

9-2019

Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars

Alla Ivanchikova

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IMAGINING AFGHANISTAN

Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars

Comparative Cultural Studies

Ari Ofengenden, Series Editor

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IMAGINING AFGHANISTAN

Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars

Alla Ivanchikova

Purdue University Press
West Lafayette, Indiana

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Printed in the United States of America.

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Paper: 978-1-55753-846-8

ePDF: 978-1-61249-581-1

ePub: 978-1-61249-580-4

Cover image: Courtesy of David Gill (www.shot2bits.com).

To my parents

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Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to family members, friends, and colleagues for their ongoing support during the entire time I have been working on this project.

The cover image shows graffiti painted inside the ruins of the Russian Cultural Center by an Afghan artist named Shamsia Hassani. The words on the ravaged brick read, “The water will come back to the dried river, but what about the dead fish.” The photo was taken in 2011 by photographer David Gill (shot2bits.com). Having been based in Kabul for seven years, Gill was the force behind many art and multimedia projects, including social documentary films *Kabul at Work* and *Afghanistan at Work*. My many thanks to these two for allowing me to use this image.

My home institution, Hobart and William Smith Colleges provided funding for trips to the archives and travel funds to disseminate my work at professional conferences. Students in my courses “Representing the 9/11 Wars” and “Imagining the Middle East” helped me grapple with many of the intellectual questions this book addresses. I am especially thankful to the Fisher Center for the Study of Gender and Justice at Hobart and William Smith Colleges that awarded me two fellowships, in 2015–16 and 2017–18. Conversations with other Fisher Center fellows, among them Marcela Romero, Robert Maclean, Elizabeth Johnson, Jennifer Cazenove, Nic Beuret, Matthew Crow, Megan Brown, and Kai Heron were invaluable and allowed me to refine the arguments for chapters two and five. I am especially grateful to Fisher Center Director Jodi Dean for her comradely support and unceasing enthusiasm for the project.

The seminar I took with Debjani Ganguly at the Institute for World Literature in Lisbon in 2015 helped me better frame some of the book’s arguments. I am indebted to the works-in-progress research group

colleagues for reading early versions of this work. Leah Shafer and Karen Frost-Arnold, my writing partners, made my daily writing practice a joyful experience. I thank my English Department colleagues for their support and encouragement, among them Anna Creadick, Laurence Erussard, Biman Basu, David Weiss, Grant Holly, Melanie Hamilton, Nicola Minot-Ahl, Rob Carson, Kathryn Cowles, Stephen Cope, and Alex Black. Women's studies colleagues, among them Betty Bayer, Etin Anwar, Christine Woodworth, Lara Blanchard, Charity Lofthouse, May Farnsworth, Rebecca Burditt, and Michelle Martin-Baron, provided useful feedback on early drafts. Anna Creadick, Kevin Dunn, and Chris Coffman offered valuable advice on the pragmatics of book publishing. I thank the Center for Teaching and Learning at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Director Susan Pliner for offering writing retreats for faculty, which allowed for uninterrupted time to write at the end of each semester. Many thanks to Tina Smaldone for helping with logistical tasks. My gratitude also goes to Wendy Stoddard for teaching me the practice of meditation and mindfulness that helped me bring this project to completion.

Chapter two is derived in part from an article published in *Textual Practice* 31.1 (2017), copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1237987>; an earlier version of chapter five was published in *Modern Fiction Studies* 63.2 (2017).

I thank the editorial team at Purdue University Press for their attention to detail and for bringing this project to the public. Comments by two anonymous reviewers were very valuable in making this book what it is today.

I am, of course, forever indebted to my wife, Melina Ivanchikova, who was a part of this project from its birth to completion and who made everything possible.

Introduction: Global Afghanistan

A Dim Object, a Bright Object

When photojournalist Lynsey Addario came back home to New York City in 2000, having traveled to Afghanistan still under the rule of the Taliban, she had trouble finding a venue for her photographs. She writes: “For a long time no newspaper or magazine bought them. In the year 2000 no one in New York was interested in Afghanistan” (77). At that time, Afghanistan was what object-oriented philosopher Levi R. Bryant would call a *dim object*—it emitted no light, attracted no attention, and the eyes of the world were not on it. This “dim” period lasted more or less from 1989—the year when the Soviet government made the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan (an event that marked the end of the Cold War, preceding the dissolution of the Soviet Union by two years)—to 2001, the year when the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City shook the world. In the weeks following 9/11, as the United States was preparing to embark on Operation Enduring Freedom, the previously dim object suddenly became bright. As reporters rushed into Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat, media outlets around the world were flooded with images of Afghanistan and its people.

What started with the brief operation to remove the Taliban regime was to become the United States’ longest war yet.¹ Historian Robert D. Crews estimates that more than a million American military and military support personnel have cycled through Afghanistan since 2001, not including the coalition forces or third-party nationals hired in droves by private military contracting companies.² This number also excludes

hundreds of thousands of other foreigners—writers, historians, anthropologists, reporters, doctors, reconstruction experts, election observers, political analysts, public relations professionals, and various other advisers and humanitarians—who went in and out of Kabul and other Afghan cities during the years following the American intervention. Many were idealistic and went to Afghanistan to be a part of the collective rebuilding effort. Others were opportunistic and predatory, eager to take advantage of reconstruction money.³ Billions of dollars have been poured into Afghanistan’s reconstruction and development project—an amount that, when adjusted for inflation, exceeds the Marshall Plan for postwar Western Europe; however, this incredible influx of cash somehow failed to deliver similar results. Paradoxically, for many westerners, a stint in Afghanistan was a chance for a career break or a welcome respite from their first-world economies marked by neoliberal austerity and unemployment. “Kabul . . . is one of the few places where a bright spark just out of college can end up in a job that comes with a servant and a driver,” wrote Canadian politician Michael Ignatieff in 2003.⁴ These expats—some mingling and even living with the locals, and others self-segregated in the loosely knit multicultural expat scene—left their marks on Afghanistan’s urban cultures, affected the economy (sometimes drastically, and usually for the worse), and were themselves transformed through this encounter, prompting a trans-cultural cross-pollination. The two decades following the attack on the Twin Towers will enter history textbooks as an era of the global West’s intense cross-cultural encounter with Afghanistan.⁵ Now is the moment to reflect upon this encounter—not just from a historical or a political perspective, but from a cultural point of view that takes stock of what transpired in this meeting of the worlds.

The brightness of Afghanistan in the years following 9/11 affected not only mass media but also other forms of cultural production, birthing an array of cultural texts set in the country. This book offers a close look into the vast cultural ecosystem—novels, films, graphic novels, memoirs, and drama—that was brought into existence by the American invasion of Afghanistan—the corpus that takes Afghanistan as its object or its setting. In the early years of the US-led war, the demand for knowledge about Afghanistan exceeded the supply; in 2007, Corinne Fowler—a pioneering scholar who provided an early overview of mass media coverage of Afghanistan—spoke of “the paucity of narratives produced in recent years. There is not as yet a sufficient body of post-Operation Enduring

Freedom narratives about Afghanistan” (215). As I am writing this, in 2019, a vast body of written and visual texts is available to anyone who has interest in stories set in Afghanistan. In fact, all it takes is a quick search on Amazon for book or film titles that feature Afghanistan, Kabul, Kandahar, or Herat in their titles to realize that Afghanistan has become a cultural franchise. As such, this corpus has its own sets of rules, laws of probability and improbability, its sets of veritable characters, its obsessions and common themes. It also has its gaps, silences, elisions, and absences that are just as important as what is present. This set of cultural texts, mostly but not exclusively Anglophone, predominantly Western- or NATO-centric, makes some things visible, just as it condemns others to invisibility; it opens some discussions while foreclosing others. These gaps and absences, just as its revelations, are the subject of the subsequent chapters.⁶

Chronology does not play a large role in this book—the chapters are organized around several thematic clusters that I outline below. Yet the three distinct “waves” of writing and screening Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, deserve at least a brief mention. The first wave of post-9/11 texts set in Afghanistan, published between 2001 and 2007, brought into view the humanitarian crisis in the country while replicating some of the Cold War conventions of writing about Afghanistan and even making use of British colonial imagery. Texts by European travelers Åsne Seierstad and Rory Stewart, who journeyed to Afghanistan as soon as its borders were opened to westerners by the US-led Taliban ouster, exemplify this phase, as well as its neo-imperial investments. For most foreigners who visited Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 the trip was an exotic adventure of a lifetime, so claims to an extraordinary experience abound in these early works. Vestiges of this colonial mode of writing about Afghanistan persist even in some texts of the second decade of the 9/11 wars. For instance, Edward Girardet, a European American correspondent with two decades of experience in Afghanistan, evokes the British colonial era profusely in his memoir *Killing the Cranes* published in 2011, a decade after the invasion: “Working in Afghanistan was like being a character in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King*” (6). Other writers of the first wave, such as early Khaled Hosseini and Atiq Rahimi, positioned Afghanistan as a generalized zone of suffering in need of Western protection and rescue. They also deployed the tropes of Soviet barbarity as a shortcut to explaining the Afghan tragedy, suggesting that communism was the sole cause of the country’s undoing. By the end of the first decade

of the War on Terror, however, claims to an extraordinary (and solitary) experience were no longer the rule, and the urge to portray Afghans as victims subsided. In turn, a more complex panorama of Afghanistan emerged in texts that were nuanced and multidimensional, of significant didactic and philosophical value. Exemplary of this period are Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), Kamila Shamsie's intensely lyrical *Burnt Shadows* (2009), and Nadeem Aslam's philosophical *The Wasted Vigil* (2008)—all of which I discuss in this book.

Finally, a third wave of texts—well into the second decade of the US-led war—dramatically expands our view of Afghanistan by making visible its transnational history and transcontinental connections. No longer exoticizing the Afghan people, these more recent texts draw attention to the global problems as seen from and through Afghanistan. Portraying Afghanistan as an outlandish, medieval, isolated locale by now seems like a tiresome cliché; representations of the country's recent history have become much more nuanced, historically grounded, and self-reflective. Exemplary of this wave are novels, graphic texts, films, and memoirs that I turn to in chapters four through six. Many texts of this period do not focus on their authors' solitary experiences, but by contrast, draw attention to the humanitarian community that gathered in Afghanistan post-9/11, and in American journalist Kim Barker's words, "behaved badly" (*The Taliban Shuffle* 78). The gaze is no longer on the "exotic Afghan" but on poorly behaving, opportunity-seeking foreigners in Afghanistan—members of a new international creed produced by a combination of neoliberalism-triggered hyper-competition for diminishing resources in the global North and US militarism.

When defining the corpus of texts that comprise the object of study in this book, I propose the term "global Afghanistan cultural production" to capture the specific nature and address of these works; these texts were not written or produced by Afghans for the Afghan public but were created by foreigners for a global audience. This book is not about Afghan national literature or film produced in Dari or Pashto by Afghan authors; a reader with an interest in Afghan national literature should look elsewhere, such as to the collection of stories *Afghanistan in Ink* that provides a timely and insightful overview of Afghan national and diasporic writing. Among the authors in *Imagining Afghanistan* are American, British, French, Canadian, Norwegian, Algerian, and Pakistani cultural producers—all foreigners with their own agendas and geopolitical positioning.

A few works by Afghan-born authors are treated, such as works by Khaled Hosseini, Qais Akbar Omar, and Nelofer Pazira; however, all three are bicultural exiles residing in the United States and Canada and writing for Anglophone publics. Many of the cultural producers that comprise the global Afghanistan corpus in this book are intimately familiar with Afghanistan, having spent years there or having traveled extensively in the country. There are many texts, however, that were produced by foreigners who admit to having never been to Afghanistan; by setting their stories in Afghanistan, they engage in the act of imagining the country as befitting their own desires and agendas.⁷ The texts examined here thus are windows upon Afghanistan only in a very specific sense: They are windows not onto Afghanistan and its culture, but onto the shared world of global cultural producers (mostly NATO-centric), as they capitalize on their (mostly Western) publics' appetites for cultural otherness and curiosity about a distant war.

Global Afghanistan writing and film are often in conversation with the set of works that has been referred to as “the 9/11 novels and film”⁸—cultural texts produced in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001. While there are many overlapping themes, the global Afghanistan corpus has distinct features that are often in tension with the 9/11 cultural production. In contrast to the 9/11 works with their deep investment in national trauma, memorialization, the issues of representability, and US national recovery, the texts I discuss in this book are examples of transnational cultural production insofar as they do not prioritize a single national perspective and are not focused on helping the American nation heal. In fact, while in the 9/11 texts the exceptional event of the attacks typically constitutes the affective and symbolic nerve, in the works I discuss in this book, 9/11 remains largely absent. If addressed at all, the event of the attacks is usually described indirectly and is registered from afar, as the reverberations make their way to distant places, such as Afghanistan or Pakistan, in the form of the War on Terror. Or, just as often, the attacks themselves are featured as a result of prior historical developments, in the form of an echo of a remote catastrophe—the collapse of the Afghan state. As Georgiana Banita notes in her book on the 9/11 novel, the attacks on the Twin Towers have been presented as a complete rupture from the past: “Global historical events that may have prefaced or prefigured the terrorist attacks were quickly forgotten in post-9/11 cultural discourse, while a vociferous counterdiscourse emerged around how 9/11 ushered

in, seemingly out of the blue, a new transnational era” (44). By contrast, global Afghanistan works seek to inscribe optics that makes 9/11 legible as a consequence of prior historical tragedies that require commemoration.

Taken as a whole, “global Afghanistan” cultural texts exhibit a specific sensibility and flavor that are an expression of the shared historical condition in which they are situated. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, this corpus registers the global, ever-expanding state of war, and conveys a sense of vulnerability and crisis, mapping the landscapes of victimhood and terror. There is a sense of global interconnectedness in all these texts as they oscillate between close-ups that reveal the violence inflicted on individual bodies caught in the mayhem of localized wars and the planetary scale that frames these acts of violence. As a corollary to registering and dramatizing the crisis of wars without end, many of these texts convey an interest in finding pathways to transnational reconciliation and peace, with Afghanistan figuring as an imagined site of such reconciliation. In sum, the texts grouped in this book register a sustained commitment to finding a language to describe what defines the post-9/11 contemporary—the era journalist Jason Burke calls “the 9/11 wars.” This impulse positions the global Afghanistan corpus as a hermeneutics of the present—an effort to find the meaning of the events we collectively experience and to situate ourselves in relation to them.

Burke’s term “the 9/11 wars” captures the period defined by a series of deadly conflicts in various parts of the world that followed the 9/11 attacks.⁹ The 9/11 wars encompass the global War on Terror declared by George W. Bush along with its Obama-era reformulations; they also comprise the cultural wars, terrorist attacks, and low-level military conflicts in Europe, Russia, Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, among other places, resulting in massive, albeit distributed, loss of life, dislocation of millions, the redrawing of the borders in the Middle East, and other changes in the global configuration of power. The 9/11 wars era is seemingly the era of wars without end; dubbed a “forever war,” an “everywhere war,”¹⁰ it exhibits “a pattern of wars without objectives, exit strategies, or geographical boundaries” (Wood 71).¹¹ My preference for the term “the 9/11 wars,” as compared to the War on Terror (Bush’s strategy) and the Age of Terror (Don DeLillo’s phrase), is related to its capacity to capture the broad geographical distribution of post-9/11 conflicts, affecting lives in the global North and in the global South. In contrast to these other terms, Burke’s term gestures toward an era that is

infinitely complex and does not easily lend itself to the East/West binaries or to the metaphors of the epic struggle between good and evil, implied in both Bush's and DeLillo's designations. Additionally, it resists the exceptionality of the United States as the prime actor (and the prime victim) of the era, drawing attention to the multiple non-US participants and casualties of these wars. Rather than being an epic struggle of good versus evil, the 9/11 wars come into view as the era of largely invisible yet persistent conflicts, with an epicenter that is constantly moving.¹² The 9/11 wars capture the ubiquity of trauma in an age when violence becomes as globalized as it is random and when military invasions, masquerading as humanitarianism, continue unabated. By bringing into visibility a distributed community of those affected by the 9/11 wars worldwide, the global Afghanistan novels, memoirs, and films mediate the complex experiences of people of multiple nationalities trapped in these wars. By examining the frames of cultural reference, images, themes, and aesthetics that emerge in these texts, this book will contribute to a richer understanding of the post-9/11 global cultural production and the place of Afghanistan in the global imaginary.

A Contested History of a Global Nation

Considered within the frame of its history, Afghanistan is a paradoxical site. Deprived of major mineral wealth (this changed recently with the world's new thirst for lithium, abundant in Afghanistan), landlocked and surrounded from all sides by three formidable mountain ranges, it nevertheless has been a locus of sustained international interest for two hundred years, culminating in the forty-year-long era of social upheaval and bloodshed fueled by external meddling and global rivalries. Its turbulent history renders the fantasy of linear progress problematic, exposing the limitations of both twentieth- and twenty-first-century developmentalisms. Its contemporary state epitomizes halted development, the ruins of its recent past mocking the dreams of Afghan modernity. Almost two decades after the US-led invasion, it remains a zone of contention for multiple militarisms, a site where the dreams for liberal democracy's reach are tested, and found wanting, as they collide with the interests of radical Islamist groups and opium producers who seek to maintain Afghanistan as their enduring base, not to mention the varied needs and demands of tribal and ethnic groups. These new rivalries are superimposed upon stark ideological and class divisions in the nation that now ranks 169/187 on the

Human Development Index.¹³ And yet, as this book shows, Afghanistan's recent history is not merely a chronicle of war, but a gripping story that tells of incredible leaps forward and shocking setbacks, a history of building and dismantling, and of utopian dreaming. As such, it continues to fascinate travelers and vagabonds, humanitarians and historians, and above all, writers and readers who seek to make sense of the country's tempestuous, radical, utopian, and often violent past.

"There is a country so in the heart of the world that the world has forgotten about it," writes Tony Kushner in his play *Homebody/Kabul* (28). The image of Afghanistan in post-9/11 global writing and film is part myth, part history, part fantasy, and part collective hallucination, and the book is set to unpack its meaning. This book's title, *Imagining Afghanistan*, thus reflects the intellectual pursuit of the project: to understand how Afghanistan figures in the global imaginary and how the world, in turn, is imagined from and through this country. The interlacing of Afghanistan and "the global" is a persisting theme in all the texts discussed in this book; it is multilayered and requires an explanation. To begin with, Afghanistan is a global place quite literally; its history is intertwined with the history of the world perhaps more than any other nation-state.¹⁴ An entire generation of refugees, exiles, migrants, and transnational militants was created as a direct result of what Oona Frawley calls "global civil war"—the war between the Soviet Union and the United States fought on Afghanistan's soil.¹⁵ Moreover, by 1979 (the year of the Soviet intervention that marks the moment of intensification of the Cold War in the area), Afghanistan was already global—an argument I develop in chapter two. And yet, westerners continue to traffic in images of Afghan isolation and barbarity, portraying it as "a hermit kingdom"¹⁶ or a land of medieval thinking and practices.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Afghanistan—as it emerges in post-9/11 transnational texts—is sutured to the globe on the level of symbol and image: Its tragedies and successes often metonymically stand in for the globe at large. In *Afghanistan in the Cinema*, Mark Graham writes: "Afghanistan is more than a place; it is a global situation, like all wars, a seismic catastrophe that shatters and scatters all in its wake" (114). As a synecdoche for the world—a site where global trends emerge, come to fruition, and meet their demise—Afghanistan serves as a figure for the shared experience of loss, and potentially, as a figure of redemption, an opportunity for healing from the losses suffered. Burke brings attention to Afghanistan's post-9/11 symbolic role as the measure of the Western

superpowers' global reach, their capacity to impose their will upon the rest of the world, and their ability to neutralize and absorb local difference in the process of reshaping the invaded countries.¹⁷ Afghanistan's reconstruction era, or more precisely, its failures, ultimately exposes and serves as a figure of the limits of this capacity. Afghanistan thus functions as an imagined object of cathexis of multiple, often contradictory hopes, desires, or fears—serving simultaneously as a lens for deciphering the present, imagining the future, and for reinterpreting the past (an idea that I develop further in chapters two and three).

Historian Timothy Nunan likens Afghanistan's history to a palimpsest: "Here, sediments of history lay stacked upon one another like the sheaves of the Persian, Pashto, and Turkic manuscripts Orientalists jealously poached" (19). Yet the very layered nature of Afghanistan's recent past, as well as its interlacement with the larger global history of the late Cold War era, makes this history a contested subject. The seduction to flatten these layers into a simplified image of a third-world humanitarian crisis has been great in early post-9/11 global Afghanistan texts. Critics rightfully observed that US mainstream media and White House-sponsored political rhetoric projected a version of Afghan history that was essentially diphasic: the spell of timeless, medieval oppression to be broken through a liberation from the West. This became particularly obvious in relation to women's rights and the way in which the burqa—made mandatory for all women by the Taliban regime—became a signifier of cultural barbarity requiring an intervention. In this, the West saw itself as a benevolent force, a progressive agent of world history, an altruistic humanitarian who intervenes on behalf of the oppressed. Struggles over the country's recent history and the legacy of its various parts comprise a prominent theme in global Afghanistan cultural production. Each work discussed in this book projects its own vision of this history, competing, if not violently clashing, with other visions. Although I make references to various periods in Afghanistan's recent past in various chapters of this book, it might be useful to provide a brief summary of the basic chronology of events here.

Afghanistan enters the twentieth century as a British puppet state, with a history of two Anglo-Afghan wars prompted by the British Crown's anxiety about Russian advances in Central Asia. The First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–1842) culminated in the famous ambush and slaughter of 16,000 British troops, cementing the image of Afghans as wild, brutal, and unconquerable, which, in the more recent context, led to Afghanistan's

mythologization as “the graveyard of empires.”¹⁸ During the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880), however, the British were successful in installing a subservient regime in Kabul, effectively gaining control of the country. But not for long. In 1919, the British Empire, weakened by World War I, was evicted from Kabul and Afghanistan became independent—“a sovereign postcolonial state before it was fashionable” (Nunan, 11). Almost coeval with the Russian Revolution, Afghanistan’s independence was recognized and celebrated by Lenin and the new Soviet State, with whom the Afghan king promptly signed a treaty of friendship. The mid-twentieth-century period of King Mohammed Zahir Shah’s rule from 1933 to 1973 was marked by stability, peace, and the steady work of modernization characterized by advances in education, infrastructure development, and women’s rights.¹⁹ During this period, Afghanistan developed strong links with Europe, the United States, and the USSR, with many elite members going to universities in these countries. In 1959, female members of the royal family went in public unveiled, encouraging modern Afghan women to follow suit, prompting a brief veil war in Afghanistan—a religious backlash promptly suppressed by the monarchy committed to modernization. The years between 1960 and 1970 saw the rise of social justice movements that engaged in utopian dreaming and organization. Kabul University, with its large base of first-generation students, became the epicenter of such movements, home to both radical leftist socialist (and feminist) groups and ultraright radical Islamist groups. Nur Muhammad Taraki (the first socialist head of state), as well as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (an ultraright Islamist and later a militant known for his violence against civilians) found their base and their audience there.

Afghanistan’s history since 1973 can be likened to a video viewed in fast-forward mode—a lot happened in a short period of time. In 1973, the monarchy was overthrown in a coup d’état and Afghanistan became a republic under the leadership of Mohammed Daoud Khan—the former king’s cousin. In 1978, Daud was overthrown by the socialist party of Afghanistan, and Taraki—the party leader—became the head of state. Forging ahead with land reform and women’s education, and facing challenges to these changes in the countryside, the new socialist government requested Soviet military support, which was denied. Following Taraki’s assassination in 1979, however, fearing the further unraveling of the Afghan’s new and unstable socialist state, USSR’s head of state Leonid Brezhnev decided to send troops to help Babrak Karmal, the leader of

the moderate socialist party wing, assume leadership. From 1979 to 1989, Afghanistan was a socialist state, its security managed by the Soviet troops who remained in Afghanistan, but who were increasingly harassed by the ever-growing groups of mujahideen²⁰ (jihad fighters), who received extensive Western and Saudi support. In 1989, Soviet troops withdrew, ending the era of the Soviet-Afghan War and marking the advent of civil war. Improbably, the socialist government of Afghanistan persisted even after the withdrawal of the Soviet contingent, falling in 1992 to the ultraright mujahideen forces who finally surrounded and seized Kabul. From 1992 until the arrival of the Taliban in 1996, warring factions of various radical Islamist groups destroyed the infrastructure of the country, unleashed war on civilians, and engaged in ethnic cleansing, all of which lead to the collapse of the state and massive population displacement. After fifty years of steady modernization, Afghanistan was reduced to ruins. While the arrival of the Taliban in 1996 restored a degree of law and order, it also solidified gender inequalities already in place, and did little to alleviate the poverty and breakdown of infrastructure. The US arrival in 2001 brought another change, with the creation of a fragile, unstable democracy propped up by Western money and NATO military personnel. To conclude this overview, if in 1880 Frenchman James Darmesteter could write, "The Afghans do not have a history, because anarchy has none,"²¹ today a historian might observe that the Afghans, for a small nation, have a uniquely rich global history, mirroring, in many ways, the turbulent history of the twentieth century.

The Book's Key Arguments

A site in which colonial, socialist, fundamentalist, and neo-imperialist histories collide and grate against each other, Afghanistan poses representational difficulties for cultural producers. Writing or screening Afghanistan in the twenty-first century involves reckoning not only with the issues of human rights, women's rights, and transnational terror, but also brings with it contentious legacies bequeathed by the Cold War. Afghanistan, I argue throughout this project, serves as a lens through which contemporary cultural producers contend with the moral ambiguities of twenty-first-century humanitarianism, interpret the legacy of the Cold War and the defeated socialist project, recognize (or obscure) the role of the United States in the rise of transnational terror, and grapple with the long-term impact of war on both human and nonhuman ecologies. An object of desire, as much as the object to be deciphered, Afghanistan's history serves as a screen upon

which fantasies of the future—images of the world to come—are projected and debated. Interpretations of Afghanistan’s socialist history, its radical Islamist past, and its neoliberal present collide to lay claims upon the world that is emerging at the end of the second decade of the 9/11 wars.

This book makes three interventions. First, using Afghanistan as a case study, it offers a critique of the humanitarian imaginary—a culturally specific mode of global relationality and engagement that has become dominant in the global North after the Cold War’s end. Second, the book shows an imbrication of the humanitarian narrative with post-Cold War aphasias, ranging from a virulent anti-socialist stance to Left melancholy that presents, mostly, as inconsistencies and gaps in representation. And finally, through an examination of a growing archive of writing and film that emerged in the second decade of the 9/11 wars, the book maps a way out of the humanitarian imaginary. Let me dwell on each of the three points here.

In its critique of the humanitarian imaginary, the book takes as a point of departure contemporary analyses of humanitarianism as exemplified by Joseph M. Slaughter (*Human Rights, Inc.*) and Didier Fassin (*Humanitarian Reason*), among others. While Slaughter’s readings are based on a different archive—the world-spanning array of novels that came out during the 1990s human rights era—his analysis of the humanitarian narrative is useful to this project. Specifically, Slaughter views the humanitarian narrative as a literary technology that solidifies global hierarchies, “recenter[ing] the traditional subjects of history now as the subjects of benevolence, humanitarian interventionist sentimentality, and human rights” (324). Moreover, Slaughter underscores the juncture between the cultural logic of literary humanitarianism and the *Realpolitik* of imperialism, demonstrating how a human rights best seller can preempt and legitimize a real humanitarian-military intervention. My focus on Afghanistan allows me to render more concrete such critique of the humanitarian narrative by bringing into view the very specific problems and impasses that result from an adoption of the humanitarian mode for writing about Afghanistan. On the one hand, screening and writing Afghanistan after 9/11 can serve as an ultimate case study in humanitarian imaginary, exemplifying precisely the interventionist logic Slaughter critiques. On the other hand, however, Afghanistan’s uniquely nonlinear history makes problematic a humanitarian reduction of its past to a biphasic formula that traces a trajectory from oppression to the subsequent access to dignity and personal development—a hallmark of

the human rights best seller as described by Slaughter. When writers and filmmakers attempt such a reduction, multiple problems ensue. Afghanistan's revolutionary socialist project, albeit defeated, also poses a challenge to the liberal notion of emancipation insofar as it privileges collective, rather than individual, empowerment. This socialist past thus proves to be resistant to either cooptation or incorporation into a human rights-based mode of representation. And as such, it becomes unrepresentable.

Therefore, the second task of this book is to bring into view the multiple anti-socialist biases endemic in NATO-centric contexts and to show their imbrications with humanitarian tropes. The book argues that many prominent cultural texts, especially those published during the first decade of the 9/11 wars, are marked by an uncritical investment in anti-communism as a shortcut to explaining Afghanistan's tragedy. In these works, the ruins of Afghanistan are proffered as the ruins of communism: Sites of socialist history figure as ruined sites, meant to exemplify the violence that the socialist state, and in particular the Soviets, unleashed on bodies, buildings, and nature. In these texts, Afghan people figure almost exclusively as (albeit defiant) victims of Soviet barbarity. While most cultural theorists, since Edward Said, have been attuned to the dangers of Orientalism, they are less conscious of the long-term othering strategies that originated in the Cold War that cast socialism as an unnatural force, communists as sexual predators, and the socialist state (especially the Soviet Union) as an unflinchingly totalitarian, destructive presence in *any* region. The archive of global Afghanistan works that I put together in this book reveals that in NATO-centric contexts, anti-socialist (and by extension anti-statist) tropes are pervasive on both sides of the political spectrum, and frame both the cultural production and its reception by critics. These modes of representing *and* seeing, as I demonstrate, result in redacting indigenous Afghan Leftist history and the complete erasure of the Afghan revolutionary subject. The framework of Orientalism alone is thus not sufficient in relation to Afghanistan writing and film; postcolonial approaches are similarly insufficient insofar as postcolonial critiques reduce the socialist era in Afghanistan to the Soviet occupation, viewed as a neocolonial endeavor, similarly erasing Afghanistan's radical Leftist tradition and its revolutionary history. I thus suggest that we add to the human rights, postcolonial, and Orientalist critiques a critique of anti-socialist bias—which ranges from virulent anti-Sovietisms to forms of bias that are much more subtle, such as “Left-wing melancholy” and “capitalist realism.”

“Capitalist realism”—a term introduced by Mark Fisher (2009)—captures the presence of “a widespread belief that there is no alternative to capitalism” (19), a view that presumes that alternatives to capitalism are unnatural, no longer imaginable, or always a priori doomed to failure. Afghanistan, for capitalist realists, serves as a prime example of the inevitability of socialist failure. “Left-wing melancholy” is a phrase coined by Enzo Traverso in his eponymous book that captures a similar sentiment; it refers to a sense of disorientation and loss that is a residue of the defeat suffered by the global Left at the end of the twentieth century (xiv). Both capitalist realists and Left-wing melancholics suffer the loss of utopia (the future) while haunted by memories of the past that evade understanding and mourning. History appears to them as a pile of ruins whose meaning is inexplicable and thus ungrievable: “Deprived of its horizon of expectation, the twentieth century appears to our retrospective gaze as an age of wars and genocide” (Traverso 10). Cultural producers (and critics) whose views align with these subtle forms of bias, as discussed in this book, might not reduce Afghanistan’s tragedy to an image of Soviet atrocity; however, since they do not have the language to talk about Afghanistan’s revolutionary past in such a way that would redeem it by remaining faithful to its emancipatory dream, they often choose to simply omit it, thus contributing to the collective work of erasure. And so, Afghan socialist modernity remains unmourned, condemned to the rubble of history.

Finally, my third intervention in this book is to suggest a way of moving beyond the horizon defined by the juncture of humanitarianism and anti-socialism. Chapters four through six move beyond critique and offer, instead, paths toward alternative imaginaries. The Afghanistan corpus of cultural texts, I argue, indexes both an endemic quality of melancholic humanitarianism as a mode of representation and a push to move beyond this imaginary. At the end of the second decade of the 9/11 wars we are witnessing, I argue, the emergence of new vocabularies and frameworks that allow writers and filmmakers to bring into view traumatic histories without succumbing to the humanitarian tropes. The humanitarian wager, I believe, is losing its appeal. New modes of representing traumatic histories include, first and foremost, a shift of attention from the suffering human figure (the traumatized survivor) to conditions and infrastructures of violence, with the intent to capture slow and distributed violence. Capturing slow or massively distributed violence requires a long-term witness or a nonhuman witness. In addition, debates over the Anthropocene, coeval

with the 9/11 wars, have brought into focus deep time as a framework for thinking and action. The global Afghanistan corpus of works registers this shift: Viewing Afghanistan in deep time—as a geological object—opens up new ways of writing about human and nonhuman suffering, recovery, and resilience. Finally, many works of the second decade of the 9/11 wars stage a comedic reversal where humanitarian tropes are put on their head and the very idea of a humanitarian invasion is ridiculed. In terms of the book's trajectory, chapter three serves as a hinge as it begins a transition from critique to constructive work, from exposing the limits of humanitarianism (and anti-socialism) to considering these new modes of representation. The book thus makes an argument about the progressive disillusionment with humanitarianism as a moral framework over the two decades of US-led wars as evidenced through novels and memoirs set in Afghanistan. While we do not yet know what is coming, it is evident that the age of humanitarian reason is showing multiple fissures that might be impossible to patch.

The Trajectory of the Book

When putting together my “global Afghanistan” archive, I made a deliberate effort to include both popular works (blockbuster films and best-selling novels) and more obscure texts. The resulting array thus contains bright objects and dim objects. One may expect that bright objects tap into the dominant cultural imaginary and strengthen it, and this is often true. And, in turn, one might anticipate that obscure texts will have more freedom to challenge our belief systems, pushing the boundaries of our vision. However, for both bright and dim objects, this is not always the case. Some blockbusters undo themselves by containing unbearable tensions and contradictions, while obscure works often channel hegemonic beliefs uncritically. These difficulties notwithstanding, I believe that a combination of visual and written texts and a mix of high and low culture will offer a veritable snapshot of how Afghanistan has been imagined, and reimagined, over the span of the two decades since the fall of the Twin Towers.

Chapter one, “Humanitarian Sublime and the Politics of Pity: Writing and Screening ‘Afghanistan’ Circa 2001,” looks at three examples of representing Afghanistan during this time period—Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandabar* (2001); Yasmina Khadra's novel *The Swallows of Kabul* (2002); and Tony Kushner's acclaimed play *Homebody/Kabul* (2002). The importance of this cluster of works, aside from providing early examples of

post-9/11 cultural representations of Afghanistan, lies in its role in framing Afghanistan as a zone of immense suffering (especially women's suffering) and humanitarian crisis, which in the post-9/11 context served to give legitimacy and purpose to the US-led invasion. These works exemplify post-Cold War humanitarian imaginary by their reliance on empathetic identification with distant suffering, in their extensive medievalization of Afghanistan, and finally, in a dramatic flattening of the country's history. The chapter's key metaphor, "flat earth," draws attention to this act of leveling in which Afghanistan's deeply palimpsestic, eventful recent history is reduced to the shallow, two-dimensional chronology of the most recent crisis (the Taliban), into which western audiences then feel compelled to intervene. The chapter exposes the limitations of representing Afghanistan in a humanitarian mode and introduces the term "humanitarian sublime" to capture the deployment of humanitarian affect in response to distant suffering.

Chapter two, "Imagining the Soviets: The Faustian Bargain of Khaled Hosseini's Kabul 'Trilogy,'" unveils the paradoxical place of the Afghan socialist era in the post-9/11 imaginary. As such, it sheds light on how Cold War-era biases continue to shape representations of Afghanistan's history in NATO-centric contexts in the age of the 9/11 wars. Animated by a desire to recover the image of socialist Afghanistan from its historical (and cultural) ruins, the chapter inscribes much needed ambiguity into the narrative of "ruination via the Soviets" by engaging the literary project of Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini. By throwing Hosseini's best-selling *The Kite Runner* (a virulently anti-Soviet text) against the background of a late-Cold War novel by an American writer M. E. Hirsh, *Kabul* (1986), as well as by staging a dialogue between *The Kite Runner* and Hosseini's two subsequent novels—*A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), the chapter demonstrates that Hosseini strikes a Faustian bargain that both accounts for his success and forces him into a number of representational stalemates that, as of yet, remain unaddressed by critics.

Chapter three, "Humanitarian Jihad: Unearthing the Contemporary in the Narratives of the Long 1979," argues that in the post-9/11 context, 1979 (a "dark" threshold of the contemporary), must be viewed as a genealogical point of origin that is more important than 1989 (a "bright" threshold connoting the presumed triumph of liberal democracy). The year 1979 marks a "hot" moment in the Cold War: Soviet intervention in

Afghanistan and the onset of US-led covert “Operation Cyclone” (a.k.a. the Afghan jihad)—a proxy war against the Soviets and the largest covert operation in CIA history. What were the costs of defeating what Ronald Reagan called “the Evil Empire”? How do we make visible the hidden histories of transnational terror? Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), Sorayya Khan’s *City of Spies* (2015), and Didier Lefèvre’s visual account of his journey to Afghanistan in *The Photographer* (produced with Emmanuel Guibert and Frédéric Lemerrier, 2009) help us imagine our way into these CIA-orchestrated “ghost wars”—largely invisible, yet deadly.²² Lefèvre’s graphic memoir, unwittingly, offers important insights into the role that European humanitarians, such as Doctors Without Borders and European reporters (such as Lefèvre himself), played in the anti-Soviet jihad in the mountain ranges of 1980s Afghanistan. This chapter’s key term, “humanitarian jihad,” points to how humanitarian images—such as the famous image of the Afghan girl of the 1985 *National Geographic*—were put to use in support of the jihad against the Soviets and the Afghan socialist state. The suffering child is a signifier of crisis, but which crisis? In Lefèvre’s graphic memoir, the suffering child is, unambiguously, a victim of Soviet barbarity; in Aslam’s and Khan’s works, the suffering child becomes a figure for US interference in the region.

Chapter four, “Witness: Modes of Writing the Disaster,” discusses three texts written by South Asian writers—Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009), Qais Akbar Omar’s *A Fort of Nine Towers* (2013), and Zia Haider Rahman’s *In the Light of What We Know* (2014). These works conjure divergent, powerful ways of inscribing the Afghan disaster as an object of memorialization, foregrounding its key role in late twentieth-century history, and situating it as a site of convergence of multiple global forces (USSR, United States, Pakistan, and others). They provide a compelling alternative to the humanitarian mode of writing traumatic histories by constructing three modes of witness, and therefore three modes of making legible the Afghan disaster. Both Omar’s and Shamsie’s texts offer a long-term witness as a main device that allows them to document the crises that would unfold several generations. The focus of the long-term witness permits these writers to document the processes of slow violence and the delayed effects of war, such as mass displacement, habitat destruction, and toxicity, which take years or even decades to manifest. By contrast, Rahman’s novel, through both its plot and its formal aspects, argues against the primacy of eye-witnessing. As the

ontological indeterminacy at the very core of the world continuously thwarts our epistemic thrust, the disaster, Rahman's novel suggests, calls for a nonhuman witness.

Chapter five, "The Deep Time of War: Nadeem Aslam and the Aesthetics of the Geologic Turn," further maps the landscape of global Afghanistan writing (especially modes of witnessing and mediation of the catastrophe) by turning to deep memory, while further exploring the idea of a nonhuman witness. Aslam's Afghanistan-based novels exemplify the affordances of the geologic turn for writing traumatic histories in the era of the Anthropocene—the era that, paradoxically, decenters the human. Aslam's writing positions Earth (seen as a rich landscape populated by multiple species and nonliving objects) as a nonhuman witness (geo-witness) to human catastrophe—a medium of memory that registers the disaster of war at a scale that surpasses the human. Aslam's works channel species memory, insect perception, and geological inscription of the war-borne toxicities that slip into millennia-old geological strata. By bringing into focus the deep time of history's material sedimentations, Aslam dramatizes the long-term consequences of the wars waged in the region—that alter landscapes and change multispecies ecologies. Seen from the perspective of deep time, Aslam's Afghanistan is not a humanitarian scene—it emerges as a habitat of demoiselle cranes and snow leopards, a land of slow-forming gemstones and Buddhism, mapping the deep history of Eurasia, human and nonhuman.

The last chapter, "The Kabubble: The Humanitarian Community Under Scrutiny," offers an overview of writing and screening Afghanistan in the second decade of the 9/11 wars by examining French illustrator Nicolas Wild's *Kabul Disco* (a graphic novel series, 2009; 2013), journalist Kim Barker's *The Taliban Shuffle* (a memoir, 2011), and American comedian Tina Fey's 2016 blockbuster *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (a feature film based on Barker's memoir). These cultural texts use comedy to depict westerners' experiences in Afghanistan and index the general waning of belief in the success of US-led military interventions in the name of democratic and humanitarian aims. They bring into stark relief the limitations (and the hubris) of the humanitarian mode of representation by mocking and parodying it. These works illustrate the complicated journey from an uncritical investment in humanitarianism as an amelioration to Third World suffering to the realization of the disconnect between the global West's humanitarian agendas, and the realities of the late neoliberal moment

that determine the attitudes and desires of the transnational humanitarian workers (and other expats) who partake in the financial bubble in the aftermath of the military operation. These late-arriving narratives dramatize the “Kabubble”—foreigners’ Kabul—as a surreal place of transnational career-building and individual risk-taking spurred by neoliberal competition for diminishing resources in the global North.²³