

# Afghanistan, Racial Melancholia, and Loss That Exceeds Loss

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**ABSTRACT** What does it mean for mourning and racial melancholia to inhabit (and exceed) the geography of Afghanistan, structured by serial wars and serial foreign occupations? As Afghans are subjected to immense forms of loss, what forms of melancholia take hold? This article builds on the critical scholarship on racial melancholia and mourning with a focus on the decades-long (and ongoing) US war and occupation of Afghanistan and considers how to think with loss that exceeds loss. Yet this is not a chronicling of the material and other losses that have transpired in Afghanistan, their quantifications, or thick (or even thin) descriptions of the serial deaths, sufferings, hardships, and forms of degradation over the past forty-five years. When summoned to evidence Afghan pain and Afghan injury, for whose recognition does one catalog this loss and to what end? In refusing to narrate loss with the requisite ethnographic and other authority, this article interrogates the demand for evidence of loss, and signals the decades of refusal to attend to Afghanistan as a place being brutalized. While refusing to narrate loss, the article demands sitting with the Afghans who are living and those who have left this world, introducing the Afghan corpse as witness to the violence of serial imperial war, and witness to the violence of Afghanistan as erasure.

**KEYWORDS** Afghanistan, racial melancholia, imperialism, refusal, loss

One scene embodies the entirety of the twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan. A US C-17 military transport plane scurries to leave the tarmac of the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. Scores of Afghan civilians run alongside, chasing the plane as it hurtles down the runway. Several Afghans manage to place themselves onto the plane's undercarriage. The plane lifts into the air. Moments later, Afghan bodies fall from the sky.

The imperial exit turned spectacle not only sets the scene but is *the* scene itself to understand the vicissitudes of destruction and loss in Afghanistan. The war that began with bodies falling from the sky on 9/11 strangely claimed its end in the same way. Of course, not all falling bodies mark life and loss in the same way (if at

all). The dehumanization of Afghan bodies in a war that habitually and casually discarded Afghan bodies is now more starkly revealed (for those who needed this dehumanization to be still more stark, more obvious to register as such).

We interrogate this historical moment of empire's flight from the scene of a crime that left the victims not knowing how to respond: to flee with empire in complicity? To flee with it in search of something else? Or was this an act to hold the United States accountable: to say, *You are not leaving! Not like this! Over our dead bodies!* A refusal to be left subject to yet another regime, to the schemes of others, regardless of who/what that regime is or claims to be? The airport scene reflected the corporeality of the "forever war" on the people of Afghanistan, returning the bodies back to where they belonged, with an imperial thud that still deafens the ears and (as is said in Dari and Pashto) burns, tightens the other organs of those still attuned.

The fallen bodies of Zaki Anwari (seventeen) and Fada Mohammad (twenty-four) were two of several who were named. Mohammad and another unnamed teenager landed on the rooftop of a Kabul home, four miles from the airport. The bodies were taken to the nearest mosque while the families were contacted. Over 500 people attended Mohammad's funeral in Paghman, just outside Kabul, that evening.

The available interpretations of this moment ranged from simplistic readings of its "desperation" to absurdly naming it "the ultimate act of civil disobedience" to rendering it merely an "unmitigated rejection of the Taliban."<sup>1</sup> But in contemporary Afghanistan it is far too easy to misappropriate loss politically and ethically, marking its constituents and its bearers. In this short essay, we read the scene and its interpretations as marking a melancholic condition where the failure to recognize, account for, and acknowledge loss, in the form of racial injury and imperial violence, suffuses contemporary Afghan political and social life.

What follows is not a chronicling of the material and other losses that have transpired in Afghanistan, their quantifications, or thick (or even thin) descriptions of the serial deaths, sufferings, hardships, and forms of degradation over the past forty-five years of serial war.<sup>2</sup> Those tasks are important, albeit exhausting. More critically, such a recounting risks being folded into the ambivalent work of acknowledgment—a desire to have recognized what one has suffered and lost. The need to narrate the losses somehow feels like a betrayal. Did one really have to go to Afghanistan and sit with Afghans or be "Afghan" to know that Afghans were being pummeled? To be sure, forms of enumeration and chronicling are often necessary. Elsewhere we have done some of that work,<sup>3</sup> observing how whiteness is reproduced in "witnessing" and narrating damage in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup> and more broadly the war on terror.<sup>5</sup> We share Eve Tuck's concerns about damage studies becoming an investment in brokenness and depletion.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the scale of the "dread"<sup>7</sup> and grief turned into grievance is too immense. Afghans, rather, inhabit a melancholic space of

psychic limbo: as harm and injury are being inflicted, there is also a constant reenactment of losses, whereby the destruction wrought upon the individual and collective selves is legible but yet to be grieved, named, classified, or acknowledged. This yet-to-be-named affliction continually alters the affective registers of Afghan subjectivities. Perhaps sitting in these psychic and material ruins, a new political subject might emerge from disposability, impoverishment, nonrehabilitation, unattended wounds, and nonvitality. Any emergent subjectivity, however, must not negotiate between mourning and melancholia as an attempt to discover a resurgent agency, which, as Saba Mahmood warns us, risks reprising the logic of the secular liberal that sees subversion in subordination as a political good.<sup>8</sup>

### **Imperial Innocence and White Racial Melancholia**

*Remnants of an Army*, a painting by Elizabeth Butler, renders the first (1838–42) of the three wars between the British Empire and Afghanistan. The painting depicts an injured Dr. William Brydon on a horse in rough terrain, somewhere between Kabul and Jalalabad. Of a British force (“Cabool Force”) of 16,500, it is claimed erroneously that he was the sole survivor. Brydon’s arrival to Jalalabad was an emotional experience for the British, as depicted in the diary account of that day by Captain Julius Brockman Backhouse:

13 January 1842: “Yesterday it had been impossible to write the horrible news of the day, and my soul is now filled with anguish at the melancholy catastrophe which has overtaken the Cabool Force—all are lost—the force is annihilated to a man.—Yesterday, about 1 P.M., Brydon, an Assistant Surgeon, of the Shah’s Service, reached this place, (on a horse scarcely able to move another yard) wounded and bruised from head to foot with stones, and he, alone, has arrived to tell the fearful tale.”

Many have succumbed to the temptation of reading into such historical fables what Afghanistan has come to be imagined in the West: a graveyard of empires. Rendering a land ravaged by war a site of loss and destruction not for the natives but for invading empires speaks to the narcissism at the heart of imperial fantasy. It is this sense of loss that is discerned in the above diary entry. Beyond the racialized romanticization of British invaders in Afghanistan as victims worthy of sympathy, even assaulted by the ruthless, savage, and rugged terrain of Afghanistan, the painting and diary entry capture the loss felt by an imperial administrator during an imperial project—the first Anglo-Afghan war—as a “melancholy catastrophe.”

Both melancholy and melancholia (pre- and post-Freudian, respectively) have punctuated the imperial condition of Afghanistan. Two centuries later, another empire spoke from the ruins it oversaw. The United States withdrew its ground presence from Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. Its twenty-year operation of “nation

building” seemed to have ended as it began: with routine sociopathic discipline. Reflecting on the withdrawal, US President Biden stated, “Last night in Kabul, the United States ended 20 years of war in Afghanistan—the longest war in American history.”<sup>10</sup> This singular speech act performed multiple functions: it announced the end of the war on Afghanistan; claimed it to be the longest war in US history, denying the duration of the ongoing colonial war on the Native populations of Turtle Island; and thereby revealed the imbrication of multiple histories of racial violence. It is in the simultaneity of these histories that we can begin to trace a racial melancholia as racial violence in the psychosocial makeup of Afghans.

In the same speech, US President Biden stated: “We completed one of the biggest airlifts in history, with more than 120,000 people evacuated to safety. . . . No nation has ever done anything like it in all of history. Only the United States had the capacity and the will and the ability to do it, and we did it today.”<sup>11</sup> Afghans, whose wartime sufferings were rarely mourned, as they were only legible if authored by the supposed religious savagery of the Taliban, were summoned by Biden to maintain the fantasies that animate the US imaginary of itself as secular humanitarian savior. The cruel excesses of the Taliban and the comforting secular embraces of American liberal ideals were woven into the psychosocial intimacies of imperial formations. Anne Anlin Cheng argues that racial melancholia seeps into dominant white culture and its racialized others. Building on Cheng, we do not see racial melancholia as a mere artifact of devastation but a symptom of an ongoing form of imperial governance. Those who ritually participate in perpetuating the common collective fantasies of imperial innocence demonstrate “the precise and peculiar nature of ‘loss’ in white racial melancholia: teetering between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space. It is precisely the slippery distance between loss and exclusion that racial myopia effects.”<sup>12</sup> White racial melancholia is therefore invested in the exaltation of imperial innocence, which requires displacing knowledge of loss, and of one’s own limit, through repetitions of denial and projection.

### **Imperial Assimilation: Afghan Racial Melancholia**

The typology of imperial subject-making in Afghanistan includes native informants; local bourgeoisie; diasporic Afghans who returned to their home country; those embedded with US military or humanitarian and development projects; and much more, with overlaps between all of these mentioned. Racial melancholy is legible across these subjects. More specifically, the narrative borne from Operation Enduring Freedom carved a national identity around women and girls’ empowerment. With billions of dollars (US\$141.24 billion from the United States alone) poured into Afghanistan for reconstruction efforts from 2002 to 2020, at

least US\$787.4 million was spent on programs specifically targeting women and girls. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), “Afghanistan is the only country in the world where this level of resources has been exclusively and explicitly dedicated to elevating the status of women and girls.”<sup>13</sup> Although there has been intense debate on the nature of the Afghan nation-state,<sup>14</sup> the case of gender-based programs illustrates how twenty years of social engineering by international donors and “gender experts” pushed to mainstream a new imagination of the nation by recasting the “Afghan woman” in a new role as the agent of its becoming. Countless stories circulated of women’s success in education, sports, music, and governance, celebrating the arrival of Afghanistan’s progressive spirit. The frequency of these stories had a hypnotic effect, masking the racial violence of imperial occupation.

Subject to this splitting of the Afghan psyche between progressive narratives from Kabul (inclusion) and the occupation’s counterterrorism operations in the name of imperial innocence (exclusion), Afghans were called on to *misremember* histories of violence: the US role in the Soviet war, the 2001 invasion, and the counterterrorism objectives of the war. This new collective consciousness and vision for the nation excluded a majority of the population outside urban centers who experienced an enduring escalation of violence. These excluded Afghans did not cultivate or embrace the desire of the colonized/colonizer, the “progressive” horizon.

International practitioners diagnosed everyday problems facing Afghans as endemic not to poverty and the drug and war economies but to social life that needed intervention and transforming. A strange nationalism was cultivated in occupation, splitting the Afghan psyche in denial from its conditions of racial melancholia. The continuing conflict in the country outside urban centers (the counterterrorism operations, the drones, black sites) served as a continuous disturbance to the demands for recognition from Western architects of progress and destruction. The oscillation between inclusion and exclusion feeds a melancholic state where mourning progress is continually faced with ongoing destruction.

How Afghan subjects of imperial occupation relate to loss illustrates how mimicry appears as a form of performative assimilation in racial melancholia.<sup>15</sup> Mimicry, by those who internalized colonial modernity in order to be intelligible in the metastasizing “progressive” spaces of the new nation, functioned to repress the conditions of a violent occupation that wielded power over Afghans and alienated them from articulating their aspirations outside the projects of those who occupied and employed them. Reflecting on the paradox at the heart of the civilizing mission, historian Joan Wallach Scott argues that the “unassimilated inassimilable”<sup>16</sup> marks both the imperative to civilize and its deferral (thereby opening the space to secure the colonial relationship).<sup>17</sup> Colonial mimicry is a melancholic state which finds expression for desire and its deferral.

In the aftermath of the Taliban's re-entry into Kabul in August 2021, desire and deferral were split to the extreme, leading to further psychic and social fragmentation. The claims of success and nation building further disintegrated. Abandoned ghost projects or underresourced schools and clinics were reported throughout.<sup>18</sup> With the exiting of gender experts and international donors and Biden's decision to prevent Afghans from accessing their own national reserves (effectively signing off on starving the nation), Afghans once loyal to the vision of a new Afghanistan were confronted with the naked ambitions of the United States, and they struggled to name what type of loss was to be mourned. The repetition of an identifiable loss—the right to education and to work for women—reinforced the imperial assimilationist logic of mourning what Afghans had invested in within a narrative of crisis and loss, thus masking their melancholic state of psychic fragmentation. This splitting of the Afghan psyche entailed both a ritual of mourning the lost object and a slip into racial melancholia, where loss is recognized but cannot be explained nor accounted for.

Meanwhile, the racialization of the Taliban as a violent pathology was ritually invoked to account for the slippages in discourses of enduring freedom within narratives of progressive loss.<sup>19</sup> There is a violence that enables a psychic splitting premised on the boundaries between the barbarian and the modern. Mourning the arrival of the Taliban and the ground exit of the United States, therefore, comes with political and social gain for the United States as it performs the desire for the racialized object of the civilized Afghan. Yet the psychic harm for Afghans is profound. The Taliban's presence as always still arriving signals both the continued imperial repression of Afghanistan and its total racial exclusion, which sustains the unresolvable condition of loss and the limits of sovereign recognition.

The ambivalence that lies at the heart of racial melancholia is further layered in the internalization of the assimilationist demands perpetuated and compounded by the Afghan diaspora, those who returned in the name of bringing democracy to their homeland. The figure of the native or native-enough informant reveals the paradox of the civilizing mission, entrenching the ambivalence<sup>20</sup> of desire and deferral that feeds racial melancholia. The informant's identification with imperial innocence leads to a misrecognition wherein whiteness recruits the difference that marks the "unassimilable" for tending to imperial innocence, further cementing the minority status of Afghans within the cultural and political contours of the liberal West.

The US withdrawal also saw the locals who served the military during the occupation as consultants and translators prioritized in the evacuations through special visas to the United States, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. If racial melancholia is about mourning a loss that has not yet been named, the displaced psyche under serial war is summoned into the borders of the white nation, adding another layer to the ontological precarity of racial melancholia.

Racial melancholia masks the intergenerational aspect of loss, the yet-again-ness not only of being deceived but also of what follows from that serial deception—debilitating misrecognition, the nation undone, falling bodies preemptively expelled from the violence of refugee regimes, and, for those “lucky ones,” the being and becoming evacuee, or a forever refugee. In May 2022 Rezwan Kohistani, a fourteen-year-old Afghan boy, was found dead—hanging under the bleachers of the baseball field at Webb City High School in Missouri. Kohistani and his family were evacuated from Kabul in August 2021 after his father, who worked as a contractor for the US military, was able to secure their entry through a US Special Immigrant Visa. The family were settled in southwest Missouri, a location with no Afghan population (and with palpable anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment). No investigation into Rezwan’s death was conducted. Police and school officials immediately ruled it a suicide: an “unattended death with no obvious signs of foul play.”<sup>21</sup>

Our grievance at the expectation and demand to narrate decades of Afghan loss, here and there, has complicated our task here. When we are summoned to evidence Afghan pain and Afghan injury, for whose recognition do we catalog this loss and to what end? Those who demand evidence of loss expose their own decades of refusal to attend to Afghanistan as a place being brutalized. Consequently, Afghanistan becomes an oversight, a failure sedimented over decades as a refusal to see. The demand for evidence of injury is not only a marker of such refusal, and reminiscent of the violence itself, but reveals its own specific fascination and liberal enjoyment in the pain of others. While committing ourselves to reside in the realm of refusal to catalog loss, we also endeavor for others to grasp how loss is registered as loss within a generalized landscape of war.

What do Afghans see in these scenes of racial calculations and violent exclusion that leave the bodies of their children falling, hanging? In the imperial formations that interpellate Afghans as unassimilable, loss shapes not only the present but also their futures. These psychic injuries are compounded for Afghan subjects who saw meaning in the vision and hoped for enduring freedom. Meanwhile, imperial innocence conspired to lynch their hopes for an adequate-enough life, the fantasy of progress ruptured, leaving them to frantically pick up its pieces in an enduring melancholic condition. Is our ethical, political, and theoretical intervention, our mode of sitting with Afghans, to ask them to “discover meaning” in the remains they gather? We hope otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

What we have proposed here while reflecting on destruction and loss is not without political perils. We run the risk not only of reproducing the logics of damage studies but of paving a way for Afghans to be confessional subjects of injury whose speech, imagination, and identity become centered on “wounded attach-

ments.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, for Afghanistan, whose serial loss has not been acknowledged, there is a far greater risk posed by an invitation to recuperate something productive from destruction—a consciously making-unconscious of the conditions that allow for a bypassing altogether of the damages inflicted on Afghans.

Freedom violently imposed by a military occupation nurtured a “diseased agency” in Afghanistan. Imperial assimilation has meant the symbolic world for Afghans is racially organized on culturally impoverished and psychically alienating terms, where a seeping colonial gangrene dissolves the ego and superego so they become indistinguishable and Other. The unwillingness of Afghans to be critics of the democratic prescription, their incapacity to speak of the humanitarian masquerade, and their need to seek refuge in an anxious repetition that misremembers loss in order to see in destruction a progressive promise—all are symptomatic of the racial melancholic condition, a disorienting state where, after witnessing one’s own death in the Other, there is no bearing, no recuperating oneself from waste.

Jacqueline Rose writes, “There will be no political emancipation for anyone until we all recognise the corpse still lying on the road, the continuing injustice, the work that remains to be done.”<sup>23</sup> Yet the political condition of racial melancholia leaves no accommodation for political emancipation. Our effort to articulate the destruction of loss takes place within an epistemic murk. We have reached bedrock as we reside in a space constituted by more than ambivalence: it is a space of death.<sup>24</sup> Under conditions where loss has embedded itself in what it means to live, can loss even be recognized anymore? The question is how to name the corpse that is still lying on the road (Rose), or on the rooftop of a Kabul home, or the “lucky” one found hanging from the bleachers of an American high school. It is not enough to bury and mourn a corpse as a lost object and see what grows from that material and psychic ground, nor to see in the corpse a universalizing impulse for recognition of loss. Islamic practice decrees an immediate burial of a corpse so it can swiftly transition to the next world. Given that the corpse we (and Rose) speak of straddles the realms of the material and imaginary worlds, perhaps we must consider a suspension of Islamic burial practice and allow the corpse to remain unburied—to linger, reside in the space of death, in this world, as witness to and remnant of the violence that produced it.

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## Notes

1. Sharifi, “Afghan Exodus.”
2. Daulatzai, “Remaining Undone.”
3. Daulatzai, “Acknowledging Afghanistan”; Daulatzai, “Discursive Occupation of Afghanistan”; Daulatzai, “War and What Remains”; Daulatzai, “Not Their War To Fight”; Daulatzai, “Remaining Undone.”
4. Daulatzai and Ghumkhor, “Damage Control.”
5. Ghumkhor and Younis, *Naming the Injury*.
6. Tuck, “Suspending Damage.”
7. Goldberg, *Dread*.
8. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.
9. While the melancholy expressed here is affect (the bittersweet sense of loss), and thus different from melancholia as psychic structure (the dread of a loss that has no name), we thought it relevant to signal the loss that is narrated and painted by empire.
10. Biden, “Remarks.”
11. Biden, “Remarks.”
12. Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, 23.
13. SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*.
14. Kandiyoti, “Old Dilemmas or New Challenges?”
15. See Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*.
16. Scott, *Politics of the Veil*, 69.
17. Scott, *Politics of the Veil*, 89.
18. Shringarpure, “We Need Wholesale Decolonization.”
19. Daulatzai and Ghumkhor, “Damage Control.”
20. See Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man.”
21. *Joplin Globe*, “Rezwan Kohistani Honored.”
22. Brown, “Wounded Attachments.”
23. Rose, *On Violence*.
24. Taussig, “Culture of Terror.”

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