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Mollie Michelle Fiero April 1, 2018

Grounds for Debate: Afghan Women's bodies as a site of contestation after September 11, 2001

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# Grounds for Debate: Afghan Women's bodies as a site of contestation after September 11, 2001

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Abstract
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Despite the immense consideration given to 9/11 in American public life, the "story" of 9/11 has remained incomplete in popular media and state-based sources. Afghan women's bodies, and by extension, their stories and life experiences, were selectively cultivated and shared to serve distinct political interests after September 11, 2001. The Bush Administration quickly latched onto Afghan women as a site of possible "liberation." American feminists portrayed Afghan women in a manner that denied their agency by focusing on "religious oppression", such as the role of the hijab and women's equality within Islam broadly. Amidst this frenzy of attention paid towards Afghan women as an idea, and as a site for contestation, Afghan women's writing and efforts were rarely shared. By using interviews recorded as part of the Columbia University Oral History Archive, this thesis questions why certain narratives have not been as extensively shares and uses these perspectives to enhance an understanding of 9/11.

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## Introduction

The day after my fifth birthday, I woke up to the sound of the television in the other room. Both of my parents were standing in front of the TV screen, staring in disbelief. I went unnoticed for a moment, which was rare in our household. My parents were focused on the looping video on television, which claimed "LIVE" footage, and showed flames and smoke engulfing two skyscrapers. The angle switched, and with the news bulletin bar blitzing below, I watched a looping image of a large plane flying directly into a tall building and exploding. By the time we had woken up on the west coast, Flight 11 and Flight 175 had crashed into the World Trade Center's North and South towers in New York City, and Flight 77 had struck the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C. When I asked my mother how she remembered that morning, she said, that as soon as she realized what was happening, she turned off the television. Later, news channels would stop showing the footage because they realized its potential to disturb viewers, and in particular, young children.[1] I also remember being told many times by my parents in the subsequent years that "things weren't like this before 9/11."

This is my memory of September 11, 2001. Many Americans have some version of their story of "where they were on 9/11." These stories are shared not because of their novelty, but to revisit what has become a collective national wound, for catharsis, healing, and the sake of remembering *to* remember as an act of honorific patriotism. I share my own version of this story *not* because it is unique or of particular interest, but because this thesis is my attempt to intervene into and reflect on the ramifications of the reality and representation of 9/11.[2] Because of my

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[1] The Associated Press, "TV loosens restrictions on airing 9/11 images," *Today*, September 10, 2006, accessed January 10, 2018, https://www.today.com/popculture/tv-loosens-restrictions-airing-9-11-images-wbna14769404.

[2] Michael-Rolph Truillot's book *Silencing the Past: The Power in the Story* (1995) discusses the relationship between individual stories, memories, and histories and says, "history is to a

age, I am on the cusp of those who "remember" and those who do not, which garners particular significance on the anniversaries of 9/11 when all Americans are implored to "never forget."

For those who have no direct personal memories, 9/11 and its social and political effects are an inherited cultural fact.[3] In the American Congress, under scrutiny from the public and pressure from President George W. Bush, there was an enormous undertaking to explain and articulate the exact "story" of these attacks. The National Commission on Terror Attacks Upon the United States (known as the 9/11 Commission) was formed in 2002 and allocated $15 million. In the summer of 2004, the Commission produced a 585-page document that was meant to serve both as an exhaustive description of the events and their preconditions, and provide policy recommendations moving forward ranging from immigration and border security to intelligence practices.[4] The report's 9th and 10th chapters are named "Heroism and Horror" and "Wartime," respectively. This swift transition demonstrates how the invasion of Afghanistan was written into the official state history as a natural progression – above scrutiny, and as an objective, clear "answer" to the emotional, wounding attacks. I discuss the 9/11 Commission Report not to imply that the timeline of events should be disputed, but rather to suggest that the embedded significance of the events of 9/11 are far-reaching and deserve thorough study. This is

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collectivity as remembrance is to an individual, the more or less conscious retrieval of past experiences in the memory…we can call it, for short, the storage model of memory-history." (p. 14) In this thesis, I will be critical of the state-centric history which is presumed to be collective and universal by bringing forward individual remembrances of 9/11.

[3] It is important to note that these two categories, social and political, are often intertwined as "socio-political" rather than being two distinct categories. Similarly, "academic" and "political" writing cannot be truly separated as political implications are present in nearly all academic work.

[4] Thomas H, Kean and Lee Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Washington, D.C.: National, Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004.

particularly true when certain accounts, such as the 9/11 Commission Report, carry the air of unmatched "legitimacy" and "credibility." It's a critical task to begin to unravel the political saturation of the history of September 11th, and, in doing so, question the "natural"-ness of this progression towards conflict, as well as the widespread changes in governance after these events.

Many American children, some of whom who will turn 18 years old next year, have spent all their lives in what has been dubbed the "Post-9/11 world." The assertion of a "Post-9/11 world" carries immense significance, by suggesting a fundamental break between "before" and "after." Feminist scholars, such as Bronywn Winter, asked what constitutes the "world" in the Post-9/11 world and who lives in it.[5] I would ask, whose stories are told, how, and why in the Post-9/11 world, and what perspectives are carried through this "rupture" in American history.

Geographically, Afghanistan is considered to be a part of both Central Asia and South Asia. It is located to the northeast of the Indian subcontinent. The Hindu Kush mountain range spans much of the country, and there are also regions with arid land or desert. Afghanistan shares its borders with Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China.

Since developing my own academic interests – in particular the intersection of religion, the state, and history – I have wondered what my memory and understanding of 9/11 lacked, and what I had accepted as "objective" but "gender-neutral" truth. I suspected that there was a "women's 9/11" that I had not been taught in school or absorbed through popular media. I had seen the 1985 National Geographic cover with the famous "Afghan Girl" photograph. Her portrait on the magazine cover, in which she wears a hijab covering her hair and has dirt on her face, is an embodiment of the foreign "otherness" that is projected upon Afghan women. The

[5] Bronwyn Winter, *Women, Insecurity, and Violence in a Post-9/11 World* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), p. 20.

image was first published and circulated during the Cold War and conflict between the Mujahideen and Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Once again, it returned to American's attention when President Bush and the First Lady both spoke about the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban during the early days of "Operation Enduring Freedom." In January 2002, a National Geographic team traveled to refugee camps in Pakistan to follow up on the story of the "Afghan Girl." They filmed a documentary of their mission to track down the woman, named Sharbat Gula, called *The Search for the Afghan Girl*.[6]

*The Search of the Afghan Girl* was always a flawed project, because it began from the assumption that she had been lost. We can ask: who lost her and was she theirs to lose? What would it mean for her to be "found?" And, why was there only an appetite to learn more about her, nearly two decades later, after Afghanistan was a site of American "interest"? To put it explicitly: it seems very unlikely that National Geographic would have "searched" for Sharbat Gula if the U.S. had not been attacked by terrorists trained in Afghanistan. In fact, Sharbat had never seen the photograph taken of her in 1984, she did not know that her image was ever used or reproduced so widely until January 2002.[7]

Undoubtedly, there was a resurgence of interest in Afghan women as part of the political agenda and narrative of the Bush administration. The American popular media, as epitomized by the Time Magazine cover, was fascinated by symbols of women's oppression in Afghanistan. The "Afghan Girl" portrait was shorthand for the broader ideology that women in Afghanistan

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[6] David Braun, "How They Found National Geographic's 'Afghan Girl'," *National Geographic News*, March 7, 2003, accessed February 2, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20120108074942/http://news.nationalgeographic.co.uk:80/news/2002/03/0311_020312_sharbat.html.

[7] Braun, "How They Found National Geographic's 'Afghan Girl'."

were nameless, hopeless, and victims of the circumstances of their birth.[8] The piercing eyes of the girl can be interpreted by their viewer as they choose – expressing hunger, desiring freedom, or reflecting back out on her audience. She does not need to be treated as an individual, with a life story, or opinions, because she was presented merely as "Afghan Girl." American viewers looked into her eyes and felt that women in Afghanistan sought a connection with Americans as their potential liberators. Without her knowledge, Sharbat Gula was used as a stand-in for every "Afghan Girl" and became part of a decades long political narrative about the role of the United States in protecting, securing, and liberating the women of Afghanistan. [9]

When I began to check out books from the library on the general subject of women and 9/11, I realized my poorly crafted search terms had yielded several competing perspectives. Women were at the center of many 9/11 arguments and perspectives. I was puzzled when reading 9/11 accounts that spoke specifically of the status and role of women in informing the way we should view or remember 9/11 and finding that three distinct groups were embattled over this very question. There were layers upon layers of feminist inquiry, criticism, and response as to how to feel about 9/11, how to understand its causes, and what the future should look like in light of 9/11. This included both feminists as public figures and activists in the anti-war movement and academia, each telling their own version, with different stories stemming from a single event. At the same time, I found that figures from the American right wing sought to align themselves with women in Afghanistan. They viewed the American military and model of democracy as a source for the potential liberation of these women. President George W. and

[8] The concept of namelessness was introduced to me in the context of feminist historiography by Dr. Ruby Lal and her work *Coming of Age in 19th Century India*.
[9] Though it could not be included due to copyright concerns, I recommend viewing "Afghan Girl" portrait, photographed by Steven McCurry, National Geographic Magazine, 1985

First Lady Laura Bush both directly extended their prayers and support to the women of Afghanistan in major public addresses.

In Afghanistan, too, women were at the center stage. Islamic mullahs claimed to protect the "honor" of their women, in contrast to the liberal, "secular" model of women's advancement. In this convoluted landscape of the memory of 9/11, Afghan women themselves became a site of contestation and grounds for debate.[10] Objects of "reform" in other words, different cycles making competing claims on women's bodies, their honor, and their person. Who were these women? It is almost as if the Afghan women, as independent subjects, creators, thinkers and doers, were all but forgotten.

It is difficult to find writing from American feminists, politicians, or right wing conservatives about Afghan women that does not contain a mention of abuse, rape, and murder. It is so natural to indulge in the idea of Islam's barbarism towards women, vaguely citing concepts of women's virginity and "honor", and the dominance of "religious" over "secular" law. In more contemporary reflections on George W. Bush's presidency, these stories of 'damned' Afghan women are remembered and used to test his early claims about the moral case for liberation through invasion. In fact, the invocation of moral/liberal/democratic righteousness blurred with notions of religious righteousness prepared the public for conflict and fueled anti-Islamic sentiment. President Bush's September 16, 2001 address, priming the nation for war, included the language of, "this crusade, this war on terrorism."[11] His answer to religion-inspired extremist violence was an American counter-crusade to protect women and liberal values, a

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[10] Lata Mani's book, *Contentious Traditions*, uses this framing of women's bodies and lives as a site of contestation and debate in the context of the practice of Sati. Her work has been formative for my understanding of feminist historiography and will be built on in further chapters in this thesis.

[11] Winter, *Women, Insecurity, and Violence*, p. 2.

framing designed to make war a palatable, moral response to terrorism.

While violence against women and girls remains a challenge in Afghanistan, it is also pervasive in every part of the world. However, Afghan women are often introduced and summarily concluded by the condition of violence. Their life histories have been employed and deployed by others, especially in the American political and academic contexts, only when both the timing and content of what they have to say is convenient. However, Afghan women exist, live, and speak outside of the parameters in which their stories are told. I aim to demonstrate the tug-of-war between several groups, including American officials such as President and First Lady Bush, the popular Christian right-wing, and several groups of American feminists in academia, popular culture, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), each claiming to serve the interests of Afghan women best.

My contribution builds on previous feminist work done in relation to 9/11. Instead of discrediting the groundwork laid by previous feminist scholars, I hope to carry through several salient ideas about 9/11 that have been promoted and draw out even further the role that Afghan women have played in these perspectives. One project on which my research relies is Columbia University's Oral History Archive and in particular their Narrative and Memory of September 11, 2001 collection. In these oral history archives, there are several interviews with Afghan women who were living in New York in 2001 and 2002 and were willing to share their experiences. In what follows, I hope to revisit and consider the position of Afghan women within the greater story of 9/11. By identifying the political web in which Afghan women have been ensconced, and re-focusing on their spoken perspectives such as in Columbia University's interviews, I hope to present a new vision of what the events of September 11, 2001 "look like" and "mean" when Afghan women's words and stories are presented alongside evidence of their

contestation, and the political conflict over their protection is peeled back.

## Chapter I. President Bush, the First Lady, and their "Voices of Hope"

While American feminist international relations theorists were writing and developing arguments about women's place in national security, American conservatives were busy criticizing 'feminism' in general. Two popular conservative Christian television personalities from *The 700 Club* show, Rev. Jerry Falwell and Rev. Pat Robertson, shared their beliefs that women had a role to play in bringing about 9/11 on September 13, 2001. Conservative televangelists found women's actions and activism in the U.S had brought about a religious reckoning. Two days after the attacks, Falwell and Robertson made remarks on the program *The 700 Club* that explained that 9/11 was delivered by God to America as "probably what we deserve[d]."[12] Falwell blamed American secularism and liberal and feminist activism, as he argued:

> [T]hrowing God out successfully with the help of the Federal court system, throwing God out of the Public Square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that pagans and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American way—all of them who try to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'

At first glance, these views appear to be so fringe and extreme that their weight in broader public discourse seems minimal. However, several mainstream media channels, including ABC News and CNN, picked up this segment. When contacted by CNN reporters to provide further comment and respond to criticism, Falwell defended the theological underpinning of his original argument, citing scripture and explaining God's role in protecting America. He explained that human behavior preceding 9/11 had "created an environment which

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[12] Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, "Falwell and Robertson on The 700 Club after 9/11," *YouTube*, September 13, 2001, accessed August 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-CAcdta_8I.

possibly has caused God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812."[13] Under criticism, he was pressured to issue an apology. He said, "I would never blame any human being except the terrorists, and if I left that impression with gays or lesbians or anyone else, I apologize."[14] Even with this small retraction of his initial statement and "finger pointing", the viewership and sway held by the Christian right-wing should not be understated. The broader sentiment that "the feminists", among others, had incited 9/11 is a clearer articulation of, often unexpressed, backlash against increasing diversity. Specifically, Falwell and Robertson took issue with the separation of church and state and "secularism" as harmful to America. Although each presented a different solution and ascribing to their own religious beliefs, their criticism of America as godless aligns with some terrorist explanations for the attacks on America's "secularism."

Scholars in the field of gender and cultural studies, Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, have intensely studied the conservative backlash against feminists after 9/11. In their writing, they cite Father Frank Pavone, who was a member of Donald Trump's Catholic advisor council and gained notoriety for presenting what was allegedly an aborted fetus onto an altar. When commenting on the 2016 presidential election, advising how to frame the ballot of Catholic Americans, Father Pavone claimed:

> It's a few very basic points. And I always go back to the position I have, is that if a candidate came up and said, "I support terrorism," you know, the conversation stops there. You don't ask them you don't start comparing other positions, other issues. You support terrorism, you're out. And abortion is no better than terrorism, in fact it's worse.[15]

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[13] CNN Web Archive, "Falwell apologizes to gays, feminists, lesbians," *CNN*, September 14, 2001, accessed August 14, 2017, http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, *Feminism after 9/11: Women's Bodies as Cultural and Political Threat* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 143.

The intense ideological motivation which allowed Pavone to make the extremely harsh statement that women's decision to terminate their pregnancy was equivalent to the non-consensual violence of terrorism, which results in chaos and death, is astounding. By providing a singular criterion for endorsing a candidate, their stance on abortion, Pavone established the moral legwork necessary to advocate for Donald Trump, which was similar to the arguments made for intervention after 9/11.

In 2003, George W. Bush's State of the Union Address made a similar jump between abortion and the moral justification for the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the U.S.'s broader position in the "War on Terrorism." He spoke to Congress asking them to act on abortion legislation, saying, "…in this work we must not overlook the weakest among us. I ask you to protect infants at the very hour of their birth and end the practice of partial-birth abortion."[16] Later in his speech, he went on to recall the events of September 11, 2001, making claims about the world before 9/11 compared to the world in 2003, in what would be described as "Post-9/11ism." Bush went on to articulate the stance of the American military and government abroad. He argued,

> "[the] qualities of courage and compassion that we strive for in America also determine our conduct abroad…Our founders dedicated this country to the cause of human dignity, the rights of every person, and the possibilities of every life. This conviction leads us into the world to help the afflicted, and defend the peace, and confound the designs of evil men." [17]

The violence of September 11, 2001 left many Americans feeling emotionally wounded. President George W. Bush viewed his role as president as extending beyond the pure policy and legal realm, seeing himself also as the nation's chief spiritual leader. Regardless of the formal

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[16] George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 28, 2003, accessed December 29, 2017, http://www.thisnation.com/library/sotu/2003gwb.html.
[17] Ibid.

separation between church and state, President Bush spoke from his position of faith about Afghan women's liberation and the "War on Terrorism." President Bush' Christian "family values" were a part of his response to 9/11, as he said, "Moms and dads are not only reassessing their marriage and the importance of their marriage, but of the necessity of loving their children like never before."[18]

At his press conference exactly one month after September 11, 2001, George Bush referred to Muslim women as "women of cover." He said, **"**I was struck by this: that in many cities, when Christian and Jewish women learn that Muslim women, women of cover were afraid of going out of their homes alone, that they went shopping with them, that they showed true friendship and support, an act that shows the world the true nature of America."[19] President Bush presented an image of all Muslim women as cowering, and taking refuge only in their interfaith friends who brought them out to shop.

President Bush's comments about the veil were by no means the first of their kind. On the American right-wing and in some left-wing feminist circles, the veil is "simplistically interpreted as an imposition by patriarchal Muslim men, enforcing the submission of Muslim women…[Post] 9/11 and 7/7 the hijab is used as a tool to portray Muslim women, in particular Afghan practicing Muslim women, as the barbarian Other, who should be kept in check."[20,21] In

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[18] George W. Bush, "A Nation Challenged; Excerpts From the President's Remarks on the War on Terrorism," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2001, accessed December 29, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/12/us/nation-challenged-excerpts-president-s-remarks-war-terrorism.html.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p. 113.
[21] "7/7" refers to the July 7, 2005 suicide attacks in the London Underground system. Rostami-Povey's book focuses on Afghan Women living in Afghanistan, and in countries including the U.S. and U.K.

reality, veiling exists in a variety of forms, and an overwhelming number of Muslim women are given the choice of whether or not to veil. These choices are made from a variety of personal factors including religious views, feelings of modesty, and safety in their daily lives. In his speeches President Bush deployed Afghan women as a rhetorical weapon to garner support for his political agenda.

My argument is not that Afghan women's perspectives have never been shared or were not recorded following the events of September 11, 2001. Rather, I aim to interrogate existing narratives and the role these women's voices have been given. I am investigating how women's bodies have become a site of controversy, and why certain images, ideas, and stories were accepted into the "mainstream", and others were not. A central task of my work, therefore, is to take seriously the popularized, 'polished' tales of women's accounts of 9/11. The work of Laura Bush, titled *We are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope* is one such text. *We are Afghan Women* blends genres between biography and autobiography, and claims to be a vessel for women to tell their own stories. However, no single perspective or set of perspectives can be taken as universal to the experiences of Afghan women. While the stories collected in *We are Afghan Women* can provide some insight and offer new avenues of discussing women's lives, they are not unfiltered or complete accounts. Unlike the Columbia Oral History Project interviews, which are presented in long form and without editing, the exact process of how the stories in *We are Afghan Women* were told, recorded, edited, and published remains unclear.[22] It's important as both a feminist issue and for those interested in Afghanistan to question the objective presentation of these

[22] As will be discussed in Chapter III, I do not mean to suggest that the Columbia Oral History Archive interviews are perfectly "unfiltered."

stories, especially considering the political incentives of Laura Bush and the George Bush Institute.

Just 41 days after the invasion of Afghanistan by U.S. forces, Laura Bush's weekly radio address called out to the American people to join her in standing by the women of Afghanistan. She said, "Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists."[23] She made it clear that the Bush administration's intentions in fighting in Afghanistan included the promotion of American and Christian values. She continued, "[the] fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."[24] The converse implication of this statement was that those who oppose the War on Terrorism were acting against the rights and dignity of women.

In 2016, Laura Bush published *We Are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope* through the George Bush Institute. Former First Lady Laura Bush serves as the Chair for the Bush Center's Bush Institute Women's Initiative, which is described as "empowering women worldwide."[25] The George Bush Institute is housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center located in Dallas, TX which contains the official National Archives and Records Administration from the Bush Administration including over 70 million pages of documents.[26] Adjoining the library and official archive is the George W. Bush Presidential Museum, which details President Bush's upbringing, path to the presidency, and major issues of his presidency. The George Bush

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[23] Laura Bush, "The Weekly Address Delivered by the First Lady," *The American Presidency Project*, November 17, 2001, accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24992.
[24] Ibid.
[25] George W. Bush Presidential Center, "Women's Initiative," accessed December 28, 2017, http://www.bushcenter.org/explore-our-work/issues/womens-initiative.html.
[26] George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, "Research," accessed December 28, 2017, https://www.georgewbushlibrary.smu.edu/Home/Research.aspx.

Institute is the research and policy body within the Presidential Center, that aims to advance the core issues from his presidency, including the First Lady's Initiatives and the "Afghan Women's Project."[27]

This book is, according to Laura Bush's introduction, meant to draw attention and memorialize accounts of Afghan women, and a few men. She wrote, "It is important for those of us around the world, both women and men, to stop and listen to Afghanistan's women. How can we help change the lives of women in Afghanistan? The women in these pages have their own thoughtful answers. By listening, we also have a chance to learn."[28] Mrs. Bush's call to "stop and listen" is one with which I agree. However, because this book was published in 2016, 15 years after the invasion of Afghanistan, these words ring slightly hollow. She remains trapped in the same idea that "we," presumably other Americans and non-Afghans, have a central role to play in changing Afghan women's lives. However, most of the stories shared within are ones of individual triumph, perseverance, and resiliency. These "success stories" were largely built on the backs of women whose creativity and intellect allowed them to generate new solutions and find joy despite the challenges they faced.[29]

The "voices of hope" in the book are divided into categories: *Living, Learning, Working, Surviving*, and *Challenging*. Each major section includes an introduction from Laura Bush and quotes are meant to frame the stories shared in the following chapter. These brief introductions are not attributed to any particular author, and were likely written by researchers and editors at the George Bush Institute. Through this act of introduction, the George Bush Institute is able to

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[27] George W. Bush Presidential Center, "Afghan Women's Project," accessed December 28, 2017, http://www.bushcenter.org/explore-our-work/issues/womens-initiative.html.
[28] Ibid.
[29] This is highly related to the concept of "playfulness" as described by Dr. Ruby Lal in her work *Coming of Age in 19th Century India*.

frame the stories they have selected and place them within a particular narrative. The actual stories come from Skype interviews with researchers that were translated into English, and presumably were then written out in a more stylized, narrative arc to be presented as an individual anecdote.

*We are Afghan Women* exemplifies the blending of the genre of popularized novel and textbook/non-fiction writing, while also walking the divide between biography and autobiography. The approach to evidence and argumentation in this book makes it seem as though it was written to connect with a white, female American audience. The presumption is that the reader has little background knowledge of Afghanistan, and also that they will be uncritically accepting of the narrative presented therein. Several times throughout the introduction, Mrs. Bush employs the strategy of providing "just enough" details, context, history, etc. Providing these bare bones details, she allows the reader to feel they have a grasp on the complexities of history, which have been smoothed, made digestible and unintimidating through Laura Bush's narration.

The last section of the book, prior only to the glossary, is called "Afghanistan Timeline."[30] With no apostrophe connecting the two words, one may assume that the history described is not one of the Afghan people's ownership, but rather a highly abridged, government-focused history. From 500 B.C. to 1747, the history of Afghanistan (assumed to be a region with defined, stable borders throughout those two millennia) is reduced to four moments of conquering by four "great men." Entire centuries are left blank, with no mention of art, literature, or even the name of a single woman until Laura Bush herself is mentioned for visiting

[30] Ibid, p. 301.

the country in 2005. The only other woman ever named in this timeline is Farkhunda Malikzada, referred to only by her first name and in relation to her murder in 2015.

This leads us to ask the George Bush Institute: does this work really prioritize the act of "listening" to Afghan women? Can it produce a story more complex than that of the official archive from where it was published? The timeline provides a military history of invasion, diplomacy, and volleying between major international political players, who are entirely male.[31] This is a common method of American textbook writing, that codifies a state's history of economic, political, and military action, while relegating the lives of women "off" of the timeline.

Laura Bush begins her introduction, "Like most Americans, my own recent history with Afghanistan begins on September 11, 2001." She goes on to recall, "Growing up in Midland, Texas, when my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Bain, told us to write a country report, I decided that I wanted to pick a nation completely exotic and remote from anything I had ever seen…"[32] By her own description, both her own and American collective memory had forgotten about Afghanistan until the "barbarism" of 9/11. Her unselfconscious description of "exoticism" and "remoteness" is a style not uncommon to writing about Afghanistan, and is enforced by the technique of history-writing used in the Afghanistan Timeline section of the addendum. Later on in her introduction, she recalls her "view of Afghanistan from the air" while sitting in a military helicopter. From "the air", she was overcome by the importance of remembering American troops' and NATO allies' sacrifices, American military lawyers, American educational

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[31] The notion of history as male is related to many important feminist concepts, including the critique of the distinction between the "public" sphere as the male domain and the "private" sphere (of the house, the family) as inherently feminine.

[32] Laura Bush, "Introduction," in *We Are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope*, ed. by George W. Bush Institute (New York: Scribner, 2016) p. xi.

programs, and American NGO's. We must wonder, if these actors stand out in Afghanistan from an American military helicopter, how does that compare to the Afghanistan experienced by those living on the ground "below?"[33] Above all, she emphasizes "successes" and "triumphs," and her own role in advocacy and volunteer work in Afghanistan.

Laura Bush's vision of her role is not dissimilar to some American feminist's self-assigned purpose to serve as a platform for Afghan women. While likely unintentional, she recreates the oppression and denial of subjectivity she attempts to undo by hearing the "voices" of these Afghan women. Speaking of her own role, she writes "I host conferences. I give speeches and publish op-eds. I have traveled to Kabul to help with the opening of the American University of Afghanistan and the creation of the Women's Teacher Training Institute… And I can ensure that the inspiring and beautiful voices of Afghan women will be heard."[34]

It seems that despite her experience in the White House and at the George Bush Presidential Center, Laura Bush had not lost her sense of sixth-grade wonder in the "exotic" nature of Afghanistan. She continues to approach the country as though it were a state of rugged otherness, and is bewildered by Islam. She places an immense weight on religion in determining women's subjectivity. The titles of the stories' categories, *Living, Learning, Working, Surviving*, and *Challenging,* imply that these are permanent, monolithic states women occupy. Each title reads like the imagined condition of far-away women, and the stories within are the readers chance to "lift the veil."[35]

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[33] Ibid. p. xvii.
[34] Ibid. p. xviii-xix.
[35] George W. Bush Institute, *We Are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope* (New York: Scribner, 2016), p. 3.

Of the 28 "voices" in the *We are Afghan Women*, four of them reference the events of September 11, 2001. From the outset, there was an immense selection bias in determining whose narratives were included in this book, given that women were chosen based on who had a connection to American non-profits supported by the George Bush Institute. Several of the women were living in the U.S. and working in non-profits or advocacy when the attacks took place.

Belquis Gavagan, who was born in Afghanistan but worked in D.C. in women's rights advocacy, called in sick that morning. She recalled, "My parents were still sleeping. And I screamed and my father asked, 'What's happening?' I said we are under attack. When my youngest brother came from school, he was all shaky, and he said, 'Are the Taliban going to come after us here?' And I said, 'No, they won't.' But everything changed from that day on."[36] She describes her family's feeling that they could not escape the Taliban, even in the U.S., where she still felt terrorized. After saying "everything changed", she goes on to describe her trip back to Kabul in January 2002, where she was overwhelmed by a sense of destruction. It's not clear if the collapse buildings and poverty she describes are to be attributed to terrorist groups or U.S. airstrikes.

Asia Frotan left Afghanistan as a young child with her family, traveling through Pakistan and Germany to ultimately settle in the U.S. as refugees. Her story revolves around the challenges she had while settling in to life in the United States. At the very end of her story looking back on her journey, she said "In the beginning, when it was hard, it was very hard. It was hard too after 9/11, because we became the enemy in the U.S. Just when we thought we

[36] Ibid. p. 33.

could take a deep breath and say this country is ours, we were rejected again."[37] Frotan experienced social isolation and antagonism from white Americans, negating her new identity as an Afghan-American.

Mina Sherzoy was born into a family of Afghan diplomats, and was afforded the opportunity to travel and receive schooling outside Afghanistan. She moved permanently to the U.K. and then the U.S. in the 1970s after finishing high school. Sherzoy built a life for herself in the U.S., but felt called back to Afghanistan, saying, "After September 11, my body was in the United States but my mind was in Afghanistan…The U.S. gave me security, the U.S. gave me everything, but I wanted to share what I have with the Afghan people, with the women, with the men."[38] Sherzoy felt driven to share her education and experience with women in the country she had left behind. Similarly, Razia Jan, an educator and advocate, said

"After 9/11, the first thing I did was to return to Afghanistan. It was the only thing I was thinking: now I can go back and help."[39] In 2004, she returned to the country to build primary schools for girls. Jan is now known for her role as founder and president of Razia's Rays of Hope, which has helped build schools for girls throughout the country.[40]

Nasima Rahmani had one of the most pro-military and pro-intervention perspectives in the book. She first references 9/11 in passing as an example of the final straw for the U.S. to intervene, after, she argues, the U.S. should have "interfered in Afghanistan in 1992, right at the beginning of the civil war, to prevent the massive destruction and killing of innocent people."[41] Near the conclusion of her story, she says:

> "What happened on September 11 in the United States obviously was the most horrible thing to happen in the history of the world and to human beings. But for the women in Afghanistan, it liberated us and it gave us the freedom to start life... In the end, the bombing had a very beautiful result for women. When U.S. forces arrived to establish a

[37] Ibid. p. 216.
[38] Ibid. p. 143.
[39] Ibid. p. 52.
[40] "Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation," accessed February 20, 2018, https://raziasrayofhope.org/.
[41] George W. Bush Institute, *We Are Afghan Women*, p. 273.

> new, interim government, things changed all of a sudden for all Afghan people and for women in particular."[42]

This perspective falls very far out of place with other Afghan women's stories and memories I have read, and aligns very closely to conservative ideology. While not disrespecting Rahmani's account, in the following chapters I will present alternate views from Afghan women who are far more concerned about the effects of war ravaging the country, and who vehemently deny the notion that the U.S. military "liberated" them. Additionally, several of these women emphasized that the hi-jacking attacks, while unprecedented on American soil, were a taste of the scale of violence that was both expected and considered acceptable in Afghanistan. In the chapters to come, more perspectives from Afghan women will be shared, along with the development of academic feminist thought that tried to keep up with the role of these women in international politics.

Because women's "voices" ought to be taken seriously as forms of evidence, interrogating who decides which narratives and stories are elevated and distributed is an important political question.

[42] George W. Bush Institute, *We Are Afghan Women*, p. 286.

## Chapter II: American Feminists & 9/11

### The field of feminist international relations

In order to understand the critical response to 9/11, it is important to understand the academic environment in which feminist thought and American feminists made their initial intervention into the field of international relations. As a discipline, international relations was traditionally limited to formal contact between countries, in the form of diplomacy, conflict, and multilateral cooperation. The major theoretical paradigms of international relations attempt to explain and predict state behavior, such as whether states would go to war, agree to international treaties, or develop nuclear weapons. Most of these dominant theoretical models rely on the explicit assumption that all state actors will behave "rationally" when making decisions.[43] Rationality, for political scientists, dictates that every actor (usually a head of state, often male) will choose to act in a way that will serve their state's own best interest. Because rationality is a universal assumption in international relations that undergirds all subsequent explanations for how states will act, the definition of "rationality" is crucial. The problem of accurately assessing what another actor views as in their "best interest" is difficult, and the universality of these principles all but necessitates a default to generalizations. These generalizations are based on values, for example, that a regime will prioritize its stability of leadership over the nation's economic security, and have been formulated by these scholars who infer based on their own assumptions about where priorities lie. Further, the presumption of rationality was tied up in positivism, the philosophical approach to knowledge based on empirical observations, which are the only valid method of confirmation of truth. In traditional international relations writing, both

[43] John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations* 23 (2009): 2, p. 242.

the "state actors" and the scholars estimating what was in the state actor's best interest were nearly always male.

Early feminist work in the field of international relations identified a core problem: women were not written in as stakeholders, citizens, agents, or subjects in the study of international political relations. Not only was the hypothetical "state actor" used in theoretical models presumed to be male, but the lives and concerns of women (which were believed to be outside the empirical record used in positivist inquiry) were not taken into consideration as to determining the "best interest." The tradition of international relations clung to studying only "high level" interactions between heads of state, and were criticized for not giving credence to those who made up the population governed by these states, especially women. Female students felt "alienated" from the study of IR in American private liberal arts institutions.[44] This feeling of alienation of female students was likely a contributing factor, among others across all academic fields of study for women's advancement and participation, that deterred and placed obstacles in the path of women entering international relations departments and other academic spaces, making a feminist consciousness in IR even more difficult. Emphasis was placed on the unqualified absence of any mention of women in academic texts in the field, believed to be signaling a semi-conscious divide between "serious" (masculine) scholarly inquiry and secondary, gender-based literature. This may be best summarized by Cynthia Enloe's question: "Where are the women?"[45] Cynthia Enloe is perhaps one of the most well-recognized names in the field of feminist international relations, her particular specialization is on the effects on

[44] J. Ann Tickner, *A Feminist Voyage through International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. xv.
[45] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

gender under systems of globalization and economics, militarism, and major international institutions such as the United Nations. In 1999, Enloe wrote an essay titled "The Surprised Feminist," in which she argued that feminism meant acknowledging the fallibility of predictions as a science, and that "the capacity to be surprised – and admit to it – is an undervalued feminist attribute." As pointed out by cultural and gender studies scholars Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, Enloe wrote this article two years before "the largest surprise event(s) of the new century: the attacks of September 11, 2001."[46]

Enloe's litmus test of exclusion of "women" was applied to book indices, course syllabi, and existing bodies of work to probe a much larger project of consciousness raising and feminist interrogation in American university circles. Additionally, feminists working in international relations did not merely want women to be acknowledged in these texts. They challenged the field at nearly every level – beginning with its foundational doctrines of who to study, what was truly relevant to constituting international relations, and the universal assumption of rationality. This is not to imply that there was a sudden "switch" flipped in academic circles, that there was consensus, or even mainstream acceptance of the importance of questioning the basis of what constituted "political theory." Rather, feminists gained ground in consciousness-raising through rigorous research, publication, and forging connections with other women in the field, and still were regarded by many as a "supplemental" rather than generative revelation in international relations theory.

J. Ann Tickner is another pioneering author in the development of feminist international relations. After getting her undergraduate degree in history from the University of London in 1959, she went on to get her masters in International Relations from Yale University and Ph.D.

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[46] Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo, *Feminism after 9/11*, p. 1.

from Brandeis University in Political Science. During her graduate coursework, Tickner encountered a book by Evelyn Fox Keller, a physicist, called *Gender and Science*, in which Tickner found several parallels between the masculine bias present in the academic field and application of physics as in international relations.[47] Tickner chose to write a master's thesis that dealt with gender directly, and came across what was at the time some of the first writing in early feminist international relations, by Enloe and others. As described by Tickner in her introduction to *A Feminist Voyage through International Relations*, there was a palpable and sometimes overt disinterest in bringing Feminist IR into the same intellectual (and sometimes physical) space as the "mainstream" discipline of international relations.[48] She recalls that when feminist international relations scholars were offered a spot on a conference panel to present their work, there was sometimes a negative response from audience members, who believed that the "material [was] more suited for bedside reading that for serious scholarly discussion."[49]

Tickner's 1997 article, "You Just Don't Understand", was widely-read and included her discussion of the un-comfortability for feminist IR theorists working with "traditional" international relations scholars in academic and even professional settings. While feminist IR writing was being published and beginning to be taught in some specialized courses, "the effect on the mainstream discipline, particularly in the United States, continued to be marginal…," while requests for "dialogue across paradigms" (between feminist IR and traditional IR theorists) went largely unfulfilled.[50] She discusses the "anxiety that accompanied attending professional

[47] J. Ann Tickner, "Interview – J. Ann Tickner," *E-International Relations*, March 6, 2016, accessed February 2, 2018. https://www.e-ir.info/2016/03/06/interview-j-ann-tickner/.
[48] Tickner, *A Feminist Voyage*, p. xx.
[49] Ibid. p. 74.
[50] Ibid. p. 73.

meetings in the 1980s when there were few women attendees and even fewer on panels."[51] Even leading into the late 1990s, she wrote "[these] continuing silences have led one scholar working in this area to conclude that most women are homeless as far as the canons of IR knowledge are concerned."[52] In her 2014 re-publication of this article, she noted that in the two decades since, "Feminist articles in mainstream US IR journals are still rare unless they use conventional methodologies."[53] Even if feminist IR theorists and mainstream IR scholars could agree on how their two "paradigms" should interact, the question of methodology remains a central point of contention. In particular, feminist IR writing has been seen by "mainstream" IR scholars to be, according to Tickner, "devoid of potential for fruitful empirical research," leading to questions like "Why can't women just as well be subsumed under stablished theoretical approaches?"[54] Consideration of what constitutes "evidence" is a central feminist question, explored at length in the field of feminist historiography, and the resistance to feminist international relations employment of "non-traditional" research methods is a tool by which feminist scholarly work is de-legitimized and divided from serious, academic thought.

American feminist scholars in schools of politics and international affairs sought to prove their work was central to the "real world," while also bringing forward new, women-focused topics of discussion. However, their "meta" discussion of what and who politics encompassed was viewed by prominent, male scholars as secondary to the "immediate" concern of nuclear states in the Cold War era. This pattern of an urgent threat taking precedent over reflections on gender was repeated again after 9/11, and was diagnosed as such by American feminists and

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[51] Ibid. p. x.
[52] Ibid. p. 73.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid. p. 75.

activists. Many critical academics were concerned that 9/11 had a chilling effect on critical academic discussion in the name of unity, patriotism, and honoring the memory of those killed on 9/11 and serving in the military abroad.

In the decades before 9/11, the rise of women in political, economic, and other leadership positions in the 1980s was met with backlash from political scientists like Francis Fukuyama. In 1988, Fukuyama, a contributor to the Reagan Doctrine and author of *The End of History and the Last Man*, published an essay in Foreign Affairs magazine called "Women and the Evolution of World Politics." In this essay, Fukuyama used observations from human's closest genetic relatives, chimpanzees, to extrapolate fundamental "truths" about the difference between men and women in the realm of politics and conflict. He shared 'scientific' observations that while chimps of both sexes have the capacity for violence towards other chimps, male chimps succeed in their social hierarchies by acting on "purely instrumental, calculating reasons" (through murdering higher-ranking chimps) rather than "emotional attachments." He summarizes by stating, "female chimps have relationships; male chimps practice realpolitik." It is difficult to accept the premise Fukuyama's argument-by-analogy, that chimpanzee colony behavior is an adequate metaphor for human gender relations. His conclusion explicitly valorizes violent behavior as "strategic", in order to justify a vision of politics that excludes women on a biological basis: that they are "hard-wired" to behave emotionally rather than rationally, a terminal weakness in Fukuyama's eyes.[55] Fukuyama does mention a few counterexamples,

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[55] Francis Fukuyama, "Women and the Evolution of World Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1998, accessed January 10, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1998-09-01/women-and-evolution-world-politics.
I was struck by the racialized commentary in Fukuyama's article. Here is a quote to demonstrate Fukuyama's de-humanizing world view:
"It is very difficult to watch Muslims and Serbs in Bosnia, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or militias from Liberia and Sierra Leone to Georgia and Afghanistan divide themselves up into

namely Margaret Thatcher, who he suggests is an exception that proves the rule given her "unusual" qualities as a woman.

In the Trump era, we are returning to a time when biology is believed to triumph over "ideology," either through the discussion of transgender identity and rights or through racialized nationalism. Right-wing American backlash to the culture of "political correctness" believed to run amok in the 1990s and again in the 2010s was victorious in the 2016 election. We are living in an era that places great political value on the ability to distinguish between "us" and "them" (where for Trump, them is nearly any other foreign nation, non-Christian religion, or even domestic political opposition) and "they" are routinely dehumanized. In this context, it is particularly important to reflect on the rise of women in the field of international relations and their contributions to feminist thought.

Since the early 1980's, feminist international relations has flourished as a discipline and actualized its potential to critically political discourses and reframe discussions. Many contemporary conversations about international development, political economy, peace and conflict studies, stand on the foundation built by feminist international relations theorists. Despite efforts feminist international relations theory offers more than a supplemental frame or additional viewpoint, it is not international relations "plus" gender.

Outside of international relations, post-colonial literary criticism from feminist scholars like Giyatri Spivak were thinking and writing critically to push the bounds of the American academy during the 1980s and into the 1990s. Giyatri Spivak, a feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial deconstructionist, has written several influential works that interrogate colonial and

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what seem like indistinguishable male-bonded groups in order to systematically slaughter one another, and not think of the chimps at Gombe."

post-colonial power relations, and the questions of representation in history. She introduced ideas about the voice as a politics, meaning that expression through voice is more than just vocalization as an anatomical concept, but that the way voices are received and transmitted through representation and history are political. She uses literary analysis as a method to trace the construction of history and reality relative to the lived experiences that "History" seeks to represent. Spivak employs a figure of a third-world, laboring, dalit (also called "untouchable", within the caste system), woman as four-times subalternized.[56] Spivak's characterization of the subaltern and her approach to postcolonial feminism is informative for understanding Afghan women as a contested ground before and after the events of 9/11. The idea of subaltern subjects and politics as voice are important to analyze the negotiation between the American, Christian right-wing, American feminist international relations scholars, and Islamic Mullahs, over who can best "protect" Afghan women.

From the field of critical security studies, and particularly feminist critical security studies, came arguments about America's "feminine vulnerability" that was "exposed" on 9/11. Critical security studies is a branch of security studies that challenges dominant security literature and criticizes excessive militarism, national security/insecurity discourse, and the military industrial complex. Nick Vaughan-Williams, a professor of international security, politics and international studies, wrote in his book *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* that, "Rather than simply accepting the temporal narrative of 9/11 as ushering in a new era, this temporal narrative has come under intense scrutiny in the critically oriented literature…While

[56] I sat in on a graduate seminar taught by Dr. Gyan Pandey on the subject of Spivak's book, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (1999). I also read this portion of her book to write this perspective. These ideas belong primarily to Spivak and for their explanation. I am grateful to Dr. Pandey.

acknowledging the tragedy of the attacks, it has been argued that other events in global politics, such as the on-going conflict in Darfur for example, have by contrast claimed more lives yet attracted far less attention."[57] Critical security studies had contributions to 9/11 language, tracing the effects of the language of the terrorist threat and how it mobilized individuals and government officials to be more open to armed conflict**.** The feminist critical security studies outlook took analysis of 9/11 one step further, arguing that the insecurity brought about by 9/11 was a masculine insecurity, responding to the threat of being feminized. These Feminist Security Theorists, such as Eric Blanchard, who argued, "The war in Afghanistan demonstrated both gender's power to legitimate national security goals and the easy acceptance of remasculinization during times of war."[58]

Human security literature shifted the focus of security conversations from the level of the nation state to the level of the individual, thus making more kinds of threats relevant, including human rights and violence against women, to the conversation of security.[59] There is value to inviting more comprehensive conversations of living conditions, particularly regarding women, in order to broaden conceptions of security. However, human security perspectives often still prompted security-based solutions, including military intervention. Human security perspectives thus provided a moral veneer for intervention in the name of women and broader causes like democracy and freedom, and a friendlier face of U.S. militarism abroad. In that way, human security was insufficient.

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[57] Nick Vaughan-Williams and Columba Peoples, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 8.
[58] Eric M. Blanchard, "Gender, International Relations, and the Development of Feminist Security Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2003): 4, p. 1306.
[59] Winter, *Women, Insecurity, and Violence*, "Introduction".

**A feminist "agenda", Part One: Gendering 9/11**

After 9/11, there was a huge national and international response in the public sphere as well as from nearly every academic discipline. Among feminist international relations theorists, there was also a wide spread of opinions and arguments advanced. For my purposes, I will focus on two prominent positions advanced by American scholars from the field of feminist international relations. These two positions are by no means the only responses to 9/11, they did not necessarily come packaged together and nor were they always separate. However, each of these positions had distinct political ramifications. The first strain of argument I will draw attention to focuses on the offensive-masculinity of the terror attacks themselves and the defensive-masculine response of the response to 9/11, from first responders to political leaders. The second argument made by feminist international relations theorists focused on the ideology of the Taliban and Al Qaeda's, and was somewhat suspicious of Islam as a whole. Each of these two arguments were pervasive and created a strong "stance," carving out a key role for American feminists to play in responding to 9/11. Unfortunately, several of the arguments made by American feminists writing and working in academia, as well as in the public sphere, ultimately were coopted by white, conservative, male figures.

The first thread I've chosen from feminist international relations theory analyzed the attacks of 9/11 using gender as a lens to decipher the 'vulnerability' of the US. The twin towers were identified as two phallic symbols of American global, "secular," economic and political power, which were "emasculated" by the attacks. Firefighters and other first responders were considered to be hyper-masculinized, physically muscular, savior figures.[60] By contrast, many

[60] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), p. 69-71.

human interest news stories featured women primarily as victims, or as widows struggling to take care of their children on television talk-shows like Oprah. In fact, these news stories are still incredibly popular, and are a relatively common genre of "where are they now" updates.[61]

Throughout the conflict and invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, feminists in academia and as public figures were some of the first and most persistent critics of the war. Susan Sontag, a feminist writer and filmmaker, published some of the first controversial critical remarks after 9/11. In The New Yorker's special publication released on September 24, 2001, Sontag's commentary stood out among other New Yorker staff writers reflections on the attacks. She directly criticized officials who did not acknowledge the role of U.S. imperialism and militarism internationally in inspiring the terrorist attacks. She also called on, "[a] wide spectrum of public figures, in and out of office, who are strongly opposed to the policies being pursued abroad by this Administration apparently feel free to say nothing more than that they stand united behind President Bush."[62] In 2004, shortly before her death, Sontag wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times Magazine condemning the use of torture and the Bush Administration's refusal to name the practice of torture in Abu Grahib.[63] Sontag argued that the images that surfaced of conditions of prisoners at Abu Grahib in Iraq should be taken seriously as an accurate reflection of U.S. military action. As a filmmaker, Sontag writes effectively about the visual medium and the reaction it should bring about in an American audience. She wrote, "[looking] at these

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[61] Lisa Capretto, "She Was Pregnant When She Became A 9/11 Widow — Here's Her Life Today," *The Huffington Post*, December 15, 2015, accessed January 4, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pregnant-911-widow-update_us_5669bddae4b0f290e52251c8.

[62] Susan Sontag, "Tuesday, and After," *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, accessed February 27, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town.

[63] Susan Sontag, "Regarding The Torture Of Others," *New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004, accessed February 27, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html.

photographs, you ask yourself, How can someone grin at the sufferings and humiliation of another human being? Set guard dogs at the genitals and legs of cowering naked prisoners? Force shackled, hooded prisoners to masturbate or simulate oral sex with one another? And you feel naïve for asking, since the answer is, self-evidently, People do these things to other people."[64] Her staunch criticism of intervention, leading up to and after 9/11, was significant given her position as a key feminist public figure.

Susan Faludi, a feminist journalist argued that after 9/11, the surge of conservatism and national pride/security discourse had consequences on women's empowerment in the US. She argued in her book, *The Terror Dream*, that public discourse, the media, and political leaders lead to a "hysterical summons to restore 'traditional' manhood, marriage and maternity."[65] By Faludi's account, 9/11 was recorded and memorialized as a day of "feminine frailty" (largely through images of crying widows) and "an ironclad countermyth of cowboy swagger."[66] She argued that media coverage described the events of 9/11 as "the death knell of feminism. In light of the national tragedy the women's movement had proved itself, as we were variously informed, 'parochial', 'frivolous', and 'an unaffordable luxury'…"[67]

**A feminist "agenda", Part Two: The "other women"**

In order to introduce her essay, "Feminist Perspectives on 9/11", published in 2002, J. Ann Tickner's began with several quotes from various sources.[68] These short quotes she chose,

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[64] Sontag, "Regarding The Torture Of Others."
[65] Susan Faludi, "The Terror Dream," accessed February 20, 2018, http://susanfaludi.com/terror-dream.html.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, p. 25.
[68] Several other quotes were also included in this section that I chose not to prominently include in this chapter, in the interest of conserving space. The other quotes were: George S. Patton, Jr., "War gives purpose to life…Peace brings out the silliness in the man; war makes him imitate the tiger."

between one and three sentences, provide a literal frame for her essay. They were presented without direct commentary at the beginning of her chapter, and as re-published in her 2014 book. Both are translated into English and are the only direct citation from these terrorists in her piece or in other pieces I have read from feminist international relations theorists. This is in part because there are scarce interviews available with individuals like Mohamed Atta, a 9/11 hijacker, and Osama bin Laden.

> "[W]e believe that we are men, Muslim men who must have the honor of defending [Mecca]. We do not want American women soldiers defending [it]…The rulers in that region have been deprived of their manhood…By God, Muslim women refuse to be defended by these American and Jewish prostitutes." - Osama Bin Laden 1998, interview with Al-Jazeera television

> "I don't want any women to go to my grave…during my funeral or any occasion thereafter." - Mohamed Atta, 9/11 Hijacker, written in a note found in Atta's baggage[69]

Ticker selected these quotations to introduce her argument about the inherent masculinity and misogyny of the U.S.' opponents in the War on Terrorism. These views were promoted by many of the same women who were pioneers of feminist international relations scholarship. These quotes constitute the beginning of Tickner's gendered reading of 9/11. For Tickner, the gender of the terrorists, who were all male, is very important. In her essay, she focuses on the ideology and tactics of radical Islam as reliant on women's subjugation. From recruitment of young boys to psychological training using the promise of sex in heaven, Tickner zeroes in on the anti-women nature of terrorists as central to her "Feminist Perspectives on 9/11."

The restrictive stance of al Qaeda towards women within their broader critique of western liberalism was particularly disturbing to American feminists. While al Qaeda was unquestionably

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Francis Fukuyama, "As women gain power in these [Western] countries, [they] should become less aggressive, adventurous, competitive, and violent."
Patricia Leigh Brown, "The operate word is men. Brawny, heroic, manly men."
[69] Tickner, *A Feminist Voyage*, p. 131.

responsible for immense violence against women, Tickner's cherry-picking of quotes framing women as the primary grounds for extremist ideology and the attack of September 11th is reductionist and self-serving. It was particularly dangerous, amidst the uncertainty and confusion of Americans coping with the "other-ness" of 9/11 terrorists, to select these few extreme statements to present to a public struggling to understand the beliefs and religion of Islam as a whole and extremists in particular.

American feminists were quick to sound the alarm on the role of gender in the motivations for the attacks of 9/11 as well as the broader threat of Islam to woman's "freedom." Further, (young) male Muslim men were demonized as a direct threat amidst concerns of terrorist recruitment. Radical Islamist men were described as sexually-motivated and depraved, with feminist writers and right wing pundits both emphasizing martyr's belief they would be rewarded with "virgins" upon their deaths. [70] Conservative, right-wing officials clung to this strand of argument. Even though the Bush Administration and many outspoken Christian figures had never included women's advancement or empowerment as a part of their platforms, they used the subjugation of women as another in route for their criticisms.

The term "madrasa" (an Arabic word meaning place of study or school) entered the American vocabulary as a site for youth radicalization and was picked up on by American feminists as a source of concern. Tickner defined madrasas as "religious schools that teach little except an extreme version of Islam to boys and young men…frequently they are also taught to hate women; in a situation where most of them feel powerless, the wielding of power over women can be a boost to self-esteem."[71] While some madrasas may teach radical Islamist views,

[70] Ibid. p. 135.
[71] Ibid.

this is by no means the norm. Tickner's distaste and fear of madrasas is ultimately a signal of her broader worldview, that young Muslim men exist and grow up in all-male spaces that emphasize "wielding power over women." [72] This fear of madrasas was not unique to feminist international relations theorists like Tickner. Many books were published criticizing the site of the madrasa as a vehicle for mobilization and radical Islam, and were responded to by Indian scholars, in works like *Madrasas in South Asia: teaching terror?* (2008) by Jamal Malik, *Madrasas in India: trying to be relevant* (2005) by Akhtarul Wasey, and *Madrasa and terrorism: myth or reality* (2004) by Mukhtar Alam.

Catharine Mackinnon, one of the most notable feminist activists and scholar of law and feminism, has written about nearly every major issue in feminism and is perhaps best known for her strong stance against sexual harassment and legal writing about gender and the Supreme Court. In March 2002, Mackinnon wrote an article in the Women's Review of Books titled "State of emergency." In this article, she questions the legal conventions that dictate what constitutes a "war", and compares the War on Terrorism to the ongoing war on women. She argued that far more deaths could be attributed to American men killing women than terrorists killed any Americans. However, the war on women (not formalized, officially recognized, and thus not capitalized) was not given the same attention as the War on Terrorism (which is officially recognized and described by American officials). She opened by writing that death did not discriminate among victims within the twin towers, but that "[o]n the perpetrator side, the atrocities were hardly gender neutral."[73] MacKinnon was correct in pointing out that all hijackers in all planes on 9/11 were male. She went on to describe the actors as "Animated by a misogynist

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "State of Emergency: Who Will Declare War on Terrorism against Women?" *The Women's Review of Books* 19 (March 2002): p. 7.

extremism, this time in the guise of religion, that has silenced women, subordinated them in private and excluded them from the public for years, men bound for glory and pleasure, for virgins in a martyrs' paradise…Their propaganda by deed was exemplary male violence."[74] MacKinnon focuses on the attacks of 9/11 as primarily and characteristically an act of male aggression. For Mackinnon, the identity of 9/11's terrorists was first as males, and second as religious extremists, though she ascribes a great significance to misogyny as central to their religious views. She jabs at "religion," presumably Islam in general though written ambiguously, as responsible for the "silencing" of Muslim women who exist in a highly regulated space. MacKinnon made no effort in this essay to clearly distinguish between Islam as a religion and the beliefs and actions of the terrorists, instead she collapses the categories of male, Muslim, and terrorist/extremist. Throughout this essay, she provides several reminders of the "state of emergency" for Muslim women in Afghanistan, who face daily threats of sexual and violent assault. MacKinnon argues that the exist in a "state of emergency" under patriarchal conditions of violence and can be attacked at any time, although there is no legally declared "war on women."[75]

Mackinnon agreed with the intervention of Afghanistan in years prior to the September 11th attack in the name of women's liberation and security. She asks, "Why did the condition of Afghan women, imprisoned in their clothes and homes for years, whipped if an ankle emerged, prohibited education or employment or political office or medical care on the basis of sex…not rank with terrorism or rise on the international agenda to the level of a threatening conflict? Why were those who sounded the alarm about their treatment ignored? Why…was their treatment

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "State of Emergency: Who Will Declare War on Terrorism against Women?" *The Women's Review of Books* 19 (March 2002): 6, p. 7.

alone not an act of war or a reason to intervene (including, yes, militarily) on any day up to September 10, 2001?"[76] Her depiction of Afghan women essentially as captives to their own religion is unnerving, especially given that her solution includes military intervention. This is a notable slip in Mackinnon's critiques of Islam, as her broader beliefs regarding gender generally associate men with violence and war and women with peace and as victims of violence. This statement expresses comfort in the power of the U.S. military to express liberal ideology internationally and safeguard American values and interests (in this case, women's rights and human rights). Her statement providing an additional "reason to intervene" before September 11th, 2001 did not age well for anti-war feminists, given the nature of wartime violence perpetrated by American forces.[77] Though, considering her broader ideological stance, her thought experiment of a military or even non-military intervention in the name of women's "liberation" likely would have looked different than the true outcome during the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan.

MacKinnon argues that terrorists' action on 9/11 was the perfection of "misogynist extremism," extrapolating that the violence of 9/11 was unremarkable compared to the degree of quotidian violence against women.[78] She wrote, "what they do to women everyday is what they did to both women and men on September 11."[79] The subject "they" in this sentence may have referred to men as a whole, terrorists/extremists, or even Muslim men in general, who she views as uniformly oppressive towards women. MacKinnon closed with a question likely meant to

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[76] Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Women's September 11th: Rethinking the International Law of Conflict," *Harvard International Law Journal* 47 (Winter 2006): 1, p. 20, accessed February 4, 2018. www.harvardilj.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/HILJ_47-1_MacKinnon.pdf.
[77] MacKinnon, "State of Emergency," p. 8.
[78] Ibid. p. 7.
[79] Ibid. p. 8.

haunt her reader, "Now after a century of increasing convergence between the civilian casualties of wars and the noncombatant casualties of peace, what will be done for the women whose own September 11 can come any day?"[80] Her implication is that women exist in a state of terror, fear, and violence. Troublingly, MacKinnon's commentary leaves no room for women's joy, creation, or any form of social/individual advancement. Her perspective maintains that the constant 9/11-type threat looms over women. This implies women's conditions are static and defined not by women's own agency or actions, but rather by the actions of men.

**American women in popular media, Beyond "Widowhood" and "9/11"**

The wives of World Trade Center victims were featured in the media as human interest stories of personal tragedy. Susan Faludi wrote a chapter in her book *The Terror Dream* titled "Perfect Virgins of Grief," in which she describes different news agency's hyena-like circling around "9/11 widows."[81] Faludi observed the Christian right wing capitalizing on the uncertainty and insecurity caused by terrorism to forward their traditional family values. In this chapter, Faludi explains that the women who were invited to morning talk shows tended to fit a particular profile. She argued that the media chose to feature women who were pregnant or mothers to young children, who didn't work outside of their homes, appeared "fragile."[82] In particular, she claims Diane Sawyer, Montel Williams, and Bill O'Reilly held interviews in maternity wards and made grand spectacles out of donating to grieving, nurturing mothers.[83]

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, p. 113-114.
[82] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, p. 121. I'm uncomfortable using the term fragile to describe 9/11 widows, and while I recognize that Faludi's argument is that media outlets weaponized widows by purposefully portraying them in a "fragile" light, it still goes against my core feminist politics of affirming women's agency and resiliency.
[83] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, p. 95. For those interested in further reading, Faludi provides many examples of different moments on television in the weeks and months after September 11, 2001 that centered around "9/11 widows."

These episodes served more to honor the memory of the deceased husbands than to provide dignity to their wives. This kind of news coverage comes across as very diminutive, predatory, and possibly as a form of grief-exploitation.

Faludi's criticism that television producers only showed "vulnerable" women is still restrictive to the label of "9/11 widow." Defining women in relation to their husbands minimizes their accomplishments and sacrifices their independent identity. At the same time the families of September 11, 2001 victims were plastered on television, President George W. Bush called out to Afghanistan's "women of cover" and the First Lady asked Americans to keep Afghan women in their hearts and prayers.[84]

Patti Quigley and Susan Retik were both pregnant when their husbands were murdered on board United Airlines Flight 175.[85] That morning, they were thrust into the role of "9/11 widow." Patti and Susan were the subject of a documentary titled *Beyond Belief* - not because of the seductive appeal of their boundless pain and tragedy, but instead because of their empathy and focus on improving the lives of Afghan women whose husbands had also been killed. When compared to the daytime talk show caricature, *Beyond Belief*'s storytelling presents a thoughtful, self-reflective image of how American women whose husbands are victims to terrorism can live. The film begins with the horrors of the morning their husbands were murdered, but quickly

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[84] Johnston's Archive, "President George W. Bush's Press Conference On 11 October 2001," October 14, 2001, accessed December 15, 2017. www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/bush911e.html. The term "women of cover" is meant to reference the veil worn by some Muslim women, which to many right-wing conservatives in the US is a symbol of women's oppression at the hands of Muslim men.

[85] In interview footage in the *Beyond Belief* documentary, Patti and Susan both reference their husbands' deaths as murder. While I have not read anything directly about why they choose to use this language, I will respect their choice and use the term murder as well. I will note, however, that they do not use "murder" to refer to the death of men killed in Afghanistan either by U.S. forces, the Taliban, or other violent circumstances.

transitions into new emotions: empathy, altruism, and a feeling of purpose. In particular, when the United States invaded Afghanistan both women felt a sense of guilt and responsibility to connect with Afghan women whose husbands were killed in war.

Directed by Beth Murphy, *Beyond Belief* traces Patti and Susan from intimate moments in their homes, fundraising efforts, founding their NGO "Beyond the 11th" and ultimately their trip to Afghanistan to work with the "other widows."[86] The film also features brief clips from English-translated interviews with Afghan women speaking about their conditions, their impressions of the United States, and their social status in their villages. Beyond the 11th partnered with Cooperative for Assistance Relief Everywhere (CARE) in Afghanistan, who already had a strong presence in the region and had the requisite on the ground connections, security forces, and trust built within the communities they were working. On the ground in Kabul, Patti and Susan used the funds they raised for their organization Beyond the 11th to sponsor business development programming. Their main projects provided women with chickens, training on how to raise them and sanitarily collect their eggs, along with business skills, to alleviate some malnourishment and poverty.

In the first few minutes of the documentary, Susan recalled, "As the story of September 11 began to unfold, and we found out that the terrorists had been trained in Afghanistan, and the US was talking about invading Afghanistan... There was so much in the news about Afghanistan. We had gone from nothing about Afghanistan to, 'Afghanistan!'"[87] The frenzy surrounding "Afghanistan" as described by Susan encapsulates the surge of interest in Afghanistan in mainstream media sources, especially after invasion. Officials searching for

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[86] Susan Retik and Patti Quigley, *Beyond Belief*, DVD, directed by Beth Murphy, Boston: Principle Pictures, 2008.
[87] Retik and Quigley, *Beyond Belief*.

where to place blame concentrated squarely on the training of al Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan. Popular media treated Afghanistan much more like an idea than a real place, with the "War on Terrorism" as a complicated, but far-removed fact of global politics.

Media sources helped curate the official story of September 11, in which Afghanistan was a terrorist training ground and site of women's oppression. However, there is more nuance and complexity beyond "the story." Much like the noted difference between "capital-H History" or "capital-T Truth" and their lowercase or plural counterparts (histories and truths), there are many stories of September 11, 2001 that are individually remembered and told. 60 Minutes specials of what it looked like and who lived there, along with the detailed descriptions of women's oppression were the most immediate sources available to color in their mental images.

In *Beyond Belief,* the invasion of Afghanistan is the key catalyst for Patti and Susan to find their role as activists and renew their purpose. Susan explained her discomfort surrounding American invasion in the film, saying, "Even at the time, when the United States was talking about invading Afghanistan, I felt that, oh my goodness, people were being killed as a result of this, and there's going to be more of us? There's going to be more widows?"[88] In a 2015 interview, Patti summarized their stance towards Afghan women as, "We couldn't stand to see that what we were doing as Americans entering Afghanistan was creating more widows."[89] In the Columbia Oral History Project interviews, several of the Afghan women commented on the massive outpouring from white women who suddenly became activists for Afghan women. These American women's driving, underlying principle was that common experiences such as womanhood, widowhood, and war, provide under-explored opportunities for conversation and

[88] Ibid.
[89] Patti Quigley, "Remembering 911 - Patti Quigley," University of Massachusetts Lowell Library, Lowell: 2015, https://libguides.uml.edu/c.php?g=528133&p=3615118.

growth. Susan expressed her hopes before the trip in 2003 as, "We are all connected, and if we can teach love and kindness as opposed to teaching hatred, that is the way terrorism will end."[90] In this framing, the American women are "teachers" of love and kindness, implying that the Afghan women are the "students."

Throughout the film, Patti Quigley found ways to detach herself from the label of "widow" and minimize the circumstances of her husband's murder to her identity. She stopped wearing her wedding band, took down a large framed wedding photo, and didn't want the term widow to "completely define [her]."[91] During the ending credits, the update was given, "Three years after co-founding Beyond the 11th, Patti stepped down from the organization to end her public role as a 9/11 widow. She continues to work with Afghan widows and children, focusing on education and business projects."[9293] Patti's decision to take control of her identity, to intentionally craft her own image as one that does not define her by the terms of her husband's murder is an exercise of her agency. However, there is a level of dissonance between her own decision to not be live as or be called a widow and her continually references to Afghan women as widows. Patti said, "I want to commit to helping these families get whole, I can't commit to always being the widow."[94] Patti's own emotional healing manifested in trying to "make whole" the lives of Afghan women, despite her lack of technical qualifications.[95] Several times, she reaffirmed that while her husband's murder had made her aware of international women's issues

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Patti Retik is currently involved in Razia's Rays of Hope Foundation, with Razia Jan being one of the women interviewed in *We are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope*.
[94] Quigley, "Remembering 911."
[95] My implication is not that only people with formal degrees and who are officially licensed/recognized have the ability to make an impact and do positive work. Instead, I aim to point out the hubris with which Patti approached Afghan women.

and injustices, specifically in Afghanistan. There was very little to no discussion about the process of research, and learning about Afghanistan undertaken by Patti or Susan. In fact, they each openly admitted to not being able to identify the country on a map prior to the World Trade Center attacks and also getting much of their information from a 60 Minutes special.

Near the end of the film, Susan said, "We aren't stuck, the terrorists may have killed our husbands on 9/11, but we aren't going to stay there." Not "staying" stuck on 9/11 suggests transcendence, nuance, and evolution, that is distinct from the permanence of the post-9/11 slogan "never forget." The question remains, however, whether the efforts and documentation of Beyond the 11th and *Beyond Belief* offered Afghan women the same privilege.

A core reason Patti and Susan travelled to Afghanistan was to meet and make connections with Afghan women. However, the main form of contact between the American and Afghan women in the film came in large group sessions, during which Patti and Susan stood at the front of the room, with their interpreter, and the director of a local NGO. Ultimately, Patti and Susan were major donors to the aid projects that the women they met relied on. They traveled with special security measures and a film crew, and stood out quite obviously. Even the NGO staffers likely felt an obligation to present a particular image to the American women: that their donations had been used effectively and their ongoing support was needed. The dynamic between the two sets of women was incontrovertibly hierarchical. Additionally, the American women were ultimately tourists who did not stay long enough to build the trust or integrate into the local community. Most of the "conversations" captured in the film showed Afghan women crying, talking about the deaths they've seen and the people they've lost. Patti and Susan cried with them, and uncomfortably tried relate what they were hearing to their own experiences. Throughout these interviews, not one woman was introduced by name. Instead, most of the

stories came through in brief snippets and short clips. Even the Afghan woman who was featured the most in the film was not addressed by name. This implies, much like the unnamed portrait of the “Afghan girl,” that Afghan women are interchangeable.

## Chapter III: Revisiting Afghan Women's Stories through the Columbia Archive

### Introduction to the Narrative & Memory of September 11, 2001

Afghan women who were living in New York were placed under a microscope after 9/11 by their friends, coworkers, NGO groups, and the media. They were viewed by some as suspicious, others as objects of pity, and were expected by some to represent and speak for every Afghan woman. As part of Columbia University's longstanding commitment to recording oral histories, especially given that the University is situated in New York, they quickly assembled several teams to record interviews about what had transpired and how it had affected people. One of Columbia's initiatives was titled the *Narrative & Memory of September 11, 2001*. The following text describes the process through which the Oral History Narrative and Memory Project was developed and the intention of its curators:

> Within days of the event, the Oral History Narrative and Memory Project became a longitudinal project with the objective of gathering as many different perspectives on the impact of September 11th as possible, and to allow individuals to speak about their experiences outside the frameworks quickly developed by official media and government accounts. The interviews were conducted over a broad spectrum of ethnic and professional categories, including those who were discriminated against in the aftermath and those who lost work or who were unable to work. The project also documents large clusters of people directly affected or near the site of the towers, as well as Afghan-Americans, Muslims and Sikhs, Latinos, immigrants, and community and performance artists. Over 440 people were interviewed in the first year of the project, and 202 follow up interviews were done in 2002 and 2003. Additional people were interviewed in 2005, and the Center recorded twenty hours of interview on video.[96]

In order to identify the five women whose interviews I used, I reviewed the profile of each of the subjects provided by the Oral History Narrative and Memory Project. After viewing demographic information, including birth place, I requested five transcripts from the all of the

[96] "September 11, 2001 Oral History Projects," Oral History Archives, http://library.columbia.edu/locations/ccoh/digital/9-11.html.

Afghan-American women who were interviewed as part of the project.[97] The interviews ranged in length from 20 to 45 pages per interview session. All the women whose interviews I used had lived in the U.S. for at least five years before 2001. All of them identified as Afghan women, and several of them also used the term Afghan-American. I do not intend to collapse the category of Afghan and Afghan-American.

My goal is not to approach these five women as a "proxy" or "stand-in" for women who were currently living in Afghanistan in 2001 or who have never left the country. Even among Afghan-American women, my intention is not to claim to have found a "representative sample." In the social sciences, samples are used to survey a "representative" subsection of a larger group, and the conclusions from which are drawn generally. Assuming that I could create a representative sample would contradict my goal of interrogating generalizations and the universalized treatment of Afghan women. Any size "sample" could never truly be representative unless it contained 100 percent, and it would be practically impossible to provide the richness of detail and give due attention to each reflection.

The five women whose interviews I used and will share excepts from are Leeza Ahmady, Fatima Danishgar, Mariam Osman, Shekaiba Wakili, and Zieba Shorish-Shamley. Four out of the five women were interviewed twice: once in the winter of 2001-2002, and again in the spring of 2003.[98] There were several different interviewers used to interview the many subjects for the

[97] I worked with David Olson to secure these interviews and ensure that they were cleared for use. David is the Oral History Archivist for the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives at Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library and was extremely helpful throughout the process, particularly in securing the interview of Leeza Ahmady.

[98] Zieba Shorish-Shamley was the only subject that was only interviewed once in 2002. It is not clear given the information I have from the Columbia Oral History Archives why she was not interviewed again. I was able to find a 2009 interview that she gave to CNN. The style of reporting in the CNN article is very different than the unedited, complete, and open-ended style

*Narrative and Memory of September 11, 2001 Project*, however in all of these cases, the same person conducted both the first and second interview. Interviewers varied in their control over the direction of the interview and their style of questioning (such as use of follow-ups, or even whether or not they interrupted interview the subject.)

The initial interviews captured the fresh memory of the events of September 11, the feeling within their communities, their own and their family's response, and their hopes and fears of how the situation in the U.S. and abroad would develop. In reviewing the transcripts for both sets of interviews, there is a palpable sense of urgency, unrest, and discomfort in these late 2001 and early 2002 interviews compared to their later counterparts.

The second set of interviews served both to catalogue the changes in the personal and professional lives of the subjects since their initial interview, but also to give them the opportunity to share more crystallized ideas. The 2003 interviews also contained more commentary on the evolving conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and described the surge and ebb of popular, media, and NGO attention paid to Afghan women. Additionally, the second interviews followed more closely with what the subjects were interested and involved in. Because the primary set of interviews were complete, there was more leeway to move beyond capturing their precise memory of one particular event, allowing for more overall reflections. Even with the extensive interview transcripts that are available, it would be naïve to say they perfectly captured the entirety of these women's memories. In the words of one subject, Leeza Ahmady, "you can't cover it all."[99]

The quotations used in this chapter come from transcripts of oral interviews. Between all

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of the Oral History transcripts, and I do not believe it could serve as an appropriate stand-in. Despite

[99] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2003), p. 49.

the interviews, certain trends in argument and experience emerge. Rather than attempting to repeat or summarize the entirety of each woman's rich and extensive interviews, I have organized key quotations as they relate to these main ideas that appeared throughout.

At times, the use of oral interview quotations may lead to seemingly awkward language or incomplete or repetitive thoughts. The spoken word and written word often do not share identical grammatical structure or vocabulary usage. Tone may also be more guarded for some women at the beginning of the interviews, and more casual and informal towards the end.

**The trend of "Afghan chic", a renewed interest in Afghanistan and Afghan women**

After September 11, 2001, many Americans felt a pull towards Afghan women, which manifested itself in many ways, but ultimately created a lot of discomfort for Afghan women living in the U.S. At the same time, many Afghan-Americans felt the need to return to Afghanistan. Amidst the uncertainty and shared concern of her family, Mariam Osman's traveled to Afghanistan in October, 2001. Because she was unable to travel at that time, Osman helped her brother plan his trip and explored volunteer opportunities with Afghan-focused organizations in New York. She was briefly involved with one group, Women for Afghan Women, but stopped participating when she realized, "[the organizations are] from all these other different people who have their own intentions and their own thing, and thing is, I just wanted to do something that I would feel better as a person knowing that I did something."[100] Osman's observations didn't apply only to Women for Afghan Women, which remains active today.[101] Rather, Osman

[100] Oral History interview with Mariam Osman (2002), *September 11, 2001 Narrative and Memory Project*, pages 31-32, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

[101] According to their website, Women for Afghan Women is a "grassroots, civil society organization; [their] mission is dedicated to securing and protecting the rights of disenfranchised Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan and New York."[101]

(along with several other women interviewed) noted that there was a huge eruption in the number of non-profit organizations that began popping up, started by many people with different backgrounds and "intentions", as Osman put it. In 2001, Osman attended the Afghan Women's Summit for Democracy in Brussels, at which she recalled a "vast number of opinions" on how to secure the best future for women in Afghanistan. In her words, "Some women were like, 'Take the burkas off.' Some women were like, 'Gradually.' Some women were like, 'Educate them.'"[102] In Osman's memory, the different ideologies, ethnicities, and perspectives brought out at the conference made unity a challenge.[103] Ultimately, the Summit did produce a document, titled the Brussels Proclamation, with detailed recommendations in the areas of "Education, Media and Culture", "Health", "Human Rights and the Constitution", and "Refugees and Internally Displaced Women."[104]

As a member of New York city's Afghan community, she shared stories of many Afghan immigrants who wanted to be a part of positive engagement, and especially to visit and return to their "home country." Osman said in January, 2002 that among her community of Afghan New Yorkers, "everybody wants to do anything. It's like Afghan chic right now. It's like everyone wants to go someplace and do something, and it's admirable, but if September 11th didn't happen, people just kind of accepted it."[105] Many Afghans, she describes, felt a strong pull to return to Afghanistan and "do something", along with the social pressure to live up to public standards that she describes as "Afghan chic." These emotions are incredibly complex. Osman felt jolted in her sense of security and complacency, and even "guilty" to have not acted to

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[102] Oral History interview with Mariam Osman (2003), p. 72.
[103] Ibid.
[104] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/afghanistan/documents/Brussels_Proclamation.pdf Ultimately, none of the recommendations dealt directly with any form of veiling.
[105] Oral History interview with Mariam Osman (2002), p. 25.

improve the conditions in Afghanistan until this flashpoint.[106] She also worried about "resentment of the Afghans who stayed [towards] the Afghan's who've left and didn't do anything," wondering how she or her family members would be received if they did choose to return.[107] For Osman, her values and upbringing emphasized the importance of staying in close contact with the family members she had left behind in Afghanistan, saying, "It's so intertwined, Afghan families, where everybody's life and desire is within the hopes and desire of another."[108]

What Osman describes as "Afghan chic", a period of time when it was fashionable to not only be aware of women's issues in Afghanistan, but also to become involved, was not unique to the Afghan community in New York. Shekaiba Wakili, an artist and art educator, found that in the days and weeks following the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center many Americans with no prior connection to Afghanistan became suddenly interested in her. In particular, she noted intrigue about "Eastern culture, like the Islamic culture situation with women, since 9/11."[109] As Wakili recalls,

> "I realized that it was like this feeding frenzy. Like all of a sudden, everybody wanted to be for Afghan women, help Afghan women, and a lot of it was very superficial. For me, that was very disturbing, because I got involved in a few projects, and I can see right through the people as to what their intentions were."[110]

This tendency of non-governmental aid and public attention to wax and wane based on international security agendas is problematic.

The sudden interest in Afghan women was evident in the media, social sphere, and educational institutions like museums. The Museum of Natural History contacted Wakili about

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[106] Ibid, p. 25.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Oral History Interview with Mariam Osman (2003), p. 58.
[109] Oral History Interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003) p. 45.
[110] Oral History Interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003) p. 64.

putting together pieces from Afghanistan for their exhibition on "Southeast Asia." Afghanistan is not geographically part of Southeast Asia. However, after 9/11, the museum curators told Wakili that, "They want to have a little bit of Afghanistan, but they don't necessarily want the traditional stuff. They'd rather talk about what's happened with women and the Taliban and everything."[111] The compromise to fit Afghanistan into Southeast Asia is not one that would be made for many other countries or regions. It reflects the desire to learn more and educate about Afghanistan, but also the Museum of Natural History's comfort in taking the liberty of moving Afghanistan "around the map" in Americans' minds because most Americans knew so little about it.

Leeza Ahmady, an artist and Central and South Asian art curator, was involved in what she described as one of the few American NGOs already working on primary school education in Afghanistan in the late 90s, called School of Hope.[112] After Afghanistan returned to the "public eye," School of Hope was overwhelmed with donations, offers, and new strategies, including one donor proposing they vastly expand operations and open up a hundred schools. Ahmady responded, "'No, we're not about opening hundreds of schools. This is not about corporate education; this is about grassroots education for places and towns that need it and want it and have the ability to have it.'"[113] The wave of attention and support, particularly from non-Afghans, allowed School of Hope to serve more students and fund existing projects, but also was potentially derailing in some instances when goals were unrealistic or came from what Osman would call different "intentions."

Attracting donations required an institutional balancing act from NGOs like Ahmady's, between articulating the need for educational resources and avoid playing into imagined tropes

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[111] Ibid, p. 44-45.
[112] Oral History Interview with Leeza Ahmady (2003), p. 44.
[113] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2003), p. 45

about Afghan people. Ahmady was sensitive to the tactics of some NGO's, who she imitated as getting donations by saying, "'Oh, please help the children in Afghanistan. You know, we're so poor and helpless.'"[114] This tactic, to Ahmady, was counter-productive to the goal of empowering and advancing the status of children in Afghanistan. She chose not to indulge American ideas about charity in Afghanistan, saying "that's just not what those children need. They don't need to be pitied. They need to be trusted and invested in because they're going to grow up and do a lot for us. They're not sitting there, begging."[115] This framing of donations as investment and purposeful allocation of funds was a way to distance herself from those tropes. A similar argument is easily made about Afghan women's status, to be considered not as objects of pity but as agential subjects and forces of change.

Fatima Danishgar, in her interview, spoke about how Afghan women's organization were able to work alongside what she calls the "American feminist voice," to serve as a vehicle to "get our message across and get it into every home in America."[116] Danishgar organized conferences with speakers including Gloria Steinem, arguably the most famous feminist public figure in the U.S., and Eleanor Smeal, the president and cofounder of the Feminist Majority Foundation. At these conferences, she implored prominent American feminists to galvanize support for Afghan women, while also allowing Afghan women to be speakers themselves. Explaining this mission, she said,

> However, we wanted to actually have Afghan women speak for themselves, because I think that's when a case is truly fulfilled, when a person of the origin, or of the background, speaks for themselves and is more, sort of, culturally in tuned and sensitive…And we wanted to bring the various diverse voices within the different

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[114] Ibid, p. 47.
[115] Ibid, p. 47.
[116] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2002), *September 11, 2001 Narrative and Memory Project*, page 2, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

> movements in the United States, particularly the feminist movement and their different approaches to the plight of Afghan women, and then have Afghan women sort of, not rebuttal, really, but exchange ideas on how now a new step could be taken to further this cause.[117]

This model was novel in bringing together American feminists who carried name recognition and had long been regarded as important figures for the rights of all women, in addition to Afghan women who held a more particular, culturally informed view and could correct any misconceptions.

Danishgar voiced her frustrations with the deficiently nuanced responses of several American feminist groups, including the Feminist Majority Foundation and V-Day. V-Day was founded by Eve Ensler, an activist and playwright of works such as *The Vagina Monologues.* Danishgar recounts a V-Day fundraiser held after 9/11 in Madison Square Garden, "where Oprah was there and she took the burqa off from this helpless Afghan woman. That's the approach that I didn't think was culturally sensitive, and as an Afghan knowing what the burqa really meant, or actually what it didn't mean at all, and was used as a tool of suppression for the American feminist movement to use that as the tools of saying they're liberating Afghan women, I didn't really appreciate."[118] In this memory, the adjective "helpless" describes the portrayal and depicted condition of the unnamed Afghan woman. Oprah, as a mainstream public figure and woman of color, was an attention-grabbing force in this dramatic "reveal" of a woman "liberated" from her burqa. This use of celebrity and drama to garner fundraising support was antithetical to Danishgar's intention to convey donations as an investment. It also failed to revere Afghan women as powerful independent actors, regardless of their decision to veil.

The tone-deaf approach to Afghan women from organizations like V-Day made it

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[117] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2002) p. 2-3.
[118] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2002) p. 28-29.

difficult for Afghan-American women to feel they had a real place or voice within those organizations. The over-emphasis on the role of American women and public feminists and "liberating" the helpless Afghan women left little room for Afghan women to take on leadership roles or even be comfortable as members of these organizations. Danishgar wrote that, contrary to the narrative supported by many American feminist organizations after 9/11, "I don't feel that I was liberated by the feminist movement in the United States, or that I was given my rights. Through that movement, I believe that my rights were inherently given to me a longer time before that, way before that. I think that that's because of the Islamic traditions that I grew up in."[119] Growing up in Afghanistan and in her family's Muslim belief system, Danishgar never felt that she needed to be liberated from her religion. The influences of Islam on her gender identity were not, as critics of the burqa suggested, stifling and restrictive. Rather, she grew up with confidence as a woman in her rights to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and the choice to wear a veil.

These conflicting ideologies – that Afghan women need to be liberated, and that they were already free – made the harmony between the "American feminist voice" and Afghan women difficult. Danishgar describes feelings as though her identity straddles between two feminists, saying,

> There is the American feminist, which does not accept anything that makes women into a second-class or distinguishes between men and women in any sense. And I think there is the Afghan feminist in me, which sort of understands the cultural aspects of Afghan culture, and also understands that the utopian ideals and the utopian dreams of American feminists will never work in Afghanistan. It just--it's wonderful, it's a dream.[120]

The "dream" of these American feminists Danishgar criticizes as unrealistic and under-informed

[119] Oral History Interview with Fatima Danishgar (2003) p. 43.
[120] Ibid, p. 42-43

resonates with Ahmady's story of donors asking them to build one hundred new schools.

Perhaps the lack of pragmatic of actionable goals is one reason that many NGO's that were founded in the name of protecting Afghan women disappeared. It could also be that "Afghan chic" went out of style, as attention moved to conflict in Iraq and other issues. Wakili describes Afghan women's NGO's swift arrival and departure from the international scene, saying, "Because then what happens, all the organizations that popped up overnight right after September 11, and most of them claimed that they were organized months before, years before, they are no longer around. They have moved on to other things. So it was like, at the moment, they seized the opportunity, and then they moved on."[121] This supports the suspicions several of the women made of the true "intentions" of these organization, and whether they were able to effectively bring about positive and sustainable outcomes for women in Afghanistan.

**Frustration with the imagined Afghanistan, Afghan women**

Another major thread in these women's recollection of 9/11 was being confronted with the beliefs about Afghanistan held by people they came in contact with in their daily life, including coworkers, students, and the general population. Millions of Americans who had spent little to no time thinking about Afghanistan, who hadn't traveled or live there, were confronted with images and ideas of what this foreign, Other nation was really like. The five women who were interviewed were met with different tropes: many ignorant, some overtly Islamophobic, and others super-charged by ideas about women's position within Islam. Fatima Danishgar articulated the disappointing nature of the renewed interest in her birth country, saying "I always wished that there was more cultural aspects of Afghanistan within American mainstream, and

[121] Oral History Interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003) p. 65

I'm only sad that it took September 11th for it to come out fully."[122]

Leeza Ahmady was already active in promoting the Central Asian Women's Forum in 2000, and worked to create an event called "Beyond Our Veils." To many non-Muslim Americans, women's veiling has been a visible symbol of Muslim women's oppression and subordination. Ahmady describes attitudes towards the veil as "mysterious, sexual, erotic notion for the Westerners. It is completely debasing the fact that there is flesh and blood underneath and that there's choice, and that there are millions of women who chose to wear it and who are still great, who are doctors, who are lawyers, who are mothers, who are teachers, who are farmers…"[123] She felt a strong need to teach Americans that women who made the choice to wear a veil were not "these little sad and powerless creatures."[124] After the terror attacks in 2001, Ahmady would be forced to act as an informal ambassador representing Afghan women again and again.

At one event Ahmady helped promote, she was involved with a Media agency to host a film screeming of *Kandahar*. *Kandahar* was a semi-fictionalized film set in Afghanistan that was widely viewed in late 2001. Ahmady recalled the conversations she had with one woman, Ruth Patkin, who worked at an independent film company, Cowgirl Media, about what discussion and introduction should be given to the film. She remembered the discussion, sharing,

> [Patkin], who's in charge of Cowgirl Media, had come into one of our meetings and was just pushing the issue of the burqa. Burqa, burqa. And I remember her and I going back and forth, and I was telling her, 'Ruth, it's not about the burqa, it's beyond that.' She's like, 'Well, enlighten me.' I was like, 'All right. Well, stick around and we'll enlighten you.'[125]

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[122] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2003) p. 28
[123] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2002), *September 11, 2001 Narrative and Memory Project*, pages 19-20, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid, p. 30.

Ahmady designed the YMCA's curriculum for teaching cultural workshops. The audience of these workshops were school children, many of whom were first introduced to Afghanistan as a "training ground" for terrorists. Ahmady shares her memories of how her identity was received by her students. She recalls speaking with her students,

> 'I'm from Afghanistan," and they would be shocked, obviously because they know a lot, so much about Afghanistan, but what they knew was so limited to whatever they heard on the news, and they had a lot of mixed-up information. You know, they would have, like, such reactions. They were like: "Oh, my god, it's impossible that you're Afghani," or, "Are you a terrorist? Do you know [Osama] bin Laden?" And so many reactions would surface up.[126]

The children's disbelief that she could really be a woman from Afghanistan reflects the rigidity of their mental image of what an Afghan woman could be. Additionally, these gut reactions show that to the children that being Afghan is synonymous with being a terrorist. Ahmady enjoyed teaching these workshops, she aimed to "break their preconceived notions and to challenge their pre-conditioned reactions and try to give them something fresh to think about."[127]

Shekaiba Wakili felt her identity was put up for debate by people she came in contact with in her daily life. She was challenged and interrogated for being an Afghan, Muslim woman – an identity that she was told was contradictory. She explains her difficult position, again as an informal, unwilling ambassador for her identity categories:

> But, also, another way it has changed [after 9/11] is just to always have to explain myself of being an Afghan and being Muslim and being a woman. I have to constantly explain myself. I hear people talking. I hear people saying stupid things. Part of me wants to say, "You're so stupid. You don't understand anything. There are many stories." But another part of me is, like, "You know what? We've all been so sheltered in this country. We've been immune to a lot of the violence, a lot of what's been going on in the rest of the world for too long." So then part of me says, "Well, the reason why we're ignorant is

[126] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2003), p. 28.
[127] Ibid, p. 28.

because we've been so comfortable. So I can't blame people for that."[128]

**Government and Media misinformation about Afghanistan and Afghan women**

The United States federal government, headed by the Bush administration, was seen as the "official" source for valid information about Afghanistan, and, by extension, Afghan women in 2001. The state's account claimed to be the most objective and empirical, and, therefore, the only authoritative source. This is a central issue in feminist historiography: the dominant, state archive is levied against non-state accounts, such as women's memories and histories, entrenching only its own validity. For that reason, the comments about the role of the U.S. government in propagating a particular narrative of Afghan women and 9/11 stood out among the five interview subjects' stories.

Zieba Shorish-Shamley was present at a hearing of the Human Rights Caucus in Congress when she was confronted directly with a senior legislator's views on Afghanistan.[129] She was offended by the member of Congress' statements, appalled by the legislator's "audacity to sit there and tell everyone and the Afghans that were there in the audience, but particularly the Afghans, that the Taliban culture was the Afghan culture."[130] The legislator's heightened degree of arrogance comes through Shorish-Shamley's retelling. She was unwilling to tolerate these statements, especially because the hearing was meant to inform U.S. human rights policies. The allegation that the Taliban was essential to Afghanistan's culture and history was highly incendiary. In her own words, her response was as follows, "I couldn't take it and be silent. I told them, 'I am an anthropologist, and I am an indigenous anthropologist. I was born and grew up in

[128] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2002), p. 34.
[129] Unfortunately, it is not clear from the information available when exactly this hearing took place.
[130] Oral History interview with Zieba Shorish-Shamley (2002), p. 40.

that country. Where did you get this information, because I'm dying to know. What is your source?'"[131] This moment of defiance from Shorish-Shamley at an official Congressional hearing is remarkable. Her confidence in her own authority, derived from experience rather than the veneer of a state office, allowed her to openly question this "official" source, and press for a more complete picture of Afghan culture.

When Mariam Osman attended the Afghan Women's Summit in December, 2001, she met with many Afghan women from different regions who brought their own experience and ideology to the table. One woman that Osman remembered particularly well was active in promoting peace through art. When speaking about the greatest negative forces at work, the woman said, "'I was so hurt when President Bush said that we have no culture, that look at these barbarians.' And she goes, 'There are thousands and thousands of years of culture behind Afghanistan, that the United States wasn't even born when Afghanistan was a country…'"[132] President Bush's degradation of the culture of Afghanistan was a particularly wounding blow, outside the official scope of the "War on Terrorism." Although I could not verify Bush' use of the term "barbarian" to describe the Afghan people writ large in any publicly available sources, his actions and remarks undoubtedly left the same sting as the word "barbarian" would on some Afghan women.[133]

At the end of her 2002 interview, Fatima Danishgar was asked if there was anything else she wanted to share before they concluded. Her response included a potent critique of the Bush

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[131] Ibid, p. 40.
[132] Oral History interview with Mariam Osman (2002), p. 32
[133] The closest reference to the term "barbarian" I could find came in an AP Archived address, in which President Bush said, "The United States of America is an enemy of those who aid terrorists and of the barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name."

Administration's invocation of Afghan women to justify their war effort, their purported oppression under Islam, and the inconsistent attention paid to them after 9/11. She shared,

> "Just one thing that really comes to mind, is the way the U.S. Government used the whole notion of the burqa and the enslavement, so-called, of Afghan women, and the liberation, as a means of this war, really disgusted me…And I think that when this war was occurring and it was starting here in the United States, to hear the president say that he was going to liberate, you know, the Afghan women, and see Laura Bush jump on the bandwagon, and say that, you know, she's concerned about Afghan women because they're being silenced by the burqa, I don't like it, because I think it's manipulating the truth, and I think it's sort of using it for their own gain. That aspect of the war really bothered me, that it wasn't until September 11th and etc., that the U.S. Government was concerned about Afghan women and what was happening to them."[134]

Danishgar's assessment directly addresses the status of Afghan women in conservative arguments. She isolates the role of George and Laura Bush on the "bandwagon" of attention and interest piquing prior to invasion, and indicts rhetoric implying liberation from Islam/the burqa. Meanwhile, as an Afghan-American woman, she found these claims of support to be "disgusting."

Leeza Ahmady described a feeling of angst that the world's eyes waited to turn to Afghanistan and Afghan women under the worst possible light. She said, "It's this thing. It's like this burning sensation, this excitement, this thing, this pain and this awareness that runs in your heart and you are, "Oh, god," again. Why can't we just be in the news for something great and positive? Why do we have to be looked at as these poor, oppressed, suppressed, terrorized nation? Because we're not about that. What's inside of me is not that."[135]

In her 2003 interview, Fatima Danishgar commented on the waning attention given to Afghanistan after the invasion of Iraq. She felt that the lip service that the President and First Lady paid to Afghan women was quickly abandoned when war efforts evolved to focus on Iraq.

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[134] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2002), p. 45.
[135] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2002), p. 17.

"I think, that they are not getting the international support that was promised to them. It's sort of like Afghanistan today, Iraq tomorrow, Afghanistan forgotten."[136] In addition to political energy and military efforts moving off of Afghanistan and onto Iraq, several women reported a similar phenomenon in media coverage. According to Danishgar, "Afghanistan has been off the front pages, even from the back pages, a long, long time, actually, especially with the advent of war in Iraq, Afghanistan was totally forgotten, and very few newspapers or media outlets actually reported on it. But it's not like Afghanistan disappeared and the problem was solved, not even near that. I guess it's the media's lack of long span attention or it's not important anymore."[137]

This view, that discussions of Iraq had eclipsed Afghanistan, was also present in Shekaiba Wakili's 2003 interview.[138] She expressed frustrations over the lack of reliable information coming into the U.S. about conditions on Afghanistan. In the first few months of 2002, Wakili felt bombarded by popular news media, stating, "When there was lots of talk about the wars, specifically people getting bombed or whatever, I just really tried not to watch TV, not to listen to the news, not to hear what was going on, not to follow it, because, emotionally, it's too much."[139]

Media coverage, from popular news outlets and private media groups, clung to particular details of 9/11 and the lives of Afghan women to create compelling story arcs, while still not engaging meaningfully with their subjects. Shekaiba Wakili spoke about an interview she had, saying, "For the little opportunity that I got to speak to TV people, to speak to television, I realized they only use what they want. They only use little sound bites, and I didn't like the

[136] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2003), p. 73.
[137] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2003) p. 56-57
[138] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003), p. 56.
[139] Oral History interview with Leeza Ahmady (2002), p. 17

soundbites that they used. I thought that that really didn't represent the whole point that I was trying to get through, the point that I was trying to make."[140] The problem of "sound bites" is one that plagues many internet and televised media sources. For Wakili, she felt that the TV's stations editing practices corrupted her story. Wakili also noted the fear of Afghan-American women's words and images being manipulated when she was recruiting women to be photographed. She diagnosed an overall sense of suspicion, explaining,

> "One of the things I think has happened in Afghanistan and also in the Afghan community, people have become very suspicious of one another. A lot of the concerns that I got was, "Is this going to be used for anything other than what you're telling me, other than a museum exhibition?" A lot of people were worried that it might be used for some political mischief or something."[141]

The political maneuvering of right wing politicians along with the "American feminist voice" continually represented Afghan women as little more than objects of pity. This wariness was exacerbated by media treatment of the few women they did interview – who were presented as an example of the universal conditions of all Muslim, Afghan women.

To Leeza Ahmady, media treatment of 9/11 "really used and misused and overused and anything you can call the story of September 11. I think that partly they are very responsible for some of the negative things that came out of this, because they have a choice to choose between a balance -- at least balance. Show something that's also great, really great, and balance the story, at least as far as the popular media."[142] Ahmady's reference to "anything you can call the story of September 11" reflects the layers of embedded, political and personal significance ascribed to that day's events. Her criticism of the popular media confirms the previous assessment's made in other interviews of the sweeping, intense coverage they produced.

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[140] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2002), p. 36
[141] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003), p. 47
[142] Oral History Interview with Leeza Ahmady (2002), p. 23

**An ignored emotional response**

Another reaction present throughout the interviews, but completely missing from both "official" right-wing government commentary or from the "American feminist voice" was feelings of shock and grief. Osman vividly recalled her every move that September morning and her feelings in the weeks following. She was haunted by nightmares in which she re-lived seeing planes crash into buildings.[143] She begrudgingly attended parties in the weeks following and felt angry seeing people laughing, smiling, dancing. She felt out of place with her grief, saying "How can you people laugh when there are so many people dead?" You could smell the smoke, and the ashes that I had on my shoes that day were probably dead people. I'm just like, "What is wrong with you people?" And it took me a long time to just adjust."[144] For Osman, the world certainly felt different after 9/11. When she returned to her regular routine she noticed national guardsmen, metal detectors, and bomb-sniffing dogs, saying it's just like everything was just changed forever —it's like our last day of freedom was September 10th, and we didn't even know it."[145]

Wakili told the story of staying at her mother's house for the week following the attack, feeling unprepared but obligated to go to work each day that week to her job as a middle school art teacher. She wished her school district would've closed and given her a much-needed period of mourning. She wondered if anything positive could possibly come out of this kind of tragedy:

> "I feel sorry for their families, for their loved ones. I feel sorry for the innocence of, our innocence, our innocence has been lost in this country, our safety because we feel like we're no longer safe. I just hope something positive comes out of this. Maybe, maybe we can as U.S. citizens and as a country see this and not feel so isolated from the rest of the world and really, really think about what are we doing to the rest of the world? There's a reason why they're poor, and we're so damn filthy rich. There's a reason for that.

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[143] Oral History interview with Mariam Osman (2002) p. 30-31
[144] Ibid, p. 39-40.
[145] Ibid, p. 30

> America basically consumes half of the world's food and so on and so forth. I just hope that we sit back and that this is the time for self-reflection in many levels. I think hopefully that's the positive thing -- I don't know if there can be a positive out of this."[146]

Danishgar invested her energy in organizing peaceful demonstrations for her Afghan community and other "under-attack" communities in New York to join together in their sorrow. She helped organize peace vigils, because "[they] felt that what was going on within New York wasn't allowing room for them to come together as a community, a South Asian or Muslim community. And they really wanted to show that they were grieving, as well, and the backlash that was occurring at the time was very frightening for us."[147] While organizing this vigil, Danishgar and her fellow organizers were denied police protection or an official permit from the city, and were left wondering whether or not they were really welcome to mourn.

The fear of war also dominated in the memory of 9/11 for many of the women interviewed. Osman reacted as soon as she heard that the terrorists had been trained in Afghanistan, "It just made no sense to me, and that's when I realized that they're going to start. As soon as the ships started going to the Gulf, I'm like, "That's it, that's it." It's like, game over for Afghanistan."[148] Many of the women grew up in war, and had seen the effects of war on their country, family, and communities. Danishgar said that many people in her Afghan community similarly felt as if 9/11 was the death knell for Afghanistan, believing "Afghan society and culture is going to be within a war forever and we're never going to see peace."[149] Wakili was unnerved by the invasion because of its potential to wreak catastrophe on both sides, saying "The

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[146] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili, p. 38.
[147] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2002), p. 23
[148] Oral History interview with Mariam Osman (2002), p. 41.
[149] Oral History interview with Fatima Danishgar (2002), p. 17.

last thing I want is a bunch of American boys coming home in body bags."[150] Fear, shock, and horror were such central and obvious features in retellings of personal accounts of September 11. However, amidst the debate over Afghan women's future, no room was left for them to grieve.

[150] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2002), p. 37.

## Chapter IV: Conclusion

Afghan women's bodies were hotly contested in the months following September 11, 2001. While a physical, military conflict began just weeks after the World Trade Center attacks, the rhetorical and ideological conflict over who held the right to "save" Afghan women was already well under-way. These fierce debates took place in an American arena of politics, activism, and advocacy. The most amplified voices were not from Afghan women, they came from different groups of Americans pitted against one another, ranging from academics and popular feminists to the conservative government in power. After decades in which most Americans, including in the seat of government, paid little to no mind to the deteriorating conditions of women under Taliban rule, the issue came into vogue during one of the greatest national security crises of contemporary U.S. history.

For the Bush Administration, who had not campaigned on or prioritized women's rights domestically or internationally prior, Afghan women were the visual case for war. Playing on tropes and American imaginations, they appealed to a sympathetic case for invasion. President and First Lady Bush wasted no time "educating" Americans about what life was like for the "women of cover."[151] Simultaneously, he signaled to the media that Afghan women were at the heart of the moral justification for the "War on Terrorism." Mrs. Bush made Afghan women's plight one of her personal issues as First Lady. She viewed herself as a champion of Afghan women, while at the same time not aligning herself with feminist movements in the U.S. She was most interested in the Other women, the Afghan women, who she felt called to serve as a Christian woman. Sally Kitch, a Gender and Women's Studies professor, wrote about this contradiction, saying, "Mrs. Bush's logic reflected not a new position on gender for her

[151] Bush women of cover footnote from above

husband's administration but rather a holdover from colonialism, which had often been justified in the name of 'saving' women. The British were frequent perpetrators of that excuse: Indian women needed saving from sati (widow burning) and child marriage; Egyptian women needed saving from the veil."[152] In 2016, when the George Bush Institute published *We are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope*, it wrote into history a satisfying finale to story of Afghan women that had since fallen out of focus. Despite the terror and destruction caused by U.S. forces, the book holds rosy perspectives on the role of the American military in bringing about women's freedoms.

Afghan women were put in the spotlight on television specials, news coverage, and other popular media sources. The media capitalized on Americans new found intrigue about the "mysterious, exotic" women behind veils. Fariba Nawa, an award-winning journalist, recounted her experience interacting with media sources after September 11th. She wrote, "For the first time, *everyone* seemed interested in what I had to say. So I shared my views in the broadcast and print media for two weeks, explaining the intricate events spanning twenty-two years in Afghanistan. I was plugged as "the Afghan voice" not as a Western-educated journalist."[153] American media officials wanted to *show* what an Afghan woman looked like, an authentic voice straight from the source. Fariba Nawa was used by news outlets to tout their diverse credentials, and she was asked to stand-in as a universal, vocal representative for all Afghan women. She was told by a TV producer, "'We need a character who's confident, speaks good English, and can deliver the information with drama.'"[154] Fariba Nawa is not a character who exists only in the

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[152] Sally Kitch, *Contested Terrain: Reflections with Afghan Women Leaders* (Urbana: Univeristy of Illinois Press, 2014), p. 4-5.
[153] Fariba Nawa, "Two Identities, One mission," in *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future*, ed. by Sunita Mehta (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p. 188.
[154] Ibid.

minds of television viewers during a brief segment. Her qualifications far surpass the ability to "speak good English." However, for the purposes of popular media in late 2001, this was exactly what she was seen as and used for.

In feminist circles both in the academy and in the world of activism and NGOs, Afghan women were brought to the forefront. Shekaiba Wakili described a "feeding frenzy" in her interview with the Columbia University Oral History projects.[155] There was a bubble of new NGOs who each claimed a unique method and mission to address the injustices facing Afghan women. However, Afghan women felt alienated from participating in some of their boards or as members because of the demeaning imagery, rhetoric, and fundraising tactics that belittled Afghan women and treated them as a homogenous group.

Two American women whose husbands were murdered on Flight 175 travelled to Afghanistan seeking a healing experience and a moment of shared mourning with women whose husbands had been killed by the Taliban or U.S. forces. These women, Patti Quigley and Susan Retik, were the subject of a film meant to shed light on the lives of the "other widows;" however, the "other widows" were never taken seriously as individual, named persons. Instead, the film recreates a dehumanizing narrative that Afghan women are to be understood in relation to the violence in their lives. While Patti Quigley made the conscious decision to remove the term "widow" from her identity, she used it liberally to address the population of women her donations served.

Riffat Hassan, a theological scholar of Islam and feminism, criticized the limited reach of many American feminists working in NGOs to tangibly improve the lives of Afghan women. She wrote in her essay, "Muslim Women's Rights: A Contemporary Debate," that,

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[155] Oral History Interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003) p. 64.

> "Since the rise of the Taliban, and especially since September 11, the U.S. women's movement, in an urgent desire to help Afghan women, have lent their support to the most radical and Westernized element of the Afghan women's movement. Hardly any notice has been taken, however, of the vast majority of Afghan women who are struggling to maintain their religious identity and personal autonomy in the face of intransigence of Muslim culture on the one hand, and the imperialism of Western, secular culture on the other hand."[156]

Afghan women were placed in the center of a tug-of-war from American feminists involved in NGOs who viewed themselves as helping emancipate the women of the "lagging", backwards country of Afghanistan. This air of condescension was palpable and led to many Afghan women living in the U.S. or working with these types of American feminists to turn away. Elaheh Rostami-Povey, a scholar of gender, religion, and Iran in particular, wrote that, "Thus, Afghan women do not see themselves as part of the western feminist movement. They feel excluded by feminists, more so in the USA than in the UK, because of the failure to construct a more inclusive feminism that embraces all ethnicities, nations, religions, and cultures."[157] While some Afghan women are certainly deeply embedded and have made a place for themselves in the American feminist scene, Rostami-Povey's analysis about the movement's rigidity and possible alienation of participation still rings true. This commentary is reminiscent of what Fatima Danishgar described as the "two feminists" within her, one American and one Afghan.[158]

Afghan women as a category were placed in a position that was extremely confining, as their lives and futures became political volleying points. Many members of New York's community feared that if they were to gain visibility their faces and words would be used for some means of "political mischief."[159] In many of their daily lives and public interactions,

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[156] Riffat Hassan, "Muslim Women's Rights: A Contemporary Debate," in *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future*, ed. by Sunita Mehta (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p. 144.
[157] Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, p. 124.
[158] Oral History Interview with Fatima Danishgar (2003) p. 42-43.
[159] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2003), p. 47.

Afghan women were still treated as foreign others and even assumed to be terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Shekaiba Wakili, a middle school teacher, found her car vandalized with a swastika and the words "America rules" in her school's parking lot. When she contacted the administration at her school, she was shooed away and told that there was nothing that could be done.[160] Despite the best efforts of the American feminist "saviors," Afghan women still felt alienated and at risk living in the U.S. Hamaira Mamoor, a board members of Women for Afghan Women born originally in Kabul, wrote, "We had never been more acutely conscious of being immigrants; and yet we had never felt more like New Yorkers, like Americans…We were 'us' and we were 'them' at the same time. And course, as it turned out, the United States did retaliate: 'We' dropped food and bombs on 'us', the innocent men, women and children of Afghanistan."[161] The calls for political and social unity during the U.S.' healing period left Afghan-Americans in the lurch, as their dual identities were being drawn into escalating conflicts.

Marzia Basel, a judge in Afghanistan who gained notoriety for holding a secret women's school under Taliban rule, reflected back on the immense human loss that had been incurred in Afghanistan throughout the conflict. Parts of Basel's memory are recounted in Kitch's book, where she writes, "'[Basel] knew that '9/11…did a lot of damage to [American] lives and we can't forget it.' But that was a 'one day issue,' while 'in Afghanistan we have lost millions and millions and millions.'"[162] Because of the imbued significance of the events of September 11, 2001, including Afghan women's role as the "silent victims," these massive body counts have

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[160] Oral History interview with Shekaiba Wakili (2002), p. 34.
[161] Sunita Mehta and Homaira Mamoor, "Introduction: Building Community Across Difference," in *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future*, ed. by Sunita Mehta (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p. 20.
[162] Kitch, *Contested Terrain*, p. 191.

been seen as justifiable.

By taking Afghan women's accounts of September 11th as evidence, and putting them into conversation with "official" sources, we can question why Afghan women's causes became popular only as a part of other political agendas. Further, given the current climate of the Trump era and accusations of "fake news", we can learn from the manipulation of Afghan women's stories and be more thoughtful producers and consumers of media. Many of the women interviewed argued that Afghan women had been "lost" to the tides of news cycles and military developments, much like the "Afghan Girl" from 1985. It seems likely that another major world event may bring American politicians and popular feminist to pick back up the "search" for Afghan women. These spurts of interest have not had long-lasting, transformative impacts. Afghan women were not offered a seat at the table to discuss their fates with genuine intention from the American government or from non-profit centers. Further, when Afghan women held their own meetings, they were given little to no media coverage and their recommendations were not taken seriously. Revisiting their memories and stories of these events offers a new frame with which we can view the "anything you can call the story of September 11."[163]

[163] This description was given by Leeza Ahmady in her Oral History Interview (2002), p. 23.

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