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A Foucauldian Critique of Sexualized Neo-Imperialism and the U.S. War on Terror

Introduction: A Political Showcase

On November 15, 2013 Secretary of State John Kerry, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former First Lady Laura Bush made headlines attending the “Advancing Afghan Women: Promoting Peace and Progress in Afghanistan” symposium held at Georgetown University. The topic of discussion was the importance of continuing to assist the advancement of Afghan women even as American troops are being withdrawn from the country. *The Washington Post* reported that Bush, “with great feeling, said she feared that ‘once the troops leave, American eyes will move away’ from Afghanistan…‘I’m so worried’ they’ll think we’ve forgotten them again, Bush went on. ‘I want the people of Afghanistan to know the people of America are with them’” (15 November 2013). Hillary Clinton echoed these sentiments, stressing the need for global partners to work together to ensure that the women and girls of Afghanistan “will not go back, they will not be forced back into their homes, denied education and health care, stripped away of their rights to participate in the economic and political systems of their country,” reported *ABC News* (15 November 2013). The spectacular nature of the event attracted Georgetown audiences, many of whom stood in line at 3 am in order to get tickets. Amidst the pageantry, the publicized objective of the meeting was to raise awareness of the plight of Afghan women and to laud the remarkable changes that have taken place since U.S. troops have entered the country. Moreover, the speakers warned against the erosion of progress once all the U.S. troops have been withdrawn. Secretary Kerry cautioned, “‘it would be more
than a tragedy to let women slip back’ from all the advances made in education, health and economic independence in the dozen years since the Taliban fell” (The Washington Post, 11/15/2013). While magnanimous on the surface, a closer examination reveals that underlying the confounding rhetoric of saving Afghan women is the resounding chorus of praise for the U.S., for U.S. troops, U.S. values, and U.S. intervention. Inevitably, whether consciously or unconsciously, the three speakers were there that day to once again praise the saving, guiding hand of the U.S., leading helpless Afghan women out of distress.

The U.S.’s intercession into the affairs and crises of the developing world appears to stem from motivations of benevolence, or an assumed responsibility to take on the role of “policeman” on the global stage. Often, the U.S. justifies its costly intercessions into the affairs of other countries, squandering tax payer money and putting citizens’ lives in jeopardy, by appealing to democratic values and human rights. However, rather than imagined magnanimity, Western interventions are characterized by intersections of power and dominance, exoticization, and othering marked by the Western imperial past (Abu-Lughod). As the U.S. continues to make its presence known in the developing world, feminist theories and conceptions of the gaze shed light on the racist, gendered, and sexualized discursive construction of the third world subject as the target of the Western civilizing mission. The male gaze is a form of violence structured by power relations and rooted in an imperial past that continues to shape race relations surrounding the gaze. Foucault’s analysis of Bentham’s panopticon and matrices of power, knowledge, and discipline reveal the transformative effect of the gaze in carrying out the Western agenda. Understanding this contemporary moment requires a look back into the past. In what follows I will ask how the patterns of historical imperialism have been reconfigured in the modern day, and how the application of Foucault’s theories can help us understand these elements. I will
interrogate the dynamics around spectacle and visuality that have persisted from the colonial period into the neo-colonial period, and argue that in this critical juncture, Foucualt’s concept of the gaze sheds light on the extreme ways representational power is mobilized to colonial and neo-colonial ends.

**Framing Colonialism: Foucault’s Conception of Surveillance and the Gaze**

Foucault’s examination of the mechanisms of the prison system as well as its role in creating and categorizing subjects mirrors the colonizing process. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains how power and knowledge come together to work within and through the body to produce highly standardized and regulated forms of behavior with the purpose of creating a subject who will himself enact these behaviors. Within this enterprise the panopticon drives the negotiation of boundaries of visuality and bodily response. The panopticon’s purpose as a prison watchtower was “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). Concrete means of enforcement, such as violent punishment, become obsolete when all that is needed is the gaze. Rather than inflicting punishment directly on the subject, this capillary model works within and through the subject to create the most efficient, ideal form of control. Never knowing whether or not the guard is present in the tower, the inmates come to regulate themselves and police their own behavior. The existence of the guard becomes irrelevant when inmates’ bodies have already become docile. Extended onto the world stage of international relations, docile subjects and nations become the vulnerable playing ground for developed Western nations to carry out their masculinist, sexual, imperial fantasies.
Foucault’s concept of gaze and panopticon explains the mechanisms colonizers and the neo-colonizers of today mobilized to exploit embedded social inequalities to conquer foreign nations. Within colonial discourse, this constantly visible, yet unverifiable power which “regards individuals both as objects and instruments of its exercise” (Foucault 170) was the primary venue through which the West carried out its imperialist endeavors. Through colonialism, “the regime of the spectacle (inspection, observation, sight) merged with the regime of power” (McClintock 58) as the new world and its subjects became subsumed under discourses of feminization, fetishism, and commodification. The major driving force in these endeavors was sexuality. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Ann Laura Stoler writes, “The tropics provided a site for European pornographic fantasies long before conquest was underway, with lurid descriptions of sexual license, promiscuity, gynecological aberrations, and gender perversion marking the Otherness of the colonized for metropolitan consumption” (43). The male gaze into untouched, virgin territory is saturated with sexual imagery and gender norms. The sexual metaphors conveyed in these political messages underlie the virility of the male gaze, paralleled by the virility of male bodies looking for an unknown object by which to express their sexual prowess and thus make the object known. Surveillance and visuality were models that allowed for a heightened, all-encompassing male presence in the new world with the native female subjects laboring under their watchful eye. In drawing from Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, Stoler continues, “the sexual submission and possession of Oriental women by European men ‘fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West’” and is described as “‘a male perception of the world [my emphasis], a male power fantasy’…in which the Orient was penetrated, silenced, and possessed” (44).

**Feminizing and Sexualizing the Colonial Process**
One trademark of the colonial process was the use of women and references to the feminine as boundary markers. Feminizing the process of territorial expansion and the land itself, according to Anne McClintock, “represents a ritualistic moment in imperial discourse, as male intruders ward off fears of narcissistic disorder by reinscribing, as natural, an excess of gender hierarchy” (24). Naming ships sailing to the new world after women as well as calling unknown lands “virgin” territory grounded the process in traditional gender hierarchies that gave colonialists a sense of stability and entitlement as they exploited native lands and peoples. As they arrived to new, unchartered territories far from the motherland, couching the quest and the new world itself in the language of the feminine made up for the loss of boundary space left behind in their home country, as well as created an avenue for the legitimate use of violence in the civilizing mission. One apt historical example of sexualized violence came in the practice of concubinage, by which European men, who were often already married, procured native women, particular in Asia, to cohabitate and perform both sexual and domestic services. Colonizers were encouraged to develop sexual relationships with these women to foster “psychological and physical well-being, as protection against the ill health that sexual abstention, isolation, and boredom were thought to bring” (Stoler 49). Justification for concubinage was also couched in terms of political order and colonial health. Rather than engaging in prostitution or having sexual relations with multiple women, or even worse, male sexual relations, concubinage reduced the spread of sexually transmitted disease. This kept male, colonial bodies productive and in service to the state. It also fostered permanent settlement and rapid growth in mirroring traditional family structures. As physical commodities, these women “could be dismissed without reason, notice, or severance pay. They might be exchanged among Europeans and ‘passed on’ when men left for leave or retirement in Europe” (Stoler 49). Moreover, they had no legal rights over the
children they bore by their European captors. McClintock provides fitting insight to men’s utilization of subjugated women in the colonial process, “In myriad ways, women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge” (24). In the undertaking to derive knowledge of and power over the land, ascribing feminine attributes constructed male colonialists as master and native lands and peoples as subjects and tools for the master’s use.

Feminizing the new world and its inhabitants cannot be separated from the simultaneous racialization process. In many ways, the category of race was invented around imperial progression as the self-definition of the good, normal classes of people was essential to the demarcation of dangerous and deviant classes (McClintock 5). Following a Foucauldian view, the body has no meaning, no categories, and in extreme terms, does not even exist, until cultural authorities assign it an identity. This identity, derived from the body as read by culture, works through the body to not only create a racial category, but also to configure the category as natural. The interplay of race, gender, and sexuality in imperialism became an elaborate social stratification mechanism and organizational device. Beyond exploring new territory, imperialism took on a civilizing mission as barbaric inhabitants were constructed as in need of Western influence as a corrective to their backwardness. One major component of the racializing process was the pseudo-scientific obsession of mapping a racial family tree. This family tree became a concrete symbol of the panoptical presence in the visualization and observation in encountering native peoples. McClintock elaborates, “Progress takes on the character of a spectacle, under the form of family. The entire chronological history of human development is captured and consumed at a glance, so that anatomy becomes an allegory of progress and history is reproduced as a technology of the visible” (38). By appealing to Darwinian forms of observation and
science, the family tree project grounded imperialists in their superior place in the new world as well as lent legitimacy by appealing to science. She continued, “The merging of tree and family into the family Tree of Man provided scientific racism with a gendered image for popularizing and disseminating the idea of racial progress” (39). The family Tree of Man presents an interesting anomaly in colonial discourse. Although women were racialized and sexualized as tools and means to the end of colonial dominance, the Tree of Man does not include women in its evolutionary landscape. McClintock explains this in terms of the contradictory simultaneous invisibility and heightened visibility of women. She writes, “the idea of racial progress was gendered but in such a way as to render women invisible as historical agents…historical progress is naturalized as an evolving family, while women as historical actors are disavowed and relegated to the realm of nature” (39). This example illustrates the highly volatile and unstable nature of women’s place in the colonial world and the multiplicity of the uses of gender in fulfilling the civilizing project.

**Bodily Markers: Making Race Hypervisible**

Many interconnected forces were at play rather than the mere juxtaposition of white/black, subject/object, and male/female binaries to create the subtle naming, categorizing, and demarcating power colonists exercised over the natives. Incorporating scientific rationale into the project rendered the bodies of the colonized subjects hypervisible and open for the Western imperialists to “invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 25), the apex of achievement being “to induce in the individual a sense of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power…and the principle that the power should be visible and universal” (201). One venue in which observation and power were used in an attempt to create universal knowledge and truth
was in the medical field. In “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination” Beverly Guy-Sheftall analyzes the medical field’s exploitation of black women’s bodies. The pursuit to derive knowledge of the soul or psychological characteristics based on examination of external markers is a direct outcome of the colonial legacy. She writes, “in order to understand these cultural constructions of Black women’s sexuality, it is instructive to revisit the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Europeans entered the vast continent of Africa and encountered a people they saw as radically different from themselves” (Guy-Sheftall 17).

During this era, the Western male gaze was fueled by the great desire to examine, and therefore know the “other” body, as it took on erotic tones in an obsession to glean inner truth from outward physical manifestations. This inner truth in turn could be used to justify the exploitation and forced labor of inferior peoples. Using “scientific” evidence to debase black women lent legitimacy to colonialism and the enslavement of black women, while easing any guilty, white, male consciences. Depicting black women as “beasts of burden, workhorses, and hypersexual” (Guy-Sheftall 23) fueled the profit motive inherent in their exploitation and enslavement. Beyond benefiting from their physical labor, white men also used allusions to black women’s inherent licentious animalism to exploit them sexually. Guy-Sheftall goes on to describe the manner in which Anglo, middle and upper class men in the medical and scientific fields used data and observations of black women’s “enlarged” genitalia as proof of their inner deviance and hypersexualized, animalistic nature. She then asserts, “black women were so thoroughly debased sexually that they willingly gave their bodies to men, making rape a crime with which they were totally unfamiliar” (25). These historical conceptions reveal that the bodies of African, Asian, South American, and other New World natives were arenas ripe for
inscription and construction by their European oppressors made possible by the Western male gaze.

In this context, Foucault’s reversal of the body/soul binary gives insight into creation of knowledge as a tool of power and means to subjugate. The European male gaze onto the bodies of the colonized women marks the emergence of the capillary method of power, where it exists and enacts its potency through a struggle between opposing forces. Within this struggle, the technology of power does not work on or above the body, but through it, amidst a back-and-forth struggle to produce the desired effect. In terms of the imperial pseudo-scientific venue, Western men used bodily markers to produce the inner “soul,” or deviant essence, of the women they examined. Foucault writes, “It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished” (29). Rather than existing as some ahistorical attribute, the soul “is born…out of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint” (29). The methods of surveillance and the gaze imposed by Western colonizers on the female bodies created a brand of “knowledge” that propagated a hypersexualized view of native women. As base, deviant subjects, women’s abuse and exploitation was legitimized and normalized with “scientific” proof. Ultimately, the bodies of these women became the vehicle through which power is expressed through methods of observation, coercion, regulation, and repression.

**Bodies on Display: Exhibition and Fetishism**

The body politic and political anatomy, materialized through the politics of visibility and surveillance were also well articulated through public exhibitions and photographs. Events such
as the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace, which displayed artifacts, merchandise, and other commodities from the new world, were symbols of the progress made in civilizing new territories. These innovations combined commodification, inspection, and pleasure to create the “experience of imperial progress consumed as a national spectacle” (McClintock 59). Visitors could travel the world, consuming history as a commodity, without ever leaving the city.

McClintock elucidates, “The panorama inverted the panoptical principle and put it at the disposal of consumer pleasure, converting panoptical surveillance into commodity spectacle—the consumption of the globe by voyeurs” (58). In an ironic double bind, consumers enjoyed the views under the false consciousness that they were the ones watching, acting as the guards in the watchtower in the Foucauldian sense. However, they were themselves also being watched. As participants in the culture of consumerism and surveillance, the viewers became active agents in their own subordination to the cult of the spectacle and of watching and being watched. The identities of the upper middle class consumers attending the Exhibit are molded and reconstructed both in relation to the elements of the exotic other they are observing and to the regulatory mechanisms of visuality.

As Foucault posits, the body and self has no meaning, and does not even exist in the sense of being discursively recognized until culture and society endow it with an identity. This identity is derived from the body and read by culture. The identities of the consumers of the Great Exhibition were produced through their participation in the spectacle and their salacious titillation with the artifacts of the New World. In their observation and encounters with these products, they drew a stark, demarcating distinction between “us” and “them.” They formed their own identity as Western, civilized superiors in direct relation to and contrast from the visible objects and the unseen producers in distant lands. The representational power of the spectacle of
the Great exhibition also acted as an interior frontier, a term originating from German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte an expounded in the colonial context by Ann Stoler. She writes, “a frontier locates a site of both enclosure and contact, of observed passage and exchange. When coupled with the word interior, frontier carries the sense of internal distinctions within a territory (or empire)” (80). The venue of the Great Exhibition served as a safe space for spectators to explore the New World and their evolving identities in relation to their nation’s conquest, while managing the internal distinctions. Stoler continues, “an interior frontier entails two dilemmas: the purity of the community is prone to penetration on its interior and exterior borders, and the essence of the community is an intangible ‘moral attitude,’ ‘a multiplicity of invisible ties’” (80). Moral attitudes about nationality, statehood, and supremacy were formed and constructed around the spectacular voyeuristic fantasy of the Great Exhibition.

Another prominent feature of the imperial expedition was fetishism. In Imperial Eyes Mary Louise Pratt notes that “reciprocal seeing is organized along lines of gender, and determined by that great sentimental obsession, transracial erotics” (82). As Westerners encountered peoples of radically different cultures, norms, and appearances for the first time, fetishization was a way to make the unfamiliar more familiar through an eroticized fixation. According to McClintock, “the fetish emerged in the inhabited intercultural spaces created along the West African coast by new trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be almost incomprehensible to the other. These coastal areas served to ‘translate and transvalue objects between radically different social systems’” (186). McClintock’s analysis raises many key concepts involved in the sexualized fascination of natives, particularly women, in fetishization. The idea of boundaries and space is a key factor in providing the vantage point from which fetishizing the other was undertaken. The coast served as a fluid, multifaceted space
where social conventions and mores of interaction were blurred. The normalized, market relations that were conducted along in the coastal areas contrasted vastly to the abnormal, unstable social settings and interactions. It was also a space of inescapable confrontation. McClintock continues, “in this triangulated space, fetishism emerged as a creative enactment of the commodity form as it defined itself against two radically different types of noncapitalist society: feudal Christianity and African lineage exchange” (186). From these interactions, the idea of the primitive emerged as racial and sexual variants of fetishism began to take on a policing role. The stark contrast between the populations of the new world and the inhabitants of the colonizers’ home countries created an avenue through which “racial fetishism became central to the regime of sexual surveillance, while the policing of sexual fetishism became central to the policing of the ‘dangerous classes,’ both in Europe and in the colonies” (McClintock 182). While the basic tenets remain intact, the hostile encounters between the dominant classes and the dangerous classes have undergone transformations throughout the centuries, evolving to conform to the present political climate and national interests.

A Contemporary Case Study: The U.S. War on Terror

To say that imperialism has been reborn throughout the ages is a fallacy, as it never died. Conquering territories, subjugating peoples, and exploiting lands for political or commercial use has been reimagined over the centuries since the West first stepped foot onto the New World. This cycle has insidiously revealed itself in multiple guises particularly in the policies and actions of the U.S., a superpower that has continued to expand its reach across the developing world. Explaining the U.S. colonial and imperial project in modern times is important because of the direct mapping of gender, race, and sexualizing discourse to the colonial past. In many venues, politics of race and inferiority have informed U.S. decisions in foreign policy cloaked
under assumed responsibilities of spreading democratic social values and peace keeping. To connect current events in foreign policy to the Western imperial past is critical to understanding the deeply embedded social structures and cultural imaginings that have withstood the test of time, even through modern claims of “progress.” Bridging these two gaps makes us bear witness to how racial hierarchies and gender norms have prevailed over the centuries and still serve the same demarcating purposes. When connecting the U.S.’s responses to modern threats or international crises to the colonial project, we realize that there really is no civilizing mission, but rather a display of power to draw the line between us and them, between the developed and the backward. This line reinforces the U.S.’s top status on the global stage and generates a sense of comfort for all Americans, that they can rest assured that they are so far removed from the barbaric peoples of the undeveloped world that U.S. protects them from. In truth, no one is far removed. World leaders and the powerless masses all belong to the same matrices of power, knowledge, and subjugation and are a product of racial, social, and gendered discourse that were expressed during the colonial era and appear today.

In the modern world stage imperialism and the male gaze have manifested itself through Western neo-colonialism. This reconfiguration is nowhere more present than in the U.S.’s response to the 9/11 attacks and its initiation of the War on Terror. The true rationale behind George W. Bush’s decision to invade and bomb Afghanistan remains blurred, but most telling is the incorporation of rhetoric regarding liberating Afghan women from oppressive Taliban rule as a justification. Multiple speeches and press releases by George W. and Laura Bush enlisted women to make a case for the violence imposed on Afghanistan, praising America’s saving hand intervening in the lives of the otherwise enslaved women. As Laura Bush noted, “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their
homes…The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (U.S. Government 2002, from Abu-Lughod 784). The couching of gender amidst schemes of violence and intervention is a nod to the West’s colonial past, as is the civilizing mission to shine a Western light on backward peoples. Moreover, the appeal to Afghan women and gender equality reveal an exoticization of third world, Muslim women who, without the violent intervention of the U.S., are otherwise unknowable, unobtainable, and untouchable. The obsession with foreign women as tools to justify the spread of the Western empire and American vision belies the messy historical and political narrative of imperialism and post-colonialism (Abu-Lughod 785).

**Projecting Masculinity: Compassionate Patriarchy and the Civilizing Mission**

Speeches, press conferences, and televised interviews serve as the stage from which leaders of the developed world broadcast their illusion of chivalry embedded in the civilizing mission of saving the exotic, disempowered women of the developing world. Michaele L. Ferguson writes, “Laura Bush invites us to imagine ourselves as the chivalrous, masculine protectors who must defeat the misogynist enemy and show Afghani women the respect that the Taliban refuses them. Women are victims, vulnerable, in need of masculinist protection, here embodied in the figure of the United States, which is willing to intervene and protect them from the indignities suffered at the hands of the Taliban” (Ferguson 23). This type of discourse constructs third-world women as in need of Western intervention, marking them as malleable subjects for the U.S. to incorporate into its expansionist agenda. The ever-present male gaze embodied by the militaristic proponents of U.S. intervention affixes itself to unknown lands inhabited by unknown subjects in an effort to make them knowable and useful, just as the conquistadors, traders, and military leaders exploited the new world at the height of imperialism. Within this light, the mission to “free” such women is better stated as a “masculinist formation”
of “sovereign mastery” (Anker 210). The national platform and illusion of grandeur lends itself to the spectacle of intervention as the rest of the world affixes its eyes to television screens and websites awaiting news of what the U.S., the global kingpin, will do next.

Bush’s masculine military strategy is very much informed by the construction of race and the politics of exoticization and orientalism present during colonialism. Within the War on Terror, orientalist titillation has a profound effect on gendering Middle Eastern subjects as docile inferiors in need of Western influence, while at the same time asserting the dangerous, volatile masculinity of Muslim men, also requiring U.S. intervention. Mary Hawkesworth writes, “Under the Orientalist spell, Westerners construe the Middle East and the Far East as an eroticized, femininized Other and act in accordance with that racist construction. U.S. military personnel serving in Iraq have made manifest the behavioral implications of the Orientalist gaze” (178). Just as the colonizers utilized racial tropes to gender subjects and justify their entry into the new world and exploitation of its inhabitants, so too have U.S. militaries relied on the constructed inferior status of the Middle East to impose its presence and reaffirm the American sense of superiority.

During the imperialist era, a gendered and exoticized desire to see into the new world, and thus know, understand, and control it, fed the colonizers’ fantasies of their righteous civilizing mission of colonialism. The colonizers rationalized their forced entry and accompanying violence through the “underlying logic of feminization” (Hawkesworth 178) as both exotic and inferior, and in need of a regulating male presence. The War on Terror also relies on a gendering of Middle Eastern men and women alike in order to support their claims of intervention. Hawkesworth continues, “Those who are produced as ‘feminine’ are weak, violated, silenced, docile, obedient, humiliated, and craven. The solution to their existential
situation is invariably a masculine assertion of power for which the appropriate feminine response is gratitude” (178). These rhetorical strategies used by the Bush administration not only reiterate patriarchal norms of dominance/submission and active/passive, but also construct racial categories while justifying social inequalities. The rationale behind the War on Terror and the invasion of countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan relies on colonial dichotomies of dominance and subordination that foster hawkish patriarchal values and “make scenarios of rescue, retaliation, and retribution appear matters of necessity” (Hawkesworth 179). Such claims made their most memorable incarnation during British occupation in South Asia, where practices like the immolation of widows and child marriage were used to justify colonial rule (Abu-Lughod 784). The Western male trope of the white knight riding in to save the helpless, distressed woman becomes increasingly salient the woman’s own race, religion, and culture are the justifications behind imagine protectionism. The misrepresented necessity of U.S. intervention is made even more visible as news stations broadcast highly charged images of veiled Afghan women under tyrannical Taliban rule. Rather than a source of critique and dialogue, these images and reports merely add fuel to the fire.

**Incorporating The Gaze**

The politics of visuality are also an essential motivating factor behind the War on Terror. The discourse of what is seen versus what is unseen, as well as bodies and visibility, is essential to the feminization of the mission to liberate Middle Eastern women. Throughout the Bushes’ speeches and rallies, cries for the emancipation of America’s Afghan sisters are references to the veil as the ultimate sign of Taliban oppression. The politics of the veil have been made a substitute for a lack of agency and a sign of the backwardness of the Taliban. However, “the significant political-ethical problem the burqa raises is how to deal with cultural ‘others’” (Abu-
The particular brand of female embodiment purported by the War on Terror is, as Gargi Bhattacharyya explains, presented as “a conflict in which there are constant references to the bodies of women and the relation of such embodiment to freedom. What can women wear? Where can they go? How freely can they move? How constrained are they in public space?...Women’s bodies are an underlying referent in so many aspects of this war” (46). In the Foucauldian sense, the body is the battleground through which struggles of power and control and played out. The covered body of the Muslim woman under the Taliban regime is also a space where cultural and sexual differences, as well as competing claims of what constitutes the civilized are negotiated. Moreover, the intersecting dynamics of sight, visibility, and space are another source of exotic titillation informing the military invasions of the U.S. These matrices are reinventions of what was seen as the hidden, untouchable, and unknowable spaces of the new world during the colonial and post colonial eras. In exposing and exploiting the bodies of female natives, colonizers reaffirmed their supremacy in making the formerly invisible visible.

On another level, the politics of the visible also contributes to the U.S.’s claim that bringing freedom and civilization in opposition to the savagery of the Taliban is vital no matter how bloody. The “literal visibility of women’s faces and bodies” is taken as a sign of Western victory over the “dysfunctional and barbaric patriarchal violence of the Taliban—the image of the lifting of veils brings…a portrayal of freedom as embodied in freedom of dress and a rehumanising of the othered woman by restoring her face to public view” (Bhattacharyya 47). The restoration of agency to Muslim women through the lifting of the veil is a Western imposition to native cultures much like the ideas of proper dress, behavior, and consumerism colonizers brought to the new world. From the colonial period onward, notions and criteria of citizenship and personhood have always been linked to how well native, occupied peoples adapt
themselves to the white, Western, ideal. For inhabitants living in territories under Western imperial surveillance, monitoring how their bodies are dressed, displayed, and utilized is critical to their assimilation and acceptance under their rulers.

In the case of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, “the display of women’s bodies and the manner of their display is a central aspect of the dissemination of the culture and values of the new imperialism, and that the civilization of the West is being measured by the ability of western/westernized women to embody the concept of rights through the deployment of their own physicality” (Bhattacharyya 50). Measuring freedom and the success of the Western civilizing mission in the embodiment of female Muslim agency also serves to identify and mark the boundaries of us versus them. Every veil that comes off is an affirmation that Western civility stands a world apart from and will always conquer the uncivilized, barbaric injustice imposed by the Taliban. Travel writings of colonizers sent back to their home countries detailing their exploits in the new world and their encounters with its inhabitants also served this purpose—to further reinforce the home country as superior and as the template for which all other lands must conform to. Just as Pratt claims, “Borders and all, the entity called Europe was constructed from the outside in as much as from the inside out” (6), the U.S. too constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs itself on the basis of how the “other” is conceived. Finally, unveiling can be viewed as an act of submission, of assent to the Western (neo)colonial agenda. The trope of unveiling can be read as “as marker of entry into the western(ised) public life of commodification, as the gesture that confirms the feminized status of the occupied space, once again revealed to invaders in the manner of a woman’s body” (Bhattacharyya 48).

Reaffirming the “Self” by Demonizing the “Other”
As mentioned earlier, the neo-colonialist strategy relies on a demarcation of us versus them. In order to save Muslim, third world women, developed countries like the U.S. must save them from someone. To this end, portraying the Taliban as terrorists through speeches and propaganda, as well as conflating all Muslim men as aligned with the Taliban contributes to the imagined benevolence of Western intervention. By highlighting that region’s morally reprehensible practices, such as child marriage, marital rape, and the disenfranchisement of women, the U.S. defended their own violent actions and covered up any of the negative consequences they caused. This portrayal of Muslim men also ignores the cogent political, social, and economic situation of the region, much of which is a result of previous Western military excursions into the Middle East which have left it volatile and unstable. As Abu-Lughod notes, “‘their’ cultures are just as much part of history and an interconnected world as ours are” (787). In trying to transcend the historical truths that interconnect the two countries and culture, and claiming a morally superior identity in saving the oppressed Muslim women, the Bush administration overlooked the U.S.’s own role in creating the political and social circumstances that led to the rise of the Taliban and the subjugation of women. Abu-Lughod summarizes, “Many who have worked on British colonialism in South Asia have noted the use of the woman question in colonial policies where intervention into sati, child marriage, and other practices was used to justify rule. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) has cynically put it: white men saving brown women from brown men” (784).

This strategic brand of othering reworks traditional forms of racism to create a new form of cultural racism that also informs nationalism, morality, and statehood. Bhattacharyya notes, “the populations under scrutiny and attack span the identities of ‘black,’ ‘brown,’ and beyond. What I am arguing is that the conduct of the War on Terror has given rise to renewed techniques
of state racism in a variety of locations and this reinvigorated campaign has drawn on distinct mythologies of race and culture” (98). She continues, “The demonization of Muslim serves as a model through which to rework racial difference as a matter of threatening cultural difference and the need to preserve social goods such as women’s rights, sexual freedom and personal liberty” (103). These social goods, however, are trappings of a Western vision imposed on a community under the guise of benevolence, civility, and betterment.

Race and War

Racial discourse underscored in the U.S.’s handling of the War on Terror illustrate that power relationships are not merely about “confrontation, a struggle to the death, or a war,” as Foucault notes in *Society Must be Defended*. Beneath these elements racial discourse plays a much greater role in reaffirming the supremacy of a certain group of people in relation to another, while constructing a racialized notion of statehood. In these lectures, Foucault puts forth a view of racism as a form of social control and biopolitical government designed to manage populations. Within the War on Terror, both U.S. and Middle Eastern populations were managed through the pervasive racist elements and propaganda. In using race as a technology of power, the U.S. draws a stark contrast between civilized U.S. citizens and the barbaric, subhuman classes of the Middle East who shun democratic social values. This provides a mandate for what types of behavior, actions, values, and rationale are acceptable for American people and creates a model to follow. The Middle Eastern, Muslim subject is the antithesis to these values and the example of what happens when other nations do not experience the guiding hand of the U.S., or when U.S. citizens themselves refuse to follow the American way. These models construct social relationships within a group of subjects and between subjects and others. Foucault comments on the timelessness of the construction and enforcement of race for political gains, arguing:
The war that is going on beneath order and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it in a binary mode is, basically, a race war. At a very early stage, we find the basic elements that make the war possible, and then ensure its continuation, pursuit, and development: ethnic differences, differences between languages, different degrees of force, vigor, energy, and violence; the differences between savagery and barbarism; the conquest and subjugation of one race by another. The social body is basically articulated around two races. (59-60)

The War on Terror then takes on the character of not merely protecting Afghan women from the brutal, oppressive Taliban, but rather protecting American people from what lies beyond our borders, what is threatening because it is “other.”

This use of racism is also sexual in nature and draws from themes of orientalism. In writing about the torture at Abu Ghraib for the compiled work *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism*, Isis Nusair elaborates, “This binary division and construction of difference…is associated with constructions of power and hierarchy where the oriental is represented as feminine and the feminine as oriental” (183). Referencing the work of Edward Said, Nusair explains, “the Orient was a counter-mirror image of the other, the superior West, and that the depiction of a single cohesive Orient leads to the essentializing and stereotyping of images, whereby the Orient is classified as backward, unchanging, irrational, menacing, and to be dominated sexually” (183). The insertion of the angle of sexual dominance serves as another nod to the West’s colonial past. Asserting control over new lands did not stop at commercial, economic exploitation. The element of human subjugation was also crucial to the imperial process and defining boundaries, and was most saliently carried out through sexual power. Then and now, sexual racism dehumanizes the “other” and strengthens the Western claim for
necessary intervention. Sexual humiliation also induces torture and trauma, further weakening native populations and leaving them vulnerable and exposed. In the War on Terror, drawing on traditional gender norms and hierarchies of dominance and subordination, the imagined masculine U.S. acts under a sense of entitlement to assert itself on the body of the feminized Middle East. Finally, the fear and angst America experiences when encountering new and unfamiliar, territories, peoples, and cultures, is channeled into forced sexual submission and the propagation of patriarchal values. When the events transpiring overseas are broadcasted in U.S. media outlets, the interconnected matrices of gender, race, and violence are often lost on the audience. The U.S. relies on democratic values and conceptions of human rights and justice as a crutch to lean on when facing the rest of the world.

**Revisiting the “Advancing Afghan Women” Symposium**

An analysis and critical review of the U.S. response to the attacks on 9/11 and its leadership in the global War on Terror begs the question of how Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton, and John Kerry, three people from arguably radically different political backgrounds could come together for a symposium on the merits of U.S. troops occupying Afghanistan. It is ironic that it was Laura Bush’s husband who led the decision to invade Afghanistan and enter into war with the Middle East, and puzzling that Hillary Clinton initially supported his decision, but later withdrew support when she found out Congress was given misleading information. A darker perspective emerges when we consider that they were gathered together to essentially extol a war and celebrate Afghan occupation as a means to a justifiable end. Moreover, as the three lauded the progress that has been made in Afghan women’s access to education, nutrition, marital rights, and the other freedoms, no words were spoken on the loss of American lives needed to secure these rights. *The Washington Post* reported that Kerry proclaimed, “Female life expectancy is at
64 years, up from 44, and in the past five years, 120,000 women have graduated from high school. About 40,000 are in college now” (15 November 2013). I do not mean to belittle these accomplishments or the fight for gender equality and justice, but rather seek to explore how these three diverse political figures could come together, united under the banner of human rights and social justice for the women of Afghanistan. One major reason they were able to use that forum was because the statements they made confirmed rather than challenged the U.S. stance of Afghanistan and fell in line with what the U.S. was trying to say about Afghanistan and what image it was trying to project of itself at that moment. This reveals that motives of development and compassionate intervention do not transcend the boundaries and politics of nation states, but rather are rooted in national politics and interests. Appeals to universal feminism and a responsibility to protect the weakest among us are the tools the nation uses to build support for its shrouded political interests.

Another compelling facet about the use of Afghan women in the U.S. War on Terror is the complexities of the the promise of freedom. In claiming to liberate Afghan women from Taliban rule, the U.S. assumes a universal, supranational conception of freedom. In reality, Lori J. Marso in “Feminism and the Complications of Freeing the Women of Afghanistan and Iraq” explains, “When we look at individuals within their contexts, then, we can more clearly see that social, economic, cultural, religious, and historical structures, in relation to women’s subjective response to them, constitute the conditions of freedom” (235). Freedom is always and can only be experienced within a cultural and social backdrop. While there may be a universal notion of freedom, it takes on a different meaning and expression based on contending forces of situated knowledge, power, and struggle. These are the conditions and restraints of freedom. The articulation of freedom that the U.S. puts forth as it carries out its engagement with the
developing world overlooks the “complexity that belies any simplistic ideological notion that Western women (assumed as a coherent group uniformly ‘free’) can ‘rescue’ non-Western women (also a group, assumed to be uniformly oppressed)” (Marso 235). The same concept that applies to freedom also applies to feminism. The Western, predominantly white middle-class model of feminism which has come to serve as the universal template cannot be applied collectively as political leaders and the Bush administration would have it. Rather than becoming rescuers or forcing the American notion of feminism onto the women of Afghanistan, it would be more effective to provide them with the tools, resources, and support they need to rely on their own agency “to improve their living conditions within their own political and national contexts” (Marso 235). Abu-Lughod corroborates, “we need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives” (785) and wary of the call to liberate.

Towards a More Just World Order

Among the principles and justifications of the War on Terror, the voice of the Afghan woman seems to be lost. Politicians and media figures claim to represent feminism and speak on behalf of the Afghan women under Taliban rule. They dramatize these women’s longing for freedom and and maintain they welcome U.S. assistance. The true stories and actual narratives of the women themselves, however, are not heard. The transmittance of their personal experience is lost. The exclusion of their voices from the international debate recalls the pivotal work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Spivak’s analysis of British postcolonial India she comes to the conclusion that what makes oppressed women subaltern is that they have no means to vocalize their struggles within the world order that has relegated them to the status of subaltern. She writes, “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but
into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (102). In the U.S.’s conception of the War on Terror, the real plight of Afghan women and girls is being displaced and instead manipulated into spectacles of neo-colonial discourse. What then can be done to ensure that they are heard and their stories are told truthfully? To begin, rather than unilaterally equating the U.S. presence in the Middle East with salvation, we should be mindful of the loss, harm, and hardship is also causes. Abu-Lughod adds that we should also take a closer look at “the ways policies are being organized around oil interests, the arms industry, and the international drug trade” (789). Moreover, rather than riding in as a saving figure, it would be more beneficial in the long run to aid Afghan women on their own terms, rather than ours. They know their lives, cultures, and communities best and it would be more effective to give them the support and tools they need to invoke change and improve their lives. Finally, to become more receptive to the voices of these women we need to “break with the language of alien cultures, whether to understand or eliminate them” (Abu-Lughod 790). This calling is easier said than done, as these social and cultural structures and imaginations are so deeply ingrained in our national psyche. The concept of alien cultures and the “other” has proven damaging and problematic, fueling violence and injustice. Finding alternatives to the binary of “self” and “other,” as well as creating a more just world order as Abu-Lughod describes has been a center of feminist scholarship and a challenge feminists everywhere have grappled with. As the War on Terror comes to a close, the same sexualized, violent, and hypermasculine frameworks of U.S. foreign interventions remains. In reexamining the Western imperial past and its modern counterpart, I hope that it guides us in reimagining a feminist politics of solidarity that makes possible the concern for women whose lived experiences and embodied identities are different from our own.


