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Reading foreign policy archives: how regime-made disasters, pointillism, and citizen-perpetrators underpin U.S. Empire-building

Abigail A. Raney
DePaul University, catcher82126@gmail.com

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**Reading Foreign Policy Archives: How Regime-Made Disasters, Pointillism, and
Citizen-Perpetrators Underpin U.S. Empire-Building**

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Author:

Abigail A. Raney

Thesis Committee Members:

Advisor - Shiera Malik, Ph.D., DePaul University
Reader - Jacob Stump, Ph.D., DePaul University
Reader - Michael McIntyre, Ph.D., DePaul University

Department of International Studies
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
DePaul University
Chicago, IL

ABSTRACT

This political project analyzes documents within the foreign policy archives of the Bush Jr., Obama, and Trump administrations to tell a story of how U.S. imperial relations are constructed to reproduce differential rule, exploitation, and the distribution of subject positions. Through a combination of postcolonial critiques of imperial knowledge production and poststructuralist discourse analysis, I argue that these documents expose how U.S. officials construct Afghanistan as a regime-made disaster, a nation-state enclave for unfettered U.S. pointillism and unequal integration into the imperial world order. In addition, the documents reveal how U.S. officials reproduce the nation and perpetuate the imperial condition through the construction of U.S. citizens as citizen-perpetrators, figures outside and above the “realm of imperial accountability” (Azoulay, *Potential History*, 554). This project is meant to serve as a commitment to ongoing efforts for U.S. citizens to reclaim the right to not be a perpetrator and begin the labor of reparations necessary to revive a shared world.

Keywords: discourse analysis, foreign policy, U.S. imperialism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
APPROACH: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND FOREIGN POLICY	6
CHAPTER I: THE PRODUCTION OF AFGHANISTAN AS A REGIME-MADE DISASTER	13
FOREIGN POLICY AND THE ARCHIVE	13
“VACUUM FOR TERRORISTS”: DISCOURSES OF WAR AND STABILIZATION.....	17
“HELPING AFGHAN WOMEN HELP THEMSELVES”: DISCOURSE OF HUMANITARIANISM	23
CHAPTER II: U.S. POINTILLISM AND THE IMPERIAL WORLD ORDER	31
THE IMPERIAL WORLD ORDER AND NATION-STATE ENCLAVES	31
“REDUCE OUR RISK, REDUCE OUR COST” : U.S. POINTILLISM AND IMPERIAL BALANCE.....	36
“THE RENEGADE, UNLAWFUL, SO-CALLED COURT” : U.S. CITIZENS AND IMPUNITY	43
CHAPTER III: CITIZEN-PERPETRATORS AND THE REPRODUCTION OF THE IMPERIAL CONDITION	49
CITIZEN-PERPETRATORS AND SOCIALIZED COMPLICITY	49
“AMERICAN BLOOD AND TREASURE” : U.S. WOUNDED VICTIMHOOD.....	54
“A STAGGERING, COSTLY FAILURE” : SIGAR, THE AFGHAN PAPERS, AND COMPLICIT CRITICISM.....	59
CONCLUSION.....	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	67
ARCHIVES	67
FOREIGN POLICY DOCUMENTS	67
SECONDARY SOURCES.....	74

INTRODUCTION

America cannot occupy the world. It must learn to live in it.

Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004), pg. 260

Afghanistan has long been a site of imperial enterprise and colonial exploitation. Often cited as the “Graveyard of Empires,” Afghanistan was the site of three wars between Britain and the tsarist Russian regime during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Afghan state emerged from intense geopolitical intervention of imperial regimes and the construction of arbitrary colonial borders without consideration for the local populations, such as the Durand Line which eventually became the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹ As representatives of the state worked to center international structures around U.S. leadership in the mid to late twentieth century, the U.S. expanded involvement into Afghanistan. Almost three-quarters of a century later, the U.S. continues to occupy and dictate the governance of Afghanistan. In early 2021, the U.S. began what representatives of the state and policy-makers framed as a “withdrawal” that will end the “forever war” in Afghanistan, reigniting the debate around whether Afghanistan is the site of the death of Empire.

Yet, in discussions on the topic of Imperialism, scholars often reproduce ambiguity and conceptual conflation in their attempts to represent “Imperialism” as a uniform, definable analytic category. Analysis of the imperial condition becomes difficult as there is no singular, accepted conceptualization of “Imperialism.” According to Robert J.C. Young, the Roman Imperial structure serves as the paradigm for the conceptualization of Empire, an imperium led by a supreme sovereign ruler driven by a desire for territorial expansion, wealth, and power. Colonialism, he states, is the construction of a colonial system through obtaining and managing colonies.² Agents of Empire build and maintain their colonial holdings and relations through the production of

¹ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 13 and 30-31.

² Young, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony*, 15-27.

knowledge and imperial epistemologies that underpin neocolonial forms of domination. Colonies represent a particular manifestation of a larger imperial network which is “the product and possession of the imperial state from its centered position.”³ Imperialism can be seen as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.”⁴ As empires grow, imperial agents require practices, theories, and attitudes that facilitate expansion. The “realization of the imperial imagination”⁵ in the form of colonialism and empire-building stem from a broader systemic project of global domination and exploitation that is vast and constantly adapting to changing world conditions. Hence, the term “Imperialism,” di-embedded from the context of its production, fails to serve as a politically useful analytic category.

Therefore, analysis of U.S. policies in Afghanistan can get lost in the debate of whether Afghanistan *is* or *is not* an example of “U.S. Imperialism.” Anti-imperialist activists face the difficult, yet necessary task of historicizing the present while maintaining a balance between gross generalizations and crude relativizations.⁶ Rather than reliance on a label to define what *is*, analysts and scholars can shift away from reified categories and towards narrative storytelling to describe *how* the world is made through social, political, economic, and epistemic processes. With more situated analysis, scholars can produce work with conceptual clarity and anti-imperial potential rather than “saddl[ing] us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary.”⁷ This project uses Afghanistan as a case study to tell the story of how the U.S. has and continues to construct imperial relations and ultimately ensure the reproduction of the U.S. imperial state. Combining poststructuralist discourse analysis and postcolonial critique of imperial knowledge production, I

³ Young, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony*, 53. Young loosely categories “colonies” into three types: settlements, areas of exploitation, and military garrisons.

⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 9. See also Hook, “Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, ‘psychopolitics’ and critical psychology,” 88.

⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 23.

⁶ Wallerstein, *European Universalism*, 81-83. See also Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* and Ferguson, *Global Shadows*. These authors outline the often-problematic usage of broad analytic categories, such as “Colonialism” and “Globalization,” in favor of relational terminology and analyses that facilitate conceptual clarity and attention to contextual specificity.

⁷ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 90.

argue that U.S. foreign policy functions as an archive in service of U.S. imperial world-building and the socialization of U.S. citizens to accept U.S. violence. The documents in these archives reveal how the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations frame the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan in ways that facilitate the construction of Afghanistan as an imperial point in the larger U.S. empire and the even larger imperial world order. Therefore, this project is both academic and political, an attempt to unlearn imperial subjectivity, expose the U.S.'s continued role in imperial enterprise in Afghanistan and throughout the world, and reiterate the call that "America cannot occupy the world. It must learn to live in it."⁸

In this thesis, I tell the story of how U.S. leaders, experts, and foreign policy-makers construct imperial relations through the archival regime of foreign policy. Through the construction of imperial points, they produce and incorporate securitized enclaves like Afghanistan into an imperial world order designed to perpetuate imperial projects and exploitation. To avoid the complete collapse of U.S. empire-building, policy-makers focus on efforts to balance imperial points so that U.S. interventionism is maintained through increasingly covert operations and imperial learning. This process relies on the normalization of U.S. violence and the socialization of the U.S. public into complicity. In telling this story and exposing the violence of the U.S. archival regime, I aim to interrupt the imperial knowledge production that undermines an ethics of care for our shared world and hold representatives of the state, policy-makers, and citizen-perpetrators accountable for imperial crimes in Afghanistan. With this project, I hope to join countless efforts to unlearn imperial epistemologies and engage in the permanent self-critique necessary to begin the labor of reparations necessary to revive a shared world.

Approach: Discourse Analysis and Foreign Policy

⁸ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 260.

Hermeneutic studies, the study of the theories of interpretation, can be a valuable form of analysis to begin to unpack the nuances of our shared imperial condition. Since people understand and make sense of their world through various modes of mediated representation, politics and political processes rely on textuality for meaning and value-making.⁹ Political actors produce social meaning through the introduction, and circulation of representations. Politicians, media personalities, academics, and so-called “experts” articulate, challenge, and (re)produce foreign policy discourse through interaction and negotiation of social meaning and the terms of its expression.¹⁰ However, no singular entity possesses a monopoly on authority or the production of social meaning. Since *who* is permitted to speak with authority and legitimacy changes, leading officials often use their proximity to political institutions and power to imbue representations with legitimacy and authority.¹¹ In doing so, imperial agents can construct lenses of interpretation and hierarchies of “truth” to influence, control, and govern actual bodies through the institutionalization of representations in official discourse.

Discourses are systems of knowledge, ideas, and representations that produce meaning about certain social relations or phenomena and frame not only how the world appears but also who has the authority to speak. Used in the construction and maintenance of regimes of “truth,” discourses are a production of their historical context. Discourses are not fixed totalities, they are adaptable and malleable to changing world conditions and the imperial ambition of those in power to normalize hierarchical relations of power and “inscribe[s] in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real.”¹² Hence, discourses are intimately connected to the production of knowledge and power, or what Michel Foucault describes as the power/knowledge nexus.¹³ For example, Edward Said outlines

⁹ Shapiro, “Textualizing Global Politics,” 12. See also Said, *Orientalism*, 325-328.

¹⁰ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 25-26.

¹¹ Dunn, “Historical Representations,” 79-85.

¹² Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, ix.

¹³ See the various works of Michel Foucault such as “The Subject and Power,” *Psychiatric Power*, and *History of Sexuality, Volume I*.

how Western scholars and experts construct and manipulate Orientalism, a flexible yet durable discourse surrounding a constructed binary between an “Orient” and “Occident,” to essentialize populations in North Africa and Asia into a singular, homogenous bloc. Because Orientalists are backed by a “support system of staggering power,” Orientalism became embedded in the institutions of imperial enterprise.¹⁴ Therefore, the production and reproduction of discourse is part of the imperial production of knowledge and power.

The production and circulation of U.S. foreign policy discourse exposes how U.S. leadership participates in and perpetuates the imperial production of knowledge and power. These agents of empire are backed by a vast network of state and private institutions designed and built to support imperial enterprise. The ability to both construct representations and discourse in service of empire-building is, as Said states, a “sign of imperial power over recalcitrant phenomena.”¹⁵ Through connections to the state and its supplementary institutions, imperial agents co-opt discourses and epistemologies into the imperial state apparatus. Once institutionalized, official discourses can function as tools for imperial agents to manipulate in order to reinforce and (re)produce relations of power. Discourse transforms into *official* discourse, “sanctioned statements which have some institutionalized force.”¹⁶ Through the use of official discourse and discursive practices, U.S. imperial agents reproduce a proliferation of boundaries, spaces, and national identification in service of empire-building and the de-legitimation of voice or dissent and resistance to U.S. imperial violence.¹⁷

Scholars can problematize official narratives and interrupt the construction of imperial relations of power through critical analysis and genealogy of foreign policy discourse. Michel

¹⁴ See Said, *Orientalism* (quote on 307).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 145.

¹⁶ Mills, *Discourse*, 62 (quote). See also Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*. For more on the intersection of the institutionalization of imperialism and the production of knowledge/power, see Said, *Orientalism* ; Wallerstein, *European Universalism* ; Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* ; Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*.

¹⁷ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 2.

Foucault terms this sort of critical genealogy as a “history of the present.”¹⁸ U.S. officials have and continue to use interpretations and articulations of difference, danger, and threat to (re)produce an idealized U.S. national identity that serves as the foundation for the production of the U.S. state. David Campbell reconceptualizes Foreign Policy discourse as a violent and complex “boundary producing political performance.”¹⁹ As a result, the U.S. imperial state and “American nation” are constantly in a state of becoming as policy-makers and representatives of the state rely on discursive tools to reaffirm the imperial regime.²⁰ As the U.S. state increasingly institutionalizes relations and discourses of power, it becomes politically useful for scholars to problematize and disrupt dominant narratives and representations that disavow and mask U.S. imperial world and sense-making. Hence, scholars can use analyses of foreign policy discourse to discuss the (re)production of relations of power in *politically useful* ways, especially when discussing texts and imperial techniques that frame countries impacted by colonial and imperial legacies such as Afghanistan.²¹

This project follows Lene Hansen’s model for discourse analyses to study the production, diffusion, and permeation of dominant U.S. foreign policy discourse surrounding the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan.²² This particular project focuses on the reproduction and adaptability of *official state discourse* and its relation to the construction of imperial relations and citizen-perpetrators. Most of the referenced documents are from “political leaders with official authority to sanction foreign policies.”²³ In the interest of the production of intertextuality, I included sources that broaden the scope of the official discourse, such as oppositional voices and the media that I argue function as complicit criticism. Therefore, this project is an example of Hansen’s Model 2 of discourse analysis that analyzes official discourses and the wider foreign policy

¹⁸ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 93 and 777. Also see Foucault, “Technologies of the Self.”

¹⁹ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 69 and 78.

²⁰ Ibid, 134. See also Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 456-458.

²¹ Mills, *Discourse*, 106. See also Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 102.

²² Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 10-11.

²³ Ibid, 53.

discussion by political opposition, media personnel, and marginal political discourses.²⁴ The omission of many cultural elements of discourse, such as movies, television, and other forms of pop culture, is unfortunate as these elements remain impactful particularly in the entrenchment and socialization of discourses and regimes of truth.²⁵ This omission is intentional to construct limits to the project without sacrificing the desired *political* critique of foreign policy as an imperial archive in service of U.S. imperial ambition and empire-building.

In Chapter I, I outline how U.S. imperial actors manipulate the narrative around U.S. foreign policies in Afghanistan in order to produce Afghanistan as what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay defines as a *regime-made disaster*. I argue that U.S. foreign policy functions as an archive, an imperial “regime of coordinated thresholds” that destroys worlds, alternative ways of being, and ethics of care.²⁶ The documents, full of political devices that normalize imperial violence, expose how policy-makers and representatives of state mask the U.S.’s active participation in imperial world-building and render imperial violence socially acceptable to the U.S. public and world audience. They consistently refer to the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship according to artificial timelines and us/them binaries that produce boundaries along the triple imperial divide of time, space, and body politics. Once the transfer of administrations is complete, the documents are archived in elaborate, categorized online databases that enshrine U.S. actions as part of a constructed “past.” Through the use of discourses of danger and humanitarianism within these documents, U.S. imperial agents discursively construct Afghanistan as a regime-made disaster, a perpetual problem for U.S. leadership to solve, monitor, and control.

In Chapter II, I analyze how the construction of Afghanistan as a regime-made disaster fits into U.S. empire-building and the maintenance of the imperial world order. Through the

²⁴ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 57.

²⁵ For more information on pop culture and imperial knowledge production, see Jack G. Sheehan, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2015)

²⁶ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 45 and 167.

construction and surveillance of regime-made disasters in geopolitically and economically strategic areas, representatives of the state and capitalists engage in a pointillistic form of empire-building in which imperial agents strive to secure nation-state enclaves for the benefit of the U.S. imperial core. This process occurs within an international world order designed to perpetuate the imperial condition, primarily through the proliferation of a globalized nation-state system. The documents ensconced in these archives reveal how Presidents and White House spokespeople frame the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as a “partnership” grounded in the securitization and “reconstruction” of Afghan society. They disavow U.S. legacies of violent interventionism and mask the unequal integration of Afghanistan into the international imperial world order. In doing so, these officials frame the role of the U.S. and U.S. citizen as immune to prosecution for imperial crimes by international accountability mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court. Hence, the documents showcase how U.S. imperial actors remove U.S. citizens and by extension the U.S. imperial state from the realm of accountability for imperial violence.²⁷

In Chapter III, I describe how U.S. imperial actors socialize the U.S. public into their prescribed role as citizen-perpetrators. The maintenance of the imperial condition relies on the distribution and weaponization of different subject positions and the socialization of people to assume their prescribed role within the imperial world order.²⁸ Through framing the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as in constant reference to the idea of “American sacrifice and victimhood” in these documents, U.S. imperial actors construct Afghanistan as a site of U.S. wounded identity grounded in “an overblown sense of injury.”²⁹ Alongside the absence of voices of resistance from within the archive, the documents uncover how U.S. citizens are trained to accept the legitimacy of imperial archives and increasingly violent U.S. interventionist policies. Citizen-

²⁷ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 554.

²⁸ Ibid, 33 and 433.

²⁹ Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, 110-11.

perpetrators, socialized to hold no empathy for those who are impacted by U.S. empire-building, become complicit in U.S. state violence and ensure the reproduction of the imperial condition.

CHAPTER I: The Production of Afghanistan as a Regime-Made Disaster

This chapter examines how U.S. foreign policy discourse functions as an imperial archive that reaffirms U.S. imperial world-building. As each successive presidency constructs new foreign policy archives, the documents and the policies they represent are frozen in time and dis-embedded into an abstracted “past” and transform imperial violence into an “object of history.”³⁰ The documents filed away into separate archives contain political devices that reaffirm artificial timelines and boundaries along time, space and body politic. Through the documents, representatives in all three administrations frame the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan with discourses of danger and humanitarianism that represent Afghanistan as a “threat to America.” The documents showcase the production of Afghanistan as what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay refers to as a *regime-made disaster*, an imperial site that fits into U.S. empire-building.

Foreign Policy and the Archive

The work of unlearning imperialism requires analysis of the tools and techniques that perpetuate the imperial condition, such as the imperial archive. The archive is often portrayed as a neutral institution tasked with the collection and preservation of documents, records, and/or artifacts. However, the effects of the archive and archival procedures go beyond the confines of a building that houses documents.³¹ Azoulay describes the imperial archive as “a regime of coordinated thresholds – ... [or] imperial shutters, that underwrite a shared world.”³² The regime does not naturally exist but is carefully produced and incorporated into imperial institutions to promote abstraction and standardization, tenants of imperial knowledge production. Imperial

³⁰ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 563.

³¹ *Ibid*, 162-164, 170.

³² *Ibid*, 167.

actors produce official documents that deploy political devices, such as “peace agreement” or “human rights,” to construct systems of differentiation for differential rule, displacement, looting, and enslavement.³³ Through the archival taxonomy of official documents seeped in imperial terminology, the documents showcase the reproduction the imperial condition through the transfiguration of reality and imperial crimes into records that can be locked away and forgotten.³⁴

Archives are critical to the construction of the idea of “the past.” Each administration receives an archive for the foreign policy documents they produce. The State Department recently constructed a separate online archive for official documents from 2017 until January of 2021 which contains a large, red banner at the top of the page emphasizing that what the viewer is seeing is archived content.³⁵ Documents in official archives of George W. Bush Jr., Barack Obama, and Donald J. Trump have a banner on top of the webpage that reads: “This is historical material “frozen in time.”³⁶ The document within these archives showcase how policy-makers frame U.S. interventionism as a part of “the past” rather than ongoing imperial world-building. These supposedly objective archives become a “shrine for the precious and cherished past frozen in documents.”³⁷

Archives and archival procedures demonstrate how imperial actors not just construct what “was” but also attempt to classify what “is.” Through classification systems and imperial terminology of official documents to-be-archived, imperial actors can attempt to produce a representation of what “is” and dictate the narrative behind how the public should interpret what “is.” Hence, archives function as a coordinated movement of imperial shutters to reinforce the imperial rights to see everything and to define, categorize and explain how the world appears. The movement of imperial shutters mask the violence of its production and produces boundaries along

³³ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 169-193 and 457.

³⁴ Ibid, 551-553.

³⁵ The U.S. Department of State, “Afghanistan.”

³⁶ See documents/speeches/videos in the foreign policy archives of The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., The White House of President Barack Obama, and The Trump White House.

³⁷ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 181.

to what Azoulay refers to as the “triple imperial divide.”³⁸ The triple imperial involves the production of divisions in time, space, and body politic that frame past/present, subject/object, and us/them binaries in service of imperial world-building. This distance between people and places is necessary for “the expansion of the principle of movement” that enables the continuation of imperial enterprise.³⁹

Official U.S. foreign policy discourse can be seen as an example of the opening and closing of imperial shutters as policy-makers attempt to reaffirm U.S. imperial world-building. Said describes the particularly violent and dangerous nature of American-style Orientalism that drives U.S. imperial enterprise. Orientalist discourse remains extremely durable and able to sustain a multitude of different representations.⁴⁰ Representatives of the state and “experts” have used these archives to institutionalize militarized language, Orientalist representations, corporate interests, and residual missionary ideology and rhetoric. Additionally, they deploy institutionalized language of the archive which facilitate the construction of hierarchies of truth that frame U.S. violence as necessary and socially acceptable.⁴¹ They have built a large network that connects Orientalist representations with imperial enterprise, an industrial complex that profits from demonizing Islam and “the Orient” and can be incorporated into new forms and manifestations of imperialism based on Manichean difference and essentialization.⁴²

The structure of the online databases and the archival procedures of U.S. foreign policy documents facilitates the development of classification systems that underpin U.S. imperial world and sense-making. These documents are transferred, organized, and categorized in elaborate online databases once a new administration takes over. These archives are organized according to date, type of document, region, U.S. Department, and more. Often, these documents are further

³⁸ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 195-199 and 201.

³⁹ Ibid, 45 (quote). See also 1-7 and 200.

⁴⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 285-291

⁴¹ Ibid, 45.

⁴² Ibid, 300 – 322. See also scholars on the Islamophobia Network such as Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry* and Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*.

categorized according to what officials frame as separate policy “issues.” Documents, especially in the newer 2017-2021 Archive of Trumpian foreign policies, contain keywords or tags, such as “Afghanistan,” “Middle East,” and “National Security” to further group documents conduits of the state determine are related based on region of focus, content, and/or category of policy “issue.”⁴³ These archives have a series of governmental “fact sheets” that policy-makers drafted to frame U.S. policies in Afghanistan and U.S-Afghan relations in accordance with official narratives.⁴⁴ These pages have links to various “factbook” pages which attempt to represent Afghanistan as a place-to-be studied and known. Here, visitors can view the country map, documents, geographic coordinates, and information around demographics, economy, energy, transportation, and what the archive frames as transnational “issues” or “terrorism.”⁴⁵ These archives expose how U.S. imperial actors make Afghanistan hypervisible and enframed in accordance with an appearance of order to be viewed and known by a neutral, observing subject.⁴⁶

Before even taking into consideration the actual language of the documents, the archival procedure of these documents begins to produce Afghanistan as a regime-made disaster and object-of-study to be monitored. Regime-made disasters are ongoing productions of imperial world and sense-making that require careful, strategic planning to construct. They serve the purpose of imperial enterprise through the reproduction of politics and relations based on the principle of differentiability.⁴⁷ The separation of documents into different sub-categories framed as “issues” begins the process of outlining how the viewer is to interpret foreign policies in Afghanistan through an objective, neutral lens. Areas and people are represented and produced as problems that “belong” to certain areas or populations. Through the use of political devices in the documents,

⁴³ See foreign policy archives of The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., The White House of President Barack Obama, The Trump White House, and The U.S. Department of State 2017-2021 archive, “Afghanistan.”

⁴⁴ The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., “Fact Sheet: Increasing Support to Help the Afghan People Succeed,” and The U.S. State Department Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Afghanistan.”

⁴⁵ See the CIA World Factbook Country Page on Afghanistan (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/>).

⁴⁶ See Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, Chapters 2 and 3: “Enframing” and “An Appearance of Order”

⁴⁷ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 359 – 366.

the imperial violations of U.S. actions and interventionism become dis-embedded and placed into the realm of the abstract, “as if they were the transcendental forms of politics, not the effect of institutionalized violence.”⁴⁸ Policies of previous administrations become seen as pieces of “the past” rather than essential aspects of the ongoing violence of U.S. empire-building. Analysis of the archival regime of U.S. foreign policy documents allows one to expose both the violence of the U.S. state and how imperial relations, such as that between the U.S. and Afghanistan, are normalized and reproduced through the strategic deployment of *language* and *political devices*.⁴⁹

“Vacuum for Terrorists”: Discourses of War and Stabilization

People in positions of power construct the politics of differential rule and reproduce the imperial state through the language of institutional imperial archive of foreign policy documents. To frame certain policies as necessary, policy-makers deploy the imperial terminology and political devices to frame certain groups or areas as dangerous or threatening. These political devices include sub-security concepts that center around the idea of determining and assessing “threats” from which the U.S. imperial state can and must protect its citizens.⁵⁰ Imperial actors begin to discursively construct distance and boundaries between U.S. citizens, represented as a unified “Us,” and other people and groups around the world, represented as an opposing “Them.” As boundaries and distance along the triple imperial divide are constructed, those who occupy positions of power can justify imperial projects. The language of foreign policy documents normalizes unequal relations of power and represent certain places and people as dangerous to both U.S. and international well-being.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 359.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 171-172 and 457 – 463.

⁵⁰ Some of these sub-security threats include: “strategic interests,” “national security,” and “containment.”

⁵¹ Campbell, *Writing Security* 172-187 and Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 30.

A particularly useful political device for imperial actors is the analytic category of War. The label of War functions as a discursive tool for imperial agents to frame present conflicts and represent state aggression as morally justified, discrete events with established boundaries, timeframes, alliances, and body counts.⁵² U.S. officials have consistently relied on discourses of danger to facilitate imperial ambition and empire-building, such as the “Myth of the Frontier” used to justify the expulsion and dispossession of the indigenous populations during Westward Expansion and the demonization of the USSR as the “Evil Empire” and primary global threat during the 1980s.⁵³ Foreign policy documents showcase how state officials disseminate these discourses and influence how citizens perceive areas and groups of people that the state finds a strategic interest in surveilling and controlling.⁵⁴

After the violence of World Wars I and II, international institutions required nations to provide a legitimating rationale for aggressive interventionist policies as *defensive* rather than *expansionary*. President Bush Jr. attempted to justify the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in October of 2001 as a retaliation against the Taliban’s housing of al-Qaeda. He framed U.S. actions as part of a “new and different war ... A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.”⁵⁵ To address international and national pressure, U.S. leaders and officials have framed U.S. violence and interventionism in Afghanistan as part of a complex and entirely new global War on Terror. During the 1980s, “terrorism” emerged as a politically powerful term which imperial actors could deploy to represent whole areas and groups of people that they wished to dominate. These actors also used the concept of War to represent the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship through a moralistic lens. Obama ran on a pledge to redirect U.S. efforts and resources towards Afghanistan, which he framed as “the good war,” and away from Iraq,

⁵² Thanh, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, 7.

⁵³ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 186 and Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 48.

⁵⁴ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 20.

⁵⁵ The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., “The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days.”

“the bad war.” He claimed that U.S. counterterrorism (COIN) operations in Afghanistan represent “a cause that could not be more just.”⁵⁶ Presidents and their leading officers framed the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as a morally justified (“good”) but completely different (“new”) form of globalized War against the international threat of “terrorism” that required “pre-emptive” tactics and flexible ethical boundaries.⁵⁷ Through the dissemination of this doctrine of preemption, officials produced the idea that powerful nations could attack any nation which they deemed a threat.⁵⁸ Bush framed the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan twice as a “crusade,” a conflict between an ultimate good, the U.S. state and American citizens, and an ultimate evil Other, the international figure of the “terrorist.”

U.S. leadership consistently rely on discourses of danger to construct binaries that are both morally and racially charged and fold the concept of “terrorism” into the public imagination surrounding Afghanistan.⁵⁹ The “failed state” of Afghanistan was portrayed as the base of operations for al-Qaeda, folding the idea of transnational terrorist groups and networks into the “fractured but no less visibly bounded space of Afghanistan.”⁶⁰ To keep the connection between the imaginative geography of Afghanistan and the transnational terrorist networks, Presidents consistently described Afghanistan in official documents as a “safe haven” for terrorist groups, continuing to discursively connect Afghanistan and the threat of terrorism.⁶¹ The Trump administration continually framed Afghanistan as a site of “immense” security threats for the U.S. by making the assertion that Afghanistan and Pakistan contained the highest global concentration

⁵⁶ The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.” In this 2009 speech, Obama claimed that the U.S. was in Afghanistan not to dictate the direction of the country, but to “confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

⁵⁷ Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism*, Chapter 5 “Writing the good (new) war on terrorism,” 121 – 152.

⁵⁸ Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, 41.

⁵⁹ Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism* and Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 49-51.

⁶⁰ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 50.

⁶¹ The White House of George W. Bush Jr., “President Bush: Information Sharing, Patriot Act Vital to Homeland Security,” News & Policies ; The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” ; The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump and President Ghani of Afghanistan After Bilateral Meeting | Bagram, Afghanistan.”

of registered “U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations.”⁶² After the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed, the White House also recirculated discourses of danger and framed the agreement as part of Trump’s commitment to “keeping America safe from the scourge of terrorism” and ensure that “Afghan soil can never be used to threaten American lives.”⁶³ While the spectre of “terrorism” is continually mapped onto Afghanistan, it is also represented as a boundless threat, one that could expand its operations if not eradicated.⁶⁴ Hence, Presidents have consistently framed Afghanistan not only as a site of potential threat of “terrorism” to the U.S., but to the whole international community.

The normalization of pre-emptive tactics and flexible ethical boundaries rely on the weaponization of discourses of danger and the fear and moral superiority they produce within the public imagination. The result is the production of imaginative geographies, spatializations that transform distance and space into binaries defined by social (inside/outside) and hierarchical (superior/inferior) binaries of difference.⁶⁵ These spatializations are transformed into “geographies of evil” as places, such as Afghanistan, are represented according to a spectrum of (potentially) threatening difference.⁶⁶ Since these archival procedures of differentiation and classification are given substance through policy, official discourses of foreign policy, such as the War on Terror, can be seen as an attempt by U.S. policy-makers to “establish a new global narrative in which the power to narrate is vested in a particular constellation of power and knowledge within the United States of America.”⁶⁷

Officials not only from U.S. interventionism in Afghanistan as a War on *Terror* but also on a War on *Drugs*. The narrative “War on Drugs” has a particularly violent and racist history in the U.S.

⁶² The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

⁶³ The Trump White House, “President Donald J. Trump Is Taking A Historic Step To Achieve Peace in Afghanistan And Bring Our Troops Home.”

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism*, Chapter 3 “Writing identity: evil terrorists and good Americans,” 59-91 and Chapter 4 “Writing threat and danger,” 92 – 120. See also Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 47.

⁶⁵ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 4, 11 and 17.

⁶⁶ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 69.

⁶⁷ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 16.

and often targeted the same marginalized groups as other discourses of danger, such as women, immigrants, and people of color.⁶⁸ The War on Drugs narrative, just as the War (on Terror), fits nicely in with other meta-narratives to demonize others and promote a society of security on a domestic and international scale.⁶⁹ Administration reports, particularly during the presidencies of Bush and Obama, often frame Afghanistan as a site of production and distribution of illicit narcotics. Afghanistan is frequently cited in these documents as the largest producer of opium globally which policy-makers claim provides financial support for insurgency groups such as al Qaeda, the Taliban, and others listed as threats to the U.S. and the broader international community.⁷⁰ Obama's administration framed his administration's interventionism as "counternarcotics efforts" to "[win] the hearts and minds" of Afghans and eliminate an opiate economy that "threatens regional stability, undermines legitimate economic development, impedes governance, and is fueling a global public health crisis ... in Afghanistan and neighboring countries."⁷¹ The political device of War, whether centered on "drugs" or the figure of the "terrorist," has and continues to serve as an integral part of the differentiation and classification systems of the imperial archive of U.S. foreign policy.

Leaders can weaponize these boundaries through discourse to facilitate imperial ambition and the construction of imperial subjectivities.⁷² Officials weaponize War narratives not only to construct geographies of evil, but to represent U.S. intervention as part of an artificial timeline that supposedly "begins" in 2001 and will formally "end" under the Biden administration in September 2021. Timelines are important to the operation of the imperial shutter as they are crucial to the

⁶⁸ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 198 – 205.

⁶⁹ Campbell, *Writing security*, 214.

⁷⁰ The White House of President Barack Obama, "Afghanistan." See many of the different statement and reports under the label of "Healthcare" such as The Trump White House, "Poppy Cultivation and Potential Opium Production in Afghanistan," and The White of George W. Bush Jr., "President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror."

⁷¹ The White House of President Barack Obama, "Afghanistan," and The White House of President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan."

⁷² Campbell, *Writing Security*, 134 and Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 6. Also see Anthony Alessandrini's discussion on "Great Chain of Being" and Modernization theory in *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics*, 177-193.

production of the past, “sealing moments by fixing them in time.”⁷³ Officials rely on constructed War timeline and the countless timelines of “withdrawal” to try to justify the continued surveillance of Afghanistan. They fail to mention that U.S. interventionism in Afghanistan began much earlier than 2001, such as training and supporting mujahedeen forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s.⁷⁴ They fail to mention the increasing use of drones and covert operations that continue to operate regardless of physical troop presence.⁷⁵ The timeline serves as a mask for the ongoing efforts to disavow the U.S.’s role in the production of Afghanistan as a regime-made disaster.

Throughout these documents, Presidents have (re)created and (re)articulated “new” timelines for withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Obama administration issued a series of ever-changing timelines for “withdrawal.” In August of 2017, Trump gave a nationally televised address in which he outlined what he called his administration’s “Afghanistan-South Asia Policy.” He framed his administration’s policy as the elimination of Obama-era “arbitrary timetables” in favor of continual analysis of “conditions on the ground.” He then framed the continued presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan as necessary since a “hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill.”⁷⁶ On February 29th, 2020, U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar signed what members of the Trump administration and media personnel framed as a “historic” and “comprehensive” “peace agreement” which framed withdrawal as conditional on compliance with the U.S. military and continued surveillance.⁷⁷ Currently, under the current administration, Biden has issued another timeline, one that he claims will “end of the forever war” in Afghanistan by September 11th of this

⁷³ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 167.

⁷⁴ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 95.

⁷⁵ See Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire*.

⁷⁶ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

⁷⁷ The U.S. Department of State, “Briefing with Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad On Updates from the Road to Afghan Peace and Reconciliation”; The U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at Afghanistan Signing Ceremony”; The U.S. Department of State, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America.”

year.⁷⁸ Yet Biden stated that the U.S. will continue to assist the Afghan government, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) but will “not take our eyes off of the terrorist threat,”⁷⁹ thereby reinforcing the historical relationship.

For many governmental figures, “withdrawal” does not mean leaving Afghanistan entirely. In a U.S. State Department briefing statement, they framed the conditions of U.S. surveillance as “watching closely and making determinations about compliance based on our own judgment” and insisted that the U.S. would “[sustain] a counterterrorism force to continue dismantling terrorist groups that seek to attack the United States.”⁸⁰ Trump himself issued a warning: “If bad things happen, we’ll go back with a force like no-one’s ever seen.”⁸¹ When asked to elaborate on the U.S.’s withdrawal, Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated: “Well, you called it a withdrawal. I would contextualize that. It’s a military withdrawal.”⁸² Hence, the archival regime of foreign policy documents allows for the construction of the conditions of possibility for what Trinh Minh-ha refers to as a more subtle form of colonial domination – a “dark night policy” where withdrawal simply means the movement towards a form of U.S. militarism and interventionism that is more covert yet designed to maintain U.S. influence.⁸³

“Helping Afghan Women Help Themselves”: Discourse of Humanitarianism

Discourses of danger and fear are not the only discourses that facilitate the continuation of U.S. imperial enterprise in Afghanistan. The discourse of Humanitarianism has also served as a

⁷⁸ The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ The Trump White House, “President Donald J. Trump Is Taking A Historic Step To Achieve Peace in Afghanistan And Bring Our Troops Home.”

⁸¹ BBC, “Afghan conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war.” Trump also framed the U.S.’s future in Afghanistan, stressing that the U.S. would “always have a presence” and must retain a reduced presence, including high intelligence efforts, to have the capacity to react in accordance with U.S. interests (See Kheel, “Trump: U.S. to keep 8,600 troops in Afghanistan after Taliban deal.”)

⁸² The U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – May 10, 2021.”

⁸³ Minh-ha, *Lovecical*, 25-29.

political device for imperial actors to frame U.S. interventionism. Much of the discussion around humanitarian intervention presents ideas of “human rights,” “sovereignty,” and “aid” as universal values, but “intervention is in practice a right appropriated by the strong.”⁸⁴ The imperial condition is designed around what Immanuel Wallerstein calls European Universalism, a worldview that emerged from Europe that attempts to define global “universal rights and values” and claim moral superiority over their interpretation.⁸⁵ Human rights language and the institutionalized language of humanitarianism underpins the imperial drive for “progress” and “development” and eventually the production of powerful nations, such as the U.S., as “an imperial class of rescuers”⁸⁶ with the imperial right to call themselves “liberators.”

Women and violence against women are often at the center of the discourse on humanitarian intervention. According to critical theorist Anne McClintock, “gender dynamics were, from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise.”⁸⁷ Women, especially women of marginalized communities, serve as valuable figures for imperial actors to use to represent imperial regimes as “progressive” and morally superior to local populations. Heads of imperial projects attempt to justify their imperial ambition and neocolonial projects through the representation of their policies as based on the “protection” and “well-being” of women and their “human rights.” Imperial agents represent “women and children” in documents through gendered, imperial tropes as victims of past and present community-based violence. Through representations in official documents, imperial actors attempt to moralize aggressive foreign policies and represent themselves as “liberating forces” for women around the world.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Wallerstein, *European Universalism*, 27.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-29.

⁸⁶ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 502.

⁸⁷ In Mills, *Discourse*, 79 (quote from Anne McClintock, 1995: 6-7).

⁸⁸ See Wallerstein, *European Universalism* ; Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 25 ; Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” ; Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” ; Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers Monsters, Whores: Thinking About Women’s Violence in Global Politics*.

U.S. officials have consistently used these documents to frame the U.S. as a liberatory force in Afghanistan. President Bush Jr. himself stated that he and the U.S. public should be proud of the U.S. for “liberat[ing] the 25 million people of that country [Afghanistan].”⁸⁹ U.S. leaders often frame the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as humanitarian intervention on behalf of the protection of the rights of women in Afghanistan. President Bush and many of his officials, such as Secretary Colin Powell, represented U.S. actions as “a commitment to ensure that the women of Afghanistan have a voice in the future of their country.”⁹⁰ Bush framed the U.S.-Afghan relationship as oppositional to the rule of the Taliban where he claimed women had unprecedented “freedoms and opportunities” in contrast to the Taliban’s “ruinous tyranny” where women faced “brutal repression.”⁹¹ Obama claimed that the Afghan people, particularly “women and girls” under the Taliban would be condemned to “brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights.”⁹² The Trump administration continued to deploy the rhetoric that represents Afghanistan as a place for the U.S. to monitor in the name of what Presidents and White House spokespeople frame as “liberal values” and “the rights of Afghan women.” Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice G. Wells framed Afghanistan as “one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman” that would need to be monitored to “support the constitutional protections and gains made in the last 18 years” and “[help] Afghan women help themselves.”⁹³ Here, Afghan women become representations of U.S. benevolence and “progress.”

The archive reveals how U.S. policy-makers attempt to construct the U.S. as an internationally recognized savior of women, an example of what Spivak termed “a case of ‘White

⁸⁹ The White House of George W. Bush Jr., “President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror.”

⁹⁰ The U.S. Department of State, “Afghan Women.”

⁹¹ The U.S. Department of State, “Message on the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council.”

⁹² The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Even Obama’s revitalized Drug Policy emphasized how illicit economies support the Taliban and negatively impact public health “particularly among women and children in Afghanistan and neighboring countries.” (See The White House of President Barack Obama, “Afghanistan”).

⁹³ The U.S. Department of State, “Ensuring an Inclusive Afghan Peace Process.”

men saving brown women from brown men’.”⁹⁴ In a 2001 radio address, First Lady Laura Bush framed the U.S. and the international community as “civilized people” that are horrified by the “brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban.”⁹⁵ Obama called U.S. presence in Afghanistan part of a fight against the return to rule of the Taliban that would “condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights to the Afghan people – especially women and girls.”⁹⁶ From these boundary-producing performances, Afghanistan is represented as “uncivilized” and unable to “progress” without U.S. assistance. The documents show how policy-makers rely on representations grounded in an imperial drive for “progress” in combination with political devices of “human rights” in their attempts to justify U.S. continual presence and surveillance of Afghan society.

While officials rely on the idea of “women and children” to frame U.S. intervention as liberatory and progressive, the documents also reveal how they represent the U.S. as a force that acts for the betterment of *all* the people of Afghanistan. Immediately after September 11th, 2001, an editor of the Washington Post claimed that Afghanistan was “crying out for some sort of enlightened foreign administration.”⁹⁷ In 2007, President Bush argued that Afghan citizens were free to “spea[k] their minds” and “begin to realize dreams” only after the U.S.-led international coalition invaded.⁹⁸ However, the documents showcase how U.S. officials attempt to *literally speak for and over the Afghan people themselves*. In 2018, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Alice Wells stated that the international community was “very focused on the rights of the Afghan people.” She

⁹⁴ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 93.

⁹⁵ The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush.” She also used this opportunity to continue to weaponize discourses of danger to produce Afghanistan as a geography of evil by stating: “not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us.”

⁹⁶ The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

⁹⁷ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 44.

⁹⁸ The White House of George W. Bush Jr., “President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror.”

went on to state that her remarks during what she framed as the “Kabul process” “underscored that the Afghan people want peace but not at the cost of their dignity and advancement.”⁹⁹ In July of 2019, Afghan journalist Nazira Karimi asked Spokesperson for the Department of the State Morgan Ortagus if the White House had any comment on the vocal dissatisfaction of the Afghan people for Trump’s rhetoric and policies regarding the U.S.-led peace process. Ortagus used this moment to forward the idea that the people of Afghan should be grateful to the U.S. for “the countless number of thousands, of tens of thousands of lives that – American lives and lives of our NATO allies and our European allies that have been lost fighting in Afghanistan for the people of Afghanistan to have a right to choose their own future.”¹⁰⁰ These documents reveal how policy-makers make a claim to the imperial right to speak for the Afghan community and act in their best interest.

U.S. policy-makers frame U.S. benevolence in terms of “aid.” They describe the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as one rooted in uni-directional “humanitarian aid” and “assistance.” They document the U.S. as “the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance,” to Afghanistan, aid that is meant to address the needs of communities, refugees and internally displaced persons due to “ongoing conflict and frequent natural disasters.”¹⁰¹ In addition, many documents showcase the interconnected relationship between official policy and non-governmental organizations. In 2015, First Lady Michelle Obama announced a new program entitled Let Girls Learn. This program provides funds to bring together USAID education programs, NGOs, and private sector investment to support the education of adolescent girls “through new investments in areas of conflict and crisis – including in Afghanistan.”¹⁰² As the international NGO industry often serves as a catalyst for neocolonial efforts to disseminate the ideology of European Universalism, Afghanistan becomes framed as a site of “humanitarian crisis,” a localized problem of

⁹⁹ The U.S. Department of State, “Briefing With Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Alice Wells.”

¹⁰⁰ The U.S. State Department, “Department Press Briefing – July 29, 2019.”

¹⁰¹ The U.S. Department of State, “United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Afghans Affected by Conflict, Drought, and Other Natural Disasters.”

¹⁰² The White House of President Barack Obama, “Investing in Adolescent Girls’ Education, Safety, and Health.”

Afghan society that can be “solved” through U.S. and NGO benevolence.¹⁰³ Hence, the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan, framed according to the idea of U.S. benevolence, resembles what Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah described as neocolonialism, political and economic exploitation through aid, predatory private sector investment, and imperial institutions that serve the interests of U.S. imperial expansion.¹⁰⁴

The documents in the imperial archives of foreign policy indicate that officials continue the work necessary to mask increased U.S. violence, exclusion, and surveillance. Successive administrations craft U.S. foreign policy to discursively tie the U.S. to liberal concepts like “human rights,” “freedom,” and “democracy.” They often resort to Islamophobic tropes of “humanitarian intervention” to represent the U.S. as a benevolent force of global good and Afghan civilians as imperial objects with no agency and in constant need of protection by the altruistic U.S. military.¹⁰⁵ Pompeo often touts this rhetoric, boldly framing the U.S. military as “a force for good everywhere and always.”¹⁰⁶ Simultaneously, representatives of the state ignore the violence of CIA-backed paramilitary forces, such as the Khost Protection Force, known for extreme violence, such as night raids and summary executions that result in civilian displacement, trauma, injury, and death.¹⁰⁷ While many official statements and briefings state that U.S.-Taliban negotiations included women and civil society groups, multiple groups have asserted that both Afghan women and civil society leaders were not included in U.S.-Taliban talks.¹⁰⁸ Coalition groups such as the Free Women Writers (دختران رابعه) have expressed concern about the exclusion of women and civil society in “peace

¹⁰³ Shivji, *Silences in NGO discourse*, 21 and 56.

¹⁰⁴ Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, 239.

¹⁰⁵ Wallerstein, *European Universalism* ; Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores* ; Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ The U.S. Department of State, “A Foreign Policy In Service to Our Veterans.”

¹⁰⁷ Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, 90 and Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Akrami, Halaimzai, and Sidiqi, “Afghanistan deal: Don’t trade away women’s rights to the Taliban. Put us at the table” and The U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – August 8, 2019.”

agreements” and “intra-Afghan dialogue” which risks perpetuating patriarchy and U.S. militarism.¹⁰⁹

The U.S. state has increased its use of aerial strikes and drone operations, causing a considerable amount of death and destruction to local Afghan populations. Under Trump, the U.S. escalated the use of violence. This administration authorized an additional 4,000 ground troops, increased targeted airstrikes, relaxed rules of engagement, and granted his military officials in Afghanistan and the CIA “total authorization” “to target the terrorists and criminal networks that sow violence and chaos throughout Afghanistan.”¹¹⁰ The military increasingly relies on aerial tactics and targeted killings from jets and unmanned drones. In 2015, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism began recording U.S. drone and jet strikes by U.S. Air Force Central Command of Central Command (CENTCOM). Since 2015, the Bureau recorded over 13,000 confirmed strikes, killing from 4,126 to 10,076 Afghan citizens.¹¹¹ The U. S. deploys MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper drones to minimize risk to U.S. personnel and maximize “intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance” operations.¹¹² Many drone operations are also conducted in secrecy by the CIA, making accurate and comprehensive data surrounding the civilian impact of drone strikes difficult to obtain and official figures considerably low. Yet, none of these figures are memorialized in any document within the archives. Instead, these realities are omitted in favor of the sanitization of U.S. imperial archives of foreign policy and representation of Afghanistan as a violent threat.

U.S. foreign policy documents function as an integral part of U.S. empire-building through the production of regime-made disasters. These documents become representations of the supposed “reality” of the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan. This relationship is represented as grounded in discourses of danger and humanitarianism that construct Afghanistan

¹⁰⁹ Laly, “The United States-Taliban Peace Deal and the Perpetuation of Patriarchy.”

¹¹⁰ Niva, “Trump’s Drone Surge.”

¹¹¹ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “Strikes in Afghanistan.”

¹¹² Sadat, “America’s Drone Wars,” 218-219 and The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “Afghanistan: US air and drone strikes, 2015 – present.”

as a hyper-visible regime-made disaster, a problem for the U.S. to save, modernize, and manage. The production of spaces, particularly geopolitically strategic spaces, as regime-made disasters underpin U.S. empire-building and fit perfectly into the international world order based on the construction of unequal and exploitative relations. The category of “regime-made disaster” allows analysts to see how the U.S. begins to construct imperial relations and how this is intimately connected to conquest, capitalist exploitation, and the “proliferation of modern nation-states.”¹¹³

¹¹³ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 362.

CHAPTER II: U.S. Pointillism and the Imperial World Order

This chapter analyzes how the construction of Afghanistan as a regime-made disaster fits into U.S. empire-building and the maintenance of the imperial world order. The documents uncover how those within these three administrations framed the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as a “partnership” to securitize and “reconstruct” the Afghan state. This representation masks the unequal integration of Afghanistan into the international imperial world order and obscures ongoing U.S. imperial violence through the construction and surveillance of regime-made disasters as nation-state enclaves for the benefit of the U.S. imperial core. This process occurs within an international world order reliant on the establishment of a global nation-state system to perpetuate the imperial condition. The documents in these archives expose how U.S. leadership and spokespeople facilitate the integration of the U.S. state and its citizens into the international world order as above and outside “realm of imperial accountability.”¹¹⁴

The Imperial World Order and Nation-State Enclaves

The term “Imperialism” entered popular vernacular in the late 19th century as industrializing European nations intensified their scramble to acquire colonies, strategic alliances, and spheres of influence. Liberal critics, such as John Hobson, connected Imperialism to the development of finance capitalism but focused their efforts on the revision of imperial and colonial policies to retain imperial control from European powers.¹¹⁵ Early European socialists made economic-based arguments but through a more revolutionary framework. They emphasized how domestic underproduction and protectionist policies to insulate domestic markets led to finance-

¹¹⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 554.

¹¹⁵ See Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*. Hobson remained fully invested in imperial ideologies, claiming that “civilized” nations should retain political and economic control over their territories to protect local populations and ensure the spread of progress and preventing the abandonment of “the backward races to these perils of private exploitation.” (pg. 244). See also Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 82 and Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 21.

capital-driven imperial expansion for new markets and outlets for overproduction. Vladimir Lenin described this new “monopoly/finance imperialism” as the “latest stage of capitalism” characterized by the pursuit of emerging capitalist nations, such as Germany and the United States, to re-organize colonial divisions to their advantage.¹¹⁶ Early European socialists remained committed to the conceptualization of Imperialism in terms of a linear temporality. They viewed Imperialism as a fixed stage of capitalism that would eventually produce its own demise as militarized national economies attempt to obtain lucrative globally dispersed raw materials and open markets.¹¹⁷ While early theorists of Imperialism established an important connection between imperial and colonial projects, uneven development, and the expansion of (finance) capitalism, they failed to account for the *flexibility* and *adaptability* of imperial enterprise to changing world conditions.

Uneven development and incorporation into international institutions and markets remains a signature of ongoing forms of imperial enterprise and neocolonial oppression. Nkrumah coined the term “Neocolonialism” to outline how imperial actors continue to engage in imperial and colonial politics and relations as they “seek the domination of the world for the imperialism they serve.”¹¹⁸ Neocolonialism can take many forms, from counseling to military assistance to advice and “aid schemes” to efforts by international capitalists to ensure that imperial powers maintain control and influence.¹¹⁹ Imperial agents, driven by the logic of capitalism, strive for the underdevelopment of newly independent states in previously colonized areas through the development of an international division of labor within a modern transnational capitalist system.¹²⁰ Imperial actors

¹¹⁶ Lenin and Bukharin, *Imperialism and War*, 37-48.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. See also Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*. Luxemburg’s theory of the demise of Imperialism was a bit different, as she argued that the *process* of colonizing non-capitalist economies becomes a self-destructive contradiction that leads to the fall of the capitalist system.

¹¹⁸ Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, 30.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 31-36.

¹²⁰ Amin, “The New Imperialist Structure.” Amin argues that this “logic of the capitalist system” consistently transforms its modes of operation to maintain North-South and center-periphery polarization and describes capitalism and “Imperialism” as “two inseparable forces of the same reality.” See also more on World Systems Theory in Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 149 and Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, 58-59 and 98-100.

maintain exploitative and politically advantageous relationships between the imperial state and pseudo-independent states to ensure the continuation of imperial enterprise. Hence, what imperial forces represent as reciprocal, unified processes of global interconnection and trade manifests as “point-to-point connectivity” to connect securitized, economically strategic enclaves into complex networks that reinforce capitalist divisions of labor and neocolonial exploitation.¹²¹

The development of an international system comprised of discrete “nation-state” units is a hallmark of the imperial world order. From 1917 to 1919, growing calls of resistance inside and outside of Europe built the foundation for global revolution. Colonized populations began to resist imperial domination with ideas of “self-determination” and “independence.”¹²² Imperial actors quickly and successfully transformed efforts to advance anti-colonial worldmaking into the institutionalization of empire. With the establishment of the League of Nations, Woodrow Wilson reappropriated the language of “self-determination” in service of the maintenance of Empire. Newly established nations, such as Ethiopia and Liberia, were only welcomed into the League of Nations with “special obligations” and systems of oversight “designed to discipline and civilize.”¹²³ Early international institutions transformed the threat of decolonization to unequal integration into international institutions designed to preserve a racially differential principle compatible with imperial enterprise.¹²⁴

Black revolutionaries during the 1930s sought to reappropriate “self-determination” to show how racial hierarchy and slavery serve as the foundational structures of neocolonial projects by representing Empire as enslavement. These revolutionaries saw colonized groups as “the key agents of global transformation” that would champion a view of an anti-imperial world as more than inclusion, but the development of an egalitarian world order.¹²⁵ To combat anti-imperial

¹²¹ Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 42-48.

¹²² Getachow, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 37-39 and 82

¹²³ *Ibid*, 58.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 10 and Chapter 2, “The Counterrevolutionary Moment: Preserving Racial Hierarchy in the League of Nations,” 37-70.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 11 and 67.

worldmaking, imperial figures such as Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, began to develop a “new world order” after World War II with the establishment of the United Nations (U.N.). The U.N. was designed to inhibit alternative modes of rule and “suppress any imaginative civil exploration of what a different world could look like.”¹²⁶ While framed as a neutral institution of international stability and arbitration, the U.N. “renders the parceling of the world into discrete units.”¹²⁷ Additionally, more powerful nations with legacies of imperial violence, such as the U.S., remain permanent members of the Security Council, the governing body of the U.N. with the ultimate power to veto resolutions. The U.N. is grounded in the imperial principle of differential rule as the negotiation and arbitration of appeals occurs between sovereign nation-states.¹²⁸ Imperial agents designed the international system, through the reappropriation of anti-imperial conceptualizations of “independence” and “sovereignty,” to facilitate the unequal integration of smaller, less powerful states into the imperial world order governed by differential rule and continued capitalist exploitation. Hence, the U.N. and by extension the imperial world order represent a manifestation of the imperial right to impose a new beginning.

The U.S. capitalizes on the imperial right to impose a new beginning. The founding fathers “imagined the fledgling federation as an empire”¹²⁹ and subsequent heads of state have remained intimately invested in “the American federalist project.” They have discursively tied the U.S. imperial character to both foreign policies of expansion and domestic efforts to dominate indigenous populations, enslaved Africans, and political opponents of the U.S. state. The colonization of Hawai’i in 1898 and colonial rule of the Philippines from 1898 until 1946 are only two examples of the U.S.’s role as a colonizing force in the world.¹³⁰ The U.S. continues to engage in empire-building throughout the world and frequently intervenes in the affairs of other states, often

¹²⁶ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 464.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 463.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 415.

¹²⁹ Getachow, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 118.

¹³⁰ Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*. For more information on Hawai’i as a long-distance U.S. colonial project, see Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 124-126.

through war and militarism, to set the conditions of possibility for the spread of modern capitalism. U.S. leaders act as architects of the imperial world order through supranational institutions, such as the U.N., World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), that aid imperial exploitation and domination.¹³¹ The U.S. remains a particularly influential force in what Samir Amin calls the “Middle East Common Market” directly, through military occupation, and indirectly, through their alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia.¹³² Hence, the U.S. has always been and continues to be an imperial and colonial power.

Despite these origins, “contemporary America is a multicultural and multireligious political community that has yet to come to grips with its settler origins.”¹³³ Governmental officials outright deny U.S. imperial legacies and practices. During a 1999 presidential campaign speech, then-governor George W. Bush Jr. framed his intended foreign policy as U.S.-style internationalism, not an imperialist agenda. He boldly stated that “America has never been an empire,” but rather the “only great power in history that had the chance and refused [empire] – preferring greatness to power and justice to glory.”¹³⁴ Despite the presence of countless voices that decry ongoing U.S. imperial violence, scholars and experts continue to minimize U.S. imperial world and sense-making. Peter Hugill represents U.S. imperial legacies as a flirtation with “conventional imperial expansion” during the late nineteenth century.¹³⁵ Frank Ninkovich refers to the U.S. imperial legacy as a “half-hearted involvement” that culminated in a “relatively modest colonial career.”¹³⁶ Michael Mann equates U.S. imperial policies to a sort of haphazard militarism in which the U.S. acts as an egotistical “incoherent empire” that will eventually lead itself into ruin.¹³⁷ Other scholars claim that

¹³¹ Magdoff, *The Age of Imperialism*, 40-43. See also Petras, Veltmeyer, Vasapollo, and Casadio, *Empire with Imperialism*. These authors emphasize that most multi-national corporations are headquartered in Europe, Japan, or the United States and most CEOs and Presidents of the IMF and WB have been either European or American elites (pg. 14-16).

¹³² Amin, “The Future of Global Polarization,” 83.

¹³³ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 244.

¹³⁴ Bush, “A Distinctly American Internationalism.”

¹³⁵ Hugill, *Transition in Power*, 298.

¹³⁶ Quote 1: Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism*, 4. Quote 2: Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism*, 247-249.

¹³⁷ Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, 15-16.

the U.S. engaged in imperial enterprise by request. Geir Lundestad boldly argues that the U.S. acts as an “empire of invitation” as European nations often encouraged the U.S. to take on a “more active interest in the outside world” since U.S. policies “were more in accordance with the will of the local populations.”¹³⁸ Efforts to frame U.S. imperial enterprise as historic, inherently unstable, or consensual reproduce the epistemic violence of archive of foreign policy documents that perpetuates Eurocentrism and obscures *ongoing* U.S. imperial violence.

“Reduce Our Risk, Reduce Our Cost” : U.S. Pointillism and Imperial Balance

Currently, the U.S. engages in a pointillist form of empire-building that takes the form of securitization, control, and surveillance of strategic territories scattered around the world. It remains both imperial and territorially colonial.¹³⁹ As resistance to traditional forms of colonization grew after World War II, the U.S. developed a pointillist empire that consists of an array of military bases and securitized points strategically positioned around the globe. This ensures a continued territorial presence and influence around the world. In Afghanistan alone, the U.S. built military bases such as Kandahar Airfield, Jalalabad Air Base, Camp Leatherneck, Bagram Air Base, and a variety of hidden CIA bases. These bases operate as launching and landing points for surveillance drones as well the selection of targets and for COIN operations in the greater Afghanistan region.¹⁴⁰ U.S. leadership and policy-makers continue to install and promote U.S. industrial measurements, language, and even mundane disciplinary tools such as the stop sign as international standards and ideals for what international institutions describe as “progress” and “development.”¹⁴¹ Since the

¹³⁸ Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation?,” 263.

¹³⁹ See Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*.

¹⁴⁰ Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire*, 44-45 and what Immerwahr describes as the U.S.’s “war of points.” (Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*, 372-390). Additionally, while the current administration is pulling out of many of these bases, they have continued to ignore calls from local villagers to collect compensation and return of their land, deferring responsibility for land disputes to the Afghan government (See Mashal and Ghazi, “U.S. Leaves Behind Afghan Bases – and a Legacy of Land Disputes”).

¹⁴¹ Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*.

development of synthetics and vaccines transformed the accessibility and functionality of colonized space, U.S. leadership adapted strategies of empire-building to ensure continued U.S. dominance of international structures of governance and surveillance of geopolitically strategic areas. Hence, Afghanistan became a militarized stepping-stone into the Central Asian region and part of a series of U.S. wars of conquest upheld by the imperial archive of foreign policy documents.

The documents within these imperial archives expose how U.S. officials mask the transformation of Afghanistan, a geopolitically strategic place, into a client state. After the invasion in October 2001, U.S. officials worked to transform Afghanistan in accordance with U.S.-style structures and institutions, such as a free-market economy and capitalism all dictated by advisers primarily from the U.S.¹⁴² Douglas Lute, a retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General, stated that “we [the U.S. military] stated that our goal is to establish a ‘flourishing market economy’ [in Afghanistan].”¹⁴³ Many local interviewees from a 2015 United States Institute for Peace (USIP) report, ranging from local traders to CEOs of Afghan corporations, expressed disdain for what they saw as a “cut and paste” imposition of a U.S.-style, liberal economic policy and market economy with no consideration for the Afghan context and too quickly for the institutions to be able to adjust.¹⁴⁴ Policy-makers used the U.S.-Taliban Agreement to recirculate a representation of the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as *economic*, a relationship based on “economic cooperation” and “stability” through U.S. efforts to promote economic growth and private sector investment.¹⁴⁵ U.S. military forces invaded and constructed the Afghan state as a transplanted copy of the U.S., a nation-state enclave to serve U.S. geopolitical and capitalist interests.

Upon careful inspection, the documents in these archives reveal how the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan have been and remains tied to the expansion of capitalism and control

¹⁴² Whitlock, “Built to Fail.”

¹⁴³ Lute, “Lessons Learned Record of Interview,” 3.

¹⁴⁴ Fishstein and Amiryar, “Afghan Economic Policy, Institutions, and Society Since 2001,” 7.

¹⁴⁵ The U.S. Department of State, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.”

over global sources of energy and resources, such as oil and minerals.¹⁴⁶ U.S. imperial agents expressed interest in Afghanistan's potential as a source of wealth as early as the 1940s. For example, the U.S. initiated the Helmand Valley Project (HVP) in 1946, an effort by U.S. imperial actors based on the Tennessee Valley Authority to "translate Afghanistan into the legible inventories of material and human resources in the manner of modern states."¹⁴⁷ U.S.-based Unocal Corporation proposed a plan in the 1990s to construct a lucrative Central Asian Pipeline that would transport natural gas from Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan. While Unocal eventually abandoned the project during the 1990s, critics assert that the securitization of this pipeline was the main source of motivation behind the U.S. invasion in 2001.¹⁴⁸ Since the capture and exploitation of extractive industries are primary tactics of neocolonial domination, U.S. experts frame Afghanistan as a site of potential U.S. capital wealth, a nation-state enclave at the mercy of the whims of U.S. capitalism.

These policy-makers and so-called experts continue to express interest in making Afghanistan "lucrative" for U.S. capitalists by tapping into Afghanistan's vast mineral potential. From 2005-2006 and 2009-2011, The U.S. Geological Survey of the Department of the Interior and the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO) ran the USGS Mineral Resource Project. Geological experts produced two "fact sheets" in 2007 and 2011 in which the experts assess Afghanistan's mineral resources. In the 2011 report, experts claimed to identify 24 prioritized "areas of interest" (AOIs) of non-fuel mineral deposits that could be targeted for production and development opportunities for U.S. and international investors.¹⁴⁹ These documents indicate an interest in the development of a "thriving market economy" and "lucrative mineral resources" in Afghanistan. U.S. policy-makers and representatives of state rely on the political devices of

¹⁴⁶ Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, 59-61.

¹⁴⁷ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 31.

¹⁴⁸ See Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*.

¹⁴⁹ Peters, et al. "Summaries of Important Areas for Mineral Investment and Production Opportunities of Nonfuel Minerals in Afghanistan." In these reports, experts outline the large valuable natural resources in Afghanistan, such as deposits of gold, silver, lithium, platinum, iron ore, zinc, bauxite, coal, and copper.

“stabilization” and “development” in foreign policy documents that frame U.S. efforts to gain access to Afghanistan’s wealth as an “opening up” of Afghanistan to private sector investment.

Ambassador Wells stated in 2017 that the U.S. does not want to create a “donor economy” in Afghanistan, but desires to “develop a private sector economy” and focus energy on tapping into the extractive sector “which has been valued at a trillion dollars.”¹⁵⁰ U.S. agencies of “development,” such as USAID, often center their policy language around the support of what they frame as “export-driven economic growth.”¹⁵¹ Through the development of a market-based economy, Afghanistan is simply more open to the exploitation of U.S. private sector capitalists.

The documentation in these imperial archives reveal how officials construct Afghanistan as a nation-state enclave through their narration of a different story. They frame the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as an “enduring partnership” based on the “stabilization” and “reconstruction” of the Afghan state and society. In 2005, Bush and President Karzai released a joint declaration in which they framed the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as a “strategic partnership” based on “democratic principles, respect for human rights, and a market economy.”¹⁵² U.S. heads of state have consistently represented the relationship between the two countries as an “enduring” and/or “strategic partnership.” In 2012, Obama and President Karzai signed the “Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement.” In the agreement, Obama and Karzai framed U.S.-Afghan relations as grounded in cooperation between “two sovereign nations” that have “partnered” since 2001 to “respond to threats to international peace and security” and “strengthen

¹⁵⁰ The U.S. Department of State, “Briefing by Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs and Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Alice G. Wells.”

¹⁵¹ USAID, “Economic Governance & Private Sector Strengthening (EGPSS).” Currently, one of USAID’s major projects is the Multi-Dimensional Economic Legal Reform Assistance Program (MELRA). Under MELRA, U.S. government “experts” from USGS and Colorado School of Mines (CSM) to provide “high-level policy and legal advice” on areas deemed “essential for fostering economic growth.” Their listed “accomplishments” include contribution to mining regulations and model drafting that “is expected to facilitate private sector investment in extractive sector” and forward an Open Access Policy to increase private sector investment in the Information Communications Technology (ICT) sector (See https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1871/Multi-Dimensional_Economic_Legal_Reform_Assistance_Program_MELRA.pdf).

¹⁵² The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., “Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership.”

long-term strategic cooperation in areas of mutual interest.”¹⁵³ Representatives of state, such as Ambassador Alice Wells, and official state departments, such as the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, used official documents to strategically represent the relationship between the two countries as a “real”, “important,” or “bilateral partnership.”¹⁵⁴ Through representations of the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as a “partnership,” officials reaffirm the construction of Afghanistan as a nation-state within the international world order and division of labor for the benefit of U.S. corporate greed and empire-building.

At the same time, policy-makers draft documents that vehemently deny the representation of the U.S. as “nation-building” in Afghanistan. During his presidential campaign, Bush Jr. asserted that U.S. troops should be deployed to fight and win wars, and not be used for “what’s called nation-building.” President Obama made similar claims that the U.S. would not become embroiled in what he described as a lengthy “nation-building project.” Trump placed all the onus for “nation-building” onto previous administrations and framed his administration’s foreign policy as focused on national security and “killing terrorists.”¹⁵⁵ Instead, officials reframe U.S. nation-building techniques as policies of “reconstruction.” In these documents, they describe the Afghan state as “corrupt” and/or “weak” and in need of “reconstruction” and/or “stabilization.” Bush, Obama, and their officials frequently frame the Afghan state as “corrupt” and therefore unable to protect and provide social services to Afghan civilians.¹⁵⁶ The Obama administration swiftly reframed U.S. actions in Afghanistan as centered around COIN operations to “reconstruction” efforts. He represented U.S. policies in Afghanistan as U.S.-led “reconstruction” and “economic assistance” to “train, equip, and

¹⁵³ The White House of President Barack Obama, “Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement Between The United States of America And The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,” 1. In the document, the two leaders also outline what they describe as “areas of key strategic interest” in accordance with imperial terminology and (sub)discourses described in Chapters 1 and 2: “advancing peace, security, and reconciliation; strengthening state institutions; supporting Afghanistan’s long-term economic and social development; and encouraging regional cooperation.”

¹⁵⁴ The U.S. Department of State, “Briefing by Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs and Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Alice G. Wells” and The U.S. Bureau of Central and South Asian Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Afghanistan” (January 20, 2021).

¹⁵⁵ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

¹⁵⁶ Santos and Teixeira, “The essential role of democracy in the Bush Doctrine: the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.”

sustain” Afghan Security Forces.¹⁵⁷ Through the framing of U.S. actions as not “nation-building,” officials continue to mask the U.S.’s heavy hand in constructing the current Afghan institutions and military forces for the benefit of U.S. imperial enterprise.

U.S. officials are interested in control over the direction of Afghan politics and economics, but at minimal cost. The documents indicate that U.S. officials often frame Afghanistan as a regional and increasingly international site of concern. In October of 2001, Bush framed the role of “tak[ing] over the so-called nation-building” of Afghanistan as a job for the international community, particularly the U.N.¹⁵⁸ He also described what he referred to as “stabilization” and “reconstruction” efforts in Afghanistan as the responsibility of international “partners” and the NATO coalition. Officials continue to perpetuate the idea that responsibility for what they represent as the “Afghan Peace Process” should be undertaken by international forces and organizations such as the U.N. The documents uncover how policy-makers call for an “expanded role for the United Nations” in what they refer to as peace arbitration and reconciliation efforts.¹⁵⁹ They meet with heads of other nations or attend U.N. sponsored summits and conferences to discuss with other “international partners” about how to “build a more extensive regional and international consensus on Afghanistan” and facilitate what they refer to in documents as an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.”¹⁶⁰ U.S. and international leadership frame support in Afghanistan as reliant on “adherence to the principles set out in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework” drafted at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference hosted by the Afghan government, Finland and the U.N.¹⁶¹ Under the guise of international cooperation and “reconstruction,” the documents contain imperial language and rhetoric. This indicates that officials continue to frame a conditions-based integration of Afghanistan

¹⁵⁷ The White House of President Barack Obama, “Joint Statement from the President and President Karzai of Afghanistan.”

¹⁵⁸ Whitlock, “Built to Fail.”

¹⁵⁹ The U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-Europe Communiqué on the Afghan Peace Process.”

¹⁶⁰ The U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on Trilateral Meeting on Afghan Peace Process.”

¹⁶¹ The U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-Europe Communiqué on the Afghan Peace Process.”

into the international community and regional political-economic spheres at minimal cost but maximum benefit to the U.S. Empire.

The documents bring to light how Presidents frame the *expansion* of the potential imperial reach of the U.S. Empire. In his “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Obama reframed U.S. actions in Afghanistan as part of a larger “AfPak” strategy to address what he called “threats” emerging from Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁶² Trump further expanded the imperial reach of the U.S. as he represented his U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan as part of his administration’s greater South Asia and Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁶³ As they continually reframe the expansive imperial reach of the U.S., Presidents reaffirm Afghanistan as an imperial nation-state enclave that is *perpetually open to U.S. intervention*. They emphasize and document how the U.S. will continue to “monitor” Afghanistan and retain a “sustained counterterrorism force” to “dismantle[e] terrorist groups that seek to attack the United States.”¹⁶⁴ As disagreement around the implications of the U.S.-Taliban agreement grew, Trump issued an imperial warning: “we [the U.S.] can always go back if we have to. If we have to go back, we’ll go back, and we’ll go back raging.”¹⁶⁵ Therefore, the U.S. does not withdraw from Afghanistan, for Afghanistan is enshrined in the archive of foreign policy documents as a potential site of perpetual militarized return.

As Noam Chomsky states, U.S. militarism and interventionism in Afghanistan represents an example of U.S. imperial world-making with “tactical adjustments to changing circumstances.”¹⁶⁶ Since empires have historically weakened due to overextension, the documents in U.S. foreign policy archives uncover how U.S. imperial agents frame U.S. interventionism as in need of “balance.”

¹⁶² The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

¹⁶³ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

¹⁶⁴ The Trump White House, “President Donald J. Trump Is Taking A Historic Step To Achieve Peace in Afghanistan And Bring Our Troops Home.”

¹⁶⁵ Macias, “Trump hints at US withdrawal in Afghanistan as election looms” (this phrase can be found in The Trump White House, “Remarks By President Trump on Protecting Seniors with Diabetes”). Secretary Mike Pompeo continued to represent Afghanistan as a site of perpetual return, stating that “we’re [the U.S.] going to come right back at it” if Afghanistan becomes “a threat to the United States of America.” (See The U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Steve Doocy, Jedediah Bila, and Pete Hegseth of Fox and Friends”).

¹⁶⁶ Chomsky, 9-11, 69.

In an April 2020 interview, Pompeo framed U.S. efforts in Afghanistan as part of Trump's "America First" campaign to bring troops home and "get the structure right."¹⁶⁷ He constantly represented U.S. efforts in Afghanistan as part of U.S. efforts to "reduce our cost, reduce our risk" abroad and ensure national security "with a smaller footprint, with a smaller force."¹⁶⁸ U.S. officials adapt foreign policy language to changing conditions to perpetuate the idea that the U.S. can or should be free to pursue interventionism without penalty and at minimal economic and human cost. Therefore, under U.S. imperial rule, there is no "common world to care" only "enclaves to protect."¹⁶⁹ The documents expose how representatives of the U.S. state constantly (re)write, (re)produce, and (re)inscribe the U.S.'s role and positionality within the international system on the grounds of the idea of American Exceptionalism through political devices and techniques of differentiation that maintain the imperial right to construct nation-state enclaves.

"The Renegade, Unlawful, So-Called Court" : U.S. Citizens and Impunity

The structure of the international world order includes few institutions designed to hold anyone, much less imperial states, accountable for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and aggressive interventionism. One such institution is The International Criminal Court (ICC), a supranational legal institution created to hold individuals accountable to international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). According to Article 5 of the Rome Statute, the ICC maintains jurisdiction over persons for "the most serious crimes of concern for the international community as a whole," including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crimes of

¹⁶⁷ The U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Pete Mundo of KCMO." Pompeo claims that achieving this "balance" entails building up Afghan forces and running independent COIN operations.

¹⁶⁸ The U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Pete Mundo of KCMO" and The U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Steve Doocy, Jedediah Bila, and Pete Hegseth of Fox and Friends."

¹⁶⁹ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 8.

aggression.¹⁷⁰ However, the ICC is founded on the protection of IHL and IHRL, two doctrines that are full of political devices to reaffirm continued imperial violence of displacement, looting, and enslavement at an international level. Additionally, the ICC and many other international monitoring bodies resort to recommendations or constructive dialogue rather than definitive accountability for violations of human rights. Critics of the international structure argue that the international accountability system is “toothless” and fails to adequately protect marginalized peoples from state and imperial violence.¹⁷¹ The ICC and other international institutions showcase how the proliferation of nation-states reaffirms a new and differential form of sovereignty “mediated through imperial political literacy,” or how well new states were able to conform and comply with international standards of governance and doctrines based on liberal values such as “human rights.”¹⁷²

U.S. officials rely on the vague language and lack of enforceability of international accountability mechanisms to situate the U.S. as above and outside of international structures. Since drones target individuals rather than soldiers, U.S. officials use stigmatized labels, such as “unlawful combatant,” “insurgents,” “jihadists,” and “suspected terrorists,” to represent Afghans as outside of international rights and protections.¹⁷³ In fact, under U.S. national law, the President holds executive powers to use “all necessary and appropriate force” against nations, organizations, and individuals who either perpetrated the terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001 or “in order to prevent any future attacks of international terrorism against the United States.”¹⁷⁴ And, U.S. citizens are rarely held accountable through national legal circuits. Trump personally issued war pardons on two separate occasions for military figures scheduled to face trial in the U.S. court system for

¹⁷⁰ ICC, “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” 3. The UN General Assembly adopted the Rome Statute in 1998 which entered into force in 2002.

¹⁷¹ Smith, “Human Rights in International Law,” 66 & 70-72.

¹⁷² Azoulay, *Potential History*, 436.

¹⁷³ Sterio, “The United States’ Use of Drones in the War on Terror: The (Il)Legality of Targeted Killings Under International Law,” 207-208.

¹⁷⁴ 107th Congress, “Joint Resolution.”

war crimes in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁵ Since international institutions rely on the general nation-state legal structures to pursue legal action against human rights violations, U.S. leadership can avoid and/or resist anything framed as an effort to hold the U.S. accountable for imperial crimes in Afghanistan.

The construction of U.S. extraterritoriality to international accountability is tied to the construction of the “U.S. citizen” as insulated from international laws and jurisdictions. Despite its role in the negotiation of the Rome Statute, the U.S. negotiation team rejected becoming a signatory party to the ICC to limit the court’s jurisdiction over U.S. nationals.¹⁷⁶ The team ultimately rejected the vague definition of “crimes of aggression” because it could be applied to U.S. military personnel in active combat zones and objected to the inability of U.S. officials to negotiate for “special accommodation for anti-terrorism conventions.”¹⁷⁷ Michael Ignatieff refers to efforts by U.S. policy-makers to portray and construct the U.S. and U.S. citizens as “leaders” and “outliers” in international politics as an embodiment of “American Exceptionalism.” These documents unveil how U.S. officials represent Afghanistan as a space of exception for U.S. imperial violence and frame U.S. inclusion in and adherence to international structures “on its own terms.”¹⁷⁸

Given the sheer violence and destruction of U.S. militarism, international institutions could pursue legal action against U.S. nationals for war crimes and/or crimes of aggression in Afghanistan. According to the Rome Statute, a war crime constitutes the “incidental loss of life or injury to civilians” and crimes of aggression the “bombardment by the armed forces of a State against the territory of another State or the use of any weapons by a State against the territory of

¹⁷⁵ Superville, “Trump intervenes in military justice cases, grants pardons.” In November of 2019, President Trump signed a Full Pardon, an Executive Grant of Clemency, for Army First Lieutenant Clint Lorance and Army Major Mathew Golsteyn. Lorance was convicted in 2013 of second-degree murder and obstruction of justice by a military jury after ordering his regiment to fire on unarmed Afghan civilians and Golsteyn was awaiting trial for murder.

¹⁷⁶ Scheffer, “Staying the Course with the International Criminal Court.”

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 84. U.S. leadership has refused to ratify countless international doctrines on the protection marginalized communities and the promotion of peace. This includes (but is not limited to): The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the two 1977 Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in addition to the ICC. The U.S. ratified all four Geneva Conventions and the third additional Protocol of 2005 but failed to ratify the two Geneva Protocols of 1977 primarily centered on addressing protection of individuals in active hostilities.

¹⁷⁸ Ignatieff, “Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights,” 23.

another State.”¹⁷⁹ The increased use of unmanned drones has transformed all places into potential battlefields susceptible to surveillance and a “risk-free ethics of killing.”¹⁸⁰ This is especially the case in Afghanistan since 2011, as drone warfare tactics has and continues to produce severe civilian casualties and displacement. In 2019, the U.S. conducted a drone strike which Colonel Sonny Leggett, spokesperson for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, described as a “drone strike against Da’esh (IS) terrorists in Nangarhar.” But, the drone strike killed at least 30 civilians resting after a day of work on a local pine nut farm.¹⁸¹ In a 2019 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report, UNAMA agents exposed how U.S. and U.S.-trained Afghan forces contributed to more civilian deaths than what they referred to as “Anti-Government Forces” as 83% of the casualties stemmed from International Military Forces “amidst reports of increasing airstrikes as part of the United States’ strategy to target the Taliban and “set the conditions for a political settlement” in the first six months of 2019.¹⁸² Yet, these facts are expunged from official archives of foreign policy. In the name of “national security” and the protection of “U.S. citizen,” Afghanistan is constructed as a space of exception where all respect for the life and well-being of the Afghan people is destroyed.

Members of the U.S. government actively defers responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity by not only *avoiding* mechanisms of accountability but *rejecting* calls for accountability. In early 2019, NPR reported that the ICC refused a probe into U.S and Afghan Forces’ war crimes in Afghanistan due to concerns over U.S. compliance to court procedures that would “make the prospects for a successful investigation and prosecution extremely limited.”¹⁸³ This comes after U.S. officials vehemently threatened punitive action against ICC officials if they pursued investigative proceedings. John Bolton proclaimed that the Trump administration would “use any

¹⁷⁹ Definition 1: ICC, “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” 5-6. Definition ICC, “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” 4-8.

¹⁸⁰ Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, 32.

¹⁸¹ Sultan and Sediqi, “U.S. drone strike kills 30 pine nut farm workers in Afghanistan.”

¹⁸² UNAMA, “Midyear Update On The Protection Of Civilian In Armed Conflict 1 January To 30 June 2019,” 1 and 8.

¹⁸³ Kennedy, “World Criminal Court Rejects Probe Into U.S. Actions in Afghanistan.”

and all means necessary to protect our citizens and those of our allies from unjust prosecution from an illegitimate court.”¹⁸⁴ After the ICC rejected the initial probe, Trump framed the ICC’s decision as a “major international victory, not only for these patriots, but for the rule of law.”¹⁸⁵ U.S. officials reiterated their disdain when the ICC authorized an investigation into war crimes against Taliban, Afghan, and U.S. forces in March of 2020.¹⁸⁶ Pompeo boldly called the ICC a “renegade court” designed to prosecute “rogue regimes, dictators, others massacring people” rather than “American soldiers.”¹⁸⁷ The documents showcase how officials articulate a form of differential rule within the international system that represents the U.S. as a force with the imperial right to act with relative impunity in secured enclaves throughout the globe, the right to predation and the “subjugation of life to the power of death.”¹⁸⁸

The imperial right to act with impunity rests on the concept of *responsibility* for governance. U.S. officials consistently represent U.S. actions in Afghanistan as support for the “training, organizing, equipping, and sustaining” local Afghan security and military forces until the “transfer of responsibility for governance over to the Afghan government.”¹⁸⁹ U.S. officials often employ this language in conjunction with representations of the Afghan government as “failed” or “corrupt” or “incapable” of reinforcing the idea that the U.S. acts as an “advisor” and “facilitator” in an “Afghan-led Afghan owned” process. Whether it be USAID’s webpage titled “Journey to Self-Reliance” to “[help] countries solve their own development challenges” or state officials that describe security in Afghanistan is “an Afghan issue,”¹⁹⁰ policy-makers represent U.S. actions as necessary to make

¹⁸⁴ Morello, “Trump administration applauds international court’s decision.”

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. See also The U.S. Department of State, “Unanimous Rejection of International Criminal Court Investigation.”

¹⁸⁶ The U.S. Department of State, “ICC Decision on Afghanistan.”

¹⁸⁷ The U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Steve Doocy, Jedediah Bila, and Pete Hegseth of Fox and Friends.” Pompeo has also framed ICC probes as “a threat” from “rogue courts” which the Trump administration “moved heaven and earth to prevent from wrongfully prosecuting [U.S. army personnel].” (see The U.S. Department of State, “A Foreign Policy In Service to Our Veterans”). See also The U.S. Department of State, “ICC Decision on Afghanistan.”

¹⁸⁸ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92. See also page 104 where Mbembe describes “a universal right of predation.”

¹⁸⁹ The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address To the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

¹⁹⁰ The U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Steve Doocy, Jedediah Bila, and Pete Hegseth of Fox and Friends,” and USAID, “The Journey to Self-Reliance.”

Afghan leaders and institutions “capable” of assuming responsibility for governance. They mask the production of these local politicians into compliant imperial figureheads, “endowed with imperial power and knowledge of ‘modernization.’”¹⁹¹ In the archive, we can see how U.S. leadership frame “responsibility” of local Afghan actors to *govern* and U.S. actors to *oversee* Afghanistan as an omnipotent yet invisible force with the power to act free from the constraints of international accountability and scrutiny.

The documents expose how leading officials and spokespeople, particularly under Trump, masked and deferred imperial responsibility in Afghanistan away from the U.S. They represented the relationship between Afghanistan and the U.S. as a “partnership” between two sovereign nations with the purpose of “reconstruction” and integration into global institutions and markets. Yet U.S. officials held negotiations and made political promises of the Afghan government without their presence in the 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement, such as the release of 5,000 political prisoners.¹⁹² They framed the Afghan government and security forces as responsible for an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” peace and represented violence in Afghanistan as a localized “conflict” or “civil war” that belonged to the Afghan people. Through these documents, policy-makers discursively transformed Afghanistan into a site of U.S. imperial sovereignty, a bounded space where the U.S. can act without fear of retribution or scrutiny, and the U.S. state and its citizens as immune from imperial accountability.¹⁹³ In order to maintain the balance of this pointillist empire, the U.S. imperial state depends on the socialized complicity of the U.S. citizen, or the citizen-perpetrator.

¹⁹¹ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 182-183.

¹⁹² The U.S. State Department, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.”

¹⁹³ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 65-66.

CHAPTER III: Citizen-Perpetrators and the Reproduction of the Imperial Condition

This chapter illustrates how U.S. imperial actors socialize U.S. citizens into the situated role of citizen-perpetrator. The maintenance of the imperial condition relies on the distribution and weaponization of differentiated subject positions and the socialization of people to assume their prescribed roles within the imperial world order.¹⁹⁴ The documents within these archives indicate that U.S. imperial actors frame the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan in constant reference to events represented as sacralized moments of national trauma. Hence, through the use of political devices in and archival procedures of these documents, policy-makers train U.S. citizens to accept the legitimacy of the archive and construct Afghanistan as a site of U.S. wounded identity grounded in the idea of “American sacrifice” and “victimhood.” Once socialized to hold no empathy for those who are impacted by U.S. empire-building, U.S. citizens assume the role of citizen-perpetrators and function as a foundational figure in the reproduction and normalization of U.S. imperial enterprise.

Citizen-Perpetrators and Socialized Complicity

An imperial condition is often grounded in the “expansion of the principle of movement” that “renders violence socially acceptable.”¹⁹⁵ The coordinated movement of archival shutters produces representation that functions as the underpinning of the imperial production of knowledge. Imperial actors emerge from vast imperial epistemologies designed to protect imperial ambition and its political manifestations. As a result, they engage in epistemic violence as they

¹⁹⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 33 and 433.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

ground imperial epistemologies in racialized hierarchies of differentiation and the production of subject-object, Self-Other relations through discourses of power, such as European Universalism, Orientalism, Western Society, and Africa.¹⁹⁶ Since archival regimes construct and maintain the imperial condition, the process of unlearning and interrupting the reproduction of the imperial condition involves the rejection of “the story the shutter tells” in a way where “neutrality is acknowledged as an exercise of violence.”¹⁹⁷

The imperial condition manifests as the indoctrination of people into situated imperial subjectivities that frame who can be considered as fully human and who cannot, or the “distribution of subject positions.”¹⁹⁸ Everyone within the colonial-imperial system is socialized to internalize these historically produced subjectivities and epistemological frames to disavow imperial violence and colonial enterprise.¹⁹⁹ This includes politicians, scholars, photographers, historians, and social scientists all of whom work together to construct and uphold the neutrality of archives and the systems of classification and differentiation that provide momentum for the movement of imperial shutters. For example, scholars have the potential to engage in critical scholarship, speak up about injustice, “widen the field of discussion,” and connect various anti-imperial movements across time and space.²⁰⁰ Yet, many European and American scholars engage in epistemic violence against subaltern groups, particularly women, as they attempt to define “the colonized” as an object of study from whom they can “save” and extract “data” from for personal gain.²⁰¹ Authors often disembed and de-politicize revolutionary thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, from their respective contexts in favor of institutionalized social science disciplines.²⁰² Historians often construct and

¹⁹⁶ See Said, *Orientalism* ; Wallerstein, *European Universalism* ; Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*.

¹⁹⁷ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 7.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁹⁹ Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* ; Mitchell *Colonizing Egypt* ; and Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 271-313.

²⁰⁰ Said, *Orientalism* xxxiii (quote) and 331.

²⁰¹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 271-313 ; Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” ; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

²⁰² Alessandrini, *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics*, 30 For example, scholars miss the shared effort to construct an “ethics without subjects” or “humanism effect” between Fanon and Foucault by fixing them on opposing ends of the “humanist” spectrum (76-77).

reinforce conventional narratives of national “History” through the exclusion of the experiences of marginalized groups.²⁰³ These “experts” and social scientists illuminate the importance of complicity to the reproduction of the imperial condition due to the ability of complicit parties to mask imperial violence and inhibit the development of solidarity for the recovery of the human condition.

Just as imperial points and nation-state enclaves are regime-made, so are the citizens that uphold the imperial state.²⁰⁴ States and citizenship are constructed and determined through the production and maintenance of boundaries based on borders and hierarchies of truth that demarcate a separation between an inside and an outside. Through political devices and archival procedures, imperial actors produce physical and emotional distance and space between perpetrators and victims of imperial violence and socialize citizens into a constant state of emergency.²⁰⁵ As a result, U.S. citizens internalize and normalize constructed “geographies of evil” and U.S. violence and aggressive militarism as an “appropriate” response that “absolve[s] the U.S. of responsibility.”²⁰⁶ Therefore, U.S. citizen-perpetrators do not see or experience themselves as complicit perpetrators to U.S. militarism. Citizens, who acknowledge an authority, legitimacy, and neutrality of archives and differential rule, separate themselves from the abstracted imperial crimes tucked away in the archive. The reproduction of the imperial condition involves a series of coordinated thresholds: the construction and balance of nation-state enclaves as well as the production of citizen-perpetrators to uphold the imperial state.

The imperial condition is founded on the principle of differential rule and mass displacement on domestic and international levels.²⁰⁷ U.S. actions in Afghanistan have caused

²⁰³ See the writings of the “Subaltern Studies” : Guha, “Preface,” 36 and “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” 37-44.

²⁰⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 52.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 273-276.

²⁰⁶ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 212.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 165.

significant displacement, casualties, and death. U.S. operations have caused the deaths of over 1.5 million Afghans in comparison to thousands of U.S. soldiers. Since the U.S. invasion in 2001, the U.S. has displaced over 5.3 million Afghans as they are forced to leave their homes to escape forced evictions, death threats, drone strikes, and “large-scale ethnic cleansing.”²⁰⁸ Those framed as outside of the U.S. imperial state are labeled as non-citizens, “refugees,” and “displaced.” Many of these refugees and displaced persons remain in a perpetual state of “being-in-expulsion,” acting as a constant challenge to the modern nation-state system.²⁰⁹ Within these documents, these crimes are framed as a result of a “humanitarian crisis” or “civil war” in Afghanistan. Through the documents in these archives, representatives and spokespeople for presidential administrations socialize and train U.S. citizens to support or ignore grotesque state violence and accept the legitimacy of the U.S. archives and differential body politics that protect them from state violence.²¹⁰ Citizens then assume their prescribed role as citizen-perpetrators.

Citizen-perpetrators function as the backbone of the imperial state through their complicity and acceptance of imperial rights, such as the right to destroy worlds and rule.²¹¹ In the U.S., the role of citizen-perpetrator is grounded in a weaponized form of national identification that facilitates pointillistic empire-building. Since national leaders are constantly involved in negotiating the ideal “national identity” and policies that constitute it, states are always in the process of “becoming.”²¹² Officials put a considerable amount of time and resources into the weaponization of emotions such as fear, nostalgia, and paranoia in service of the development of a masculinist ethnonationalism in the U.S.²¹³ Those who construct and frame conceptualizations of “National

²⁰⁸ Vine et. al, “Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States’ Post-9/11 Wars,” 3. Since 2001, U.S. militarism and war has produced 2,083,126 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers and 3,218,827 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (18).

²⁰⁹ Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, 2.

²¹⁰ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 126 and 203.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 522.

²¹² Campbell, *Writing Security*, 11.

²¹³ Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, 19. See also Wendy Brown’s article on “Wounded Attachments” and Jacqueline Rose’s article on how moments of national trauma can serve efforts to militarize national identification.

Identity” rely on the performativity of nationalist representations.²¹⁴ In his influential essay, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Homi Bhabha conceptualizes the “Nation” as “a narrative strategy – and an apparatus of power – that produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories, like the people, minorities, or ‘cultural difference’ that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation.”²¹⁵ Foreign policy-makers strive to produce a unified, idealized national sense of identification that is exclusionary of even U.S. citizens framed as outside and/or against the representation of the good “American citizen,” such as the black community, the queer and trans community, the disabled, the undocumented, and women. These marginalized communities within the U.S. experience the devastating effects of differential rule such as differential treatment, increased levels of surveillance, and consistent violence from the U.S. state. The archival regime extends this differential treatment internationally, as “the way America treats its marginalized citizens at home is mirrored in the way it treats both its foreigners of color within and its others abroad.”²¹⁶ Through systems of differentiation and the production of citizenship, U.S. officials construct a sense of national identification rooted in white supremacy and hyper-militarized ethnonationalism and “gained through the exclusion and denigration of others.”²¹⁷

Citizen-perpetrators become grounded in the performance of a *wounded* national identity. The documents uncover how officials construct a wounded and militarized national identification that functions as the foundation for the imperial subject, the citizen-perpetrator.²¹⁸ As governmental personnel frame the country and its citizens as outside and above international accountability, U.S. citizens come to see themselves as *exceptional*, excluded from the violent world

²¹⁴ McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 117-120 and Bhabha, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,” 299.

²¹⁵ Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” 293.

²¹⁶ Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, 22-23 (quote on 23).

²¹⁷ McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 112.

²¹⁸ Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Chapter 3 “Break their bones”: Zionism as Politics (Violence), 108-155 and Brown, “Wounded Attachments: Late Modern Oppositional Political Foundations.”

of colonialism and capitalist exploitation.²¹⁹ To reinforce the construction of nation-state enclaves of the U.S. pointillist empire, U.S. leadership map threats of War and Terrorism onto imperial points, like Afghanistan. Presidents and those who claim to speak on behalf of the state then frame strategic moments in U.S. history as moments of extreme injury and exceptional national trauma for citizens of what is represented as the “American nation.”²²⁰ This allows officials the opportunity to frame the relationship between Afghanistan and the U.S. as one based around the idea of U.S. suffering and sacrifice. Therefore, Afghanistan becomes a site of U.S. wounded identity and exceptional “American victimhood” as the U.S. is represented as a benevolent victim, a force of good that continues to suffer from the aggression from those labeled as “Other.”

“American Blood and Treasure” : U.S. Wounded Victimhood

From these foreign policy documents, we can see that U.S. officials represent the relationship between Afghanistan and the U.S. as rooted in what is framed as exceptional U.S. victimhood. Through the weaponization of fear, memorialization of 9/11, and glorification of “American victory” and “sacrifice,” officials disseminate discourses of danger that facilitate a state of paranoia of potential danger. This permanent state of insecurity provides policy-makers with an opportunity to manufacture “bogeymen” and frame nation-state enclaves as sites of threats to be controlled, surveilled, or even eradicated.²²¹ The weaponization of the affect of fear becomes intimately tied to the production of geographies of evil and systems of differentiation that reaffirm the imperial state. U.S. citizen-perpetrators become immersed in what Achille Mbembe calls a “society of enmity,” a perpetual state of being driven by a desire for an enemy, a fantasy of

²¹⁹ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 50-53, 203 and 501-502.

²²⁰ From the Vietnam War to the Cold War, U.S. officials often weaponize collective memorialization to legitimate U.S. intervention and normalize direct intervention and “low-intensity conflict.” See Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 7.

²²¹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 44-54.

extermination, and the anxiety of annihilation that drives U.S. imperial world-making.²²² As U.S. citizens gradually internalize geographies of evil and subsequent affect of fear, they come to accept the principle of differential rule that protects and insulates U.S. citizens from experiencing themselves as perpetrators to imperial violence.

U.S. foreign policy members can look into the archive and strategically select events that can be reframed and transformed into sacralized moments of exceptional U.S. suffering and victimization. Many legitimizing rationales of the imperial condition, such as the War on Terror, pivot around one particular moment from U.S. history: September 11th, 2001 (9/11).²²³ U.S. foreign policy-makers framed 9/11 as an essential, defining moment in the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan.²²⁴ While 9/11 had the potential to build global solidarity, U.S. officials represented 9/11 as an “act of war” from a growing threat of anti-American “terrorism.” From the constant replay of news footage and images to annual memorial gatherings with ceremonies and speeches to the 2010 Park51 “Ground Zero Mosque controversy,”²²⁵ U.S. officials, experts and media outlets construct their representations of 9/11 around Islamophobic rhetoric that reinforce what Nazia Kazi describes as Orientalist myths that reaffirm empire, such the myth that Islam is inherently violent and the myth that Muslims are incapable of democratic self-rule.²²⁶ These representations serve the logic of capitalism, as a vast network of Christian Zionists, misinformation experts, and radical neoconservatives that Nathan Lean dubs the Islamophobia Network, profit from this

²²² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 43. See also Minha-ha, *Lovecidal* and the development of a Mindset of militarism facilitates perpetual war (47).

²²³ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 13

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 25. See also sources on Islamophobia: Feffer, *Crusade 2.0*; Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*; Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry*; Kumar, *Islamophobia*.

²²⁵ The “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy of 2010 centers around protests of right-wing, anti-Muslim individuals, such as Pamela Gellar and Robert Spencer, and groups, such as the Stop Islamization of America (SIOA), against the construction of Park51, an Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan. Their arguments against the construction of the center pivoted around Islamophobic rhetoric, such as the center’s proximity to Ground Zero, and was part of a rise in anti-Muslim violence in the summer of 2010. For more information see Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, 23-24; Kumar, 165-169; Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry*, 40-41; Feffer, *Crusade 2.0*, 7-9.

²²⁶ Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, “The Persistence of Orientalist Myths,” 41-62.

manufactured “Green Scare” and militarized national identification in service of U.S. empire-building.²²⁷

The documents in foreign policy archives reveal how policy-makers transformed 9/11 into an exceptional tragedy that fit comfortably into other anchor points of “American victimhood,” such as the Cold War and Pearl Harbor.²²⁸ U.S. officials continually reproduces “small traumas” through the constant reminder of “the tragedy” and the “horrors” of 9/11. The Bush Jr. Administration consistently pivoted their representations of U.S. actions in Afghanistan around the memory of 9/11 as an exceptional tragedy.²²⁹ 9/11 has even been memorialized through the construction of an official “9/11 Memorial Museum” on the exact site where the Twin Towers stood in New York.²³⁰ Many officials reference 9/11 as a marker for time through the differentiation between a “pre” and “post” 9/11 world. As officials and experts frame 9/11 as a new beginning, they participate in the transformation of 9/11 into a marker of imperial temporality framed as the beginning of a “new” era dictated by threats and crises that Afghanistan and its people pose.

As they mapped the figure of “the terrorist” into the imaginative geography of Afghanistan, officials represent and project the blame for the “horror” and “tragedy” of 9/11 onto Afghanistan. In his 2009 speech, Obama framed the U.S. experience in Afghanistan as one of sacrifice, stating that “nearly 700 Americans have lost their lives” and “troops from over 20 countries have also paid the ultimate price.”²³¹ In 2014, he reframed the U.S. experience in Afghanistan as “progress” at a “heavy price” since “2,200 American patriots who have made the ultimate sacrifice, that last, full measure

²²⁷ See Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry*.

²²⁸ Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism*, 31.

²²⁹ Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism*; Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 13. U.S. officials went so far as to frame the “Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement” as symbolic because it was signed on the first anniversary of the assassination of Osama bin Laden.

²³⁰ See the 9/11 Memorial Museum website (<https://www.911memorial.org/visit/museum>). On the website, visitors are said to have an “unforgettable encounter with the story of their attacks, their aftermath, and the people who experienced these events.”

²³¹ The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.” He also reiterated that the U.S. “did not choose to fight a war in Afghanistan” but resulted directly from “9/11,” where “nearly 3,000 of our people were killed ... for doing nothing more than going about their daily lives.”

of devotion, right here in Afghanistan.”²³² Both Trump and Pompeo have continued to weaponize the memory of 9/11 and frame Afghanistan as a site of “American sacrifice.” In his “Afghanistan and South Asia Strategy” speech where Trump claimed, “nobody can forget the horrors of 9/11” and that “9/11, the worst terrorist attack in our history, was planned and directed from Afghanistan.”²³³ Framed as the source of U.S. victimhood and national trauma, policy-makers can weaponize the U.S. national identification in service of perpetual war and interventionism in Afghanistan.

These documents also bespeak how U.S. Presidents and members of their administrations construct an increasingly masculinist and militarized national identification represented by the figure of the “American soldier.”²³⁴ As they continue to represent Afghanistan as solely “responsible” for the events of 9/11, officials simultaneously represent the figure of the “American soldier” as the embodiment of the ultimate “good.” In countless documents, these officials refer to U.S. soldiers as “brave Americans” who have sacrificed themselves “to protect U.S. and allied citizens – including those in the Hague – and to give the Afghan people a chance at a better life.”²³⁵ Presidents give elaborate speeches at military bases and represent soldiers as the epitome of the “American nation.” Policy-makers advise U.S. citizens, framed as a unified “the American people,” to look to soldiers for “inspiration” as they are represented as the embodiment of “the best that our country has to offer – the virtues that have made America great for more than two centuries, and the values that will keep us great for centuries to come.”²³⁶ Soldiers are represented as a “fierce brotherhood of firefighters” and the epitome of “the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens.”²³⁷ Trump himself called U.S. soldiers “the special class of heroes whose selflessness, courage, and

²³² The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the Troops at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.”

²³³ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

²³⁴ Rose, *The Question of Zion*.

²³⁵ The U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo At a Press Availability with Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Attorney General William Barr, and National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien.”

²³⁶ The White House of Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the Troops at Fort Bliss, TX.”

²³⁷ The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., “President Delivers State of the Union Address.”

resolve [that] is unmatched in human history.”²³⁸ Through the glorification of the figure of the soldier, governmental personnel continue to reinforce not only the construction of imperial relations, but the consolidation of the nation as well as the production of U.S. citizens as complicit in U.S. imperial world-making.

The documents also expose how policy-makers expand the glorification of the figure of the “American soldier” and frame the U.S. as a successful, powerful force of good throughout the world. They continually frame the “greatness” of the U.S. in terms of representations of “progress” and “victory” in Afghanistan. In order for the imperial state to construct and pursue these projects of empire-building “ordinary people must accept that these actions better the world, uplift a broken or downtrodden population, or spread positive values like democracy.”²³⁹ The Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations have consistently framed U.S. militarism as part of conflicts that the U.S. would eventually “win.”²⁴⁰ On July 4th, Trump gave a speech in South Dakota in front of Mount Rushmore where he represented the U.S. citizen as part of “the most magnificent country in the history of the world.” He framed the U.S. as exceptional in comparison to every other nation, stating that “no nation has done more to advance the human condition” and “no people have done more to promote human progress than the citizens of our great nation.”²⁴¹ Leaders frame the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship through “victory,” “progress,” and “greatness” narratives and discursively tie “Afghanistan” to the public imagination surrounding “9/11.”²⁴² Citizens come to see and understand U.S.-Afghan relations as a relationship built on a combination of “American sacrifice/victimhood” and “American greatness.” Afghanistan becomes a site of complex U.S.

²³⁸ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

²³⁹ Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, 90.

²⁴⁰ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia” ; The White House of President George W. Bush Jr., “Rebuilding Afghanistan”; The White House of President Barack Obama, “Remarks of President Barack Obama.”

²⁴¹ The Trump White House, “Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota’s 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration | Keystone, South Dakota.”

²⁴² See Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, for a more in-depth analysis of the discourse of “American Victory” (37-41 and 123-130) and Campbell, *Writing Security* for more on use of foreign policy to frame neocolonial projects as “conquest” and “intervention” that represent national strength and international progress (165).

wounded identity and a place that U.S. citizens see and understand as “underserving” of grief and care.²⁴³

Foreign policy documents uncover how representatives of the U.S. state weaponize the idea of a national identification rooted in wounded attachments to constructed national tragedies, like 9/11, and an inflated sense of national self. Through these documents, officials frame Afghanistan as distinctly *different*, a site of threat to the fabric of U.S. society, identity and economic, political and social survival. The result of discourses of danger and national sacrifice is the production of *ressentiment*, defined by Pankaj Mishra as the mixture of envy, powerlessness and humiliation that fuels militant patriotism.²⁴⁴ In the documents, officials enshrine the representation of the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan as defined by both the idea of “American sacrifice” and “American greatness.” As a result, they construct and reproduce natural hierarchies of systems of classification and differentiation that produce U.S. citizens as complicit in the disregard for the lives of those affected by U.S. imperial violence. The internalization of systems of differentiation and the production of citizen-perpetrators becomes increasingly evident when one looks at how documents and archives framed as “criticism” recycle the same representations and themes as U.S. official discourse.

“A Staggering, Costly Failure” : SIGAR, the Afghan Papers, and Complicit Criticism

The success of the indoctrination of U.S. citizens into the role of citizen-perpetrator can be seen in what is framed as “criticism” of U.S. actions in Afghanistan. Azoulay argues that criticism based on systems of classification and differentiation rooted in the distinction between citizen and non-citizen facilitates the production of citizen-perpetrators who “conceive of themselves in a

²⁴³ Brown, “Wounded Attachments and Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, Chapter 6 “Victimhood,” 93-108.

²⁴⁴ Mishra, *The Age of Anger*.

differentiated, not shared, world.”²⁴⁵ Officials and critics alike often describe The Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) as a source of critique for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. According to official documents, SIGAR was established by presidential order in 2008, as a third party, independent “watchdog” organization to monitor and report on U.S. activities in Afghanistan. SIGAR has a vast online archive of reports and documents divided into sections and sub-categories of differentiation. The SIGAR archive has all reports organized into different tabs and archived for online viewers to peruse. SIGAR launched a “Lessons Learned Project” (LLP) in 2014 that has produced eleven different reports centered on imperial language, such as “Counternarcotics,” “Support for Gender Equality,” “Corruption in Conflict,” and “Stabilization.”²⁴⁶ Throughout the eleven official reports, SIGAR agents continually regurgitate political devices and representations, such as “reconstruction” and the representation of the Afghan state as “weak” and “corrupt.” Under the tab “Special Projects,” SIGAR holds a library of “fact sheets” that frame the “facts” about U.S. actions and relations with Afghanistan. The archive of SIGAR represents another threshold that reproduces the archival taxonomy of the U.S. imperial state.

Ultimately, SIGAR documents contain the same political devices and imperial rhetoric as those in documents found in foreign policy archives. SIGAR agents discursively connect U.S. actions in Afghanistan to the idea of imperial learning. Policy-makers who draft SIGAR reports continue to frame U.S. involvement as “inefficient” or a result of “poor planning and execution” rather than imperial world-building. In SIGAR’s High-Risk List Report from 2016, SIGAR agents continued to represent the idea of “American sacrifice” as the “high costs” of “reconstruction” efforts. They frame SIGAR as an organization for the protection of the “enormous investment that American taxpayers have made in Afghanistan.”²⁴⁷ They also represent the LLP program as an effort to “preserve lessons from the U.S. reconstruction experience in Afghanistan, and to make recommendations to

²⁴⁵ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 272.

²⁴⁶ See reports in the SIGAR “Lessons Learned Reports” archive.

²⁴⁷ 116th Congress, “Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction’s 2019 High-Risk List,” 4.

Congress and executive agencies on ways to improve our efforts in current and future operations.”²⁴⁸ In SIGAR’s 2020 High-Risk List, SIGAR agents continue to forward the representation of U.S. interventionism as incomplete and necessary due to what they frame as eight “high-risk areas.”²⁴⁹ Therefore, SIGAR functions as a form of complicit criticism that furthers the normalization of U.S. imperial violence as a socially acceptable “object of history.”²⁵⁰ SIGAR agents center their reports on “recommendations” based on the idea of “improving” the balance of U.S. empire-building to avoid imperial strain without sacrificing imperial benefit. These documents reveal how forms of critique, especially those that stem from *within the imperial state*, continue to (re)make imperial ambition as adaptable to the construction and maintenance of imperial relations.

Another source framed as criticism is the *Washington Post*’s exposé entitled “The Afghan Papers.” In 2019, the *Washington Post* released this multi-part exposé comprised of over 600 documents, including SIGAR interviews and a series of Donald Rumsfeld’s “Snowflake” emails surrounding U.S. operations in Afghanistan since 2001. While experts and media outlets often framed the exposé as an overwhelming critique of U.S. aggression and militarism, the *Washington Post* continues to recycle imperial terminology and differentiation that represent Afghanistan as a site of imperial learning. All 611 interviews and documents are housed on a single online database and grouped according to six “story topics”: “Spin,” “Strategy,” “Corruption,” “Nation-Building,” “Security Forces,” and “Opium.”²⁵¹ The documents indicate that the architects of U.S. interventionism, such as policy-makers, military and government officials and aid workers, framed their criticism around the idea of inefficiency, lack of coordination, poor planning, and reliance on a

²⁴⁸ SIGAR, “Lessons Learned Program.” The official mission statement reads: “the goal of the program is to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of current and future reconstruction efforts through comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan since 2001. Our reports show what has and has not worked over the course of the U.S. reconstruction experience. They offer detailed and actionable recommendations to policy-makers and respond to the needs of U.S. implementing agencies—both in terms of accurately capturing their efforts and providing timely and actionable guidance for future efforts.”

²⁴⁹ SIGAR, “High Risk List.” The interactive report highlights eight “high risk” areas are: “the capability and capacity of Afghan security forces”, “corruption in the Afghan government”, “sustainability”, “counternarcotics”, “reduction of U.S. control”, and visibility over “reconstruction” funds, “oversight”, and “planning and strategy”.

²⁵⁰ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 563.

²⁵¹ Whitlock, Shapiro, and Emamdjomeh, “The Afghanistan Papers.”

rotation of “experts” faulted only for being “ignorant” about Afghanistan society and politics. They also continually referred to U.S. actions as part of ongoing projects of “reconstruction” or part of the U.S.’s “economic investment” in Afghanistan. These critiques do not expose or outline the imperial crimes of the U.S., they simply reproduce the idea that criticism of U.S. actions in Afghanistan pivot around the idea of “inefficient” and “incompetent” U.S. imperial world-building in Afghanistan that could be improved rather than challenged.

The documents in supposedly critical archives showcase how authors often recenter the idea of “critique” of the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan around the U.S. experience rather than elevating the voices of Afghan people that have been left out and excluded from the archive. The authors of the *Washington Post* exposé had the potential to include criticism from local voices, especially those from marginalized communities most affected by U.S. violence. Local critics, such as Zarlisht Halaimzai, the Director of the Refugee Trauma Initiative, continue to vocalize their concerns regarding U.S. militarism and so-called “humanitarian” intentions that have little to no consideration for “the unimaginable suffering to Afghan and American families.”²⁵² Yet these voices were again left out of both official and critical archives. Instead, 23 out of 25 of the “25 essential documents from the Afghanistan Papers” were from the U.S. and U.S.-led NATO and 22 were male. Only two interviewees were local Afghans, former official Mohammed Ehsan Zia and former governor Tooryalai Wesa.²⁵³ Wesa centered his critique around U.S. official’s pursuit of social programming in Afghanistan with little to no consultation with local officials or Afghans. For example, he stated that U.S. officials concocted programs to teach locals how to wash their hands, which was incredibly insulting given that locals wash their hands five times a day for prayers.²⁵⁴ Despite the complicit dimensions of the *Washington Post* exposé, U.S. leadership continues to trivialize any form of critique of U.S. interventionism or imperial violence. Defense Official Mark

²⁵² Halaimzai, “The United States’ fatal flaw in Afghanistan? Excluding Afghans.”

²⁵³ Whitlock and Rindler, “25 essential documents from the Afghanistan Papers.”

²⁵⁴ Wesa, “Lessons Learned Interview.”

Cancian and defense policy expert James Carafano both framed the exposé as inconsequential, and they reiterated that the Pentagon would not change their policies despite the release and dissemination of the exposé. The inclusion of those most affected by U.S. violence could have served to expose U.S. militarism in Afghanistan rather than reinforce the discursive representation of elite U.S. “experts” and military forces as the voices of both “expertise” and “criticism.”

At a joint news conference with the Australian Prime Minister, Trump claimed that his administration could end what he framed as “the war” “very quickly” except “many, many, really, tens of millions of people would get killed, and we think it’s unnecessary.”²⁵⁵ By framing the deaths of millions of Afghan people as “doable” but “unnecessary,” Trump represents the continuation of mass moral disengagement and disregard for the lives of those affected by U.S. empire-building. Through these documents, policy-makers and complicit critics facilitate the production of a “banality of evil” that renders violence against Afghans and the reproduction of the imperial condition socially acceptable.²⁵⁶ Therefore, foreign policy documents are not just words or “policies” that can be recorded, stored, and forgotten in various archives – they are intimately tied to violence, discrimination, and prejudice that has devastating effects on the lives of areas, groups, and people that Presidents and members of their administrations wish to dominate and control.

Since no colonizing power colonizes innocently, representatives of the state, policy-makers, complicit critics, and citizen-perpetrators are *dehumanizing themselves* through concerted efforts to destroy worlds, dictate international politics, and construct relations between peoples based on “domination and submission.”²⁵⁷ From these documents, we can see that official documents, narratives, and forms of liberal critique will not produce an anti-imperial revolution “for the

²⁵⁵ Wagner, “Trump says he could end Afghanistan war quickly but ‘tens of millions’ of people would die.”

²⁵⁶ Waller, *Becoming Evil*, 98-106 and 174-176.

²⁵⁷ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 5-6. See also Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*. Here, Fanon discusses how colonial violence produces neuroses and a “sick society” that relies on the (re)production of racialized “delirious Manichaeism” that constructs “white” and “black” as situated, hierarchical categories that order society and produces inferiority complexes and psychological neuroses (See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 47-50 and *Black Skin, White Masks*, 160 and 180).

Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house."²⁵⁸ Therefore, the time is now to look elsewhere and begin the shared labor of reparations and repair necessary to open the door to the possibility of an anti-imperial condition.

²⁵⁸ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 31 (quoting Audre Lorde).

CONCLUSION

The unbearable imperial condition cannot be changed with this destructive call for the impossible in the form of a new beginning ... instead, it is the threshold of unbearable that should be restored and used in order to cry out, "not everything should be possible!"

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), pgs. 55-56

Imperial violence is our shared commons and therefore "all imperial crimes are surely the common inheritance of humanity."²⁵⁹ U.S. foreign policy documents expose how this imperial condition we live in is constructed and maintained through the production of regime-made disasters, the establishment of unequal relations between states, pointillistic empire-balancing, militarized patriotism, and ultimately socialized complicity. The documents within foreign policy archives reveal how heads of state and their personnel mask the movement towards non-public and more covert forms of "occupation lite"²⁶⁰ in Afghanistan through discourses of danger, systems of differentiation, and political devices that represent violence, interventionism, exploitation, and impunity as socially and internationally acceptable. These documents are then nestled into archives where violence and violation become part of a constructed "past" rather than ongoing and perpetual imperial enterprise. As citizen-perpetrators increasingly accept and internalize the neutrality of these archives, the imperial world order is reaffirmed and increasingly "dispossessed of tenderness and love."²⁶¹

Imperial actors and the citizen-perpetrators they reproduce emerge from the colonial matrix of power designed to reproduce racialized social categorization according to Eurocentric norms and the unequal international division of labor.²⁶² Hence, those integrated into societies with

²⁵⁹ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 152.

²⁶⁰ Minh-ha, *Lovecidal*, 25 and 46.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 154.

²⁶² Quijano, "COLONIALITY AND MODERNITY/RATIONALITY," 168-171 ; Escobar, "Beyond the Third World: imperial globality, global coloniality and anti-globalisation social movements," 211 and 217 ; Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: on (de)coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience," 278. See also Maldonado-Torres "ON THE COLONIALITY OF BEING." Maldonado-Torres states that the coloniality of being is characterized by "permanent suspicion" which emerged from European colonization and became the foundation of European identity [*ego conquiro*] (244.)

colonial legacies and socialized in imperialist epistemologies can start the shared labor of reparation through the interruption of the production of themselves as citizen-perpetrators and an open refusal to remain complicit in the violence of the U.S. imperial state and the imperial condition as a whole. Both victims and perpetrators are needed to begin the process of recovery for the human condition and the end of imperial forms of domination and exploitation.²⁶³ This involves perpetrators and those who benefit from systems of differentiation that insulate them from imperial state violence to engage in deep and difficult reflection and the assume of “responsibility for not letting the perpetrator vanish.”²⁶⁴

This project, then, is a commitment to an anti-imperial project that is both intellectual and political and an ongoing effort to reclaim the right to not be a perpetrator of U.S. imperial violence.²⁶⁵ It is both a piece of scholarly work and an inherently political statement that rejects official discourses that claim to speak and act “for the nation” and “the American people.” This project suggests the potentially transformative power in *active* and *open* rejection of U.S. imperial discourses and political devices that representative of the U.S. state weaponize to perpetuate U.S. imperial world-building. Derek Gregory issues a warning: “insofar as we [U.S. citizens] assent to them, often by our silence, then we are complicit in what is done in our collective name.”²⁶⁶ U.S. citizens can seize this moment as an *opportunity* to firmly establish a threshold of unbearability to continued violence by the U.S. state in their name.²⁶⁷ They can disavow their privileges and go on strike until the U.S. acknowledges imperial crimes **and** begins to engage in the labor of reparations.

The recovery of the human condition is always possible, for “justice, reparations, redress of the world can never be too late.”²⁶⁸

²⁶³ Azoulay, *Potential History* 148.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 518.

²⁶⁵ Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 7-9.

²⁶⁶ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 28-29.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 55-56.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 537.

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