and into a microphone towards a perceived, but not pictured, audience. She is wearing a green scarf around her head and a “magic green bracelet” on her wrist.



31

*Figure 36 - IE11*

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<sup>31</sup>Pouya. 2009. “United4Iran Austin Rally.” Image (JPEG). United4Iran Austin Rally. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/2485/3757540882\\_52aa41e184\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/2485/3757540882_52aa41e184_b.jpg)).

In an even greater embodiment of green symbolism, photograph UI59 below shows a woman on stage this time holding the microphone into which she is speaking. She is wearing a large, shiny green fabric around her body with a similar red fabric around her head and the lower portion of her face. A blowing wind makes the already tight fabric cling to her further emphasizing her gendered body. The images of these two women are a good example of the sustained gender performativity in movement spaces that women participate in while marching in protest or speaking from a stage.



Figure 37 - UI59

As women participate in various methods of political theater, some of these performances require women to subvert their gendered performativity to embody their participation in political theater. For example, the white painters' suits and synchronous gestures of the human screen serve to dismantle gender binaries creating an illusion of one

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<sup>32</sup> Boyle, Stephen. 2009. "Corktown Music Festival – United4Iran." Image (JPEG). Corktown Music Festival. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/3443/3761635261\\_bdf872599b\\_b.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/3443/3761635261_bdf872599b_b.jpg)).



human body. The political performance in photograph UI17 below requires a similar shift in these participants' performativity of gender due to the expectations of their street performance. Image UI17 captures two women wearing costume style white masks covering their entire face and connecting with the faux fur hats they are wearing. Both women are wearing thick jackets, gloves, and a clear rain poncho as their outer layer. These women are standing under a makeshift noose while gesturing a V-ictory sign with each of their hands. The full-faced masks and thick winter gear worn by these performance participants disguise their gendered bodies instead placing emphasis on these women's actions.



33

*Figure 38 - UI17*

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<sup>33</sup> United4Iran. 2010. "7." Image (JPEG). 22 Bahman – Montreal, Canada. Retrieved 3 August 2020 ([https://live.staticflickr.com/4007/4363289241\\_d7b50817ab\\_z.jpg](https://live.staticflickr.com/4007/4363289241_d7b50817ab_z.jpg)).

## INTENTIONALLY INCORPORATING ISLAM: LOCAL EFFORTS GO UNNOTICED TRANSNATIONALLY

A final theme which is present in the local movement aesthetic but absent from the dominating transnational aesthetic is the presence of Islamic symbolism and movement tactics.

I was casually sipping my drink when I first heard it. My ears perked up and my facial affect changed to beaming excitement and a curious smile. I noticed my aunt smiling back at me. "You hear that?" she asked me already knowing the answer. "They're chanting!" I proclaimed. "They are" she said as she opened the window so we could better hear the rooftop chants. An older woman's voice was the first one I heard. "Allah Akhbar" she exclaimed. Then I heard her echoes, "Allah Akhbar", the primarily female voices chanted in reply. My excitement grew. "Can we chant too?" I asked. She quickly looked at her son, the homeowner, for confirmation. If for any reason we were found participating in this protest action, the homeowner could also be held responsible. "Is that ok?" she asked him. "Oh yeah. Absolutely." He answered. "You can say and do whatever you want against the regime while you're here. What are they going to do? Let them come; I'm not scared". His mother gave him a conflicted look. I know his blazey attitude concerned her while his resistance made her proud. "Come on" she said to me, "let's go up to the roof". We walked up the stairs into the dark night and stood on the rough overlooking the city lights. The chanting continued and with permission to join in, I turned my head up to the dark sky and hollered, "Allah Akhbar" in between the chants of the others. I attempted to identify where the other chants were coming from, but it was impossible. We stood out there a few minutes chanting a little but mostly listening and observing what was happening around us.

For anyone extensively studying the Iranian Green Movement, the inclusion of Islamic movement tactics from the 1979 Iranian Revolution and thereafter, was an intentional tactic incorporated by movement activists. Like the women I heard that night in December 2009, Iranian women participated in the inclusion of Islamic signs, symbols, and chants. However, these Islamic representations are absent from the transnational digital street aesthetic of Green Movement protests. There are only 2 photographs in this

sample that include Islamic imagery. One of these photographs is from a specific protest in Iran which included the participation of religious authorities (Mullahs). Recognized by their symbolic white headdress, these Mullahs are visible in the photographs from that protest action. Modeling the gender segregation in traditional Islamic practice, only men are visible at this action. Some of these men have adorned green symbolism and some are marching in tight groups with the Mullahs.

In a similar photograph taken at a transnational solidarity rally, a man dressed as an Akhund is standing in the middle of a small crowd. He is holding a very large flag; the 3-stripes of all Iran flags are visible but with the fold of the flag, no symbol or even the presence of one, can be seen. The lack of Islamic symbolism throughout the digital street aesthetic is not reflective of the local street aesthetic which included much more Islamic symbolism than visible. Along with the presence of religious figures, references to Islam are present in protest chants like “Allah Akhbar” and “Ya Huseyn, Mir-Huseyn”. The latter phrase, which also appeared on posters for the movement “juxtaposes the contemporary crisis with that of the 1979 uprising while highlighting their shared Shi’i symbolic language” (Rauh 2013: 1324). However, the movement’s most visual marker, green symbolism, holds important symbolic value in Islam as well. Green is associated with the “prophetic family especially Imam Huseyn” and has been recognized by many as “the color of Islam” (2013: 1323).

One reason that Islamic references are absent from this sample of photographs is the non-visual methods used to incorporate Islam into the Green Movement aesthetic. The protest chants, for example, cannot be captured by a still photograph and require

additional forms of documentation. Since this study prioritizes visual images of street protests, it does not sufficiently document nonvisual elements such as the use of verbal symbols or the creation of protest art.

## CONCLUSION

A deeper analysis of the local street aesthetic revealed some components of the movement's gendered aesthetic that was marginally present in the larger digital aesthetic. The most significant of these marginalized images of women in the movement is the participation of older women primarily serving as "Mothers" of the movement including the collective of "Mourning Mothers". While there are minimal photographs demonstrating the actions of these mothers, their bravery and public appeal won the hearts of the local community who upheld their actions more broadly reaching members of the transnational advocacy network including powerful participants like Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. Although these firsthand accounts help to include the participation of mothers' actions into the local street aesthetic, they are mostly absent from the larger transnationally dominant digital street aesthetic.

The gendered representation of violent imagery in photographic images of the Green Movement includes a misrepresentation of the violence Iranian women participate in and are subjected to during protest actions. The few images demonstrating state violence against women participating in movement actions are stereotypical representations of women in danger. Still, there is an underrepresentation of state

violence against women during protest actions including sexual and physical assaults while incarcerated. Similarly, the depiction of violence women engage in as a method of participation in Green Movement actions is underrepresented and used symbolically unlike the more active ways men are represented engaging in violence.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

When I looked over, I noticed her staring at me from the car besides ours. I instinctively smiled at her and as if she could sense we were comrades, she returned the gesture and revealed a “magic green bracelet” as she flashed me a V-victory sign. Her car and others around us honked in solidarity as the traffic opened ahead of us and we all began driving forward unaware of where we were going next. It was the evening of Ashura in 2009; I was with my family in Tehran anxiously observing the days ongoing street protests and violent state repression. My cousin and I had convinced his mother to drive us near that evening’s scheduled protest. We were there, in my aunt’s car, observing the Basij members on motorbikes circling us with batons strapped to their backs, when I saw this young woman in the car next to me. I felt my smile double in size when as quickly as she appeared, this young woman put down her hand, and the car she was in sped off. I knew I would never see her again, but in that moment, we shared an experience I would never forget. Women like her, like myself and my aunt, we were everywhere that night.

Just as I saw women participating in subtle and obvious forms of protest that Ashura day in 2009, women’s participation is visible throughout the movement’s aesthetic in obvious and subtle ways. I came to this study to learn more about how women’s participation in the Iranian Green Movement is represented and sometimes misrepresented in the visual documentation of the movement. Through an extensive examination of sample photographs from Green Movement protests, I discovered that the most visible gendered aesthetic is as much based on women’s daily performances of femininity as it is their methods of participation in the movement. Iranian women’s embodiment of transnationally popular representations of femininity facilitated the visibility of these women and their methods of participation in the movement. While these gendered methods of participation were hyper visible, other methods of gendered participation less adherent to these popular representations of femininity continue to be

relegated to the margins where their actions remain mostly invisible to a transnational community.

In studying the visual aesthetic of the Iranian Green Movement, I began my analysis with the question, “*what is the nature of women’s participation in Green Movement protest actions?*” To begin answering this question, I inductively coded images from the digital street aesthetic and was able to identify variations in the presence of gendered bodies within this aesthetic based on location and group size. This initial analysis also revealed gendered representations of symbolic imagery (symbols, gestures, signs, etc.) and violent imagery (wound, weapon, and fire). Women are more likely to be seen participating in the production of symbolic images by dressing in green adornments, gesturing V-ictory, and holding protest signs. Conversely, women are scarce alongside images of violence. Instead, it is men who are much more likely to be seen participating in the production of violence in the digital street aesthetic.

These findings begin to demonstrate the gendered presentation of women in the Green Movement’s digital aesthetic. Women are seen participating in methods of protest focused more on how women present themselves and less on the actions they are taking. These gendered representations of participation appear in the digital aesthetic in these more overt descriptive ways but also in more subtle ways through the commonplace contributions of everyday gender performances. By looking past individual thematic categories to consider the entirety of the gendered performances constructing this aesthetic, we can begin to offer explanations for why one gendered aesthetic is

collectively promoted at the detriment of alternative representations (bodies, methods, symbols, etc.).

## REVIEW OF FINDINGS

Chapter 4 highlights women's participation in constructing this dominant gendered aesthetic. Evaluating the most frequently recurring images of women in the digital street aesthetic, I was able to identify three embodied gendered performances that served as highly visible methods of participation in the movement's dominant gendered aesthetic. The first method of embodiment involves women's public dress as a type of "personal aesthetic" or presentation of self. The stringent dress code laws in Iran have politicized women's public appearance making women's bodies a site for political and cultural symbols such as, in this case, the adornment of green fabrics. The second method of embodiment emphasizes women's peaceful public persona through the martyrdom of Neda Agha-Soltan. Video footage of an unarmed, nonviolent Neda shot and killed for her political participation was digitally spread instantaneously. Neda's gendered embodiment appeared in the movement's symbolic representation through the replication of her image at street protests and other movement spaces. The final method of embodiment encompasses women's beautifying practices and pleasant facial expressions as part of their frontline service in support of the movement. Young, thin, well styled, and made-up women are often seen looking towards the camera acknowledging their visible role in the



frontlines. Some women will increase their visibility by smiling, gesturing V-ictory, or promoting movement symbols.

While women's participation contributes to the construction of this dominant gendered aesthetic, there are many others participating in the production of these dominant images from professional and street photographers capturing the images, to digital participants disseminating the images, to neoliberal media systems steering the content promoting the images. Little is known about the intentionality of the participants across the network that collectively produced the aesthetic. For example, some women in Iran demonstrate their resistance to the state's unjust gender laws through the visible resistance of the state's public dress codes. Women colorfully ornament their bodies with makeup, hair dye, tight and colorful clothing, which is as much a sign of resistance as it is conforming to a white patriarchal capitalist lens. However, this example is specific to women's experiences in Iran and not part of a broader collective influence contributing to the actions of participants, groups or institutions promoting this aesthetic. Instead, this is more reflective of the unequal power of influence neoliberal media systems have on producing images that conform to hegemonic ideology.

Chapter 5 highlights women's less visible methods of participation and gendered embodiment. Most notably absent from this dominant aesthetic is the participation of older women purposely serving as "mothers" for the movement. These older women's participatory methods include shielding younger protestors, pleading for the safety of all protestors, and even striking enforcement officers in defense of self and others. While almost entirely absent from the dominant digital aesthetic available to the transnational

community, those observing the local movement aesthetic are much more aware of the participation of the Mourning Mothers from both visual representations and oral narratives.

While the participation of younger women was sensationalized, older women's participation was highly effectual although mostly unknown to a broad audience. Outside of the traditional standards of "sexualized beauty", these women embodied their gendered identity through alternative methods. As a gendered identity, "motherhood" affords older Iranian women increased levels of agency, mobility and security navigating Iran's public life during times of political turmoil. Accustomed to caring for the state's younger populations, older woman joined these protests in an effort to protect, and even legitimize, the protest actions of younger civilians. In this capacity, these mothers became the moral conscious of not just the movement, but the state. As the mother describing her experience on Ashura exemplified, older women negotiated with male representatives of the state as "a mother" guiding a child towards nonviolent, morally just actions.

There are other methods of participation that are also primarily overlooked in the digital aesthetic. Along with the marginal visibility of the mothers of the movement, I identified two emerging themes in the local street aesthetic that are primarily absent from the digital street aesthetic. The first of these two emerging themes is the lack of violence seen in images where women are present. Many of the photographs Green Movement participants disseminated outside of Iran were meant to highlight the violence protest participants were facing. While violence did emerge as a theme, it was a gendered theme associated with men and masculinity. This doesn't mean a complete absence of all

images of violence facing women at Green Movement participants but a marginal representation of a much larger, and more complex, problem.

The final theme to emerge from the local street aesthetic but is only marginally represented in the digital street aesthetic is religious symbolism. Incorporating religious symbolism similar to those used in protest actions in the Iranian/ Islamic Revolution was an intentional strategy implemented by Green Movement participants. I had heard about these efforts and even participated in a late-night rooftop chant of “Allah Akbar”. Religious chants are one way that religion was worked into protest actions that are almost impossible to capture from a solely visual aesthetic. This reiterates the importance of triangulating research with more than one data source specially to capture both visual and auditory features of a spectacle.

## DISCUSSION

Having completed a thorough examination of the gendered representations within the Green Movement aesthetic, it is clear that certain representations of gender were more regularly used to promote the movement than others. This collective process includes many participants from many locales. Looking broadly at which images of women are more regularly circulated and which images of women are marginalized to the local aesthetic, it is the images of women performing femininity, and other aspects of culture, which are more aligned with global North ideologies of femininity and womanhood than local regions in the global South. As mentioned in Chapter 4, this is in large part due to

the dominating influence of global North media systems promoting a prevailing cultural influence, especially regarding the beauty standards of women. However, the unequal power of influence neoliberal media systems has on producing images that conform to hegemonic ideology don't just influence the shifting presentation of self being practiced by women in the global South, but also influence the dissemination of images of women that reinforce this hegemonic ideology.

In the article, "Merchants of Morality," Clifford Bob demonstrates the powerful influence global North organizations have on shaping the marketing strategies of a global South movement pursuing transnational support (2002). One way a global South movement can market their cause to transnational backers is through the highly visible aesthetics of protest. Bob describes this transnational bid for support as entering a "Darwinian marketplace where legions of groups vie for scarce attention, sympathy, and money" (2002: 38). To gain the support of potential global North backers, a global South movement will model its grievances, demands, and tactics to the expectations of these powerful players.

Too often, the desire to conform a movement around the expectations of global North backers leads a global South movement to aesthetically fulfill the colonial gender tropes that are expected of them. Though Bob does not assess the role of gender in the marketing of a transnational social movement, many female scholars have studied the gendered marketing of transnational social movements. One such study conducted by Ananya Roy (2010) examines microfinancing as a transnational campaign utilizing a gendered marketing strategy aimed at ending global poverty. Designed for a global North

audience, these transnational campaigns; present the microfinancing recipient through a set of specific gender norms. As Roy states, “the new poverty agenda hinges on the ‘Third World woman’” (69) as the face of poverty and recipients of these microfinance loans. Roy describes the look of one of these microfinance donation ads spotlighting Felicita; “She was smiling, a broad grin that was confident, and she bore in her hands a garment with vibrant embroidery” (1). As Roy discovers, while this gendered aesthetic is effective for securing economic support from the global North, it also contributes to maintaining traditional gender roles while also increasing women’s responsibilities.

Just as the feminization of poverty has promoted a particular image of the “poor Third World woman” for the purposes of microfinance, the Orientalist fetishizing of Iranian women has gendered the Green Movement’s digital aesthetic to promote an imagined “new Iranian woman”. Women have become the face of human rights in Islamic states with their collective presentation signifying extreme examples of “violent oppression” or progression towards “unbounded freedom.” Now widely criticized by antiwar activists, during the onset of the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, “media images and public discourse was rife with images of veiling and of the oppression of women” (Fernandes 2005: 56). At the time, this aesthetic representation of victimized Afghani women was primarily marketed through international non-governmental organizations and television and print media. These traditional media systems have historically been aligned with the state and are more likely to promote an aesthetic in line with the state’s desired messaging about the movement. By receiving transnational backing and media attention, Afghan women’s local organizing groups inadvertently

sacrificed ownership of their visual and verbal messaging. Although Afghan women's visibility increased, they lost agency over their self-representation and the ability to frame their cause.

The construction of a dominant gender aesthetic in Iran's Green Movement holds many similarities to the case of Afghan women with significant differences. The biggest difference in the way these women are aesthetically presented is through the primary medium that produced and distributed the messaging. The Green Movement's use of digital media appeared to be a more "inclusive and participatory" form of representation with many participants able to work as curators in the production of a digital street aesthetic. Indeed, as described in the research methods, the 190 sample photographs in this study came from an abundance of curators, some of whom could be verified as the original artist (photographer), some who were verified to be reposts of digital publications (curator solely), and some where original photographer and/or original disseminator of image could not be verified (unknown). The assumption that digital technologies "afford people an opportunity to participate in politics" while also "challenging mainstream media, especially in regimes which curb and monitor Internet access" (McGarry, Erhart, Esleen-Ziya, Jenzen and Korkut 2020: 22) is an understandable, but not entirely accurate one.

One challenge facing digitalized transnational social movements is the ongoing digital divide which exists within local communities but is exacerbated across transnational networks. Along with geography, other social categories contribute to the digital divide especially class but also gender, race, education, etc. (Fallon and Boutilier

2021). In 2009 there was a huge digital divide between the global North and the global South with some regions in the global South trailing far behind. For example, looking at statistics on internet penetration (the portion of the population with Internet access) for 2009, North America was at 73.9% with 14.6% of total internet users while Southwest Asia (the “Middle East”) was at 23.7% with just 3.3% of total internet users (Tech Musings 2010; Internet World Stats). In 2009, less than 25% of the population in Southwest Asia had internet access so only a small portion of the state was able to participate in online activism. The digital divide between the two regions and Southwest Asia’s minimal percentage of global Internet users suggests that much of the Green Movement’s virtual activism was from participants outside of Iran. Unfortunately, there are no available statistics for Flickr users by region or country for 2009. However, Flickr does provide current statistics for their users by country. In 2021, 9 of the top 10 countries with the greatest percentage of Flickr users are all global North states with the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany making up the top 3 (Similarweb.com). The top spot goes to the United States whose users comprise 30.22% of Flickr traffic while Iran ranks 65<sup>th</sup> with only .09% of the traffic share. Flickr also has current data on the gender distribution of its users which were not available in 2009. The current gender distribution on Flickr is 39.20% who self-identify as female and 60.80% who self-identify as male (Similarweb) making Flickr one of the few social media platforms with a greater percentage of male users (Campbell 2022).

While the exact impact of this digital divide on the curation of the digital aesthetic cannot be determined, this does raise questions about the social structure of social

movements and the role of the external public on the construction of this digital street aesthetic. During my initial review of the photographs in this study, I discovered that many of these photographs were reposted and not original works. As technosociologist Zeynep Tufekci states, “The open participation afforded by social media does not always mean equal participation, and it certainly does not mean a smooth process” (2017). Tufekci is pointing us towards the structural inequalities that exist in an advocacy network dependent on digital technologies. The structural inequality of the digital divide is just one of the many structural inequalities contributing to the unequitable position of participants located in the global South versus those located in the global North. This digital divide grows amid a protest cycle when totalitarian states block Internet access immediately shifting influence over the conceptual flow of visual and text communication. While some tech savvy citizens can discover workarounds to this censorship, we can presume that many are not.

This structural divide raises concerns about the equity of the networked construction of protest aesthetics and the cultural norms being produced and reinforced as culture structure. Incorporating the analysis of culture structures with analysis of the digital divide provides a powerful explanatory model for why the Green Movement’s dominant gendered aesthetic is swayed towards cultural norms of gendered beauty from the culturally dominant North and lack images of older women and Islamic symbolism despite their utility in the movement. If protest participants on the ground in Iran are the *artists* performing the aesthetic, it appears that participants throughout the transnational



network, primarily those located in the global North, are *curating* these performances into a dominant visual representation of the movement.

The Green Movement was the first movement in the state to strategically incorporate the external community to gain support for their cause. This provided the Green Movement a public platform to communicate their claims, actions taken in support of their claims, and the visual images produced in support of these claims. “Going transnational” *enabled* the Green Movement to secure a great deal of transnational attention and support resulting in one of the largest transnational solidarity actions, the “Global Day of Action for Iran” spanning over 130 countries. Transnational organizations lobbying in support of human rights conditions in Iran were founded and began their own campaigns directly supporting Green Movement actions. Many education and political institutions convened conferences and special events to create knowledge about the history and trajectory of Green Movement actions. The immediacy by which information was coming out of Iran and the powerful visual ways this information was communicated created a sense of urgency for action and in the absence of protests or public demonstrations, Green Movement participants with sustained web access could sustain their activism digitally.

In most cases, these transnational participants were unaware that they were promoting a single gendered aesthetic basically sidelining all other representations of women within the aesthetic. This marginalizing of certain groups of women and methods of participation *constrained* movement efforts by presenting an exaggerated, overly optimistic representation of women’s participation in the movement. These

transnationally located Green Movement participants are demonstrating their *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) by reflecting their cultural perception of beauty through the reproduction of images of women adhering to global North beauty standards. These transnational participants are gravitating towards images that are familiar although they exist outside of their own experience. Studying the impact of digitization on the aesthetic experience of music, cultural sociologist, Nancy Hanrahan, finds, “It is not a connection that draws upon some work of *making a connection* to the artist, of seeing or feeling something outside of one’s experience, but rather of having the self reflected back through the musical encounter” (2018: 299). I believe similarly that global North spectators circulated Green Movement protest images that they could see their self reflected in contributing to the promotion of one dominant aesthetic.

Green Movement protest participants within Iran were new to the challenges they would face by opening the movement up to a transnational network. Desperate for an audience to witness the human rights violations they were facing; Green Movement participants used their bodies to produce an abundance of protest images and make them available to a global audience. However, participants were unaware of how these photographs would be circulated or the potential shift in messaging that can result. In the case of the women whose presentation of self with green adornments, and V-ictory gestures accompanied by tight manteaus, loosely worn shawls with visible hair, and beautified faces came to dominate the Green Movement’s gendered aesthetic, they are likely unaware that their resistance to local traditionalist patriarchy may be perceived transnationally as acceptance of white, capitalist patriarchy. This reveals the intersecting

systems of oppression, in this case patriarchal, that many women in the global South confront in their transnational relationships, as well racialized and classed systems.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

This study contributes to many areas of sociological inquiry. First, this research expands the understanding of protest aesthetics and helps to identify the precarious position movements in the global South find themselves when they need to look beyond their national borders for support in their struggle to gain local rights. For participants of the Green Movement in Iran, the necessity to look externally for support left the movement vulnerable to preserving control of their aesthetic representation. This study found that although a global South movement can increase its digital visibility with the support of a transnational advocacy network, the relationships within these networks and access to the digital technologies necessary for participation are based on globally disproportionate positions of power. Although Green Movement participants released protest images transnationally seeking more visibility for their cause, this increased visibility does not equate to inclusive visibility.

This study provides valuable insights on empirical knowledge production using qualitative data in various ways. The rapidly shifting role of communication technologies in facilitating transnational movement connectivity has been difficult for scholars to keep pace with. This research expands on the use of digital photographs as qualitative data providing a clear guide for data collection and sampling, as well as demonstrating three

methods of qualitative analysis of these photographs. By focusing on the analysis of images instead of text, this study provides a greater understanding of the meaning making process of visual imagery within a transnational advocacy network. It also provides a better understanding of the transnational's influence on local social movements through the study of visual images posted to social media as the digital street aesthetic of the movement.

Empirically, this study also provides a framework for applying an autoethnographic method of inquiry. This research helps to demonstrate how scholars can empirically incorporate a subjective experience into the research process creating a space for the integration of the researcher's activism, self-identification, and long-term engagement with the public as a source of knowledge production. By operationalizing the role of participant scholar, this valuable lived experience and subjective expression serve as continuing empirical data informing the study, not just site visits of a given event and time. I began my inquiry into the Green Movement as a participant and member of the community. While I entered the movement space as a member of the Iranian diaspora and transnational advocacy network, I was also a sociologist documenting my observations. Just as my intersectional identity is present in all spaces I occupy, so is my *sociological imagination*. As a woman participating in the Iranian Green Movement, I was enthused by the attention Iranian women's movement participation was receiving transnationally. As a sociologist, I raised questions about the substance and purpose of this sensationalized reporting on women's Green Movement participation.

This study opens concerns about the consent of those being photographed by citizen journalists, especially with viral digital images. Who gets to decide rights on the photograph and how does consent impact this? Also, this continues the evolving work on gender representations including across digital channels. We need more voices of women all around. So many things going on: some representation of women does not mean representation of all women. Institutions with greater power of influence can sway opinion and judgements of taste more so than the movement work of civil society organizations unless these organizations are able to integrate secure communicative structures prioritizing the voice and creative control of the movement's messaging.

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Sahar Haghghat graduated from Edison High School, Huntington Beach, California, in 1999. She received her Bachelor of Arts from California State University Long Beach in 2003 dual majoring in Psychology and Sociology. She was employed as a service coordinator in Oakland, CA while completing her Master of Arts in Sociology from California State University East Bay in 2009. Sahar worked as a General Education lecturer and academic advisor at CSUEB before moving to Alexandria, Virginia where she completed her graduate certificate in Women & Gender Studies at George Mason University. Sahar completed her PhD in Public and Applied Sociology. She currently lives in Long Beach, CA with her daughter Mina.