

Article

Hailing and Hallowing: Persian Hagiographies, Interpellation, and Learning How to Read

William E. B. Sherman 

Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA; will.sherman@charlotte.edu

Abstract: This essay discusses the pedagogical value of hagiology by examining how medieval Persian hagiographies can be used to explore the concept of “interpellation”: the process by which individuals are constituted as subjects in particular ideological systems. This essay uses an analysis of Rumi’s anecdote, “Moses and the Shepherd”, to demonstrate how hagiological approaches are valuable not just in understanding how a saint is constructed in a particular historical and cultural context but also how an audience is constructed and interpellated. The essay then introduces a pedagogical exercise that connects an analysis of Islamic hagiographies with an exploration of how students are interpellated with modern subjectivities in our contemporary ideological systems.

Keywords: hagiology; Persian hagiography; interpellation; pedagogy; genre; Sufism

*Footprints of drunkards are a special kind,
distinct from those the sober leave behind.*

*He starts just like a rook, steps straight ahead,
then bishop-like diagonally instead.*

*Sometimes just like a wave’s crest rising high
and then as if a fish has slithered by.
-From *The Spiritual Couplets* of Rumi¹*



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1. Introduction

When I open the classroom door to the stories of saints, my hope is that my students and I are taken on a diagonal journey that—through its drunken wanderings—offers us opportunity to gain some analytical leverage both on critical themes in the academic study of Islam and on topics of urgency and importance in the lives of my students. The case for including hagiological materials in courses focused on Islam is simple enough to make: what we understand as the varieties of Islam today have taken shape through narratives of Sufi *walis*, pilgrimages to hallowed shrines, dialogues with the blessed dead, affective remembrances of Muhammad and Husayn (among many others), engagements with “religious others” over competing and shared stories of Jesus and Mary, and so forth.² To understand the experiences of Muslims throughout space and time—even if it is a partial, gauzy understanding gained in the rush of a semester and within the bare walls of a state university classroom—requires attention to hagiographic processes in Islam and how hagiographies (of whatever medium) negotiate issues of sexuality, authority, religious difference, political power, ethical cultivation, historical memory, and the very sense of what counts as a self.³ In my classroom, we lean heavily upon premodern Persian hagiographical sources to explore such issues, though, depending upon the class, there are frequent points of comparison with hallowed figures across geographical, temporal, and religious boundaries.

While I would defend the enthralling richness of Persian hagiographies and the hagiological questions they throw in our face as we attempt to cultivate a critical and ethical analysis of the histories of Islam, these hagiographies have also proven immensely rich in letting us follow their wayward steps toward much broader lines of inquiry: What does the hallowing of a saint through a saintly narrative teach us about the formation of the reader or listener? How are we “interpellated” and “hailed” into certain subject positions and formations—even against our own will—by the media, genres, and technologies that hold our attention? How are we different people in different fora? In short, hagiographies are key in my classroom to exploring issues of ideology, technology, conceptions of language, and other topics entangled with the concept of “interpellation”: the process by which individuals are constituted as subjects in particular ideological systems by being “hailed” as already part of that ideological system. For this particular article, I will attempt to answer *not* these weighty questions of ethical importance but one more to the point: how does paying close, hagiological attention to the intricacies of Persian hagiographic literature help us understand all of *that*? My answer also proceeds crookedly and diagonally by offering, first, a reading of a short vignette by Rumi that concerns the prophet Moses and his run-in with a shepherd. Following this, I will briefly introduce some of the theoretical concepts that bolster the conversations that my students and I have about Persian hagiographies. By way of conclusion, I will introduce an exercise that we practice in my classroom called “Wali Ways” and explain its motivation. In “Wali Ways,” students create multiple hagiographies in different genres of a single figure that they choose, and, in the process, my students and I collectively explore how we are constituted as a particular *audience* and how we are *taught to read and see* by hagiography.

2. Revisiting Moses and the Shepherd

Mawlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad, better known in the Anglosphere by the simple epithet “Rumi”, recounts a story of the prophet Moses in a work known as the *Spiritual Couplets* (“Masnawī-yi ma‘nawī”). It is among the most famous of the short anecdotes that Rumi threads together in his *Couplets*, and, as will become apparent, the anecdote typically facilitates conversations on the topic of pluralism or religious diversity (though I bring the anecdote to different effect in my classrooms). In broadest terms, the story is as follows: the prophet Moses is walking one day when he hears the fervent prayers of a shepherd. Moses is shocked by the shepherd’s anthropomorphizing rhetoric: the shepherd offers to comb God’s hair, to pluck away God’s lice, to repair God’s shoes, and more. Moses is convinced that the man, in his childish simplicity, has committed blasphemy, so Moses yells at the shepherd and shames him, “Your blasphemy pollutes the atmosphere/and tears to shreds that silk of faith so sheer” (Mojaddedi 2007, 2.1733). The shepherd laments, “Moses, you sewed shut my mouth and scorched my soul with regret” (Lewis 2007, 2.1752). Satisfied with his intervention, Moses continues on his way. Immediately afterwards, Moses receives a divine “revelation” (*wahy*) in which God chastises Moses, “You’ve torn My servant from My presence” (Lewis 2007, 2.1754). God goes on to explain that it is passion that God values; the formalism of one’s prayers and pieties (perhaps even one’s theologies) matter not to God. In one of the most widely shared couplets of Rumi’s oeuvre, God declares, “Hindus praise Me in the Hindu tongue/Sindis praise Me in the Sindi tongue” (Lewis 2007, 2.1761). Having received his own lecture, Moses rushes back to the shepherd and reiterates God’s lesson, “Don’t search for manners or rules/say what your longing heart desires!” (Haeri 2021).⁴

Located as I am in a large university in North Carolina, my classrooms tend to be full of students possessing a familiarity with (and often a commitment to) American varieties of Protestant Christianity. The story of Moses and the shepherd resonates profoundly with many of these students for whom an individual, “authentic” relationship with Jesus is the driving concern in religion as they understand it. Other students find Rumi’s apparent celebration of religious diversity to be enthralling and a joy to explore. At this point in the class, however, we have explored other forms of Sufi literature, other genres in which

the lives of saints and prophets are narrated, and other texts in which the Qur'an serves as the literary weft to the warp of a religious narrative (as it does here). And so, we step back and away from those themes in "Moses and the Shepherd" that merely reflect our prior ideological hopes and ethical ideals back to us. If this is not about "authenticity" and "pluralism" (such wonderfully neoliberal commitments!), then what is it about?⁵

Within the context of the Islamic hagiographies that we explore in the course, a critical consistent theme is learning how to read, see, bear witness to, and recognize blessedness. What becomes clear in jumping from the terse biographical dictionaries of al-Sulami to Attar's more imaginative storytelling to the recorded conversations between Amir Hasan Sijzi and Nizam al-Din Awliya is that these are all *arguments* for sainthood.⁶ There is no surprise there, but the context of "learning to recognize saints" must shape our reading of "Moses and the Shepherd." This is not a story about "individual authenticity in matters of faith" (or at least it is not just about that); it is a story of education and learning how to see *hallowingly*. The shepherd begins as a model for how we necessarily *see* holiness through the limitations of our own senses—something that Moses fails to understand at first. Moses is then quite explicitly taught by God how to see holiness in others. In the anecdote, Moses feels quite liberated by his new approach, and so he chases after the shepherd. But who is this shepherd? According to the narrator ("Rumi", if we must), the shepherd's footsteps make a frenzied trail through the desert, and, given the rich tradition of exploring "bewilderment in the desert" as a master metaphor in the Persian Sufi traditions that inform Rumi's own approach, we are cued to consider that the shepherd is perhaps a spiritual master in his own right rather than the naive simpleton Moses had assumed.⁷ After Moses explains his new insights about "saying what your longing heart desires" to the shepherd, the shepherd responds, in so many words, "Yeah, yeah, I get it." Not only that, the shepherd explains that he had already learned *that* particular lesson as he sailed past the "lote-tree at heaven's end" (Mojaddedi 2007, 2.1792). Referencing 53.14 of the Qur'an, the lote-tree is a key detail from the Prophet Muhammad's heavenly journey known as the *mi'raj*. The implication, therefore, is that the shepherd—ostensibly so naive in our first encounter with him—has experienced exactly the type of celestial ascension that distinguishes the Prophet. Though neither Moses nor the narrator comment on the shepherd's now-revealed quasi-Muhammad status, we can venture that the reader of Rumi's *Couplets* is being taught how to see—or at least how to expect—that insights born from the *mi'raj* (or its equivalent) can manifest in the world around them in different, surprising ways.

And yet there's more: among the most famous narratives of Muhammad (and one which would have been well-known to readers and listeners of "Moses and the Shepherd") describes a conversation that occurs while Muhammad is in the midst of his *mi'raj* and he meets with none other than Moses.⁸ In this particular story, Muhammad has just encountered God and was told that the nascent community of Muslims will pray fifty times a day. As Muhammad descends from the highest heaven back to Earth, he chats with Moses who insists that Muhammad return to God to haggle down such a steep devotional requirement. Eventually, Muhammad returns to his people with the commandment that they will pray five times a day. This particular vignette might serve as another layer for reading Rumi's "Moses and the Shepherd". In precisely those Muhammad-like qualities that the shepherd reveals through his mention of the lote-tree, the shepherd can be understood as someone who learned from Moses that strict, devotional formalism is *not* the mark of true piety. Time and causality wrinkle at this point, but, in short, we see that Moses learns from the Muhammad-like shepherd the same lesson that Moses will teach to Muhammad himself (and that the shepherd already knows by virtue of Muhammad-like qualities). There is a cycle of learning to see and perceive what counts as holiness. Via the shepherd, Moses learns that the *how* of his piety matters more than the *what*, and Moses learns to see the shepherd as a prophetic, *mi'raj*-ing figure in his own right. The shepherd, as an implicit echo of Muhammad, similarly learned the significance of *how* relative to *what* from Moses. If teaching someone how to see holiness is the mark of a saint or prophet, then the poet

("Rumi") becomes just such a figure in the eyes of the reader or ears of the listener. It is the poet who has strung these pearls together and woven this time-looping cycle of "teaching to see" as a lesson for us.

To add one final layer, the subtleties of this story require the reader's immersion in the so-called orthodoxies and formalisms of Islam—those very same "formalisms" that the story seems to initially reject. It is the Qur'anic references that stitch additional narrative layers and thematic resonances into this story. Indeed, the vehicle by which God chastises Moses for his initial reaction to the shepherd is called *wahy* by Rumi. That is to say, Moses does not *feel* differently about the "authenticity" of the shepherd's prayer; rather, Moses receives a direct, heteronomous revelation that intervenes and corrects his previous behavior. Moreover, the shepherd may already have anticipated the revelation that Moses brings him on the permissibility of passionate prayers, no matter the form ("Yeah, yeah, I get it."). The shepherd, though, credits his knowledge and *mi'rāj* to Moses' initial chastisement, "You cracked the whip, which made my stallion vault/above the heavens with a somersault!" (Mojaddedi 2007, 2.1793). God might speak Sindhi as well as Persian, but the story's language is inextricably Islamic. The story suggests that *anyone's* prayers can matter, but the story also suggests that this is an insight *only* available to those who have heard the whip-crack of a lawgiver's revelation.

In the end, I want to suggest that this story represents a nuanced and effective interpellation in which the reader or listener is hailed as both a fully formed "servant of God" and as someone *already* aware and committed to a Qur'anic path for such piety. This is Rumi winking at the reader, "You're a smart one, aren't you? You must agree with me!". This two-step of acknowledging the reader's "personal" righteousness while inviting them into a particular social vision of Islamic righteousness (mediated by Rumi) is an effective demonstration of a much larger project of Persian Sufi hagiographies: not just teaching readers how to read and see, but interpellating them into such subject positions from which they see the entire exchange of Sufi stories with hallowing eyes.

3. Hailed by the Saint: Hagiology and Interpellation

As Rondolino, Hollander, and Bashir—among many others—have explored, there is fertile analytical ground for exploring hagiography as a *process* (Rondolino 2020; Hollander 2021; Bashir 2011). A saint *becomes* an exemplary saint in a process that involves an imagination of a particular truth and value system in which the saint's exemplarity can be understood, a representation of the saint in any number of media, and then the appropriation and use of that representation by devotees for their own social, political, economic, and cultural aims (Hollander 2021). A critical feature in the premodern Persian hagiographies that lie central to much of my teaching and research is the interdependence of a saintly master and his or her disciples. As Bashir has demonstrated, the very act of storytelling—in whatever form, genre, or medium—is part of an exchange of teaching, miraculousness, and hallowing acts of recognition that collectively constitute an economy of sainthood and mystical insight (Bashir 2011, pp. 19–20). While scholars have long explored how particular saints are *constructed* according to the norms and expectations of the religious imaginaries in which they are embedded (and, in turn, serve to scaffold those very imaginaries), less attention has been paid to how the *reader* or *listener* is also constructed in the process: how they, like Moses and the shepherd in Rumi's tale, are taught to see. If Bashir's insistence upon the interdependence of master and disciple is correct, then the hagiography is not just a "saint-making-machine" but also a "witness-making-machine". I suggest that it is *this* aspect of Persian hagiographies that can complement previous approaches to "comparative hagiology" and open hagiology to exceptionally rich pedagogical horizons in which issues of selfhood, ideology, subjectivity, agency, and so forth can be explored alongside rigorous, grounded explorations of the specific social logics and contexts in which a hagiography was inscribed (Spiegel 1990). In my own teaching, the concept of interpellation is an anchor for exploring this nexus of Persian hagiography and such grand comparative questions.

The term interpellation rarely enters my classroom, though I have occasionally shown some short Youtube videos that explain the concept from perspectives grounded in literary theory and media studies. Though frequently attributed to Althusser et al. (2014), the concept of interpellation and other related concepts have found particularly incisive explorations in the works of Stuart Hall (1985), Judith Butler (2013), John Mowitt (2002), Mladen Dolar (2006), and James R. Martel (2017). This is not the space to examine the paradoxes of interpellation theory that rests at the uneasy meeting of the two seas of Marxist structural criticism and psychoanalytic theories of the self.⁹ Rather, for our purposes, a working notion of interpellation is one that emphasizes the way that we *become* subjects embedded in particular ideological and social systems by acts of *hailing*. The classic example is Althusser's policeman who shouts "Halt!" to someone walking down the street. As pedestrians turn around, they have *recognized* the *hailing* call and, thus, become subject to the governing, police authority of the state. This process of interpellation unfurls without or perhaps even *in spite* of the deliberate, intentional acts of the one who has been hailed. An affective response to the shout of the police officer—a turn of the head, an increased heart rate, a caught breath—has already located the one who has been hailed within that particular ideological system. Identifying these processes of interpellation, however, may be the key to misinterpellations and active resistance (Martel 2017).

To turn to some examples within Sufi hagiological traditions, the simplest is found in texts like Bayazid Ansari's *The Endeavor of the Believers*. Each section begins with an "Ay pesar-e man!" ("O my son!") (Ānṣārī 1976). The reader is immediately hailed as a gendered subject within a particular social relationship of authority. A more complicated gesture is found within Amir Hasan Sijzi's *malḡūzāt* ("recorded conversations") with the famed Chishti master, Nizam al-Din Awliya (Lawrence 1991). In class, we diagram the direction of exchanges recorded in the *malḡūzāt* work translated in English as *Morals for the Heart*. Each day of *Morals for the Heart* begins with Amir Hasan Sijzi's proclamation that he, a humble wretch, obtained blessing by kissing the feet of his master, Nizam al-Din—an exchange of blessing for a sign of reverence. In some of the more complicated entries, Amir Hasan will record multiple layers of conversations in which a visitor will bring Nizam al-Din a gift, ask him to teach him some wisdom, and Nizam al-Din will then narrate a story in which *he* (Nizam al-Din) was a lowly disciple witnessing the exchange of signs of devotion and Sufi wisdom among Nizam al-Din's own master and visiting pilgrims. At times, the layers become *Inception*-like in their complexity and depth: multiple generations of revered Sufi masters describing how everything they know was learned by kissing the feet of their own masters.¹⁰ The stories themselves are marvelous for the classroom as they open us to the complex social imaginaries of the past. One particular story, for instance, describes how Nizam al-Din's male body spontaneously emitted menstrual blood during the course of a particularly intense prayer session (Lawrence 1991, p. 369). Nizam al-Din had evidently become *so* united with God that his remarkable union threatened to rip a hole in the space-time continuum (as I describe it) unless his prayers were ritually "invalidated" by the impurity of his miraculous menstrual blood. Beyond the specific themes of the individual stories, however, are the consequences of these carefully described conversations with Nizam al-Din—wisdom, blessing, and miraculousness are deeply embedded in an exchange of stories and spiritual reputation. By seeing countless examples of Sufi masters narrating the stories of *their* masters, we are seemingly taught how to recognize a saint. The saintliness of Nizam al-Din—whatever that means exactly—manifests through the stories told by Amir Hasan that are, in turn, heard and read by an audience that comes to include me as well as my students. We are, in short, interpellated as witnesses to Nizam al-Din because we come to recognize that we are participating in the very economy of hagiographic narration that *constitutes* Nizam al-Din in his saintly apotheosis. As *Morals for the Heart* argues on behalf of Nizam al-Din as the master saint, it also interpellates the reader as a disciple who is co-constitutive of the nature of the saint.

As is clear, however, we might find ourselves interpellated into this hagiological process without the process necessarily "working" in the way that Amir Hasan intended.

That, too, is part of our lesson. The interpellations of Sufi hagiographies might implicate a reader or listener as a subject in a particular ideological system, but the consequences are not determined. Nevertheless, we find ourselves always already hailed in these interpellations by the time we come to recognize what has happened. We are dragged in the wake of our attention and the forms, genres, and technologies that grab it (Stiegler 1998).

A crucial point in all of this is that intricate formal and stylistic details become matters of urgency and importance in understanding the types of communities interpellated as “Sufi disciples” and “witnesses to marvels” by Sufi hagiographies. In the classroom, we notice how the decision by Amir Hasan to recount the conversations of Nizam al-Din Awliya as opposed to narrating a biography of Nizam al-Din has important consequences for the “Nizam al-Din Awliya” that we encounter. More importantly, it has important consequences for the interpellated, imagined audience of Amir Hasan’s text. The saint is a construction—but so too is the audience. By attending to this interpellating hagiographic process as it manifests in differences between genre, media, and form, we begin to understand the sociality of these premodern Muslim communities and their saintly exemplars. We begin to understand not just the qualities of an elite saint but also of the everyday, ethical imaginations of the interpellated disciples. To return to “Moses and the Shepherd,” the narrating voice comments at the end:

The image in the mirror which you see
is yours and not the mirror’s obviously;
The breath inside the reed its player’s blown
is not the reed’s but the reed-player’s own. (Mojaddedi 2007, 2.1796–1797)

While the temptation remains again to see this as a discussion of an intensely individualistic conception of spirituality, we might look at it in the frenzied diagonals of the drunk: *God* may not care about the forms of one’s prayers, but those *forms* and *genres* are the means by which particular audiences, socialities, and subjectivities are constituted. The hagiography is a mirror that does not construct just the saint but also the storyteller and the story-listener in a mirror carefully shaped by centuries of generic conventions.

4. Wali Ways: A Classroom Exercise

In some of my courses that have included a unit on Sufism and Sufi saints (*walī/awliyā’* in Arabic), I have asked my students to complete an exercise we call “Wali Ways: Exploring the Genres of Sainthood”. Over the course of a number of weeks, we engage a variety of hagiographic genres: biographical dictionaries, collections of sayings, lengthier biographies, recorded conversations, visionary records, documentaries, miniature paintings, websites, and fable-like anecdotes, such as “Moses and the Shepherd”, that find their way into epic poems. Among other tasks, we attend to how a single figure—such as Rabia al-Adawiyya or Mansur al-Hallaj—finds elaboration and transformation through these genres so that we can understand the distinctive stylistic choices, possibilities, and limitations of these genres and media. “Wali Ways” then asks the students to identify a non-Sufi figure for some representational experimentation: fictional, personal, famous, celebrated, or otherwise. Students have selected grandmothers, LeBron James, Malcolm X, and Frodo Baggins among other choices. The students are asked to then create *three* hagiographies of their chosen figure. *Two* of those hagiographies must conform to the “classical” hagiographic forms we have explored as a class. The *third* hagiography must be in a style of their choosing; they are asked to pick a genre/medium that contributes to contemporary hagiographical processes. Among other examples, students have written spoken-word poems about Malcolm X, sketched a memorial tattoo as if Frodo was a friend who had passed away too early, and described what a political advertisement on behalf of LeBron James might look like. As part of the assignment, students are asked to analyze how the form of the “hagiography” inextricably shapes the hallowed figure. The *who* of Frodo shifts as the *what* of the genre shifts (biographical dictionary entry vs. recorded conversation vs. tattoo).

That concludes the formal expectations of the assignment, but the final step is a wide-ranging conversation in class. We move beyond the construction of “the saint” to the question of interpellation: how do these various formal experiments interpellate the audience as different types of subjects? Who is the viewer of a tattoo *hailed* (or invited) to be compared to the reader of a *malfūzāt*-style recorded conversation with Frodo? The questions spin larger: who are we *hailed* to be by the architecture of our classroom, by the sports betting ads that play on university cafeteria TVs, and by the quasi-anonymity of a Reddit handle? What control do we have over these processes of interpellation that are always already subjecting us to particular ideological and epistemological regimes? *How are we made into different people in different media and fora?* By immersing ourselves in the lives of Persian narratives of saints, we then end by interrogating the forces that *subject* us and create for us the textures of our sociality despite our presumptions to independence and agency.¹¹

5. Conclusions

From a paean to individualized spirituality, personal authenticity, and liberal conceptions of pluralism, the story of Moses and the shepherd transforms into something else: a thicket of social relationships, intertextuality, ideologies of perfection, and hagiographic process. More than a mirror that reflects just our desires, we can learn from the story itself how to cast our drunkard eyes diagonally at this mirror and glimpse the imagined audiences—including ourselves—conjured by the formal details of Rumi’s *Couplets*.

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Notes

- ¹ The lines cited throughout this article correspond to the Estelami critical edition of Rumi’s *Mathnawī-yi Ma’ nawī* (also transcribed as *Masnavi-yi ma’ nawī*) and are, with some exceptions, standardized across translations. Mawlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi “Rumi,” *Mathnawī-yi Ma’ nawī*, ed. Mohammad Estelami, 7 vols. (“Rumi” Muhammad Balkhi 1990). In this article, I draw on the translations of both Mojaddedi and Franklin Lewis, while consulting the Estelami edition and providing the verse number from the Estelami edition. Mojaddedi (2007, 2.1783–1785).
- ² For a partial list of works that continue to shape my thinking on saints in Islamic contexts, see: (Amin 2016; Bashir 2011; Bazzaz 2009; DeWeese 1994; Ewing 1997; Haroon 2007; Sevea 2020; Steinfels 2012; Stewart 2019; Thum 2014). Additionally, consider Tanvir Ahmed’s recent, evocative blogpost (“The Unyielding Dead”) on such issues: <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/the-unyielding-dead-interring-conquest-in-the-graves-of-gods-friends> (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- ³ For an argument on behalf of the humanistic value of teaching the “Persian World” more generally, consider Bashir (2022).
- ⁴ This particular translation is Nilofar Haeri’s and comes from her book (Haeri 2021) that shares its title with this verse: Say What Your Longing Heart Desires: Women, Prayer & Poetry in Iran. The verse corresponds to Mathnawī, 2.1787.
- ⁵ Consider Haeri’s brilliant analysis of contemporary Iranian women’s exploration of notions of pluralism and authenticity by way of their interpretations of this story: Haeri (2021), pp. 11–21.
- ⁶ For two introductions to Sufism that introduce these genres within their historical context, consider: Karamustafa (2007); Green (2012).
- ⁷ For a classic exploration of the Sufi theme of bewilderment (ḥayra), consider the works of ‘Aṭṭār (1984). O’Malley (2023) has recently provided a wonderful analysis of ‘Attar’s works.
- ⁸ Among other places, this story is recounted in the 349th hadith of the collection of Sahih al-Bukhari. It is available online at: <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:349> (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- ⁹ Chapter 2 of Mowitt (2002)—“Knocking the Subject”—includes an immensely helpful consideration of this tension.
- ¹⁰ For a creative interpretation of Christopher Nolan’s film *Inception* in light of Sufi imaginations of the dreamworld, consider: Ogunnaike (2013).
- ¹¹ Lofton’s (2019) *Consuming Religion*—especially the chapter entitled “Binge Religion”—has proven to be a wonderful companion piece for this conversation, and Lofton describes “sociality” in brilliant fashion.

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