

Black Waves in Digital Humanities: Vaziri's (2023) Exploration of African Enslavement in the Persian Gulf through Film

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Abstract

Racial Blackness and Indian Ocean Slavery: Iran's Cinematic Archive (2023) by Parisa Vaziri offers an in-depth exploration of the intersection of Blackness and slavery within Iranian historical and cinematic contexts. The book critically examines how Iranian cinema portrays African enslavement and marginalized narratives, particularly through *filmfārsī* and Indigenous theatrical traditions. Vaziri underscores the historiographical neglect of Indian Ocean slavery, emphasizing the forgotten stories of the enslaved. By incorporating maps that trace African migrations and the routes of the slave trade, she enriches the reader's understanding of global history.

Digital Humanities for Analyzing Culture

Vaziri's work engages with the historiographical neglect surrounding Indian Ocean slavery and presents a nuanced critique of how cinema both reflects and obscures historical connections. The integration of digital humanities plays a pivotal role in preserving those marginalized histories, and Vaziri emphasizes the archival challenges and the importance of digital preservation in safeguarding Iran's cinematic heritage from political upheaval and loss. By intertwining race, history, and media, Vaziri's exploration contributes to broader trends in global cinema, intersectionality, and digital aesthetics, inviting readers to rethink traditional cinematic narratives and embrace new methodologies in digital film studies. Through this critical lens, Vaziri's work offers both a preservation of marginalized histories and a path for future scholars to address historiographical neglect in film and media.

The origins of this book can be traced back to Vaziri's doctoral dissertation, which was written during a time of social upheaval in Iran. The 2022 protests over Mahsa Amini's tragic death provided a poignant backdrop, influencing Vaziri's approach to gender representation in Iranian cinema. That personal connection adds a layer of urgency and authenticity to her work.

This book begins with a sentence from *The Historiographic Perversion* (2009), a book written by March Nichanian, Visiting Professor of Cultural Studies at Sabanci University in Istanbul. It reads: "Historical objectivity regarding facts, the quiet assurance of established history, is no more than a luxury of those who can enjoy truth without conflict" (qtd. in [Vaziri 2023, 1]). Nichanian's concept of "historiographic perversion" foreshadows a book deeply entrenched in the critical examination of historical objectivity. By opening her book with this sentence, Vaziri shows readers that her work will scrutinize the very foundation of what is commonly accepted as historical truth, questioning the neutrality and assurance of established history. Readers can expect Vaziri's book to offer a profound inquiry into the writing of history, exploring the influence of power, ideology, and conflict on the construction of historical narratives.

Why Cinema?

Vaziri presents a compelling argument against the contemporary extractive nature of content production. She posits cinema not merely as a form of entertainment but as a powerful medium for reflection and intellectual engagement. Her perspective resonates with the thoughts of philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who eloquently remarks that a "process of

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global unification has taken place through cinema" (qtd. in [Vaziri 2023, 10]) Vaziri's book underscores the unifying power of film to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, offering a shared space for global narratives and dialogues.

Indian Ocean Slavery and the Lack of Archival Resources

Vaziri's examination is particularly striking in its critique of the historiographical neglect of Indian Ocean slavery, which starkly contrasts with the attention given to Atlantic and trans-Saharan slavery. That lacuna in historical discourse, compounded by the scarcity of archival sources, is a silent testimony to the marginalized narratives of the enslaved. Related scholarship shows both African migrations across the Indian Ocean and the differences between three slave trade routes: trans-Saharan, Atlantic Ocean, and Indian Ocean [Rajan 2011] [Think Africa 2021].

In her exemplary work, the author articulates a significant challenge in the study of slavery: the scarcity of archival materials. She notes that the narrative of Indian Ocean slavery, as in other regions, is often pieced together from material evidence that was not created by the enslaved themselves, but rather from records shaped by bureaucratic narratives or formalized correspondence. Such indirect documentation creates a barrier to fully understanding the enslaved perspective.

Further, the author highlights the critical role of digital media in preserving cinematic history. She reflects on how a multitude of films, pivotal to her research, would have been lost if not for the digital age. Those pre-revolutionary works, previously at the mercy of inadequate storage solutions, faced further jeopardy from the deliberate destruction during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, resulting in the demolition of a significant portion of Iran's cinematic infrastructure as well as the loss of countless historical film records. Transition to digital platforms has not only resurrected those films from potential obscurity but allowed for the conservation and continued examination of Iran's rich cinematic legacy.

Vaziri's Contribution to Digital Film Studies

Racial Blackness and Indian Ocean Slavery is very much in conversation with contemporary trends in digital humanities, particularly in its emphasis on archival challenges, global and diverse perspectives, and the intersection of media such as film with broader historical and cultural narratives. Vaziri's book can be seen as engaging with several contemporary directions in digital film studies, especially Burghardt et al.

The critical areas in digital humanities and film studies that Vaziri's work explores center on archival challenges, media convergence, global perspectives, intersectionality, and cinematic narratives. One of the central themes is the scarcity of archival materials documenting Indian Ocean slavery, as mentioned above, and the role of digital media in preserving these neglected histories. That aligns with broader trends in digital humanities, where efforts to rescue fragile historical artifacts have become essential. For example, the digital preservation of pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema — threatened by inadequate storage and political upheaval — highlights the crucial role of digital tools in safeguarding cultural legacies.

Vaziri also examines the convergence of cultural and historical narratives in Iranian cinema, particularly through the lens of Blackness and slavery, reflecting broader trends in digital film studies that analyze layered, transnational narratives. Her focus on African diasporic influences in Iranian films demonstrates how media convergence operates at the intersection of race, history, and culture, situating Iranian cinema within global histories of slavery and migration.

By critiquing the historiographical neglect of Indian Ocean slavery, Vaziri contributes to ongoing discussions about representation and inclusion in global cinema. Her work intersects with Black Digital Humanities (Black DH), which leverages digital tools to amplify marginalized voices and address historical neglect. Black DH's radical and interdisciplinary approach challenges traditional historiographical practices to create more inclusive narratives [Prince and Messina 2022]. Projects such as the Real Black Grandmothers archive, the Black Beauty Archives, and the Black Lesbian Archives exemplify this by preserving Black cultural histories and aesthetics [Gallon 2022]. Jenkins and Myers further emphasize how platforms like podcasts act as counter-public spheres, enabling the expression of narratives often neglected by dominant media [Jenkins and Myers 2022].

Vaziri's exploration of African-descended peoples in Iranian cinema broadens global film studies by highlighting underrepresented histories, enriching discussions of intersectionality and marginalized narratives. Her emphasis on digital preservation is particularly significant for films at risk of being lost due to political or social upheaval. Similar to preserving Iran's cinematic history, Black podcasts serve as digital archives for capturing voices often overlooked by mainstream media [Jenkins and Myers 2022].

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In her concluding chapter, Vaziri discusses the Collective for Black Iranians, which emerged in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. The collective employs digital aesthetics to challenge traditional historiography and confront anti-Blackness and the legacies of Indian Ocean slavery. Such counternarratives resist the erasure of marginalized histories and foster solidarity within global and digital communities.

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Finally, Vaziri's theoretical approach to Iranian cinema challenges conventional narratives, offering new frameworks for understanding the aesthetics and historical underpinnings of race and migration. Her work aligns with post-cinema discussions in digital film studies, advancing innovative perspectives on cinematic history. By addressing the intersections of race, culture, and history, her scholarship contributes significantly to global film studies and digital humanities, amplifying voices and narratives long overlooked in both scholarly and cultural contexts.

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Postcolonial Perspectives in Digital Humanities

Vaziri's work in addressing the above intersections and inequalities in knowledge production suggests connections to some of the formative work in digital humanities, particularly from scholars like Roopika Risam. Risam's groundbreaking work, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (2018), provides a critical framework for understanding how digital humanities can confront systemic disparities in representation and knowledge creation. Putting Vaziri's book into conversation with Risam may help highlight strategic convergences as well as perspectival differences between their approaches to digital humanities and their potential to foster a more inclusive scholarly landscape.

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Risam's *New Digital Worlds* addresses how digital humanities can confront and address inequalities in knowledge production, particularly concerning marginalized communities such as the African diaspora and Black radicalism. The book examines projects like those focused on W.E.B. Du Bois, situating his work within a global context and striving to include Black voices in the digital cultural record, which has traditionally been dominated by Anglophone and white perspectives. Risam emphasizes the need to enhance digital scholarship in fields like African diaspora studies and critical ethnic studies. Her work underscores how postcolonial digital humanities can rectify both historical and contemporary inequities in representation and knowledge production. Risam's research rethinks digital humanities as a practice that critically engages with issues of race and power, advocating for the use of digital tools to create a more equitable and inclusive scholarly landscape.

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Risam and Vaziri's works converge in their focus on enhancing representation and inclusivity in the digital humanities, though they explore that theme from distinct perspectives. Both scholars critique traditional methodologies and frameworks, calling for innovative approaches that address historical and ongoing inequities. They stress the importance of ethical representation, aiming to avoid exploitation and ensure that marginalized communities are portrayed with respect and accuracy. Overall, Risam and Vaziri both view digital humanities as a powerful means for fostering equity. Risam reimagines digital humanities as a practice that confronts issues of race and power, while Vaziri highlights the potential of digital technologies to create more representative and inclusive narratives. Their combined efforts reflect a broader movement within the field to improve inclusivity and challenge established practices.

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Digitally Countering Anti-Blackness

Vaziri's work explores Iran's history of slavery, particularly as reflected in films produced after 1953. She discusses two iconic films in Iranian cinema that directly engage with the persistence of anti-Blackness, challenging the notion that slavery has no place in Iran's history. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1984), directed by Bahram Beyzai, stands out as a seminal work foregrounding racism based on phenotypic differences. Similarly, *The Runner* (1984), directed by Amir Naderi, portrays the life of a young boy named Amiro in southern Iran whose character is crafted as a reflection of

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societal attitudes toward race and humanity. The film suggests a perspective of innocence and impartiality, presenting it as a potential pathway to overcoming racial prejudices.

Several other works in conversation with Vaziri's book have identified how anti-Blackness persists in digital systems, regardless of who is programming them. So too have they highlighted how Black Computational Thought aims to dismantle these systems from an ontological and epistemological standpoint. If anti-Blackness often persists within digital systems, perpetuating violence through computational logics, Black Computational Thought seeks to dismantle these systems by challenging their very foundations, offering a pathway towards more equitable digital practices [Morrison 2022].

As Vaziri challenges our perception of the history of slavery in Iran, it becomes evident that adopting ethical visualization practices is necessary to mitigate potential harm in the representation of marginalized populations. Adopting an ethical workflow in digital humanities projects, as outlined by Hepworth and Church, involves careful consideration at every stage of data collection, visualization, and publication to minimize harm and ensure responsible representation [Hepworth and Church 2018]. Ethical considerations in data visualization are paramount, as visual artifacts often carry implicit biases that can reinforce existing prejudices. It is essential to adopt ethical visualization practices that acknowledge and mitigate potential harm while ensuring accurate representation [Hepworth and Church 2018].

Insights from Vaziri on Contemporary Debates in DH

In the introduction to her book, Vaziri articulates a profound function of cinema: the ability to access the unlivable past — those dimensions of history or memory that remain unlivable or inaccessible in real life. Cinema, she argues, becomes a medium for envisioning future possibilities, offering a “future kinesthesia”, a space where new ways of thinking and living can emerge. Such transformative power lies in its capacity to record, preserve, and transmit the unlivable into the future. By deferring the unlivable, cinema not only documents but reimagines cultural practices and human experiences, bridging the past and future in ways that transcend the limitations of the present.

Vaziri's concept of accessing the unlivable past serves as a meaningful complement to the discussions presented in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2023*. In Chapter 9, Frazier et al. argue that digital humanities must actively center the identities and lived experiences of Black communities. Their emphasis on ethical representation underscores the importance of ensuring that digital projects honor and amplify Black voices without exploitation. Meanwhile, Gallon asserts that Black DH serves to unmask racialized systems of power, critically confronting how the digital world often reinforces these structures. For Gallon, studying Black people is inherently a “deeply political enterprise” that disrupts the traditional foundations of the humanities [Gallon 2016].

Such perspectives, rooted in the lived realities of Black communities, complement and expand upon Vaziri's concept of the unlivable past. While Vaziri's cinema accesses what is unlivable to envision a future, Black DH engages with the lived present to dismantle systems of power and advocate for ethical representation. Together, these frameworks highlight the dual power of digital and cinematic tools to transform cultural narratives, first by retrieving what has been inaccessible and then by centering marginalized experiences in the here and now.

Vaziri's work is a crucial contribution to media studies, offering insightful critiques and celebrating cinema's potential as an intellectual stimulant. This book is highly recommended for those interested in the intersection of film, culture, and history, as well as anyone seeking to understand the profound ways in which our global stories are woven together in the frames of cinema.

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