#IAMHUSSEINI: television and mourning during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is a study of mourning among Shi’a Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic through a call-in talk show called #IAMHUSSEINI. By analyzing the discourses of callers and presenters and locating them within a visual context of the television studio, this article shows how the viewership of #IAMHUSSEINI constitutes a televisual majlis (Arabic: ‘assembly’) composed of more than passive asynchronous consumption and resembling what Patrick Eisenlohr refers to as ‘atmospheres’. This article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic drove #IAMHUSSEINI to recalibrate to expectations of a spatially proximate ritual, rather than sustaining a ‘natively digital’ aesthetic, repurposing Richard Rogers’ approach to digital methods. This change brought about a tacit understanding of the televisual majlis among #IAMHUSSEINI’s viewers. This article therefore posits a difference between ‘spatial intercorporeality’, in which bodies are mediated by spatial proximity, and ‘functional intercorporeality’, in which they are mediated by the material preconditions of a shared activity.

**KEYWORDS** COVID-19; intercorporeality; Religion and media; religious broadcasting; Muharram

**Introduction**

Alongside much of the rest of the world in 2020, matamdārān (Urdu: participants in Muharram mourning ceremonies. Sing. matamdār) were abruptly constrained by increasingly restrictive ‘lockdown’ measures legislated by governments the world over, to ward against the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus.1 As with other religious groups, matamdārān had to adapt. Karbala TV is the official television channel of the Imam Hussein Shrine, but Imam Hussein TV is by far the most popular, constituting a network of five channels, respectively in Persian, Arabic, English, Urdu, and Turkish. The most popular of these is the anglophone branch of Imam Hussein TV, or IHTV 3, whose provision of opportunities for mourners to fulfil their devotion is manifold. Every vital part of the pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq is captured on screen, from the annual address of the Grand Ayatollah in Iran and the ceremonial raising of...
the flag of Hussein to the walk of the free and the run of tuwayirīj (Arabic: a road into Karbala whose name implies anxiety and agitation). Plus, for fear that the sense of community brought about by the majlis (A.: ‘assembly’. Pl. majālis. In Muharram: ‘a congregation of mourners’) might be lost in the transformation of Muharram observances into a televised form, the Welcome to Karbala program was established in 2016.2

Welcome to Karbala is a call-in talk show dedicated to shared devotion among Twelver Shi‘as.3 However, the show that was advertised most frequently in 2020 was #IAMHUSSEINI, a newly instituted follow-up. Welcome to Karbala was not discontinued but #IAMHUSSEINI became the channel’s prime-time priority. There are several key differences, which this article will address later, but for one show to displace the other from its important late-night slot, effectively signaled a rebrand, and there was good reason for it: executed successfully, Imam Hussein TV could capitalize on a larger audience than ever before by offering a solution to those left bereft of means to observe rites of mourning in the Hijri month of Muharram.

On the surface, it may appear as though a call-in talk show is unsuited to enabling matamdārān to mourn the martyrs of Karbala in a digitally mediated manner. Indeed, many scholars of digitally mediated religious ritual, especially during the pandemic, emphasize asynchronicity (e.g., Baker et al. 2020), disembodiment (Hegazy 2020), individualization (Rahimi and Amin 2020),4 and privatization (Kowalczyk et al. 2020; Molteni et al. 2020), with notable exceptions. Stephen Modell and Sharon Kardia, for instance, demonstrate ‘three major ways that religious faith has helped to sustain people’s health and welfare in the midst of the broad social challenges posed by this novel coronavirus: … church-based health programs; … a sense of hope provided by religion; … [and] essential social services’ (2020, 2243, 2249-2251).5 Likewise, Muharram is centered on community (Korom and Chelkowski 1994), group belonging (McMurray 2021), intercorporeality (Eisenlohr 2021), and shared identity (Vahed 2002). Yet, by remediating ‘presence and distance’6 as sequential and personalized, as a later comparison between Welcome to Karbala and the live recitations of Haj Mahmoud Karimi illustrates, Imam Hussein TV permits matamdārān to witness the complex emotionality of Muharram play out in slow motion: on the one hand, callers express tremendous individuality; on the other hand, they are symbolically incorporated into a collective body of mourners that is greater and more apparently transnational than any offline iteration of the majlis.7

How, then, can this rift be understood? That is, what is the balance of practitioner and community—of matamdār and majlis—as it is articulated and reconciled by callers to Imam Hussein TV? Moreover, what does the relationship between one and the other—between viewer and viewership—say about the nature of digitally mediated interactions, especially as it pertains to the study of religious ritual? And how did this

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2The majlis is a highly adaptable word, but in this article, it refers specifically to an assembly of matamdārān
3Both Karbala TV and Imam Hussein TV espouse a Twelver view of Shi‘a Islam, but as in many other forms of mourning in Muharram, members of other religious groups access it also.
4Babak Rahimi and Mohsen Amin write that ‘the compression of distance underlines a distinct form of connectivity that heightens a sense of shared spiritual experience in the performance of pilgrimage’ but, in their study, ‘digital technology [is] embedded in [a] ritual practice’ that could occur without it. However, they describe purely digital ‘pilgrimage [e.g.] via virtual reality headsets… [as] essentially an individuated experience’ (2020, 89, 91).
5Wesley Wildman et al. (2020) and Heidi Campbell (2020) represent similar voices of dissent.
6See Lorea et al. in this issue for a thorough explanation of mediation, remediation, presence, and distance.
7Although Patrick Eisenlohr makes mention to ‘Shi‘i attachments to holy lands and places in India and beyond, resulting in transoceanic forms of belonging’ (2021, 388).
change during the COVID-19 pandemic? The analysis of #IAMHUSSEINI in light of these questions reveals five key points:

1) The show reinforces community through digital media often found to be isolating, even before the pandemic.⁸
2) This community undergoes a ritual process that is necessarily intercorporeal (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 168. See next section), despite its reliance on digital mediation.
3) The infrastructure required for digital mediation existed prior to the diagnosis of patient zero.
4) The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was to recalibrate the programming of Imam Hussein TV to expectations of a spatially proximate ritual, rather than sustaining a ‘natively digital’ aesthetic (Rogers 2013, 5. See next section).
5) In that sense, the change Imam Hussein TV underwent during the COVID-19 pandemic was more of a cultural change than a technological one, but it is a change that brings into relief aspects of the televisual majlis that were true before the pandemic; #IAMHUSSEINI simply made it less tacit.

My argument unfolds as follows: First, I formulate a theoretical framework for differently conceptualizing ordinary and televisual majlis, positing spatial intercorporeality and functional intercorporeality as a means to articulate this difference. Second, I outline the semiotic and discourse-based analytical methods that precipitated the findings of this article. Third, I show how a majlis forms in person. Fourth, I explain in what ways the emotionality of a spatially proximate majlis is textured. Fifth, I introduce Welcome to Karbala and educe meaningful differences that amount to a natively digital aesthetic and functionality. Sixth, I introduce #IAMHUSSEINI and show how it sustains the emotional texture of a spatially proximate majlis. Seventh, I ascertain how the viewership’s response to #IAMHUSSEINI changed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, finding that callers came to treat the show as a viable alternative to spatially proximate rituals. Eighth, I ascertain the televisual majlis of Welcome to Karbala in light of the majlis that surfaced through #IAMHUSSEINI during the COVID-19 pandemic. The final section considers how the lessons of the pandemic can bear on understandings of pre-pandemic phenomena.

Approaching the televisual majlis: spatial and functional intercorporeality

In this article, I argue that callers to #IAMHUSSEINI form a televisual majlis that intercorporeally continues to reinforce a transnational community of Shi’tas alongside the spread of the novel coronavirus. Maurice Merleau-Ponty originally theorized ‘intercorporeality’ as the mutual ‘annexation’ of two bodies, a kind of interaction afforded by spatial compresence (1964, 168).⁹ Here, I propose the notion of spatial intercorporeality

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⁸It may be contested that the television is not always ‘digital’. However, much like the vinyl record ‘in the age of digital reproduction’, the television ‘materializes paradoxical cultural values’, at once concretizing a perceived heritage of shared authentic material encounters and an anticipated future of atomized asynchronous participation (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, 22). In this sense, it is not so much a question of digital technology as it is one of ‘digital culture’. See Bennett and Strange 2011, who advocate television’s inclusion in such understandings of the digital.

⁹Compresence is more specific than co-presence. On the phenomenology of grief, Thomas Fuchs writes that one may ‘feel’ the presence of the recently deceased (2018, 43). In that sense, both the living relative and their deceased ancestor
to denote the tactile reciprocities made possible by physically mediated spaces, in contrast to those facilitated by digitally mediated spaces, which I render functionally intercorporeal. Functional intercorporeality does not involve spatially proximate bodies touching. Rather, as this article will show, the call-in talk show is an embodied practice and the bodies of practitioners overlap through the mutual production of ‘atmospheres’ which radiate from callers and presenters and, through multiple modes of mediation, impact affectively and sensorily the bodies of other callers, presenters, and viewers (Eisenlohr 2021; Eisenlohr 2022).10 It is the entanglement of these atmospheres and the emotions and sensoria they entail and engender that constitutes a majlis, following Richard Wolf’s understanding that the Muharram mourning assembly comprises the ‘emotional texture’ that proceeds from and acts upon matamdārān (2000, 84). In theory, then, functional intercorporeality pervades all, including non-digital, media, and they need not be mutually exclusive. The worth of differentiating between them lies in its potential to clarify and elaborate the affective and sensory nature of digitally mediated worship.

A potentially contentious claim is being made here: if groups of people are ‘sitting together’ (a possible translation of majlis, as in McMurray 2021, 3), even when digitally mediated, to commemorate the Battle of Karbala and mourn its martyrs, a majlis forms among the viewership of the show and its producers. Indeed, by narrating #IAMHUSSEINI’s metamorphosis throughout the pandemic, the nature of this majlis becomes increasingly clear: #IAMHUSSEINI attempted to capitalize on a larger audience composed of matamdārān who became newly dependent on digital media technologies to observe the mourning of Muharram. Subsequently, the presenters of the show come to be styled as ritual officiators. Nevertheless, its popularity is due, in part, to the pre-existence of the necessary technological infrastructure. Indeed, because this shift is principally cultural, I suggest that, although the televisual majlis becomes less tacit, the viewership of Welcome to Karbala must also signify a kind of televisual majlis.

The decreased tacticity of the televisual majlis parallels and results from Imam Hussein TV’s move from a ‘natively digital’ aesthetic to expectations of a spatially proximate ritual (Rogers 2013, 19). That is, it becomes less indicative of ‘digital culture’ (Bennett and Strange 2011, 4). Richard Rogers posits ‘an ontological distinction … between the natively digital and the digitized, that is, between the objects, content, devices, and environments that are “born” in the new medium and those that have “migrated” to it’ (2013, 19). His use of the term concerns digital methods, advocating programs designed with, and for the research of, digital media. I apply the term to aesthetics in order to differentiate between visual and functional tropes that are specific to digitally mediated worship and those borrowed from spatial compresence.

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10 Patrick Eisenlohr has intervened in the phenomenology of atmospheres on two fronts: ‘atmospheric citizenship’ (2021) and ‘atmospheric resonance’ (Forthcoming). Both are based on an understanding of ‘the sonic as atmospheric half-things’ (Ibid., 1) that at once ‘proceed from persons, objects, or their constellations in events’ and ‘act on felt-bodies’ (2021, 371, 375). The former asserts ‘claims of belonging’ (Ibid., 379) whereas the latter ‘bridge[s] possible gaps between divine and human actors by stitching together different kinds of human experience in suggested motion’ (Forthcoming).
Methodology

The analysis herein links the discourses of callers and presenters to a visual context of the television studio within which they work and an auditory context of the emotive fluctuations in the timbre of their voice and the quasi-musical tonalities of their prayers and supplications. Hence, this article is in part a digital ethnography insofar as it is ‘representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story’ (Underberg and Zorn 2013, 10). While I provide thickly descriptive vignettes, there is little participation on my part as a researcher. I do not interact overtly with any callers or interview the presenters or producers. Instead, in addition to reflecting on my own sensorial experiences, the analysis leans more towards a discourse analysis inclusive of auditory ‘utterances’, visual semiotics, and various ways in which the auditory discourses of participants and visual aesthetics of the case studies inform and direct one another (Schiffrin 1994 in Johnstone 2017, xi).

Brian Paltridge suggests that discourse analysis ‘considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used’. In other words, discourse analysts deduce what is meant by what is discursively formulated, be it said, written, or otherwise integrated into a ‘discourse’ (2022, 14). As this article will demonstrate, the sonic contours of the discourses formulated by matamdārān phoning-in to #IAMHUSSEINI prove important in the generation of meaning. Specifically, they reveal the emotional texture of atmospheres produced by such a discourse, atmospheres that constitute a majlis. For this reason, I pay attention to, as J. M. Unvala does, the elegist’s ‘fluency of speech, … breath, … noise produced at the back of the throat, … his serious and grave features, his lachrymose voice, his gestures of helplessness and deep mourning, combined with the crescendo tempo in which he reaches the climax of the tragic stuff of his recital’ and to other sounds too, as callers and presenters ‘beat their thighs hysterically, shed bitter tears, and shriek incessantly’ (in Korom 2003, 36–37).

‘It has been criticized’, Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer point out, ‘that each systemization of different approaches [to discourse analysis] necessarily neglects the interconnectedness of particular approaches’ (2016, 19). For this reason, I do not delimit my methodology according to the kind of discourse analysis undertaken in collecting and interpreting data for this article, but it may be said that there are elements of a ‘sociocognitive’ approach: i.e., what are the ‘discursive and semiotic structures’ or ‘implied and implicated meanings’ of the interactions mediated by the talk shows? For example, what is being ‘positively’ and ‘negatively’ represented? How are pronouns used to demarcate ‘ingroups and outgroups’ such as the majlis? Who and what are callers identifying with and who and what are they distancing themselves from? (Van Dijk 2014, 65, 73). This allows me to ascertain, on the one hand, how callers relate to each other (if at all) and, on the other hand, how they respond to specific production choices (e.g., changes in dress, studio layout, etc.).

The data in question is composed of what is said or recited and the manner in which these are articulated by callers and presenters in one episode of Welcome to Karbala (2017) and two episodes of #IAMHUSSEINI (2020, 2021). However, my understanding of these episodes is rooted in having watched approximately sixty-five hours of live programming between 2017 and 2022. The episodes given close readings in this article were chosen according to what I ascertained from my notes to be the most effective
microcosms of the five broad trends summarized in the introduction. I believe that changes in aesthetic and functionality between these four episodes evidence those statements. Two episodes are available on YouTube and I have included them as audiovisual samples (AV3-4) for readers to refer to. I also cite two recordings paradigmatic of spatially proximate majāls as audiovisual samples (AV1-2), so that readers may verify any assertions. The 2021 episode is yet to be published on YouTube at the time of writing.11

I relate the findings of the discourse analysis to the visual signifiers inhered in the layout of the broadcasts, as does Martin Stokes in a chapter on ‘Islamic popular music aesthetics in Turkey’. In it, he draws on the commentary written beneath videos of the legendary Turkish singer, Mehmet Emin Ay, uploaded to YouTube and Facebook to show how ‘listening drove this community, [and] pushed it into self-awareness and action’. Stokes himself builds on Charles Hirschkind’s ethnography on cassette sermons. In Hirschkind’s case, such action concerns ethics; specifically, the ‘political project’ of the da’wa movement. In Stokes’, it concerns aesthetics, ‘understood here as the quest for beauty’ (2006 in Stokes 2016, 41, 43).12 In mine, it concerns the observation of a religious tenet: what Regula Qureshi refers to as ‘the imām principle’ (1981, 43).

The mourning of Muharram in spatial proximity

The first ten days in the Islamic month of Muharram are a period of mourning for the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala (61 AH/680 CE), an event in which many of the ahl al-bayt (Arabic: ‘family of the house’ of the prophet), were killed or kidnapped. Shi’a Muslims believe that the leader of Islam should be a direct descendent of the prophet, since he was divinely ordained by God and, they argue, designated no heir. Annual rites of mourning are a way for Shi’as to observe this tenet without knowing the identity of their rightful leader. Their leader at the Battle of Karbala was Imam Hussein ibn Ali, a grandson of the prophet.

Mourning can take many forms. The most common of these is ma’ātim (A.: ‘funeral’. Pl. ‘ma’ātīm), in which matamdārān emulate the grief of Hussein’s sister, Zainab, which she expressed by beating her chest (a pre-Islamic custom. See Osman 2015). In ma’ātim, matamdārān may empathize with the physical pain Hussein felt upon his death and the emotional trauma Zainab underwent as a result. Many scholars have represented ma’ātam as a process of increasing ‘intensity’ (e.g., Ruffle 2015, 193). This intensity is fueled in part by chanting, which directs the chest-beating, and by the gesticulations of other matamdārān, although they intensify each other. In that sense, it is an intercorporeal experience in that bodies respond to and direct one another.

Patrick Eisenlohr believes that this intercorporeality produces ‘atmospheres’ that both ‘proceed from persons, objects, or their constellations in events’ and ‘act on felt-bodies’. These atmospheres ‘fill spaces’ in a ‘marking of particular urban locales as specifically Shi’a’, thereby ‘performing claims to belong’ (2021, 371–372, 375, 379). These claims

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11All audiovisual samples are available as supplementary materials in this issue.

12I understand aesthetics differently. Without meaning to overlook ‘the problems of a semiotically oriented aesthetic theory’, I build on the opposition Suanne Langer draws between ‘discursive’ and ‘presentational’ forms. The latter denotes what Ludwig Wittgenstein believes ‘we cannot speak about’ but Langer argues ‘is a bearer of articulate content and meaning’, such as images and sounds; that which is not explicitly discursive (Innis 1985, ix, 87).
may be internal or external to Shi’a Islam. Epsita Halder has shown how female *matamdārān* create places for women in the process of establishing spaces to perform *ma’tam* (2020). Meanwhile, Peter McMurray has shown how commemorative events articulate ‘new possibilities for ... sensory reconfigurations of the city according to ... who “belongs” and is entitled to access urban space’ in Berlin, Germany (2021, 2). The *majlis*, then, is engaged as much in intercorporeal communication as intracorporeal affect, in profane and sacred place-making, and religious and political expression. As Halder says, they are all ‘integral to each other’ (2020, 59). When these aspects coincide in the commemoration of the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala, as they do on Imam Hussein TV, they form a *majlis*. Specifically, they produce the ‘emotional texture’ of a Muharram mourning *majlis* (Wolf 2000, 81).

**Tradition, gender, and emotional texture**

In order to formulate the argument that the emotionality of #IAMHUSSIEINI is reoriented to the expectations of a spatially proximate ritual in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the emotional texture of spatially proximate rituals must first be established. How the rites of Muharram are gendered is crucial to understanding this emotionality. There is considerable scholarship on female lamentations and the experiences of women mourning Hussein (e.g., Qureshi 1981; Hegland 1998; Aghaie 2004; Halder 2020). On Imam Hussein TV, there is a talk show dedicated to the female Shi‘i experience presented by women, entitled *Her Thoughts*. As the presenters in *Welcome to Karbala* and #IAMHUSSIEINI are men, the aesthetic and functionality of the show is imbued with the characteristics of male mourning traditions. However, in the same way that female worshippers may attend the elegies of male vocalists, female callers attend televisual lamentations. Therefore, this study endeavors to bring female voices to the fore, as issues of gender play intricately into the emotional texture of Muharram, though this is not a focus of the analyses.

In male lamentations, the swift sweeping gestures of men are endowed with the martial symbolism of the soldiers needed to protect Hussein. One of David Pinault’s informants says it demonstrates ‘we would have stood with him and shed our blood and died with him’ (1992, 105). In the recitation of poetry set against performatively ‘violent’ chest-beating, the bodies of imagined warriors fall into and rub against one another, expressing, directing, and amplifying the incensed, mournful passions of the male community (Wolf 2013, 347). The intensity of their gestures is intentionally ‘exhausting and demanding’, as mourners undertake the idealized role of men at the Battle of Karbala (Pinault 1992, 104). Their responses to the recitation may be obfuscated by crying, giving way to increasingly strained shouts, cries, and chants, evidencing the sincerity of their grief.

**Audiovisual sample 1: Abbas Ali. 2017. Badshah Hussain Farsi Noha Full By Haj Mahmoud Karimi. YouTube video (4:07). February 26, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIfXB5QCV4g.**

Abbas Ali’s video of Haj Mahmoud Karimi (AV1) is paradigmatic of such chanting. In it, Karimi waves towards the *majlis*, at which point *matamdārān* are expected to beat their chests, thereby elucidating the soundscape’s prescriptive nature, amplified both literally and metaphorically by the elegist’s microphone through which this nature is
actualized. It also brings into sharp relief the intrinsically mediatory role of the elegist as he at once directs and is directed by his respondents. The spirit of an energetic cadre of male revolutionaries gathered in the public square unfolds in the pulsating vocables which punctuate the rhythm of their resistance. Uniformed in drab black mourning attire, it is unwise to credit the attendant’s escalating religious and political passions to the kind of accumulative social ‘electricity’ that Emile Durkheim and countless others observe elsewhere (1915, 215). The matamdâr’s expression is instead precise, prescribed, and controlled, incorporated into a cohesive unit, each mourner’s chant, dress, and motion coherent with the next. The rise of their cantillation does not transport participants to any transcendent spiritual state. Instead, the material particulars of their realities, articulated lyrically and musically, remind each of them of a common history of suppressed demonstrations of Shi’i identity and faith, emblazoned in the flag of Hussein under which they all grieve.

Recurring lyrical themes in the poetry chanted alongside ma’âtim include ‘oppression’ and ‘overcoming’ (Tabar 2002, 296–297). Hence, the practice demonstrates ‘to the world, and especially to other Muslims, the crucial importance of the tragedy of Karbala’, as it resonates with many Shi’as today and their social and political status (Howarth 2005, 169). Musically, tonality is a popular tool for Shi’as to dissociate themselves from other religious groups. While râga, combinations of notes and the conventions for using them, are often portrayed as ‘Hindustani’ phenomena (e.g., Ruckert and Richard Widdess 2000, 64), they are utilized throughout South and Central Asia during the Mourning of Muharram (Fischer 1992). Meanwhile, a narrative of Zainab founding the ma’tam tradition pervades the poems recited by majlis chanters (Zaidi 2007, 162–163). For a historically Arabophone tradition to occur via Hindustani musical means linguistically and geographically analogizes the performative separation of the Shi’a from the Sunni (and herein lies the semiotic significance of such symbols as the flag of Hussein).13 Similarly, audiovisual samples 1 and 2 are likely to be based on dastgâh (Persian: ‘system’, specifically of musical modes).14

Audiovisual sample 2. Kai Khor. 2019. Noha Song about Enemies of Iran (English Subtitles). YouTube video (3:21). July 25, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGBZold3-qI.

In a contrasting example, the anonymous publisher describes the chant as ‘an Iranian song … about their readiness for a war against [the] USA, Saudi and Israel’. In the video, the elegist recites the phrase ‘terror, corruption, and hypocrisy are united against us’ and compares Imam Hussein and Ruhollah Khomeini. Meanwhile, numerous respondents echo the poetry and rhythmically propel their hands in the direction of the elegist who chants beneath the national emblem of Iran and shouts ‘Haydar’, a nickname of Imam Ali. The music is more static than AV1, implying a kind of certainty, as if there is no need to go anywhere musically. Every phrase entails a small range in pitch, rhythm,

Simonetta Casci has shown how South Asian Shi’as perform this distinction architecturally (see 2002). Both examples amount to a ‘translocal’ mode of dissociation; Shi’as globally mobilize aesthetic tropes associated more with local traditions than with generally Islamic rituals (e.g. Wolf 2014, 114; Eisenlohr 2015, 695).

Audiovisual samples 1 and 2 were recorded in Iran and very little work has been done on the tonality of the poetic recitations that accompany Iranian ma’âtim. S. M. Reza Ale Mohammed (1995) and Mohammadreza Sharayeli and Padideh Adelvand (2017) have observed dastgâh in ta’zieh (Persian, from the Arabic for ‘condolence’, denoting passion plays depicting the Battle of Karbala, which are widely performed in Iran during Muharram).
and volume, but it remains loud and quick-paced. For these reasons, it sounds as much like a call to arms as a religious observance (AV2).

The unifying element of both instances is an entanglement of religious, political, personal, collective, sacred, and secular. Mariam Zahab similarly recalls someone in Pakistan, explaining that ‘living Ashura is standing against oppression’ (2008, 109). In this way, matamdārān perform a politically charged religious emotionality informed by a personal experience of being Shi’a that allows them to empathize with the martyrdom of Hussein, in turn evidencing to a collective their commitment to God. Yet even this definition reifies dichotomic categories—religious and political, personal and collective—that Muharram observances elude. This is why Wolf ascribes to the slipperiness and overlap of such categories the phrase ‘emotional texture’ (2000, 81). My argument depends on ascertaining the emotional texture of Welcome to Karbala and #IAMHUSSEINI, whereby the former is presented as distinctly digital, and the latter as ‘real’ or ‘physical’ despite being digitally mediated.

**Welcome to Karbala, Muharram on TV**

*Audiovisual sample 3. Imam Hussein TV 3. 2017. Welcome to Karbala – with Husain al-Sukhni 3. YouTube video (46:46). September 14, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = rVjczE42z4A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = rVjczE42z4A).*

‘The best opportunity to visit and send your salutations upon the Master of Martyrs, Imam Hussein and the moon of Beni Hashim, Abal-Fadhil Al-Abbas, live at the comfort of you[r] home’. Thus reads the description beneath an episode of Welcome to Karbala, uploaded onto YouTube in 2017, the relationship between viewers and presenters having been clearly laid out: while the former are distant and stationary, the latter are active, intermediary agents or go-betweens that ensure viewers’ supplications and salaams reach the martyrs regardless of the effort and energy that is often considered crucial to sufficiently empathizing with the pain of Hussein and the grief of his survivors. Imam Hussein TV immediately presents itself as limited since comfort and distance are antithetical to the emotional texture of Muharram. Indeed, through exertion, matamdārān aspire to be emotionally, physically, or spiritually closer to the martyrs, how they felt at the point of passing away, where they died, and what they stood for.

The title sequence—a montage of footage in and around the Imam Hussein Shrine—gives way to the presenter, Husain al-Sukhni, sat before a transparent glass wall facilitating sight of bayn al-haramayn (the space upon which the Battle of Karbala is thought to have transpired). Reflections in the window reveal the bluish hue of the Imam Hussein Shrine’s azure tilework, exaggerated by artificial lighting. Color plays a prominent role in Muharram rituals, as the lights that envelope the streets of Karbala turn red at the start of the month but remain green for most of the year, symbolically overlaying the color of heaven with the color of the blood spilt by Hussein and his companions. Welcome to Karbala thereby presents itself as apart from this ceremonially significant dichotomy (Figure 1).

‘A reminder of how the show works: this is a show where you can message us on Facebook, this is a show where you can call in free-of-charge on WhatsApp… You can call and perform a live ziyārat (A.: ’pilgrimage’, denoting a kind of supplication). [The names of] anyone that does call in [and] any comments that are left on the feed will be written
down inshallah and put inside the shrine of Abi Abdullah al-Hussein’, so al-Sukhni introduces the episode (AV3, 02:07-02:36). The expectations of the show are clearly laid out: al-Sukhni will read out messages to Hussein near his shrine, callers can pray beside footage of it, and all respondents will be figuratively presented to him. It is, in a sense, a very personal endeavor: ‘all we want in this world, as lovers of the ahl al-bayt,’ [is] just to stand in front of the dome and say al-salāmu al-aykum (A.: ‘peace be upon you’) Aba Abdillah al-Hussein’ (AV3, 05:26-05:36) and if that is not possible through pilgrimage or ritual translocation (see Wolf n.d.), Welcome to Karbala offers spectators a televisual means to do so. Thus, before anyone was found to be infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus and before pilgrimages became impossible en masse, a digital medium with an online presence existed through which mourners could access various rites of faith. For example, the channel also broadcasts the adhān (call to prayer) five times per day. Husain al-Sukhni’s tone of voice is serious but conversational, imploring nothing of callers except to freely exploit the available airtime. Likewise, al-Sukhni’s suit indicates a formality distinct from the grave reverence implied by the traditional black mourning attire worn by Karimi and his respondents.

The presenters hear the wants and needs of each other separately, one asking Hussein to ‘please heal my knee’, a private concern of a sort that may be lingering in the minds of Karimi’s attendants but are rarely articulated so audibly and explicitly as to be heard in those terms (AV3). Not all the show’s interlocutors call in either; some send messages to be read out by the show’s presenter. Each of them is sensorily detached; voices without mouths, cries without tears, and ma‘ātim without hands and chests. Meanwhile, the enduring stillness of Husain al-Sukhni’s stern and somber pose ensures this detachment, partaking in no attempt to convey the emotional texture of supplications on callers’ behalf. Without the indication that their contributions originate in the human body, Welcome to Karbala maintains no illusion of ‘liveness’, of ‘mystifications’ like the ‘magic’ or ‘energy’ of a live event ‘and the “community” that performance is often said to create among performers and spectators’ (Auslander 1999, 3).
Indeed, one may conceive of the formation of a majlis as a ‘community process’. That is, the meanings of Muharram materialize in embodied creative expressions, which can only happen ‘when artisans, performers, and audience members come together’ to play witness to it (Korom and Chelkowski 1994, 150). Nevertheless, al-Sukhni’s monologic, occasionally even homiletic style of presenting keeps spectators at an imagined distance. Or, rather, it reifies the distance often assumed of digitally mediated interlocutors by performing a disjunct between the emotions of callers and those of the presenter, between Zehra Rizvi who asks al-Sukhni to ‘please pray for my dad’s health’ and his succinct reply, having read her message on his phone, that ‘yes, sister, we will do’ (AV3). It is an interaction that flips the proceduralism of ma’tam on its head, by allowing, even expecting, the presenter to respond to the supplicant.

The interaction between al-Sukhni and Rizvi evokes the ‘digital subject’, a designation that rose to prominence in the sociology of the internet to convey the specificity of the online expression of a human being relative to their expression corporeally. Since the pre-digital subject is already the result of an estrangement of the body from the mind, in that what the body does is thought merely to express the mind, Olga Goriunova prefers instead the notion of a ‘data subject’. This suggests that people on the internet (or, in this case, the television) simply index the body; they are somewhere ‘between captured, unique, and persistent biological characteristics and premeditated forms of symbolic expression’. Goriunova seems to imply that corporeal expression is a complete process whereas digital expression is incomplete; it does not quite make it to the body, or some aspect of bodily expression required to power the production of a digital/data subject is lost herein. In the above-given encounter, Rizvi is characterized as little more than a ‘data subject’, indicated only by the hardware through which her pleas may be read by the presenter, upon which is the data she left for him: name, location, plea, etc. (2019, 126). That Rizvi’s request is not granted in the same moment that it is recited only inflates a sense of distance, felt now temporally as well as spatially. By chronologizing the mechanics of their conversation—i.e., you have said this, now I will respond thus—al-Sukhni eliminates all sense of the present, the absence of which fortifies a rift between the presenter and his callers and thereby highlights the seeming sequentiality of digitally mediated sociality, which some scholars deem ‘inauthentic’ (e.g., Staehler 2014, 228). Whether or not this is the experience of the show’s interlocutors, Welcome to Karbala displays an aesthetic that keeps callers at a perceived ‘distance’ (Goriunova 2019, 128).16

#IAMHUSSEINI: A show for the covid-19 pandemic.

Audiovisual sample 4. Imam Hussein TV 3. 2020. LIVE NOW from Karbala #IAMHUSSEINI with Minhal Al-Khafaji. YouTube video (61:26). August 21, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZc6IghKS7w.

15On the Bauls of Bengal, Carola Lorea has already weighed in on the question of digital authenticity, defending Majharul Islam’s paradigm, ‘which is actually based on “the test of time and the acceptance by the people,” instead of being centered around the medium of transmission’ (2014, 71).

16Goriunova describes the nature of this distance at great length, detailing in what ways it is ‘luminous’, ‘thick’, ‘elastic’, ‘temporal’, ‘vast’, and ‘twisted’ (2019, 129).
Fast forward to 2020 and in #IAMHUSSEINI, much like in Welcome to Karbala, the intense feelings of its interlocutors, conveyed through prolonged elegies obfuscated by vocalizations of crying and tales of oppression, are transmitted to an international audience, taking the shape of a call-in talk show. Throughout the show, callers grieve for the martyrs by chanting, praying, reciting poetry, and weeping. Occasionally, the host will ask the caller a question and they will discuss any number of topics, from the significance of the day to a personal tragedy that might allow them to empathize with the pain and sorrow of Hussein and his companions. Staged before the red lights of bayn al-ḥaramayn and the flag of Hussein, its set evokes the blood shed in Karbala before a glass panorama revealing Hussein’s tomb, relentless visual reminders of the lugubrious tone that the show determinedly sustains (Figure 2). Evidently, the channel had decided to try to become more faithful to orthodox forms of worship. Whether this was to capitalize on the availability of a vast new audience or simply to update and rebrand, its effect was to attract a larger viewership than ever before. At the time of writing, the episode of Welcome to Karbala achieved just 149 views on YouTube. Some husaynīāt (A.: Shi’i ritual halls. Sing. husaynīah) host more people than that, for the televised majlis is not a typical mode of worship. As the presenter noted, worshippers must visit the tomb of Hussein and ‘inshallah you are all granted this opportunity in your lifetime’, suggesting that the opportunity to stand before live footage does not quite compare (AV3, 05:51-05:57). As Wolf has shown, processing through space anywhere can translocate matamdārān to an imagined Karbala, hinting at the priority placed on spatial over functional intercorporeality (see n.d.).

Nevertheless, one can see that an effect of the pandemic was to begin reorienting the fashions of a televisual devotional practice away from something distinctly digital; that ‘subversive’ quality that ‘contests established and traditional authorities’ on, for example, established colorimetric semiotics or procedural norms (Chawki 2010, 170).

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17In contrast with more recent episodes of #IAMHUSSEINI, which achieve thousands. The television viewership is much bigger, but these numbers likely reflect differing levels of popularity.
In other words, the pandemic has prompted broadcasters to realign the digital format more closely with in-person rituals insofar as it sustains the expectations of a spatially proximate ritual on a digital platform. This trend was not limited to aesthetics: in response to one caller’s difficulty reciting, the presenter asks the rest of his viewership:

‘Did you see the pain in her voice? Did you hear that? And she didn’t even see Imam al-Hussein in her life. She didn’t witness the calamities of Karbala. She didn’t see an inch of what Karbala was, yet she choked while crying. This man who inspires millions, this man who stood for what his father stood for, this man who on the tenth of Muharram took a stance anyone else would have given up, but Hussein remained firm. Hussein stood firm. He buried Ali al-Akbar, buried Qasim, buried Habib, Zuheir… You are all parents out there. I know we have parents watching. Look around you. Look at your children. Imagine burying them. The man buried in that grave went through that and more and someone wants to tell me the killers of Hussein can attain paradise, that the killers of Hussein can have the shafā’ā (A.: ‘intercession’) [of the] rasūl (A.: ‘messenger’) [of] Allah, that the killers of Hussein can have the mercy of Allah subḥānallahu wā-ta‘ālā (A.: ‘glory and exaltations be upon him’) bestowed upon them?’ (AV4, 26:47-28:55).

This explanation brings into relief a mourners’ primary motivation for engaging with a televised mode of worship: to empathize with the suffering of Hussein and thereby satisfy God, the same rationale for attending a spatially proximate ritual. The response of the presenter demonstrates a move towards a more interpersonal approach to the show’s viewership. Its immediacy and its language locate both himself and the caller within the present moment: ‘did you see the pain in her voice? Did you hear that?’. The caller is alluded to as a spatially as well as temporally present discussant; at no point in the recollection of the anonymous caller’s message does the presenter, Minhal al-Khafaji, look away from the camera. The caller is stylized not as the data on his phone but as another human with whom he has conversed. By focusing his gaze on the camera, al-Khatib refers both to ‘you’, the singular viewer, as well as ‘you’, the plural totality of viewers. All viewers are thereby placed in the proverbial shoes of the discussant, manufacturing a mutual sense of comradery. Such comradery crystallizes as community on the flag of Hussein, as each caller’s name is written down upon it before being draped over the Imam’s tomb. This is a gesture drenched in symbolism: the flag marks Shi‘as’ performative separation from Islam as a whole, while processes of embodying empathy with the martyrs and ritually translocating to the site of their massacre during Muharram both exemplify various kinds of aspirational closeness to Shi‘i Imams, who are perceived to be the best and bravest models of Shi‘a Muslim (see Ghaffari 2018). Acts of writing callers’ names on the flag and bringing that flag to the tomb of Hussein mediates between bayn al-hāramayn and the digitally mediated viewership.

Even though the emotional texture of Muharram unfolds sequentially and televisually, the interactions of presenters and callers resemble the kind of community process that constitutes a majlis by inscribing their affective bodily responses in a translocative representation of their togetherness; it is functionally intercorporeal if not spatially so, a televisual majlis if not a spatially proximate one. Although this may be true of Welcome to Karbala in many ways, the producers of #IAMHUSSEINI have simply made it obvious by modulating from a natively digital to a seemingly less digital aesthetic.
Changing caller habits and the emergence of a televisual majlis

For many spectators of Imam Hussein TV, the COVID-19 pandemic was a curious moment of exposure to other matamdārān’s conceptions of the memorialization of Hussein and his companions. It was a collective catharsis unlike few other expressions of Shi‘i religious lamentation as producers enabled congregants to visualize the televsual majlis and feel united by their mutual experience of separation, acknowledging a widespread thirst for togetherness in a period of drastically prohibited spatial compresence. One of those congregants was Mohammad Saleh, the inaugural caller of the show:

PRESENTER: ‘Do we have a caller on the line? Brother Mohammad Saleh, salām al-aykum. […] Brother, the dome of Imam al-Hussein a.s. is right here. Send in your dū‘ās, Say your salāms. Cry your heart out to Abi Abdullah al-Hussein’.

Mohammad prays in Arabic and weeps.

PRESENTER: ‘Thank you very much, brother. He is saying that by the grace of Imam al-Mehdi, [the imam of our time], we are able to come here and commemorate and renew our allegiance’.

For Mohammad, #IAMHUSSEINI meant performing a solo recitation of the kind that might be heard at a majlis were he able to leave the house and preaching. As the presenter correctly translated, Mohammad links his individual emotionality to the collective experience of an indeterminate ‘we’. Here, Mohammad reminds viewers of their purpose in worshipping, of drawing attention to and solidifying their ‘allegiance’. To whom this allegiance applies is purposefully left open, extending viewers’ loyalties to a multitude of spirits and ideals invoked by the presenter: ‘the millions of you watching, we all share one common denominator, and that is labayk yā Hussein’ (A.: ‘I am with you, Hussein’). In 2020, the ways in which callers form a televsual majlis was implicit in their subtle turns of phrase. Throughout the year between 2020 and 2021 episodes, the show had grown into a confident declaration of Shi‘i unity, epitomized in the tacit dolefulness of al-Khafaji’s black kurta. Later that day:

CALLER: ‘Whenever I sleep. Whenever I wake up. I feel that I am far. But my soul is there … It is so sad you know. I am sitting beside the TV. I am watching’.

Whether Mohammad was referring to the audience, Shi‘as, or Muslims generally, the capacity for those watching to empathize with his intentions to forge allegiances between the presenter, his participants, his audience, and Hussein consciously conjoined each of them into a singular collective. The later caller used his dial-in time as a period of reflection. The personal nature of the comments differed from Mohammad’s. Theirs was about the ‘I’ and a sense of physical distance from a place of worship that intensified their sorrow, but their soul, they said, was in Karbala, imprecisely related to their consumption of the program. This gesture ties the caller to the zuwār (A.: ‘visitors’, pilgrims visiting in person) of Hussein, but the presenter maintains a distinction between the visitors and the callers, evidencing ongoing attempts to verify in what ways the callers constitute a televsual majlis.

Such attempts transformed callers’ conception of the show, as progressively more matamdārān embraced the suitability of the televsual medium for expressing sincere feelings of tremendous grief. One can hear in Aliza Jafari’s voice, for instance, when
she rings to complain that ‘I cannot come to Karbala’ the disjunction in her croak as it trembles under the contractions of her throat, which prepares to cry. When she implores other viewers to ‘please pray for me’, one can sense the desperation and disappointment entailed in her seclusion, as her breath rasps and falters with the sudden staccato of the final syllable of her sentence. When she exclaims that ‘we are so far from Imam Hussein’, one can attest to the slow vibrato of her tone, which reaches its crescendo in her elicitation of the martyr whom she frantically cries out for. Far from the sequenciality of #IAMHUSSEINI separating callers into brief meaningless interjections, there is such depth to the unique interjections of each caller that their symbolic collectivity on the flag of Hussein educes meaningful idiosyncrasies for each member of the televisual majlis.

The presenter does not acknowledge these subjectivities. Instead, he renders his audience ‘us’, by no means an entirely explicit majlis but not a particularly tacit one either. Commentary regarding televisual worship undertook multiple forms. For the anonymous caller, it was a barrier to that usual way of worshipping, which they were ‘far’ from. For Mohammad, little had changed. For the presenter, it was perseverance in the face of obstruction, invoking the subjugation narratives that become commonplace during Muharram and applying them to COVID-19:

‘You can perform your own ziyārat … Call in via WhatsApp … The pandemic has tried to prevent us … but I see the love for Hussein. … COVID-19 has tried to prevent the zuwār of Imam Hussein, but … [it] took the utmost precautions, stood there with their face masks … [and their] face shields … [and] brought servants of Imam Hussein out with sanitization … cleansing the air …’

Hence, the show’s interlocutors were referencing each other for the first time—you heard the cries, you heard the heartburn, you heard every single thing that you could possibly hear … [in] your contribution towards this channel’—which presenters ensured by setting forth their own feelings, thus incorporating themselves into the televisual majlis and evolving from television presenters, to ritual facilitators, to ritual officiators, culminating in this sentiment from a live broadcast in 2021: ‘we want everyone to feel like they are karbala’? (A.: ‘of Karbala’) (Imam Hussein TV 3, 2021).

The presenters of #IAMHUSSEINI frequently remark on the community process their show sustains: in a recent episode, they stated that ‘whatever tears are shed will come straight to your home’ and praised Fatima from Oman for ‘doing ma’tam in the home’ due to social distancing regulations. ‘When you do ma’tam at home’, the producers said before speaking over one another and resolving their discordance with agreeing murmurs (Imam Hussein TV 3 2021), approving of Fatima’s ‘techno-spirituality’ (see Othman in this issue). This does not mean that community is an inevitable byproduct of participating in a digital form of mourning in Muharram. In truth, the presenters of Welcome to Karbala stressed no such community. As the examples in this article show, callers to that show are framed as individual mourners rather than collective congregants, the latter being a sense of self that became increasingly entrenched throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a collective televisual identity was bolstered, in what ways the community expressed its sense of self diversified. For example, Vernon Schubel has shown how Muharram rituals are ‘important opportunities for families to provide clear demonstrations to their children of what their community stands for’ (1991, 125). Likewise,
Imam Hussein TV 3 captured the imagination of children whose interjections were as disparate as the adult viewership. One young girl from Germany, named Ilaha, wished to pray in her head but live on air, completely silent except for long breaths that occasionally gave way to the mumbled overflow of her internal thoughts. This moment is the closest it felt to being in a husaynīyah. It was as if the viewer was praying next to her, conjuring a sense of uniformity. In contrast, a regular caller of the show, a girl named Mehdia, made enthusiastic conversation about the significance of the specific day, the conversion and subsequent martyrdom of al-Hurr in this instance, to the visible delight of the presenters. Through wide smiles, they exclaimed ‘mashallah’, validating and fueling her passion for the commemoration of Hussein, as well as for the show, alongside Anisa from London, who recited a verse from the holy Qur’an. Her ‘beautiful recitation’, the presenters claimed, ‘is better than most of the people here’ (2021).

**Welcome to Karbala reconsidered**

At a spatially proximate majlis, one can smell the sweat stimulated by the kinetic effort involved in each other’s maʿātim. One can feel the thud of their fellow congregants’ hands beating into their chests, their feet hammering the floor and their shoulders brushing up against one another. One can hear the cries and weeps of reciters and respondents landing upon their ears in person rather than in stereo. One can see their fellow mourners before their eyes rather than before a screen. Yet, the screen bears a fascinating ontology: Ingrid Richardson belongs to a growing community of phenomenologists who have ruminated on ‘the body-screen relation’ and ‘the “distancings” or alterations to somatic involvement that may inhere in such practices’ (2011, 422–423). Richardson’s article is in conversation with Adriana de Souza e Silva and Eric Gordon’s work on ‘net-local public spaces’. Such work intends to reconcile ‘the immediately proximate and the mediately distant within a carefully crafted set of social rituals that ultimately serves to extend the purview of local space’. The net-local public space thus expands a definition of the ‘local’ to encompass a manifold of spacetimes and offers a perspective of the screen that mitigates distance rather than creating it (2010, 4). Consider, for example, the role of translocation in Muharram commemorations. Wolf has shown how matamdārān may process to Karbala virtually by processing elsewhere physically (n.d.). In fact, a toolkit of poetic tropes exists to ‘cultivate … a sense of pan-Shiʿi solidarity’ (Marei and Shanneik 2021, 69). Thus, before digital media, rites of Muharram were already ‘translocal’ (e.g., Wolf 2014, 114; Eisenlohr 2015, 695). On the television, #IAMHUSSEINI evidences the adaptability of functional intercorporeality. Digitally mediated worship is just one iteration of it: through the television speaker, viewers hear maʿātim; through the screen, the tears of presenters prompt the crying of callers. It follows that Welcome to Karbala shares such intercorporeality even if the aesthetic of #IAMHUSSEINI is manufactured so as to signal it more clearly.

The editors of Sociology of Religion, when considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, hypothesized that the ‘possible implications of these changes’ are manifold, but extend to privatization, asynchronicity, technological disparity, community action, and conflict with governments (Baker et al. 2020, 359, 363). The first three of these might fit in the bracket of ‘individuated experience’ (as Babak Rahimi and Mohsen Amin observe in their study of digitized pilgrimages to Karbala. 2020, 101): practitioners
experience the space, time, and technology of digitally mediated events distinctly, hence they ‘focus on what is in one’s heart’ (Killian 2007, 305). Necessarily, important issues of age, class, and gender (inter alia) do impact the accessibility and demographic composition of the televisual majlis, especially as it intersects with issues of digital literacy and the costs of purchasing and owning a television, but similar disparities have been observed in spatially proximate majālis (esp. Halder 2020). Nor are more tangible barriers, such as television screens, an innovation of pandemic times. In spatially proximate rituals, male and female matamdārān usually mourn separately. When a man is reciting, women commonly participate at a tangible distance, such as on a mezzanine, or an intangible distance, as behind male respondents. When a female elegist is reciting, men who are not related to her usually participate at a tangible distance, behind a screen designed to protect the modesty of both. Hence, to what extent a digitally mediated mourner may feel distanced by a screen, electronic or otherwise, largely depends on the genders of the participants. In some configurations, the intermediation of a screen may feel entirely appropriate. In others, it may feel obtrusive.

When Baker et al. implement the term ‘aysnchronicity’, they denote a state in which the same mode of worship might be accessed by different people in different places at different times and experience that time differently. I experienced this disconnect first-hand. The dialed-in participant of #IAMHUSSEINI is in any number of dissimilar times and spaces. Many mourners call from India and Pakistan, others from across Europe and the Americas. At the time I was watching the 2021 episode this article takes as its case study, I was upright in a dining room chair, beginning to ache from an awkward posture. A chill from the ceiling fan caused the hairs on my arm to stand upright, prompting me to shiver. Occasionally, I would notice its gentle hum encroach upon the impassioned sermons of the presenters, which would refract around the back of the laptop where its speakers are located, distorting the sound. The glare of a wall lamp made one corner of the display of my small laptop appear less clear and I would be intermittently distracted by the sweet aroma of herbal tea and the murmurs and passing tiptoes of the people with whom I share my home. The reddish hue of the IHTV3 studio was dotted with the dust my screen had collected, drawing attention to my need to clean it.

This is a different sensorium to that of the matamdār in a husaynīah but is no less valuable for devotees who use digital media to worship during Muharram, manifest in the emotive intensity of their participation. Moreover, these sensoria converge through complex forms of functional intercorporeality, which arise out of interpersonal procedures of televisual bereavement, no matter the ‘distance’ from which Welcome to Karbala’s presenters may appear to sit (Goriunova 2019, 128). Internet-use is an embodied practice but the idiosyncratic space from which it is accessed informs the sensorium inasmuch as it is informed by the embodied internet usages of one’s digitally mediated interlocutors. Through spatial intercorporeality, Eisenlohr observes the production of an atmosphere. Through functional intercorporeality, then, I observe numerous inter-penetrating atmospheres that constitute no less of a majlis, regardless of the measure to which Imam Hussein TV chooses to signify that fact. Welcome to Karbala may bear a natively digital aesthetic, but its viewership, by ritually grieving via television, generate the emotional texture of a majlis.
Conclusions

Notions of ‘get[ting] together’ (Thaiss 1999), of building ‘a collective spirit’ (Vahed 2002, 92), and of imparting ‘collective consciousness’ (Parizi et al. 2019, 49), which pervade Muharram scholarship, appear dismembered by the individualization of practitioners, but this is one small part of a much bigger picture. While there is no direct mention of a majlis, one forms tacitly in the functionality of #IAMHUSSEINI, the presenter setting forth a collective body of mourners through his seamless oratorical journey between each guest. His majlis has a ‘face’—that is, a sign of some larger body of interlocutors—signified visually by a banner overlaying footage of the presenter in his studio, advising viewers to ‘free call’ in and the flag of Hussein upon which callers’ names are inscribed (figure 2). For many of those phoning into IHTV3, #IAMHUSSEINI is the closest they can get to the martyrs’ tombs without pilgrimage or ritual translocation. As the majlis is a threshold between living and dead participants, denoting those evoking and those being evoked, it follows that it is possible for digitally mediated matamdārin to be as ‘present’ in Muharram observances as the deceased martyrs. It has been the goal of this article to show how #IAMHUSSEINI is demonstrative of such presence. This presence acts on and proceeds from felt bodies in ways reminiscent of Eisenlohr’s work on atmospheres. In short, though matamdārin may not be spatially compresent, the talk show-ritual is functionally intercorporeal.

Hence, what is truly unique about digitally mediated worship, in this instance, is that it is sequential and personalized in ways that challenge prevailing ontologies of community and sensoria in Muharram, yet it remains illustrative of a broader, elemental phenomenon of habituation and recalibration ‘to a new political and technological order’ that is a constant fundamental aspect of the human condition, of one’s experience and presence in reality, of dasein or ‘being there’ in Heideggerian terms, which anthropologists have observed for decades (Hirschkind 2006, 11. See also Qureshi 1999). This article has accordingly endeavored to articulate an understanding of religion in which technology is integral. As the famous internet Imam, Shaykh Arif Abdulhussein, said in a lecture he gave during a Facebook-streamed majlis on the re-personalized nature of digitally mediated worship, ‘COVID freed God from the mosque and [placed him] on his rightful throne in the hearts of men’ (2020, online).

One should read Abdulhussein’s sermon with the concept of emotional texture in mind, since it is fundamental to Shiʿi conceptions of religious fulfilment; that is, God is served through deeply visceral modes of ritual intercorporeality in the commemoration of Imam Hussein. Therefore, its recalibration to digital media did not countermand collective religious unity. Nor was this recalibration an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the pandemic prompted digitally mediated forms of worship, such as devotional talk shows, to re-orient their aesthetic, even their functionality, to expectations of a spatially proximate ceremony. Set against much of the current scholarship on religion and ritual in times of contagion, it is as Wesley Wildman et al. argued, ‘the fight against COVID-19 is a vivid reminder that concept “religion” does not carve human social behaviors neatly at any joint’ (2020, 116). Likewise, callers to #IAMHUSSEINI form a televisual majlis that intercorporeally continues to reinforce a transnational community of Shi’as alongside the spread of the novel coronavirus.
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