'Their soul listens':
A Sociology from Art Praxis in Kabul

by

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Declaration

I, Bilquis Ghani, declare that this thesis titled, *'Their Soul Listens': A Sociology from Art Praxis in Kabul* (ETH17-1357), is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney and that the PhD thesis is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes.

To the best of my knowledge, this thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Working through the legacy of war and the daily potential for violence, young *Kabuli* artists carve out moments of peace in Kabul's streets and galleries. This thesis is a qualitative study of how young artists in Kabul are using their art practice to navigate and negotiate their sociocultural contexts and leverage the creative process to impact change. In doing so, they make change possible by suturing ruptures caused by conflict and actively responding to local challenges. The empirical data consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews with sixteen artists based in Kabul, male and female, in late 2017 and early 2018. The thesis presents themes from the empirical work in three parts, each consisting of two chapters.

The analysis combines a sociology from art praxis with a Southern theory approach in which artists construct and explore new ways of being through a dynamic creative process. Artists offer complexity and nuance about their contexts by envisioning ways of being that are specific to their locale, and which exist outside reifications such as modern and traditional, rational and emotional. The research approaches the artists' art praxis as forms of knowledge, and employs Southern theory as an approach to theorise the necessity of art.

The thesis first explores the affective impact of art as a common human attribute and its linkage to social change and social cohesion. Given that artists' use of social media formed a key avenue for distribution of their works, the thesis also explores how social media presence can act as a form of alternative media in the contemporary context. By leveraging the online space, artists are able to bridge difference across time and distance, as well as create opportunities to self-narrate.

The thesis then focuses on gender as a key construct of identity. The analysis argues for a feminism which raises feminist praxis over the label of feminist, a position which is responsive to a context in which 'feminism' is associated with Western incursions on society and culture. The chapter raises the question of liberal feminist teachings' applicability in a context like Kabul. Challenging reified tropes of masculinity, the analysis also complicates conceptualisations of Afghan men as warlord or warrior and argues that men in Afghanistan navigate difficult and rigid cultural expectations. A code of honour limits both men's and women's movement.

Finally, the thesis seeks to humanise and demystify the artists discussed in the thesis. The thesis makes a case against reductive orientalising caricatures of Afghan men, women, and culture by presenting their subjectivities. As artists practicing in volatile environments, they have in-depth and nuanced understandings of their situations which they navigate. Kabul, the city in which they practice their art and from which they distribute their work, becomes the protagonist of the final chapter. By practicing art in public spaces in Kabul, a form of public pedagogy creates a public termed the incidental-ephemeral public with whom the affective residue of the art and the art scene travels.

In keeping to the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, weaved through the thesis is the author's own position as a former refugee and Afghan living in diaspora.

For my father

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List of Acronyms

ANIM   Afghanistan National Institute of Music

AWWP   Afghan Women's Writing Project

FWW   Free Women Writers

PDPA   People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

UNAMA   United Nations Assistant Mission in Afghanistan

Authorship attribution statement

Findings from this research have been included in two articles:

- Components from chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis were published in:
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Chapter One:

Introduction

I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among objects.

<div align="right">(Fanon 2008, p. 89)</div>

I grew up with stories of my grandparents, uncles, and aunts in Afghanistan, strangers who passed long before I was old enough to learn of their existence, now lost to the folds of time. They knew me and loved me once. The lives they inhabited, the world they knew and the realities they lived filled my childhood mind. These stories about a time long ago in a world that no longer exists, always end the same way, with the heavy weight of nostalgia. A nostalgia for something lost, not by choice or by nature's designs, but by war. Until the day he died, my father would often tell us of the moment he, my heavily pregnant mother and three children left our *watan*, our country. I imagine the car rattled away as they watched their home get smaller and smaller. She would recall my father's words in her ear, 'Remember this. We may never see it again'. Indeed, they would not. That world may have vanished, but it remained alive and well in their minds. As children, we heard stories of my mother taking on a snake in the backyard of their estate in Herat armed with only a shovel; of my father's first sighting of my mother as she left the school where she taught chemistry; and of the Soviet bombs that rained down on Herat on the day I was born with not a doctor in sight. These stories continued to be a source of nostalgia and pain for my parents and we feel them too. They wield a sense of loss that my father carried with him until his final days. They echo as roots to a heritage both alien and deeply familiar. It is these rich stories that have journeyed with me through this research. The richness of these stories is difficult to capture in words alone. The affective residues of these experiences maintain their place, buried under the banality of the expected and the everyday.

While my classmates were learning the finer points of popular culture and exploring how they identify or define Australian-ness, I was learning to translate between cultures. As a person living at the nexus of Afghan and Australian cultures, I was aware of the fluidity with which ways of being could merge and emerge. English was not my first language. I recall my father's long hours spent studying English idioms despite his strong grasp of the language. He understood that language is much more than a broad and developed vocabulary, and this has been my experience too. Culture textures language in ways that we can only decode experientially. Segalo, Manoff and Fine (2015) point out that 'In many ways the assumption that one has to verbally express thoughts and feelings/emotions in an attempt for meaning making is problematic, and we must acknowledge alternative ways of expression' (p. 345).

Cultural producers create and explore meaning through the process of art making. This research is the product of conversations with Kabul based artists about their art praxis. I

knew very early on that it was the phenomenon of art, and less so the content or quality of it, that piqued my interest. It is through creative processes that exploration of experiences beyond words can emerge. My role was not to approach the art as a critic but someone curious about its very existence in Kabul. Through the precarious context of war, insecurity and a turbulent history, such prolific visual art and music is produced there. I have endeavoured to position my analysis in the contextual realities of the artists without projecting my own subject position located in the colonial metropole. This presented its own challenge.

I was conscious of how my training and education in Australian institutions contextualised my interpretations of interview responses. My own Afghan heritage does not ensure my immunity from projecting a lens developed through years exposed in Northern institutions of university, schooling and work. There is no vantage point from which I could have achieved a 'pure objectivity' and nor is knowledge ever purely objective. But I hope that my closeness to the subject matter offers some level of gradation to the analysis. My experiences as an Afghan are entwined in the pages that follow and the multiplicity of ways this has informed and often complicates my own identity and the frames I employ. I have tried to be transparent about this and have identified where possible how my own subject position has influenced my analysis. In so doing, I hope that, rather than compromise the analysis as bias, it becomes a more real, lived, and sincere analysis. I offer you the gaze of an Afghan raised in diaspora, looking across the sea at her own roots.

I have set out to contest reductive appraisals of complex social worlds with roots in the common histories of the participants of this research. Oversimplification of these complexities has hit a nerve for me, having seen myself reflected in their stories. It has been a process through which I would learn to also articulate the complexities of my family's experiences as Afghan refugees - not as 'objects among objects', as Fanon (2008) mentions above: racialized, objectified and Othered, but as complex peoples with hopes and fears.

Background and context

In order to understand the context in which today's narrative making through art takes place, I present a brief account of Afghanistan's encounter with British colonialism (and Soviet imperialism) as background to my use of Southern theory as theoretical tool. I

continue with a brief account of the Afghan artistic heritage which artists continue to leverage today.

Legacies of interference

Much of Afghanistan's history sees it locked as a buffer state between Anglo and Soviet interests. Hyman (1982) explains, 'The very survival of Afghan independence into this century is intimately linked to Anglo-Russian rivalries and the use of buffer states and spheres of influence' (p. 40) in particular reference to the nineteenth century. The reign of Amir Abdurrahman Khan (1880-1901), or the 'Iron Amir', named for his heavy handed and brutal rule, marked the beginning of Afghanistan as a demarcated territory and government. The legacies of the politicisation of ethnicity, a major tool employed by British imperialist designs in Afghanistan, persist into Afghan society today and form one of the key challenges that participants sought to address. The Pashtunisation project of the Amir's central government and his British allies catalysed alliances between the Persian and Turkic speaking groups who saw the project as an incursion from above (Roy 1992). But the link between Afghans' heterogeneity and their rejection of central government is tenuous if not considered within its historical context. By the time Amir Abdurrahman Khan took over, multiple Pashtun dynasties had come and fallen and the British, fearing Afghanistan was a gateway for Russia to penetrate British India, had intervened in Afghanistan by removing and replacing leaders. Dalrymple (2013) notes, in his historiography of nineteenth century Afghanistan, 'Afghans were perceived [by the British] as mere pawns on the chessboard of Western diplomacy, to be engaged or sacrificed at will. It was a precedent that was to be followed many other times, by several different powers, over the years and decades to come...' (p. 8). The first Anglo-Afghan war of 1839 ended with 'a rare moment of complete colonial humiliation' (Dalrymple in Ibrahimi and Maley 2020, p. 13). The second Anglo-Afghan war in 1879, motivated by the same concerns over Russian expansion, ended with the Treaty of Gandamak in the same year, which made Afghanistan a British protectorate. Afghanistan's foreign affairs as well as some territories were handed to the British, who maintained a permanent presence in Kabul. The treaty included continuation of payments by the British to Abdurrahman Khan during his leadership of the country from 1880. Ibrahimi and Maley (2020) explain that, though the Amir created the modern Afghan state, his methods caused 'deep wounds in the fabric of the country' (p. 15) through the politicisation of ethnicity and religion, making it difficult for the state to penetrate society and govern effectively.

Three years after his ascension, the Amir accepted the highly contentious Durand line which created an artificial boundary between the Pashtuns of British India and Afghanistan. The Durand line, which today marks the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, remains highly controversial, reflecting a geographic division between Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns. These are division that are not reflected in social and cultural realities. As Bezhan (2014) explains, 'successive governments in Afghanistan have claimed the line was never meant to be a formal international boundary, voicing support for Pashtuns in Pakistan either to join Afghanistan or form a separate state (p. 198).[1] The Amir subjugated the religious establishment who had historically enjoyed political and social influence as moral guides, as well as economic power. He used religious arguments instrumentally to legitimise his power and demonise his enemies as 'un-Islamic'. The Amir mobilised ethnic groups against each other, even within Pashtun tribes. These ethnic divisions persevere in Afghanistan. It was during these 'communal divisions' that the Hazara War of 1891-93 was waged (Ibrahimi and Maley 2020, p. 16).

When the Amir died in 1901, his son and heir, Habibullah Khan took over a centralised government with clearly defined territorial boundaries, but Afghanistan was still dependant on the British. Habbibullah Khan was keen to continue his father's work, though was more relaxed and less the 'iron fist' his father had been. Rather, he was sympathetic to Mahmoud Tarzi, a journalist and intellectual, and amenable to Afghanistan's 'first major intellectual push for social modernisation' (Saikal and Maley 1991, p. 17). With British control of Afghanistan's foreign affairs and the Amir's own isolationist agenda, the country did not form ties to potential social and economic partners. It was not until Habibullah's son, Ammanullah Khan, took over in 1919 that Afghanistan achieved its independence from the British, following the Third Anglo-Afghan war of the same year. Indicative of the interest of Afghanistan's neighbours in national affairs, in May of that year, Lenin wrote to Ammanullah Khan to congratulate his ascension to the throne and offered this advice, 'May the desire of the Afghan people to follow the Russian example be the best guarantee of the strength and independence of the Afghan state' (Lenin in Hyman 1982, p. 41). Though Ammanullah Khan wanted change, payments continued to Pashtun tribes for their cooperation, in effect allowing them to maintain tribal alliances. The cessation of these payments sparked revolts against

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[1] See Bezhan (2014) for details on the Pashtunistan issue in the post WWII period in Afghanistan. In particular, the prospect of a Pashtunistan did not appeal to most Afghans and proved divisive rather than unifying.

Ammanullah Khan (Ibrahimi and Maley 2020, p. 19). Ammanullah's rapid social and financial program of reforms also angered many of the traditional and religious groups and eventually caused his demise in 1929 when he was forced to abdicate.

Habibullah Kalakani was the first non-Pashtun leader and in his short time in leadership, reversed many of the reforms of Ammanullah Khan. He was executed in 1929 by Pashtun tribesmen mobilised by Mohammad Nadir Khan. Nadir Khan became the first King of the *Musahiban*[2] rulers, a Pashtun dynasty which lasted from 1929 to 1978. In that time, the 1931 constitution was developed and positioned the religious and landed elites as intermediaries between the state and the local (Ibrahimi and Maley 2020, p. 19-20). Shahrani (1990) contends that the *Musahiban*, 'formalized the power of the traditional rural aristocracy and the dominance of the Pashtu language, Pashtun values and culture as the basis for Afghan nationalism' (p. 45). The *Musahiban* dynasty ended with the toppling of President Mohammad Daoud Khan during the community Saur revolution of 1978, also called the 'April revolution'. The Soviet backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) led the Saur revolution.

The years that followed were tumultuous and violent. The Soviet war in Afghanistan ran from 1979 to 1989, followed by civil war during which different resistance groups to the Soviet forces, funded by various world powers, vied for power at the expense of civilians.[3] In 1996, the Taliban rose to power until US and allied forces toppled them in 2001. Afghans faced daily threats to life throughout these forty years.

The post 9/11 era has seen a mushrooming of commentary about Afghanistan's political history and people, 'producing narratives that have too often incorporated unexamined and recycled colonial era tropes and stereotypes' (Nichols 2013, p. 146). The period provided what Rostami-Povey (2007a) refers to as '*new* Islamophobia' (my emphasis), indicating an earlier period of migration that saw racist attacks on Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s (p. 112). This new Islamophobia provided an 'Other' to the 'us' and constructed the *hijab* as a symbol of both weak Muslim women and oppressive Muslim men (Rostami-Povey 2007a, p. 112-113)[4]. The post 9/11 period has also seen large influx of donors, NGOs,

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[2] In 1973 the monarchy became a republic led by President Mohammad Daoud Khan.
[3] Refer to Roy (1990) for a study of the resistance movements opposed to Marxist rule from the Soviets and their history, ideology, visions, and structures into the late 1980s.
[4] While Rostami-Povey (2007a) explores the experiences of Afghan diaspora in the UK and USA, much of what she refers to also echoes our experiences in Australia. I would add that even without a hijab or a beard, my parents experienced years of prejudice by virtue of their strong accents in the 1980s and 90s, which only escalated in the post 9/11 era.

UN agencies, and government arms each vying for their own interests, causing increased fictionalisation in the country despite sophisticated checks and balances (Bizhan, Wilner-Reid and Bhatia 2018). Since 2014, the country has experienced the rapid decrease of international revenue, transition of military operations to the Afghan National Forces, and the dispute over the results of presidential elections (Bizhan et al. 2018). It is against this backdrop that artists in Kabul today operate.

An artistic heritage

Afghanistan's artistic heritage reflects the influences of the dynasties that rose and fell across thousands of years, 'Including a rich oral tradition, as well as literary, artistic, and musical achievement' (Ibrahimi and Maley 2020, p. 4). Hamid Naweed's *Art Through the Ages in Afghanistan* (2013) is a comprehensive account of this history. This expansive artistic heritage foreshadows today's artistic practices and was important to the participants of this research. I stumbled upon my grandfather's contribution to this legacy while poring through these volumes (Naweed 2013, pp. 272-273). It was as if a ghost had reached out of the page and tapped me on the shoulder. It was a nod to my own roots, indicating the embeddedness of this history with my own. This record of artistic heritage also challenges Eurocentric modernity's assumptions of historical linearity.

I depend on Naweed's work to offer insights on the artistic heritage of Afghanistan, but limit this to the most recent pre-war period. Naweed (2013) recounts the expression of various battles, heroes against colonial powers, and national narratives appearing in paintings and poems in Afghanistan during Europe's colonial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries (pp. 221-244). He also recounts the encounter of the arts in Afghanistan with European traditions, giving the example of photography and painting. Resistance to foreign intervention was met with epistemicide, 'Western orientalists wrote very little about their [Afghan's] art and culture or totally ignored their cultural existence' (Naweed 2013, p. 227). What was included reflected orientalist and exotified accounts by 'imperial studies scholars of Afghanistan...who learned much from indigenous scholars, while adapting that knowledge to the requirements of colonial conquest and rule' (Rubin 2020, p. 1). King Ammanullah Khan's modernisation agenda and a period of hopefulness following independence from the British in 1919 impacted Afghan art and culture such that their legacies are now part of the country's contemporary schools of art (Naweed 2013, p. 246).

Emerging from Naweed's account of art history in Afghanistan is its susceptibility to artistic innovations outside the country too. Afghan artists were receptive to new genres which they adopted and adapted (p. 248). This led to a period between 1933 and 1973 (the reign of King Zaher Shah and the democratic constitution of 1964) of prolific art, poetry, literature, and music. This period also reflected the transition of art appreciation out of the exclusive royal courts and into the public sphere, 'average people could relate to arts and enjoy the artistic pieces of their choice' (Naweed 2013, p. 262). Naweed recounts the works of the era as being 'honest and realistic' with 'subjects that everyone could relate to' (p. 259). It also included women's contributions to art[5], enabled by the constitution's encouragement of women's social participation.

It was also the time of the famous singer, Ahmad Zahir. Afghans around the world continue to recognise Ahmad Zahir as 'Afghanistan's Elvis' and recognise his work as innovating Afghan music, incorporating dance into his performances and symbolic of a progressive genre of music. His music reflected secular, modern, pop style attributes. Ahmad Zahir's music is still popular among young and old and reflects the progressive zeitgeist of Afghan musical history. Naweed (2013) refers to the period between 1950s and 1970s as the 'golden age of arts and cultural renaissance in Afghanistan' (p. 269). As creative expression modernised, other *ustads*[6] revived the traditional styles of miniature painting. The Department of Fine Arts at Kabul University taught both modern and traditional styles. Its institutionalisation reflected a broadening of arts in society and its acceptance as fundamental to society.[7]

Unsurprisingly, arts became a vehicle for propaganda during the communist regime of the 1980s. Artists were to propagate Marxist-Leninist messaging and depictions. Even so, artistic institutions like the now Faculty of Fine Arts of Kabul University, the Sanaie School of Kabul and Maimanagi Art Institution continued to allow students some level of independence in their art practice (Naweed 2013, p. 300). This period of socialist realism failed to appeal to artist or audience and as Naweed recalls, 'most of the art pieces of this

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[5] Naweed (2013) offers the example of Simon Wali who pioneered women's arts in the country, introducing Western inspired styles too, such as the techniques of French impressionists (p. 275).

[6] Ustad is a term used for a learned person of a certain field. It can be a university lecturer or a master calligrapher or an accomplished and respected artist. This period includes the contribution of my own grandfather mentioned earlier, Ustad Mohammad Mashal.

[7] The Fine Arts Department at Kabul university was established by Ammanullah Haiderzad in 1974 reflecting the cultural milieu of the time. 'Aesthetics, art appreciation, art criticism, composition, colour theory, and creative designing concepts were also taught for the first time in the country' (Naweed 2013, p. 283).

era were destroyed after the fall of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in 1992' (p. 300).[8]

The civil war that followed the toppling of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan ravaged the country and centres of art and culture were no exception.[9] The ensuing Taliban take over banned much of what artists could do under claims of strict Islamic sharia observance. The Taliban period signalled the end of the 'golden period' for arts in the country and the beginning of a period of a cultural holocaust, a violent rupture, erasure and uprooting of Afghanistan's rich artistic heritage. Where I refer to war and rupture throughout this thesis, it is the culmination of the effects of the Soviet war and the civil war but most disastrously, the Taliban period. Yet artists continued to practice even during the hardest of times. Naweed explains,

> to the greatest surprise of many observers, artistic creations continued to be produced in Afghanistan under extremely difficult circumstances. The artists who maintained the characteristics of Afghan art through difficult periods, from the beginning of the Marxist regime until the era of civil war and the rise of the Taliban are admirable individuals whose names should always be remembered by history. (2013, p. 301)[10]

I echo Naweed's call and acknowledge some of those 'admirable individuals' in my research. Today, cultural production in Kabul continues to break through political, economic, and sociocultural challenges. Naweed (2013) adds, 'Despite a lack of appropriate funding for promotion of the arts, the Afghan artists have demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm and effort in the advancement of arts in the country (p. 314), a sentiment shared by many of the comments of the artists I interviewed.

Today, art in Kabul produced by participants adumbrates a future reflective of the aspirations of its upcoming generation. They channel their experiences through many of their works to speak to an audience at home and afar. Despite the political, economic, and social challenges that Afghans face today, there is a vibrant art scene emerging. Travis Beard is director of *Rockabul* (2018), a documentary about a Kabul based heavy metal band.

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[8] Naweed also points out that socialist realism was employed by PDPA oppositional groups to depict their own heroes too.

[9] Faridullah Bezhan's (2016) account of Maryam Mahboob's short stories illuminate the double-edged sword which identifies this period. Afghans were caught between the Soviet Union's and the *mujahideen'*s interests - one demanding they lose God and the other demanding they use God.

[10] Many artists continued to practice outside of the country too, having left the country in three waves between the communist coup in the 1970s and the turn to Islamic fundamentalism from 1992.

He spent seven years living in Kabul, returning to Australia in 2017, and spoke to me about the creative scene in more recent years (personal correspondence, 13 Jun 2017). He pointed out that there was a peak of various types of cultural production until 2014 when escalating violence muted the nascent cultural expressions that were emerging. That year saw the withdrawal of foreign combat troops. In December of that year, a suicide bomber attacked the French Cultural Centre in Kabul[11]. The hall was filled with people attending a screening of a French documentary. Among the injured was Dr Ahmad Sarmast, founder of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) and a participant of this research. The funding for arts projects, music festivals and investment in cultural production very quickly dried up following this horrendous attack, explains Beard, who laments that the city no longer conducts large cultural events like the pre-2014 period. Even so, participants of this research reflect the swell of creativity which has taken root again in Kabul. It was not difficult to find a new group or individual engaging the arts for social and cultural development of their country. I reiterate John Clammer's (2015) words, '[T]he springs of creativity once unleashed are hard to bottle up again and continue to express themselves in numerous imaginative ways' (p. 13).

It is this phenomenon and its creative producers that I explore in this thesis. Against the grain of popular misconceptions, the next generation of *Kabuli*s[12], and perhaps Afghans more broadly, are reason enough to hope for peace and stability, and cultural renewal.

Research Paradigm

Art has a discursive way of speaking that reflects its soft power. Writing as early as 1958, Rudolph Morris, in seeking to define a sociology of art, describes the effect of art, its soft power, as 'a universal phenomenon of human society in action' and therefore open to sociological inquiry (p. 310).

In this research, I consider why art persists with such fervour in the Kabul context, despite the dangers it attracts, instead of taking the existence of art for granted. In the methodology chapter, I further discuss the evolution from a sociology *of* art to a sociology *fro*m art and build on these precedents to suggest a sociology *from* art praxis. Sociology from art, rather than implying a normative sociological position (as in a sociology of art),

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[11] See VOA News (2014). Earlier that day the Taliban claimed responsibility for an attack on a bus.
[12] *Kabuli* refers to anyone from Kabul. For a detailed definition of *Kabuli*, see Issa and Kohistani 2007, p. 56-57.

builds a sociological understanding *from* the art. I draw on a sociology from art (Clammer 2014, Danko 2008) to suggest a sociology from art praxis. I employ a sociological lens to the praxis of art making but this lens is also shaped by the observations. Art praxis centres the artist and their art making as response to context, over just the artwork alone. The focus on praxis seeks a contextual understanding of the production and reception of art as a socially and culturally generative process. Praxis is responsive, dynamic, and reflexive. Sociology from art praxis as a task of understanding is descriptive, that is, it seeks to understand, describe, and document. Rather than a critical sociology, this thesis treats 'art as a form of knowledge' (Heidegger in Clammer 2014, p. 15). As Ernst Fischer (1978) explains, in *The Necessity of Art,*

> all art is conditioned by time, and represents humanity in so far as it corresponds to the ideas and aspirations, the needs and hopes of a particular historical situation. But at the same time, art goes beyond this limitation and, within the historical moment, also creates a moment of humanity, promising constant development. (p. 12)

In the Kabul context, I position art praxis as a form of subjugated knowledge, specifically, 'local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity and which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all the knowledges that surround it' (Foucault 1997, p. 8). In essence, the sociology from art praxis nurtures a sociology from subjugated knowledges.

Art by peoples who have been spoken for, more often than they have been spoken with, has power.[13] Scholarship, whether historical, social or in the political sciences is disproportionately reflective of elites. Politicians, wealthy investors, renowned scholars, men. Stephanie Cronin (2008), in *Subalterns and Social Protest,* explains that 'the mentalities, agendas and ideological underpinnings of these elites have been relatively accessible to the historian, as they were historically both literate, generating voluminous documentary sources, also powerful, able to generate a dominant discourse, framing and reinforcing their own versions of themselves ready-made for the scholar' (p. 1).

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[13] In *Orientalism,* Said (2003) begins by quoting Marx, 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented'. Said's use of the quote is to highlight the orientalist paternalism with which the West viewed 'the Orient'. Here I argue that art as self-narration is powerful because it fills the gap left by the omission of subaltern perspectives and is, therefore, a challenge to orientalist paternalism.

In what follows, I contribute to discourse on the alternative voices of the marginalised and the silenced. Rather than a sudden and violent refusal of the status quo, I approach artists' art praxis in the same way that James Scott's (1990) hidden transcripts does, such that art in Kabul reflects 'the discursive practices offstage [which] sustain resistance' (p. 191). It is through art's aesthetic nature, acting like a cloak, that resistance and subversion are hidden in plain sight. As a large urban centre, much attention has fallen on Kabul's political, religious, and military elites. This thesis provides fresh perspectives from some of its inhabitants.

This research does not claim to represent all Afghan perspectives, especially given the population's vast and complex heterogeneity. Nor does this thesis intend to be broadly generalisable. In this research I complicate narratives through a sample of *Kabuli* artists, and offer a platform for them.

The methodology used in this thesis is hermeneutic phenomenology which recognises the researcher's presence in the dialogic relationship with participants as they create and explore meaning. I draw on semi-structured interviews with Kabul based artists. In line with the phenomenological approach, the themes reflected in each chapter emerged from these interviews. Secondary source material provided the language to describe and the theory to understand the primary material without compromising its centrality.

Theoretical Framework

This research is my modest contribution to a greater project of decolonising what we know about Afghans. Northern epistemologies and histories of colonialism make it difficult for Afghan artists to have a platform beyond the local and beyond mere curiosity.

This thesis reflects a conceptual marriage between a sociology from art praxis and Southern theory to contribute to a decolonising epistemology, through *Kabuli* cultural products, about Afghans and their culture. The nexus of influences taken from these two disciplines offer insights into an epistemology of the South as expressed through cultural production. That is, art as a decolonising epistemology which disrupts modernity's rationalism-affect binary.[14] As Zolberg (2015) explicates, 'the world of the arts at particular

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[14] Though I have distanced myself from modernity's privileging of reason, I have not suggested that my perspective is a postmodern approach. Though culture plays an important role in postmodernism and the self is not the immutable self-as-subject of modernity, nevertheless, postmodernism is still deeply Eurocentric (Yin 2018, p. 197).

historical moments deserves to be studied not only for what it reveals about aesthetics, but for what it reveals about society' (p. 902). The contemporary Kabul context is one such historical moment. Clammer's (2014) assertion that 'art is itself a form of knowledge' is pertinent to this research (p. 98). I explore how *Kabuli* cultural production can offer a platform for artists to self-narrate their desires, intentions, and subjectivities. The study sits at the intersection of culture, politics, art, and war. In doing so, *Kabuli* cultural products constitute a rebuke to monotone histories rooted in Western modernity's inscriptions of normality.

I argue that art can act as an avenue through which artists have a platform to amplify their perspectives. As such, I have drawn from both a decolonial theory and Southern theory framework. It is decolonial because it disrupts the centrality of a purely rationalist legacy of European modernity and it contributes to Southern theory because it offers the perspectives of *Kabuli* artists as sources of knowledge. As mentioned above, rather than critique their art or their societies, I have sought to understand, describe, and document what Raewyn Connell refers to, in the opening pages of her seminal work, *Southern Theory* (2007), as 'the self-knowledge of society' (p. vii), that is, knowledges of societies by societies. Rostami-Povey (2007a) explains,

> The western hegemonic alliance rationalised a system of governance in Afghanistan to facilitate the West's desire to control Central Asia in the face of the potential danger of pressure from Russia, China, and India for autonomous development. The plan for the control of Central Asia and the Middle East did not start with the war in Afghanistan. Its root is in the failure of neo-liberalism and the emergence of neo-conservatism. (pp. 43-44)

She succinctly adds, 'It is only by listening to Afghan women's and men's voices that we can begin to understand their struggle for their identity, rights and recognition' (2007a, p. 129). By centring the worlds and words of *Kabuli* artists, I contribute to a decolonising of epistemologies, challenge assumptions about Afghans and Afghanistan as portrayed through media and political discourse and policy, and offer a textured account of a rich cultural heritage.

I articulate a line of advocacy which contests Northern accounts of Afghan peoples by centring the *Kabuli* artists and their art praxis. This work offers an account of how the artists navigate social and cultural ruptures in Kabul and seek to shape the future of Afghan society. The legacy of war and the ongoing chaos, as violence both realised and as

constant potential, overshadow and permeate through daily life in Afghanistan where war, and the resultant collective loss of ties to land, identity, and tradition, has created a 'great discontinuity' (Connell 2007, p. 215). Art is one tool employed to nurture the production of meaning, being and creating. Segalo, Manoff and Fine (2015) assert that there is resistance in mode as much as the message. Referring to embroidery as storytelling among a group of black South African women as a decolonising tool, they describe it as a way 'to tell a narrative in an artistic and visual way that allows for multiple interpretations of their experiences, thereby negating the notion of a single story that does not acknowledge multiple perspectives and contexts' (p. 345).

The *Kabuli* participants of this research, although locally relatively privileged, on the global scale, belong to the subjugated majority of the South and their omission from historiography reflects an omission which my contribution will help to fill. I refer to them as subaltern perspectives, 'a way of creating an agenda of investigation, always to look for resistance to power – whether spectacular or unheroic' (Connell 2007, p. 169). The elites who do fill the national narratives and history books of Afghanistan do not reflect the participants of this study. In the next chapter, I describe my use of Southern theory as a political decision to build understanding informed by local Afghan perspectives. Though this research is the product of an Australian university and must comply with the requirements of a Northern institution, I nevertheless hope to disrupt Northern epistemologies, even if minimally.

In essence, this thesis is a project in de-mystification and re-humanisation of a segment of Afghans living in Kabul. It is also an appeal for a more textured account of the intangible destruction of war, as well as the intangible capacity of art to suture, despite being the first casualty of war.

Definitions and terms

Culture

The term 'culture' is amorphous and contested. I adopt Nancy Hatch Dupree's (2002) definition of culture as 'shared ideas, beliefs, emotions and customs that mould behaviour and place value on creative artistic expressions in such fields as art, music, literature and architecture. It defines the way people live, the way they utilise both material and non-material resources' (p. 978). Clammer (2015) expresses culture as transformative in that it is, 'the source of our collective memories and our social imagination, and is both the

depository of historical experiences and also the main resource for conceiving and mapping humane and viable futures for our planet. Culture is not just *what is* but also *what could be*' (p. 5, author's emphasis). Both definitions fit the current research given their connection to creative products and their generative role. Indeed, I argue that culture, in its plurality, offers a means by which people anchor identity. The Afghans of today are the collateral damage of political, military, and economic wars. Culture offers identities that are not bound to war, security, violence, or extremisms. It is the ribosomal presence in everyday life, present through the mundane and the spectacular, through which we make sense of our surroundings and of each other. I approach culture as 'a constitutive practice in the construction of meanings' (Zolberg 2015, p. 905). Cultural products of the sort explored in the following pages are expressions of life and of living and offer an identity that reaches into heritage and offers a conceptual space for imagining, 'it is through the practice of art that the imaginative faculty is exercised' (Kaplan 2002 in Clammer 2015, p. 7).

Culture also refers to the tangible creative outputs of a society, the cultural products which can shape, critique and challenge. I have used culture herein to mean both a reconceptualization of culture through arts, as in the reconceptualization of Afghan culture, as well as how it is reflected through a study of creative outputs, ergo cultural products. Cultural products are the tools through which citizens use, particularly in conflict spaces, to enact some degree of autonomy over the trajectory of their society. As Howell (2014) explains, 'Experiences as valued contributors to new creative endeavours increases voice and confidence, which can facilitate citizen's participation in civic action on decisions that affect their lives (p. 319).

Rupture

Different meanings can be applied to the concept of rupture in this thesis. Rupture can mean the unwanted damage to a thing, abstract or material. Afghanistan's recent past has created ruptures in culture, traditions, its social dynamics and its people and places. However, as the thread that runs through the following chapters, I present rupture not only as a breaking of something in a negative sense, which war has made abundantly available, but also the intentional breakages and contestations created by art and the creation that flows through the fissures. The pervasiveness of this rupture lends itself to an equally inescapable birth of alterity. It has created space for change and subversion as well as opportunities for innovation.

In this thesis I employ the term to capture both meanings. I refer to the rupture that people experience following the devastation of war. The rupture in this case is to society and culture, to conceptualisations of identity, connections, and community. Rupture also means the intentional rupture by artists. The power of cultural products lies in its ability to rupture the current systems which have been forged as consequences of war. In essence, art ruptures norms that have long become the response to war and conflict to make space for peace.

North and South, East and West

Where I refer to epistemologies, I refer to the North and the South as centres of dominant and marginalised knowledge production. I understand that these categorisations are inadequate, but I use the terms in large part to aid communication. By the North, I mean where knowledge and theorising about the South has been generated (Connell 2007). By the South, I refer to formerly colonised cultures and their subjects, oftentimes referred to in homogenised and essentialised terms. They have been the focus of studies 'about' and rarely studies 'with'. These are states that today experience financial disadvantage due to the North's cultural, political, commercial, and/or military interference which can date back to the 15th century. On occasion I will use the West/East expression, but only where I refer to economic or political divisions or where it is more commonly identified as such, for example, Western liberal feminism, or Edward Said's East and West references throughout the thesis. My use of these terms is functional, and I do not wish to reify complex global networks or to suggest that each exists in isolation of the other. Rather, I wish to acknowledge the imbalances of power and the dependence of one upon the exploitation of the other.

Where I have referred to first and third worlds, I have done so when authors have done so in articulation of their perspectives and conceptualisations, or where it holds particular meaning. For example, Uma Narayan in *Dislocating Cultures* (1997) employs third world feminism to refer to feminism from India. However, the terms work within a colonial paradigm of first and third worlds, an assumption of hierarchy pitting the 'civilised' first world against the third which, in applying neat binaries, reifies the complex interrelatedness of worlds and omits the dependencies of the first world on third world exploitation. For good reason, the use of these terms is now outdated and rarely employed. These terms are also used intentionally to highlight the broad acceptance of this world hierarchy in colonial times and reference to them in this thesis will be to mobilise this point for the argument being made.

Diverse subjectivities

I attempt to steer away from analytic generalisations and maintain a contextual focus, namely middle-class Afghan artists in contemporary Kabul. While I refer to general hardships such as the Taliban or war, I acknowledge that social structures of ethnicity, class and gender would produce different experiences. For example, the homogenising reference to 'Afghan women' can be problematic. A Hazara woman living in Hazarajat would have a very different experience to a Hazara woman living in Kabul. A Pashtun girl in Nuristan would experience access to education and familial obligations differently to a Pashtun girl in Kabul. In her seminal piece, 'Under Western Eyes', Chandra Mohanty (1991a) points out the tendency to collapse entire peoples under a superstructure which does little to inform potential political resistance. Arguing that feminist work is inherently political, Mohanty (1991a) explains, 'Thus feminist scholarly practices (whether reading, writing, critical, or textual) are inscribed in relations of power – relations which they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support. There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship' (p. 53).

Though my analysis is based in the Kabul context, I approach the work of *Kabuli* artists in the world. As Zolberg (2015) contends, 'pursuing questions of meaning, identity, and value in terms of a single society alone is clearly insufficient to understanding social processes and emergent structures' (pp. 910-911).

Subaltern

Antonio Gramsci's conceptualisation of the subaltern was tied to social class division and was used to refer to the proletarian class, excluded from hierarchies of power. For Gramsci, 'they were subjects of diverse capacity in terms of their self-consciousness and organization, up to the point of acquiring the ability to launch a challenge for hegemony...before the capture of power and the definitive reversal of their state of subalternity' (Liguori 2015, p. 120). Spivak (1988) borrowed the term subaltern from Gramsci and referred to the oppressed subject, excluded from colonial historiography as subjects of 'inferior rank' (p. 283). Her conceptualisation of the subaltern is inherently feminist, adding, 'If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (p. 287). Unlike Gramsci's definition of the subaltern, Spivak preferred the term for its flexibility and ability to encompass different social identities which cannot be viewed in reductive terms (Morton 2003, p. 45). She conceived of the term as 'truly situational...That word, used

under duress, has transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under a strict class analysis' (Spivak 1990, p. 141).

I have referred to participants as subalterns and their contributions in terms of their artistic practices as well as their interview responses as subaltern voices. While they hold a privileged position within Kabul, being middle class and educated with the means to pursue creative endeavours and to travel, my reference to their subalternity contends with their positionality within global discourses and structures of power. This is a position they are aware of. This awareness becomes evident throughout the following chapters. For example, Shamsia Hassani, a street artist based in Kabul, recounts her experience during a trip to the US when somebody assumed she needed instruction on how to use an elevator. She portrays an acute understanding of her place in the world as someone from *The Third World*. Chapter five will further explore this example but suffices here to illustrate that she is aware of being orientalised. In contrast, within Kabul, Shamsia explains that she must be aware of how she dresses or where she shops given the prestige of her position in Kabul University.

Art

Finally, my use of the term 'art' also transcends Northern constructs of art and the Northern aesthetic which is informed by dominant epistemic paradigms. Though they may not have an 'art world' in the Northern sense, artists have at their disposal, especially with the internet's broad reach, the world of art and its history, as reflected in the hybridity of their art objects. I adopt Clammer's (2015, p. 14) 'aesthetic democracy' approach by treating the art of *Kabuli* artists as objects of diverse modernities, influenced by and influencing art produced elsewhere. A decolonising of the aesthetic creates a space for theorising *Kabuli* artists from within their own contextual subjectivities. Through global capitalism, we are subject to a 'colonialism of the senses' (Clammer 2015, p. 15) which can colour how we perceive, say, a young Afghan girl with a spray paint like Shamsia can as emulating, rather than innovating or Beard's earlier lamenting that art in Kabul has fizzled out, a perception formed because there are no Western style festivals. I have used the word art and cultural products interchangeably as well as artists and cultural producers.

I have kept the identities of my participants concealed to allow for a more open and comfortable exchange through the interviews, even where they granted me permission to use names. I have used actual names where doing so would benefit them in some way, either through making them known as artists or where this thesis stands as a platform for

a view point they wish to be attributed to them explicitly. Additionally, I have also used their real names where the public profiles of their works would not allow for discretion.

Thesis structure

This thesis has three parts which reflect the key themes from the data. Each part consists of two chapters. The themes arose from the interviews and were identified and pursued using inductive analysis methods discussed in the next chapter. Throughout the work, non-English words are italicised, unless they are direct citations.

Part one, titled 'Enchantment and Encounter', is about artists' self-narration. This part consists of chapters three and four. I theorise art's application in the Kabul context and argue firstly at a local level and then at a global level for its importance in transcending boundaries and forging bridges across difference. In chapter three, I look at art as a source of communication in the immediate space it inhabits. I argue that this communication transcends the rational mind as a precognitive moment of enchantment. This chapter considers how cultural products re-envision and disrupt norms by circumventing the conscious rational mind. This process, as enchantment, leverages a primal pull toward the sensual and in doing so, accesses that part of us that is open to alterity. It is through enchantment that a form of aporetic space is forged where knowing and not knowing create Dionysian moments of potential. Art's 'soft power' sees it reach the audience through the preconscious in ways that other modes may struggle. I further explore the Kabul context to illustrate that beyond, and perhaps because of, the affective capture of art and its abduction of the senses, it can work to suture the ruptures and discontinuities caused by war. In chapter four, I argue for art's counter-narrative potential on a global scale as alternative media. Artists distribute their works via social media as a desire to be heard and reflects an awareness of the simplistic moulds that have been applied to them. It is through their art that artists can contribute to discourses and begin to rupture the monolithic narratives about them as Afghans. Both chapters advocate that art has a power to reach into and beyond difference.

In Part two, titled 'Gender', I build on the theme of rupture by reconceptualising feminism and conceptions of masculinity in the Kabul context. This part consists of chapters five and six. In chapter five I explore what feminism means in the Kabul context and argue that, through art, young female artists' art practice is feminism in praxis. This is a feminism beyond the 'feminist' label, which has strong links to Western feminism. Rather than

identify as feminist, the artists I spoke to *do* feminist work. In chapter six I turn my attention to reconceptualising masculinity and the codes of honour that shape gender expectations in Kabul. Initially prompted by how often young women mentioned their fathers as a source of their strength and success, I complicate simplistic tropes applied to Afghan men of warrior or terrorist. Given the complex and contentious history in Afghanistan and the deployment of gender for political means, this section will give a layered understanding of gender as intersubjective and historicized experience.

The third and final part is titled 'People and place', and consists of chapters seven and eight which explore the relationship between the artists and their contexts. In chapter seven I explore the subjective positions of the artists which have informed the analysis so far and present the complexity of their worldviews. In this chapter I hope that they are humanised beyond research participants or 'Other' but as relatable individuals with fears and aspirations, as more than abstractions. In chapter eight I explore their world, Kabul. Kabul, the protagonist, impacts the participants as much as they impact it. In this chapter I argue for a relational dynamic between city and inhabitant. I argue here that, through their art praxis, artists shape their city as it shapes them and explore the publics that encounter their works in public spaces. I treat the streetscape as a component of the art and offer its contribution to the work and the praxis.

Overall, I have made use of theorists from the metropole, but I have tried to do so without the enchantment of European modernity. Knowledge production and the generation of cultural products in Afghanistan do not fit within a linear historicism which sees Europe ahead and *Kabuli* artists playing catch-up. They create and respond to their own moments and leverage the 'socially healing power of art' in ways which allow them to navigate their social contexts and transcend taboos in non-verbal modalities (Clammer 2015, p. 33).

Conclusion

I am forever touched by Raewyn Connell's (2014a) words when she expressed, 'the obsessive counting, measuring, ranking, and testing that reduces culture and knowledge to tightly packaged blancmange, is itself proof of what it [the neoliberal audit regime] seeks to suppress: the tremendous lurid diversity, the erupting multiplicity, of possible projects of knowledge' (p. 216). There is also Bauman's poetic assertion that 'culture is a permanent revolution of sorts' (Bauman and Tester 2001, p. 32). To this end, I hope that the works I present in the pages that follow reflect the 'erupting multiplicity of possible

projects of knowledge' and challenge the approach to different cultures from essentialist positions (Connell 2014a, p. 216).

The time I spent speaking with the participants of this research had a deep and enduring impact on me. Having been raised in the Afghan diaspora in Sydney, Australia, I was used to the guarded nature of interactions with the community for fear of rumour and reputation. As a community seeking to secure what's known in an unknown environment, many of the social etiquettes of home were magnified. It seemed the world outside our front door was riddled with temptation and risk and anyone who ventured there, tested it, was open to critique. This was particularly true for women and girls. I came to expect the same sort of guardedness from the interactions with research participants. Instead, the richness of the descriptions of their life experiences and the openness with which they shared their thoughts offered much to think about. Had I employed all that had been given me through these interviews, I would have the equivalent of several PhDs. As such I have tried to offer a diverse portion which best does justice to the lived experiences of my interlocutors and seek to use more in the coming years.

If I were to articulate the *raison d'être* of this thesis, it would be to echo Ernst Fischer's (1978) appeal for the necessity of art, not as a luxury to be enjoyed by an elite few versed in its interpretation, but as an avenue through which artists, 'go out in search of reality beyond the illusory world of pseudo-facts, phrases, and conventions...to construct reality' (p. 198). Further, like Clammer (2014), I ask, 'How, then, might we understand art movements not simply as stylistic evolutions within visual and expressive culture, but as genuine social movements in their own right?' (p. 100). Building, rebuilding, a society still grieving and carrying the scars of war, in country and in diaspora, needs so much more than financial capital. That the fabric of society is fed, not by money, but by the space to create, hope, and explore, and thus heal, has been my belief throughout this thesis. It is cultural products like the ones I use here that provide *Kabuli*s an avenue for building, healing and being. They offer what purely economic policy or statist development strategies alone will time and time again fail to deliver (Howell 2014). I hope that through this research I have offered a platform which I am privileged to have, to the voices marginalised by contemporary discourse and 'war on terror' fetishisms. As voices from the margins of the dominant episteme, they hold the power to stand upon the ruptures of war and envision better.

Chapter Two:

Methodology

It is time to change the conversation. The past had better be large and demand little. The future had better come closer. Let's enlarge the present and the space of the world. Let's move on. Let's travel with crude maps. Between theory and action there may be correspondence, but there is no sequence. We will not necessarily reach the same place, and many of us will not even reach any recognizable place, but we share the same starting point, and that's enough. We are not all headed to the same address, but we believe we can walk together for a very long time. A few of us speak colonial languages; the large majority of us speak other languages. Since only a small number of us have voice, we resort to ventriloquists, whom we call rearguard intellectuals, because they go on doing what they have always done well: looking back. But they have now received a new mission from us: to care for those of us who lag behind and bring them back into the fight and to identify whoever keeps betraying us at the back and help us find out why.

(Santos 2016, p. 2)

Reason is often misconstrued as the only instigator of thought, as if it has, indeed, captured the imagination. But there is more to what stirs one to think than what thought itself can make transparent.

(Barnacle 2001, p. 3)

In this thesis, I focus on art's contextual existence, the praxis of art making, and question what its creators aspire to achieve through its use. My interest in cultural products in Kabul is not one of documenting genres, historical traditions, or styles. Nor do I attempt to critique art, as my wish was not to assign a measure or standard of quality. My interest is in the perspectives of the creators of those cultural products in order to rehumanise and contextualise the realities of life in war afflicted Kabul. Many of the participants address the simplifications they experienced about Afghans and Afghanistan as they travelled. They also defined their position as artists in Kabul as culture makers and societal influencers. But even so, they are *Kabuli* artists in the world. This research interrogates *Kabuli* artists' perspectives about the role of art in their country and their hopes for their people as well as their broader connections globally. Although they may have relevance beyond the specific, the findings are not intended as generalisable truths about the role and place of art for all Afghans or all societies.

Referring to the arts as an avenue for research, Baron and Eisner (2012) explore the facets of art which foster understanding. Rather than finite definitive findings, such as those offered by quantitative methodologies, they advocate for research approaches that 'exploit the power of "vagueness"', which can 'touch souls' (p. 4). I ask 'what does this art and these artists hope to achieve?' or, 'why do they persist despite the challenges against its existence?'. I am genuinely curious about the artists as people and their intentions.

I approach the phenomena of artistic expression in Kabul today with sociological curiosity. I am conscious to avoid is treatment of participants as only subjects or objects. The views of the artists as equals in the world was a particularly central component of my ethical approach. It is here that I see artists' voices as contributing to epistemologies about themselves and their worldviews.

Epistemological framework:

A combination of seeing the lacklustre unidimensional depictions of Afghans in news media, a belief in the non-neutrality of knowledge production, an artistic family heritage and a conviction that next generation Afghans are working, against the odds, to build a discourse, forms the epistemological and ethical foundation of this work. Indeed, as people embedded in their societies, they critique their society, identify priorities and seek

productive ways into healing the social fissures of war toward a peaceful and vibrant Afghanistan.

My approach is best captured through the intersection of a sociology from art praxis, which focuses the analysis contextually in Kabul; Southern theory, which amplifies subjugated knowledges; and critical theory, through which knowledge production is explicitly acknowledged as non-objective and non-neutral, opening space for counter-narratives. While I have discussed each approach separately below, the three perspectives are far more entwined and offer one form of post-abyssal thinking.

I employ post-abyssal thinking, a form of co-knowledge production, as a way of presenting participants' artistic praxes, as well as my own intentions, to reach across abyssal lines. That is, artists rupture the neat binaries drawn by colonialism. Santos (2018) defines the abyssal line as, 'separating metropolitan societies and forms of sociability from colonial societies and forms of sociability...basic as it is invisible, it allows for false universalisms that are based on the social experience of metropolitan societies and aimed at reproducing and justifying the normative dualism metropolis/colony' (p. 6).

Sociology from art praxis
Sociology from art praxis both positions my analysis within sociology - rather than art theory, critique, or history - and seeks to understand the artists' praxis as contextually responsive and dynamic, rather than purely the art's role. It is an approach that does not presuppose an 'art world', nor take art's presence for granted. The approach fits well with Southern theory. It is not the content of the art, but the context that I am interested in, as it shapes the production and reception of the work in the sociological sense as well as offers nuance to Kabul, where this knowledge is created. Where I do employ the content of works, it is in service of presenting a sociological point about context or the artist.

Arnold Hauser (1982) defines the sociology *of* art as the influence of art on society (p. 89), even as he contends that the relationship is two way, 'like the relationship between body and soul: neither are they contradictory, nor can they ever be in harmony' (p. 93). Much of the work on the sociology of art has firm roots in the art worlds of the colonial metropoles. Examples of these approaches include critiques of the sociology of the North (Inglis 2010), analyses of the workings of an 'art world' and the marginalisation of art in the contemporary neoliberal world (Alexander and Bowler 2014), comment on domination and class as reflected in Western art cultures (Bourdieu 1984) or the exploration of art worlds (Becker 2008). Becker (2008) argues that more than just the artists and their art

works create the ecology of art creation and reception. The 'art world concept' (p. xxiv) presupposes an institution that manages and commodifies art in ways that do not relate to Kabul. The production and reception of art in conflict zones like Kabul have artistic practices incomparable from the art worlds of the global North and their traditions of art and culture. For Kabul, the 'art scene' or 'art world' is not one of formal institutions which attribute a level of cultural capital. Disrupted by wars and instability, they date back thousands of years, and defy any assumptions of linearity along European lines. Yet the sociological curiosity remains a relevant component. As with a sociology of art, this research approaches the artists and their praxis as a sociological phenomenon, rather than through an art theory, art critic or art history paradigm.

Sociology *from* art is best considered through the works of Clammer (2014) and Heinich (in Danko 2008). Dagmar Danko's (2008) presentation of French theorist Nathalie Heinich's oeuvre brings her sociology *from* art into the anglophone sphere. Heinich's approach offers a perspective which, at least in part, creates space for a Southern epistemology based on a sociology *from* art. As she explains, 'More than any other object, art enables us to rethink, sometimes to abandon or to reverse, a certain number of positions, routines, mental habits that are anchored in the sociological tradition – or at least in a certain way of practicing this discipline' (Heinich in Danko 2008, p. 242). Heinich is positioned toward, 'her own brand of descriptive and pragmatic sociology' (Danko 2008, p. 244) as derived from 'the interpretive and phenomenological tradition' (Clammer 2014, p. 7).

The sociology of art is an approach to the artwork with a sociological standard, whereas the sociology *from* art teases out the sociology from the art. While the latter leaves out the artwork in favour of context, sociology of art employs the artwork as a sociological fact (de la Fuente 2007). Finally, whereas the sociology of art assumes an art world with all the structures and institutions that implies, sociology from art offers a non-normative, value neutral position (Clammer 2014, p. 7) which centres the actor over the content of the art. I take value-neutrality and prioritise the perspective of the participant as well as of the researcher who brings their own values, experiences and expectations.

Heinich approaches the role of the researcher as 'bridge builder between different persons and their divergent opinions' and not as a critic (cited in Danko 2008, p. 246). In arguing for a sociology *from* art (and later a sociology of values), Heinich approaches art as indicative of phenomena from a specific social context and the role of the sociologist as

observing 'what they *do*, rather than describing what they are or saying what they are worth' (Heinlich in Danko 2008, p. 252). Positioning herself counter to Bourdieu's critical sociology, and a stance which fits harmoniously with hermeneutic phenomenology discussed later, Heinich's 'value neutrality' understands the perspective of the actors themselves and what they consider relevant, such that 'especially in relation to art, which is of such high value for the actors in the art field, the sociologist should free himself or herself from a normative position' (Danko 2008, p. 245). The researcher should in turn free themselves from establishing what is art or what is not, and what is 'high' art or 'good' art. In essence, the researcher strives to understand the actors' position, particularly in the Afghan context in which actors' voices, worldviews and knowledges have long been subjugated. Foucault (1977) conceptualised subjugated knowledges as,

> a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity. (p. 7)

A sociology from art potentiates an avenue toward amplifying subjugated knowledges. Foucault's reference here to the *un-scientificity* of subjugated knowledges signals at the centring of Eurocentric Enlightenment knowledge production valued for its roots in rationalism at the expense of affect.

Heinlich's sociology *from* art (in Danko 2008), positions the lens of the researcher sociologically, rather than in any art world tethered to formal or semi-formal systems or structures, making it malleable enough to be transferred to contexts outside of Europe. Building on this, my approach is positioned as a sociology *from* art *praxis*, an approach more keenly focused on the intents, changes and practice of art making as response to context. By centring the perspectives of the artists, as in Heinich's approach, I contribute to the decolonising of studies of art and aesthetics.

I treat art as a key social ingredient, yet not unitary, all encompassing, or privileged in any way, but one that fits within the folds of what constitutes a society. Art is one medium among many through which sociological inquiry can be conducted. While denying any unique essentialism or determinism to art's role in society, I posit that its study can nevertheless engage sociological questions of 'power, representation, and subjectivity, of the sort we find in cultural studies' (Wolff in de la Fuente 2007, p. 415). In what follows, art is approached as an, 'active ingredient or animating *force*' and 'in action', as opposed

to 'inanimate *product* (an object to be explained)' (DeNoro 2003, p. 3, author's emphasis). Art, whether visual, musical, or written, engages with society actively, such that neither arguing for its power to shape or be shaped by context alone will suffice. The creative media are activated within a certain context, in the service of that context, and vice versa, the context can respond to cultural products.

The intertextuality of art in Kabul - of rupture, hope and fear - conceptualises the details around the production of the art. Art speaks to a common humanity from a specific subjectivity, the message is interpreted through the experiences of the viewer. As such, 'the world of the arts at particular historical moments deserves to be studied not only for what it reveals about aesthetics, but for what it reveals about society' (Zolberg 2015, p. 902).

Southern theory

As epistemologies of the South, *Kabuli* art challenges dominant Northern epistemologies on two fronts: it amplifies subjugated voices as a form of knowledge, and it leverages art and affect as a rebuke to purely positivist and rationalist traditions. Rather than just cultural products, art becomes cultural representation of a generation of *Kabuli* artists whose use of creative products shares their intent to heal the ruptures left by years of war and to create their own ruptures to sociocultural structures they want to see changed. Southern theory offers valuable insights into how to approach subjects of the South, the *Kabuli* artists of this study. Southern theory is a tool to engage with their perspectives as sources of alternate, otherwise subjugated, knowledges.

Furthermore, the approach broadened how I consider concepts like agency and question 'what is knowledge?'. I encountered one of the greatest intellectual challenges through this process. Though I speak fluent *Dari* which made interviews possible, I am limited to reviewing literature in English. I found many extremely useful texts are written in English by Northern academics and by applying Southern theory to my reading of them, I rethink the literature and seek to go beyond. I also used Southern scholars who helped me to consider concepts and theories, as well as my own positionality through a Southern theory lens. For example, Uma Narayan's (1997), *Dislocating Culture: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* was pivotal when I was considering my own positionality. For Narayan, 'Third World subjects' include people from 'communities of colour' in Western contexts, whether temporarily or permanently placed, who may or may not have a sense

of identity which connects to the South. For her, a 'Third World subject' encompasses individuals whose,

> ...communities, achievements, and "culture" have not been regarded as part of "mainstream Western culture". Individuals from all these categories are positioned in interesting ways in projects designed to make the curriculum more responsive to achievements that have been marginal to the pedagogical gaze of mainstream "Western culture"... (p. 121)

As another example, Sujatha Fernandes's (2017b) critique of the Afghan Women's Writing Project was pivotal in identifying ways that seemingly innocuous creative projects could be perpetuating narratives designed to benefit Western political interests at the expense of Southern cultures and identities. The 'soft power' of the creative process, a tool for Kabuli artists, can also be used to manipulate public opinion and justify military intervention in Afghanistan. Such was the case in the US's employment of Afghan women's stories (Fernandes 2017b). Additionally, Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) helped how I consider religion and agency, and to decolonise my use of these terms. Elaheh Rastami-Povey's *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (2007a) looks at NGOisation in Afghanistan and challenges the omission of Afghan women's daily struggle for their rights. Like Spivak's (1988) seminal work, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Rostami-Povey considers the position between Western expectations and local customs that women in Afghanistan must navigate. Similarly, I use Achille Mbembe's (2001) discussion of types of violence and power in *On the Postcolony* to consider violence and power in the Afghan context and the impact of imperialism and war that continue to make peace illusive in the country. In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2008) Dipesh Chakrabarty argues for the heterogeneity of knowledges. He explains, 'European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations...' (p. 16). The subaltern counter-narrative position I take uses art as one response to the persistence of Eurocentric narrative making about Southern peoples. As Chakrabarty further explains, 'the margins are as plural and diverse as the centres' (p. 16). I argue for a 'continuous dynamic relationship whereby multiple traditions help to shape multiple modernities while modernity radically alters all traditions' (Casanova 2011, p. 264). Mbembe's and Chakrabarty's works resonated with my conceptualisation of Afghanistan. They challenge the historical linearity model which relegates the non-European world into the realm of 'not yet', the 'waiting room' of history (Chakrabarty 2008,

p. 8). Challenging this simplistic conceptualisation of progress (in the North) and stagnation (in the South), Fernandes (2017b) contextualises gender in the Afghan context, 'this reified notion of unchanging traditional culture prevents us from seeing how gender relations in Afghanistan have been profoundly shaped by factors of war, occupation, and conflict. Afghanistan has historically been used as a pawn between rival colonial and imperial powers' (p. 653).

By reading these works and many others closely, I have offered alternative ways to consider the Afghan context beyond a Northern-centric lens. The tools of Southern theory are summarised by Connell (2007) who explicates the four consequences of theories located in the metropole, they are 'the claim to universalism; reading from the centre; gestures of exclusion; and grand erasure' (p. 44). I wish to avoid rendering 'the social thought of colonised cultures irrelevant to the main theoretical conversation' (Connell 2007, p. 46). Even within countries like Afghanistan, the voices of the powerful speak the loudest. McChesney (2013) argues that with a focus on only the first and fourth quarter of the twentieth century, many accounts of Afghanistan's past give the perspectives of elites inside Afghanistan and superpowers outside of the country, offering a falsely polarised account of its history. There is, for example, an absence of women and minority ethnic groups even in 'Persian-narrative sources' which focus on military elites (Noelle-Karimi 2013, p. 142). James Caron (2013) argues that Afghan historiography has often reflected the viewpoints of Afghan elites as 'Atlantic-centric and Kabul-centric perspectives' but that, 'In contrast, Afghan popular and intellectual cultures alike have often voiced alternate histories' (p. 138). The erasure of these alternatives is addressed to some degree in this thesis through the cultural products of *Kabuli* artists.

The power of cultural production is expressed by Ngugi Wa-Thiong'o (2004) who articulates cultural epistemicide, though he does not name it as such:

> The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their language, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. (p. 3)

Wa-Thiong'o (2004) goes on to add that the neo-colonial project renders a people's past a 'wasteland of non-achievement' which can only be remedied through the embrace of

imperialism and the modernity it promises. This deep dive into the layers of coloniality and the emphasis on the consequences of cultural erasure, while Africa based, can be projected elsewhere.

Imperialist incursions appear as epistemological exclusion of Southern knowledges. Abdul R. JanMohamed's (1985) 'Manichean allegory' persists in the neo-colonialist projects of today. By amplifying the perspective of the subaltern, this research offers a platform in opposition to an all-encompassing colonial modernity (Ludden 2002). I seek to foreground the empirical data such that it is not lost in the folds of positivist methodological and academic agendas (Masselos 2002, p. 188).

As I write, the US and the Taliban were recently engaged in peace talks for Afghanistan to the exclusion of the Afghan government. While these talks have failed, the undermining of the Afghan government, already perceived as weak, is a calculated consequence of a realpolitik which still bears a neo-colonialist agenda. I apply subaltern studies[15] to the Kabul context as 'a way of creating an agenda of investigation, always to look for resistance to power – whether spectacular or unheroic' (Connell 2007, p. 169). It is a subalternity in the era of Trump's Muslim ban, the relative success of Pauline Hanson in Australia, and the shift to the right of the political spectrum globally, expressed through anti-immigration, anti-refugee, anti-multiculturalism, anti-intellectual, populist policy and Islamophobic, free speech rhetoric.

Breaking free of theorising as the preserve of the Northern academe allows for the conceptualisation of cultural producers in Kabul as theorists of their own worlds. As Alatas (2001) points out, 'Being alternative requires the turn to philosophies, epistemologies, histories, and the arts other than those of the Western tradition' (p. 59).

> Its core ideas – about avoiding essentialisms, problematic reifications, and stereotypical assumptions about the (non-Western) 'other' and also not replicating these in the conceptual and methodological machineries in use in the social sciences – continue to be the bedrock of what are now more broadly termed 'alternative discourses' in the social sciences. (Sinha 2003 p. 8)

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[15] For a critique of subaltern studies see Vivek Chibber's (2013) *Postcolonial theory and the spectre of capital*. I also found a useful response to Chibber's indictment of subaltern studies by Axel Andersson (2013).

The treatment of knowledges produced outside of Northern (European and US) institutions, such as the perspectives of the Afghan *Kabuli* artists I have presented here are my modest contribution to the core ideas Sinha mentions above. Further, I employ Connell's (2014a)[16] project of understanding the society as a product of colonial or neo-colonial incursions and 'articulating interests and purposes within that society and constructing art and knowledge from the periphery' (p. 215).

Indeed, the creative works of a new generation of artists offer an entry to creative expression and civic contribution which would otherwise be difficult to access. They offer alternative narratives of identity, aspiration, and hope. Here, the subaltern speaks and with gusto. The artists and writers in this research offer a contemporary depiction, nuanced through the creative process such that it is not stripped of affect through developmental, medical, political, or military language. Hoerder (2001) expresses this poignantly, 'Out of the power to impose discourses and racial-social classifications and out of the defiance by those this imposed upon...the dialectic of the next generation's discourses emerges' (p. 877).

Creative artefacts, whether found in galleries or on Kabul's blast walls, are the language of a generation who have known nothing but war and dispossession. 'The *knowledge of social situations* embedded in non-metropolitan discourses about local society is knowledge of the same order – as detailed, subtle, grounded in experience, and contestable – as metropolitan discourses about metropolitan society' (Connell 2007, p. 105). This is the guiding principle of my approach to understanding cultural production in Kabul. For Afghans, dispossession of culture, narratives and heritage are the legacies of decades of war, irreplaceable by aid funding or foreign political advisors. As Connell (2007) further articulates, 'that the general idea of dispossession – one of the most important and under-theorised concepts in social science – needs to sink roots into the mud of particular landscapes' (p. 206). This has been a recurring challenge and one I have been conscious of through this research. As Segalo, Manoff and Fine (2015) articulate in their exploration of alternative modes of decolonising work. 'The politics of representation often carry with them an internalised set of "imperialist eyes"' (p. 343). The 'scar tissue' of wars past and present, in the Afghan context, frame the art praxis of cultural producers, oftentimes as

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[16] Connell's (2014a) first and second projects are 'the defence and preservation of indigenous knowledge and practices' and 'thinking of invasion', respectively (p. 214). The fourth project Connell identifies is 'the reconstruction of knowledge that is set in train by colonialism and decolonisation' (p. 215). The fifth project is the 'application of Southern theory and postcolonial perspectives' (p. 216).

an anchor from where their message begins. Like Connell (2007), Segalo et.al (2015), call for research that challenges hegemonic knowledges by 'cultivat[ing] a rich understanding of local frames' (p. 343). As such, the participants whose valuable contributions have enriched this research are present with the reader, speaking for themselves, about themselves and complicating the simplification of dominant narratives about them.

Critical theory

Critical theory offered me a way of looking at knowledge, how it is created, by who and for what means. By critical theory, my intention is not purely the critical theory established by the Frankfurt School in the early twentieth century. My approach reflects a theoretical bricolage (Steinberg and Kincheloe 2010). I am interested in questions of justice, knowledge production, emancipation, and oppression in an effort to, 'drag us out of the stagnant moral pond of twenty-fist century Western culture' (Steinberg and Kincheloe 2010, p. 141) and a critical theory, 'more sensitive to modes of domination that involve race and gender and to the complexity of lived experience', and incorporate the perspectives of groups otherwise excluded (Steinberg and Kincheloe 2010, p. 140).

This thesis takes knowledge production as highly reflective of structures of power. The creation of knowledge is not value neutral nor objective. As an Afghan-Australian Muslim woman living in Sydney, I live the tension of seeing oversimplifications of Afghans on the one hand and the reality of their hard work toward peace on the other. From this position, I take a pro-justice approach, driven in the first instance by the belief in equality of voices.

I refuse a purely positivistic approach of measurability, replication, and apathetic critique to lives and experiences. I subscribe, instead, to knowledge production as deeply subjective, and equally rigorous. As Styrdom (2011) notes, in his appraisal of critical theory's transcendental dimension, it 'is based on a type of engagement with reality which is geared towards exposure for the benefit of learning and the enhancement of human socio-cultural existence within the limits of the natural order' (p. 9).

My work with research participants aims to be non-extractivist (Joffre-Eichhorn 2019, Kouritzin and Nakagawa 2018), seeking to further the research as well maintain a social justice agenda which works in favour of the participants. In these ways, this research does not seek generalisability or objectivity. Infused with my own experiences as an Afghan living in diaspora and influenced by my experiences working with asylum seekers and refugees in Sydney, this research is inherently political, and justice focused.

In essence, I believe that a local and aesthetics approach can open up a world of knowledge that would otherwise be invisible. Through these approaches we can 'make alternative and marginalised voices visible in the public domain', particularly in conflict societies (Vogel et al. 2020, p. 4).

Post-abyssal thinking

Post-abyssal thinking refers to Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2007) framework for challenging epistemology's normative position in modern science. Specifically, it is, 'an epistemology rooted in the experiences of the global South' (Santos in Nunes 2009, p. 95-96). Post-abyssal thinking's challenge to Western modernity, and the equivocation of progress with neo-coloniality and of knowledge with Truth, becomes clear. Approached as 'coknowledge emerging from processes of knowing-with rather than knowing-about' (Santos 2018, p. 147), the current research draws from Santos' epistemologies of the South as post-abyssal scientific knowledge.

There is more to the South than the North's understanding of it, particularly where that understanding is constructed through modernity's ontological foundations in reason and science alone. In essence, Northern epistemologies are insufficient in offering validation to a plurality of knowledges such as those encountered through Indigenous peoples at the colonial borderlands. Post-abyssal thinking thus opens up the possibility of redefining what constitutes knowledge.

Santos further argues that abyssal thinking persists in the contemporary period. This neo-orientalism (Akram 2000) manifests in the West's response to Muslims and Arabs and their refugee or asylum claims. The 'new abyssal colonial' does not remain in the colonial zone, they intrude on the metropolitan zones of civil society. This intrusion occurs through increased global connectivity, with particular emphasis on social media, echoing Santos (2007), 'The return of the colonial does not necessarily require that she be physically present in metropolitan societies. It suffices that she have a relevant connection with them' (p. 6). I am drawn to *Kabuli* street artist Shamsia's post, figure 1 below, in which her body works to make tangible an otherwise abyssal line, and through which she pushes at the boundaries of abyssal thinking.

Figure 1. Shamsia's Facebook response to recent bombings in Kabul targeting mosques (Hassani 2019a). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.

Below the image, Shamsia writes:

> Identity is an element that humans can't choose for themselves. As the citizens of a third world country whose identity is not trustworthy for others, I always believed that I have not treated the world badly, but war and politics showcased me as an untrustworthy individual to the world. I never fought any wars, never hurt anyone, so why am I accused, and why is the world giving me bad reactions? Why am I being humiliated for my identity? I, I love my identity, just like an individual from any other country. I love my people and my country.

> I have the barcode of a third world country with me. I didn't ask for it, but I was given this barcode and wherever I go into this world, I will be interrogated about it, I will face restrictions, and borders will be closed on us. We live in fear, we laugh in fear, and we sleep in fear, and wake up in fear just to see if there is tomorrow or not?

> I, a lot of citizens of the third world countries, have died and lived many times. In this painting, the character's body is part of Kabul's map, which shows one of the worst days of Kabul. An explosion rocked the city and I was very close to it, the blue dot is my location. I was so scared that I lost all my senses, I didn't know where to go, and that explosion took place in my heart. Whomever sees this painting, he/she will find themselves on that blue dot, close to darkness, close to death.

Shamsia's description clearly highlights the 'incomprehensibility' of the 'other side of the line' explained by Santos (2007), using the analogy of the barcode to express her place in the world, the objectification of her identity, and the sense of disempowerment she senses from it. At the same time she critiques the structures that enforce the barcode and her message is received across the globe. I would even say that the barcode represents a commodification of her embodied self as brown, Muslim and woman. Her position 'on the other side of the line' has been used for political gain as expressed through refugee and immigration policy and Western foreign policy.

Through this work she draws attention to the two sides of the abyssal thinking line, making the invisible, visible. 'What used to be unequivocally this side of the line', explains Santos, 'is now a messy territory cut through by a meandering abyssal line' (2007, p. 7). Shamsia uses English to express her views about her place in the world when she asks,

'why am I being humiliated for my identity?'. In the chapters that follow, the artist participants, like Shamsia, often direct their messages to fellow Afghans, but they also reach across the abyssal line, expressing an awareness of their situation in a global context, and transgressing into 'this side of the line'.

Research design:

A hermeneutic phenomenological research design centres the subject, and acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher. It is through this method that I have been best able to centre the perspectives I drew from the empirical work.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology
Phenomenology's focus on 'lived experience' enquires as to how an experience was or is like for a person (van Manen 2017a). As van Manen (2017b) captures, 'any ordinary lived experience tends to become quite extraordinary when we lift it up from our daily existence and hold it with our phenomenological gaze' (p. 812). For hermeneutic phenomenology, description is a form of interpretation (Laverty 2003, Kafle 2011). In applying this approach, I have attempted to understand the experience of artists from multiple angles – by visiting Kabul, by keeping track of their online presence, through the conversations I had with them and through formal interviews.

I approach the artistic praxis in Kabul as the phenomenon to be studied with an 'attentiveness to particularity'. I am consciously aware of my role as the researcher and how my subject position may act as a variable (Barnacle 2001, p. vi). Through my treatment of *Kabuli* art as the focus, the phenomenon, and by extension the artists that produce the work, I get as close as possible to the worldview of the artists and thus to the cultural context to which they respond. The artists and their practice represent '...the irreducible difference of the other' which I aim to better understand through sincere conversational curiosity and interpretation (Barnacle 2001, p. v).

The self in hermeneutic phenomenology
Hermeneutic phenomenology's ontological focus accepts the multiplicity of realities which are shaped by the historicity and positionality of the person. The subject of research is approached by the researcher holistically as an encounter. The researcher's goal is to understand the event or phenomenon through the multiple layers it possesses. As Sharkey (2001) explains,

> The hermeneutic task is presented as one where the meaning of the text opens up in an encounter that is best described... as contextual, playful, and dialogical. Researchers who engage in hermeneutic phenomenology take these insights seriously and seek to enter the middle space [between text and interpreter] that is opened up in dialogical and playful engagement with the object of the research interest. (p. 24)

My interest in the situational interaction between *Kabuli* artists and their contexts, incorporates acknowledgement of my own encounter with them as I 'attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories' (Kafle 2011, p. 186). Rather than seek objectivity and detachment, as in existential phenomenology, this approach embraces subjective experiences as an avenue into 'underlying structures or essences in that experience' (Sharkey 2001, p. 19). In place of describing these experiences in their objective reality, hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the multiplicity of realities which vary not in realness but in the extent to which they have been understood.

In line with hermeneutic methodology, my own reflexivity has helped to inform the interpretive process of understanding. The hermeneutic approach calls on the researcher to 'give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experiences relates to the issues being researched' (Laverty 2003, p. 28), rather than bracket the historicality of my interpretations, as in phenomenology. I include some of these subjective positions throughout the thesis. As Sharkey explains, rather than jettison the researcher's prior understanding and experiences, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to test them through 'genuine engagement' defined as 'open to the possibility that "something else might be the case". The implication for research is that the researcher must always remain open to having his or her current understandings confirmed or varied by what arises as the research unfolds' (p. 17). An awareness of my own subjectivity, I hope, enriches the work and I invite 'active reading' of the analysis I present, the empirical data and my own subjective position (Fiske in Louw 2001, p. 208).

The unavoidable perspective of the knower in attaining the qualities of the object, which they seek to know, and the fragmentary understanding that this implies is key to hermeneutic phenomenology. In employing 'thickened' language, hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to 'break through taken-for-granted meanings in everyday life', and the reader thus encounters the subject matter through a fresh perspective (Sharkey

2001, p. 18). The approach is therefore in line with the theoretical framework of decolonial studies.

Phenomenology's openness to Southern epistemologies

I found in hermeneutic phenomenology a methodology that embraced the multiplicity of realities that was in line with the Southern theory approach explored in Chapter 1. Chakrabarty (2008) describes the hermeneutic tradition as an approach that, 'produces a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds. It produces what may be called "affective histories" [which] finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life' (p. 18). Furthermore, the insistence in hermeneutic phenomenology for acknowledging historicality creates space for the researcher to see the phenomenon through its colonial history or the researchers own projections of dominant tropes. The methodology insists on the participant leading the direction of the interview, even if they fall outside of the researcher's intent (Laverty 2003, p. 30).

The question of the researcher's relationship to their participants and the voices which this research seeks to elevate is always pertinent. Decolonising methodologies ask the researcher to be accountable to the communities they work with, rather than a reverence for distance between researcher and researched. This sentiment echoes hermeneutic phenomenology's refutation of 'bracketing'[17] and 'reduction'[18] (as in Husserlian phenomenology) and 'objectivism'. This methodology is cognizant of who conducts the research. Throughout the work here, I adopt many of the positions held by the decolonial methodologies perspective, particularly my argument that counter-narratives that challenge, dismantle and complicate dominant perspectives about the South must be lifted, including in academia. Consequently, my application of hermeneutic phenomenology has been influenced by decolonial perspectives.

However, I feel to truly categorise this work as reflective of decolonial methodologies would require deeper collaboration between the *Kabuli* arts community I seek to understand as echoes of my own heritage, and my own embeddedness in the world that has educated me. I acknowledge my distance from my roots, even as I seek to uncover them. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), in the opening lines of the forward to her book, *Decolonising methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, writes, 'This book explores

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[17] Of researcher's historicality

[18] Researcher's ascension above their own biases and expectations to reach the core primal phenomenality of experience

the intersection of two powerful worlds, the world of indigenous peoples and the world of research. They are two important worlds for me: I move within them; in one sense I was born into one and educated into the other' (p. 19). Smith goes on to highlight the decolonial methodology's tendency to favour the conceptualisation of ideas over hard and fast methods of obtaining data. My intent has been to think critically about assumptions which weigh upon words like 'Afghan woman', which have long lost their descriptive meaning and are now weighed down with neo-colonial assumptions. Through art, I seek to bring out the human experience of these groups. I show that through art, artists are reaching into their own immediate communities and beyond. The significance of this needs to be recognised for reconceptualising gender, offering counter-narratives, and reclamation of space, both physically and conceptually.

Method:

Preparation and recruitment

My analysis is informed by three sources, chronologically, they are: participant social media posts (in the public domain), observations from my trip to Kabul, and interviews I conducted upon my return. The extent to which they informed my analysis are in reverse order. I depended most heavily on interview responses, the questions of which were informed by my experience of Kabul. Where required, I sought special permission to use images from social media posts. Nevertheless, interactions over social media helped me to further contextualise and understand the intentions of the artists before and after interview. My engagement with artists' posts first ignited my curiosity about them.

With a family heritage steeped in art appreciation and with artists in my own family tree, I was unsurprisingly drawn to artists in Kabul. I had followed various artists operating from Kabul through social media and online news media. These were the potential research participants I contacted first. I recognise that this would necessarily mean that a particular younger demographic adept at engaging social media would be favoured over other groups. Indeed, this helped shape my research focus around young *Kabuli* artists. My first exposure was to two female graffiti artists, Shamsia Hassani and Malina Suliman. Unfortunately, at the time of fieldwork, Malina had left Kabul and was not included in this research. Shamsia, however, was still Kabul residing. She was under great demand and reaching her initially proved challenging.

My first conversation was with Travis Beard, the founder of Combat Communications in Kabul. This consultation was conducted in the field work and data gathering preparation phase, following formal ethics approval. My searches online showed that he had been active in the art scene in Kabul. When I emailed him for an interview, assuming he was Afghan, he mentioned that he was on his way back to Sydney and that we could meet in person. We met for a chat and he helped me prepare for the context I was venturing into. An Australian national, Beard had spent seven years in Kabul working in the music scene and was able to offer some insights. His advice included dress codes and safety precautions. He was also able to vouch for me with high profile artists who I had had no success in reaching. Following an introduction by Beard, they were more open to speaking with me.

I also sought the advice of Professor William Maley who travels to Afghanistan regularly. Professor Maley connected me with people in the country who might be of help should I need it while I was there. These initial consultations with Beard and Professor Maley and the in-country contacts they offered informed some of my preparations. I also sought the advice of Dr Ahmad Sarmast, Director of the Afghan National Institute of Music who later became a research participant. Sarmast's advice further informed my preparations for Kabul and also eased some of the safety concerns I had about the trip.

I found that many potential participants were more responsive on social media than email alone. My recruitment process was opportunistic, and I also employed snowball sampling. I asked all participants if they knew of others who might like to speak to me and also agreed to as many interviews as I could fit in the time I had scheduled. Many generously offered me further contacts to interview and most of my participants were found through this process. Time permitting, I could have had a larger number of interviews but due to candidature time constraints I commenced the transcription process, ending the interview phase. This research incorporates the responses of sixteen artists.

In participant selection, I sought interviews with people who had a lived experience of cultural production in Kabul. I wanted a broad range of ways that cultural production may manifest in this context and while I started with a view to interview young women, I soon broadened this to men as it became apparent that each did not exist independently of the other in the Kabul art scene. I had a diverse range of participants and reached a point of saturation whereby further interviews were no longer yielding significantly new perspectives. Indeed, I restricted the transcripts I used for analysis to 16 out of 26 as these

captured the breadth of viewpoints. This process of participant selection is in line with the hermeneutic phenomenology methodology, however time constraints played a role. The ten I selected to be excluded were due to demographic and perspective overlaps with interviews I had already transcribed. In one instance, the young woman I was speaking to displayed unease with the interview process and I ended the interview early with sensitivity and respect. In a second instance, the interviewee's retelling of an experience which was unrelated to her artistic work took up the duration of the time she had dedicated. A third artist was no longer Kabul residing.

Kabul

I selected Kabul as the research site for pragmatic reasons. Access, safety concerns and my exposure to the works coming from the capital contributed to that decision. Other areas of Afghanistan may well be doing art, but Kabul was within reach.

Given the security situation in Afghanistan, and Kabul in particular, I was not able to secure permission to conduct fieldwork in country. Fortunately, I was able to meet with artists informally during a holiday I took late in 2017. I met with several prospective participants socially and this helped to build rapport, trust, and support for my study and eventually to secure formal consent to be interviewed. My last trip to Afghanistan had been to Herat in 2004, the place of my birth. The changes in the country since then would not be captured by this distant experience, nor would a series of interviews conducted from Australia. Interviews were later conducted from Sydney via Skype or Facebook Messenger following this trip. Having now completed the interviews, I can say that the trip played a pivotal role in building rapport, offering context, and framing questions.

I spent three weeks in Kabul. In preparation for the ethics application, I had already reached out to many of the participants so they were happy to accommodate a meeting with me while I was there. As indicated above, I did not conduct research work while I was there, and I was clear about relaying this to participants too. The experience, albeit short, still helped to shape my questions and offered a good starting point for most interviews. I was able, for example, to ask for their thoughts on observations I had made and I was able to understand references to Kabul that interviewees made in their interview responses. I was also able to leverage my own experience as ice breakers at the beginning or to anchor questions. During my time in Kabul, I kept a journal of thoughts and observations, noting down experiences that surprised me and tried to articulate the assumptions which I had carried with me that led to the surprise. This is a process I have a habit of doing in any

travel I have done. I would later return to these written entries, particularly in preparation for each interview, which offered me a 'more precise sense' of what I was attempting to achieve (van Manen 1990, p. 64).

Regrettably I was unable to spend enough time in Kabul to constitute an immersive experience of the sort required in grounded theory or ethnography, particularly given that I was not to conduct research there. However, I have tried to remain true to the context I seek to understand as much as possible, scaling the pages of interviews in lieu of the pavements of Kabul.

The interviews

Prior to interview, all participants were sent information sheet and consent form in Dari. Given that the subject matter was mostly cultural production, and the questions designed to fit their medium of practice (music, art, poetry), the participants did not experience any difficulty responding. Only in one case did the interviewee request not to be recorded for a short component of the interview. This person wanted to elaborate on some experiences in their personal life. It reflected to me the comfort they felt speaking to me, even if they wanted it off the record. I complied with the request and have not used unrecorded segments in the research.

I focused on interviews with young women but kept my scope open to men who I came across through the snowball sampling process. Given the challenges with infrastructure, distance, and connectivity, I acquired verbal consent to conduct the interviews. This verbal consent was recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted through Skype and Facebook Messenger often without video given the weak connections. With any participants I had not met, I tried to at least begin with video so as to help both of us build some degree of comfort in the setting.

I conducted all participant interviews in Dari except eight which were in English. I sought expert help for particular words during the transcription phase. Interviews averaged 60 minutes, but several were almost two hours. The interviews were semi structured as I wanted the interaction to be conversational and, 'within the context of a relationship' of equals (Laverty 2003, p. 29), an employment of non-extractivist methodologies. I followed tangents allowing them to run their course and found that often the subject matter would return to my original question organically. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, including notes of laughter, where I detected nuances such as sarcasm, frustration, or pauses.

I asked each participant if they wished for their names to be released and while some agreed, I told them that the default position would be to conceal identifying details. Therefore, I have de-identified participants throughout the thesis. One exception was for participants with public profiles, such as Shamsia Hassani and Artlords co-founders Kabir and Omaid. De-identification of them would prove futile given their presence in the public sphere through social media and television. Only in the section on religion in Chapter seven have I concealed all participants' identifiers for safety reasons.

My interview process was iterative such that while I began with a series of questions, I soon amended the questions to respond to themes which emerged repetitively, such as Islam, identity, family, art practice, audience, social media, future hopes, history. This gave me the flexibility to present the question in a way which best suited the participant. I revisited how I asked the questions and which questions I asked with each interview. It was an important part of centring the participant in the conversation so that the interview process was co-created and reflected a 'process of continuous meaning making' (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009, p. 77). One example was the handling of questions around religion. I was cautious about probing into this subject matter as this is a contentious topic in the Afghan context and I was aware that some did not want to speak about it.

Table 1 below is a list of participants and some demographic information about them and their affiliations. In most instances I use pseudonyms. Where I use real names, I do so because their affiliations and public profiles would reveal their identities anyway or because individuals have insisted. In these cases, participants granted permission to use real names.

Name	Gender	Age in 2019	Affiliation and position	Medium
Ahmad Sarmast*	Male	56	Afghanistan Institute of Music (ANIM) – Founder and Director	Music
Shahnaz	Female	23	Ferooz Koh (FK)/Turquoise Mountain - Student	Visual art
Kabir*	Male	35^	ArtLords – Co-founder	Wall art
Omaid*	Male	33	ArtLords – Co-Founder	Wall art
Nasrin	Female	22	ANIM – Student	Music
Naheed	Female	25^	Berang arts – founding member	Contemporary art
Noorjahan*	Female	27	Free Women Writers (FWW) – Founder	Writer, poet
Rohina*	Female	27^	FWW – Contributor	Writer
Shireen	Female	39	FWW – Contributor	Writer and poet
Homaira*	Female	24	Unaffiliated	Visual artists, contemporary art, installation
Jahan*	Female	25-30^	Berang arts – founding member	Visual arts – painting
Mohammad*	Male	30-35^	Unaffiliated	Film maker, stop motion
Parwez	Male	35^	Unaffiliated	Calligrapher
Sahar*	Female	23	FWW – Contributor	Writer and activist. Sahar is also a documentary film maker
Sharifa	Female	32	Government	Government Advisor
Shamsia*	Female	31	Berang Arts – Founding member	Wall art and graffiti

Table 1. Table of participants used in this study (indicates real names, ^ indicates approximate ages)*

Analysis

Like the data collection, I employed an iterative approach to data analysis too. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) point out that the iterative process is 'not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process, [and] is key to sparking insight and developing meaning' (p. 77). Inherent in this iterative analysis process is the presence of the researcher's subjectivity and how it applies to the research at hand (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009, p. 78). My approach to analysing the transcripts also employed a reflexive inductive process through which themes emerged from the data which I acknowledged would be shaped by my own subjectivity. I advocate, through this inductive approach, for art's role in Kabul as an avenue for creating change and exploring complexity. Each chapter presents a theme and employs a range of secondary research and established theory to help understand the empirical findings. In essence, and in keeping the participants central to the analysis, the analysis is grounded in the empirical work.

While I read the interview transcripts, I also considered recent socio-political events. As will become further apparent, the legacy of war continues to form a foundation of artists' world views. By asking artists about their art practice and the intentions behind it, artists gave me insights into these world views and my analysis is shaped by my theorising with them, through their transcripts against the backdrop of war. Barone and Eisner (2012) articulate a move away from seeking final outcomes, closure, or intentions to diminish, if only by a small degree, uncertainty. Rather, they refer to an approach that fosters uncertainty, 'to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view' (p. 16). I have also sought to disrupt common conceptions of Afghans as other, offer alternative perspectives, and complicate the common sense. In this way, my intentions in this research and the intentions of the *Kabuli* artists, through their art practice, align. As Scott (1990) explains, 'The recovery of the nonhegemonic voices and practices of subject peoples requires, I believe, a fundamentally different form of analysis than the analysis of elites, owing to the constraints under which they are produced' (p. 19). I hope to contribute to a 'fundamentally different form of analysis' that Scott refers to.

Ethics

My analysis is coloured by the belief that despite depictions of Afghans as violent or victim, the participants of this research represent vibrancy and commitment to building a peaceful society. At its heart, this thesis reflects a political work. At its core, and in keeping with a critical theory approach, this thesis approaches knowledge as produced and shaped by hegemony and I accept that I have taken a position partial to amplifying marginalised perspectives.

I closely followed formal university ethics processes which required clear articulation of risk factors and contingencies, yet I approached the question of ethics as beyond one of compliance, but one of a commitment to human relationships. It was important for me to meet with potential participants first, build sincere rapport and trust, and stay in touch.

As with data collection and analysis, I employed iterative consent (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). This process accepts that it is not always enough, particularly when working with vulnerable groups, to obtain one-time single blanket written or verbal consent. Indeed, the formality of this process created a cleavage between researcher and participant (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway 2007, p. 306). The matter of consent for me is an ongoing conversation with participants who, as capable and self-aware

individuals, can advise me of their wishes. This is a 'reciprocal research' and is 'based on the notion of exchange' (Hugman, Pittaway and Bartolomei 2011, p. 1279). I offered participants the option to change their mind or withdraw consent, which meant the consent process was embedded in the relationship. For example, though I had formal 'informed consent' to use interview material for publications and research, I contacted participants who were included in two recent journal articles and shared the articles with participants before submitting to the journal editors. Further, I also continue to consider the changing security situation in the country and consider the artists' changing worldviews or approaches. The formal university ethics processes have institutional risk factors embedded, and I held these, alongside the interests of participants, in mind throughout this project.

Throughout the data collection, transcription, and analysis phases, and even as I wrote the final lines of this thesis, I have asked myself: How do I work in favour of acknowledging Southern voices as equally valid, even as I belong to an institution in the North with research subjects from Kabul?

PART ONE:

Enchantment and encounter

Chapter Three:

Why Art

In 2004 I visited Herat, Afghanistan, for the first time since my family had fled in 1982 when I was 11 months old. My mother and I stayed at her family home, or what was left of it. Living there were my grandmother, my uncle and his family, and my widowed aunt, still nursing a broken heart from her recent loss. Like the aged body of my grandmother, now paralysed on one side, the neglected art room of her late husband, Ustad Mohammad Mashal, sat in the front of the house. It was separate from the main building, exhausted and withered from decades of war. I crawled through a gap between wooden boards that even termites had abandoned, and which unsuccessfully attempted to seal the room. Dried and hardened paint brushes and dust filled bench tops were all that remained of this once celebrated artist and poet. My grandfather. The spirit of his creativity lingered in that tiny room where he had spent hours putting his visions to paper or canvas, or in the garden where fruit trees and flowering plants, meticulously arranged, became the colours with which he created his art.

Many years later, seated at a conference in Toronto, Canada, a presenter's slides include a graph depicting a global creativity index. It is intended to be a measure of the creativity of a country. I am not sure how this index comes about and when I enquire, he is unable to clarify its parameters. There on the bottom, with one of the lowest creativity index scores, I see Afghanistan.

Back in Herat, behind an old blanket pretending to be a curtain, among old heaters wrapped in plastic, moth eaten clothes and various paraphernalia, like echoes of another time, I find some of my grandfather's masterpieces: a vase with delicate inscription, canvases of landscapes, miniature drawings with Quranic inscriptions that fill the borders in delicate gold paint. I wonder if that conference presenter's creativity index considered the richness of this history and the echo of the work which still reverberates through that little room and its memories.

Introduction

It can certainly be argued that imagination rather than reason is the main faculty of human interaction with the world, an imagination expressed in myriad forms, many of them artistic...

(Clammer 2015, p. 8)

This chapter is about affect, most significantly its symbolic partnership with cultural products, context, and the spectator. In essence, it focuses on a single moment - the encounter in the first instance, between artefact and audience. Pierre Bourdieu's provocation that 'sociology and art make an odd couple' signals to that part of experiencing art that defies measure and mathematics (cited in Zolberg 1990, p. 1). 'Affect is a dimension of experience', explain Osborne and Tanner (2007), 'not easily amenable to analysis in terms internal to linguistics or iconography' (p. 9). Indeed, a purely positivist approach to such things as the encounter with art will time again fall short of capturing the moment of enchantment and the affective bridges that it crafts. As Clammer suggests above, our encounter with the world in meaningful and persisting ways employs the world of creativity. Suzanne Lacy's (1996) focus on contemporary public art offers the affirmation that we turn to artists to help us work through the complexities of our world rings true and foregrounds the essence of this chapter too. She explains, 'When there is no quick fix for some of our most pressing social problems, there may be only our ability to feel and witness the reality taking place around us. This empathy is a service that artists offer to the world' (p. 174-175). The artist's role in facilitating the felt moment is an affective bridge, a level of empathy between the viewer and the artist through the artwork.

Where war has ravaged both the physical world and the intangible world (such as cultural heritage and social cohesion), any instance in which a people can stop and feel (and learn) is a moment worth nurturing. The moment belongs at the nexus of the artwork and its observer without the externality of considered critique or structured argument often applied to art. That very first instance of being moved by art - a piece of music or image or poem - resembles a whisper in the mind as it is received, not a forceful and rationalised declaration or argument. The moment is felt and experienced sensually.

I do not wish to reduce art in Kabul as means to a set of social or policy outcomes (Putland 2008). Art has intrinsic value, independent of any instrumental, means-to-an-end quality.

Even so, this need not cast art out of its social and cultural role. As Hawke (2001) articulates,

> Before art became an industry manufacturing commodities or an economic development strategy, before it was used as a band-aid to disguise social inequity, before it became a badge of superiority, before it became a decorative embellishment, it was (and remains) the paramount symbolic language through which shifting meanings are presented. (p. 23)

Art's more complex role for self, for society, and for each in dialogue remains difficult to explain. As an artefact in the world, art can enchant or entice, offer meaning, nuance, and alterity.

I argue that art ruptures the habitus through encounter with its audience. It is where alterity breaks through. I discuss the discursive spaces which art creates within Kabul in the final chapter, but it is important to note that it is within those spaces, during the affective reach of a piece of art or music, that the viewer is most open. *Kabuli* art, rooted in context, navigates social, cultural, and political complexities. To the passer-by or the audience, it can abduct the senses and the imagination, with art's affective reach. The source of art can come from classical or contemporary, community or gallery, but the moment it inspires will circumvent the rational mind and reach inward.

I am fortunate enough to experience the affective reach of artistic traditions from multiple cultures, through the biculturality of my life, rich with the textures of the refugee experience, Dari language, music and poetry, omitted from the high art world of Shakespeare, Monet, and Turandot. Nor was I exposed to the elite artistic pallets of such contemporary art and the gallery spaces that nurtured sensibilities different to mine. The inherent classism of 'high' art is critiqued in Dan Gilroy's 2019 art-world satire *Velvet Buzzsaw* in which the contemporary art world is critiqued for its exclusionism. With a tongue-in-cheek use of horror, the exaggerated, and somewhat caricatured artistic inclinations of the characters are depicted through extreme vanity. Consumed in their immediate lives within the exclusive and prestigious art world, they fail to see the reality of their situation, depicted by the murderous intentions of a series of haunted paintings. The film offers scenes in which a garbage heap belonging to a prominent artist is mistaken for installation art or the bloodied body of a main character strewn below an expensive shiny art piece on a spotless white gallery floor is also mistaken for art by a bus load of

school children. Gilroy's depiction highlights both the complexity of defining art and the art world elite who decide its parameters.

Art theory in the North tends to operate within well-defined Northern-centric definitions and establishments. There is a deficit in Northern categorisations of art beyond museum pieces or anthropological tools, to account for art and aesthetics from places like Kabul (Crehan 2011, p. 22). This deficit reflects the absence of Southern epistemologies, and experiences, from the centre. As Berger et al. (1972) explains, 'Every image embodies a way of seeing' (p. 10). *Kabuli* art embodies the *Kabuli* experience, whether hope, fear, or aesthetic expression.

The grassroots arts projects here illustrate the employment of the aesthetic encounter for political purposes. Specifically, Kabul based artists use cultural products, such as art and music, to contribute to efforts to create community as well as a platform to express their own subjectivities. With a view to offering the nuanced and considered voices of Kabul's artists, I look at art as the enchanter with its audience. Art's inherent potential for political use (Bradley 2007) and how it lends itself to be a tool for social change will prove to wield a power of its own, what Kabir, co-founder of ArtLords, a group doing street art in Kabul, termed art's 'soft power' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). Whereas language is a cognitive process, art reception employs the pre-cognition of the viewer in a felt non-linguistic moment. Social anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998) calls this 'abduction' which, he argues, 'is useful in that it functions to set bounds to linguistic semiosis proper, so that we cease to be tempted to apply linguistic models where they do not apply, while remaining free to posit inferences of a non-linguistic kind' (p. 15).

Enchantment and modernity

Kabuli art reaches out and touches its audiences by circumventing cognitive processes, 'as an alternative, non-verbal medium for symbolic communication' (Alexander in de la Fuente 2010, p. 8). This is not unique to *Kabuli* art, but in Kabul it offers respite amidst chaos, during which the learning self is activated prior to the embodied self's awareness of it. Poet and mixed-media installation artist Homaira explains:

> Art impacts society a lot, because we have different languages…but the visual language is much more impactful…. Therefore, drawing, the arts, it is the *language of sight*, it's something that you see, *you feel it*…That's why in my opinion, this

drawing and arts impacts on society, on culture, it impacts on everything. (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018)

Street artist Shamsia beautifully articulates the touch of art as

...this natural mind that before you say this is called art, a person's soul is drawn to it. Want it or not, it is drawn to it. That's why, in life, in everyone's life, there is art... (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Jahan, a visual artist also told me, 'My work is always about addressing the non-spoken issues that are experienced and felt in their surroundings' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). Their comments allude to art's capacity to reach inward, a Dionysian moment before the rational mind begins to form opinion, thought or meaning. They point toward an innate trigger to respond to art, to feel it and experience the moment of enchantment, and they suggest the inevitability of the sensual encounter with art. Like Shamsia, Naheed also refers to the felt touch of art, 'The work that an artist does, I don't think other fields have the same impact because art has to do with feelings, it has a very deep effect' (participant interview, 12 May 2018). Certainly, the moment is followed by words, thoughts, and rationalisations, but, as Berger et al.'s (1972) opening lines express, 'seeing comes before words' (p. 7). Ellsworth's (2005) reference to the art encounter as 'a *nonlinguistic* event', is what she explains as 'the experience of knowledge and self as simultaneously in the making [which] can even be said to *preexist cognition*' (p. 2, my emphasis). It is, in Homaira's terms above, a 'language of sight'. This moment is enchantment: an unintended, untamed, and primal encounter. I focus on the instance of the encounter - an ephemeral moment of affect as a bridge into a world of possibility.

The moment before cognition is defined by jan jagodzinski (2014)[19] as 'the 0.3 seconds of presence that are not registered consciously. It is here that the asignification and asemiotic processes become political, ethical, and pedagogical questions' (p. 70). The aporetic space, created by the encounter with art, cleaves open the mind to possibilities.[20] While this can occur through love, nature, or any number of stimuli, here it is facilitated through art's enchantment of the viewer. Though enchantment can result from a reverence of the artists' abilities, signifying a gap in capability between the viewer and the producer, I

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[19] jan jagodzinski's name is lowercase
[20] In chapter eight, I define aporetic space as a productive space between knowing and not knowing. In Khan and Hare (2004) aporia is used as the Derridean 'non-road', referring to a difficult choice (p. 60).

employ enchantment as the capture of the imagination. Enchantment need not possess any definitional qualities. What constitutes artwork is not necessarily that which enchants. Intention to be art and its enchantment are detached. Art as a bridge between the material world and the heart, or affect, is enchantment or affective bridge. The enchantment of the observer is art's reaching out to the world and is unrelated to the artist's technical virtuosity. The drawing by a child of their father, for example, can elicit a pre-cognitive moment, an enchantment, of the father to the work, independently of the child's artistic talent.

To require any level of advanced technique, such as art appraisal, would need cognition. Rather, enchantment requires sentience enough to feel, but the moment needs no more. The language of the felt moment leaves the observer open to possibility. As Hein (1996) explains, artists have, 'the ability to speak in a rich variety of languages – verbal, visual, conceptual, sensual, serious, humorous, figurative, and rational. Sometimes and somehow, they break through ordinary expectation and cause people to venture upon new perspectives' (p. 5). Enchantment is art *reaching out*, though it does not intend to dominate or master the world. It is us, as observers in the world, that are drawn to it (Curry 1999, 2012).[21]

Naheed, a visual artist, and co-founder of Berang Arts[22], a Kabul based artists' collective, refers to art's ability to take the viewer into another world, one of creativity and imagination:

> In my opinion, one of the characteristics that art has is that it has a great effect, … and through a very beautiful way… and through a deep way it can be said, which results in people being forced into thinking, and results in questioning… and when they form a relationship with an artwork, they enter a world they had not thought of before, they had not experienced it before. (participant interview, 12 May 2018)

Naheed suggests that art has the potential to broaden the range of possibility as perceived by the viewer and to inject alterity into that experience. Curry (1999) makes the distinction between primary and secondary worlds. It is in the primary world in which norms

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[21] While Curry (2012, 1999) refers to 'magic' as the intentional working upon the world to change it, the intentional dazzling of magic, as in marketing, he calls 'glamour'.

[22] Berang Arts maintain a Facebook page through which they distribute members' works and provide information about events and initiatives. (date accessed: 28 May 2020, https://www.facebook.com/BerangArts/)

(discussed later) apply, woven like threads into the fabric of our everyday. The secondary world is where one enters into the moment of wonderment, which Naheed refers to, experienced through enchantment. *Kabuli* artists operate in a context where peace is temporary and the challenges to cultural cohesion are the products of distant and recent wars. Indeed, it is 'an essential goal of art', explains Curry (1999, p. 403), to elicit wonderment and by extension, to enchant us. War, through its demand for vigilance and incitement of fear, insists that we remain in the primary world. Through art, a secondary world becomes possible, even amidst the chaos. Enchantment's lure into the secondary world marks a suspension of the will to question and to disbelieve, a position that sees it both part of and antonymous to modernity.

The modernity I refer to is a rationale or outlook which centres the individual, values capital and tacitly endorses (neo)colonialist aspirations, a legacy of the historical period following European Enlightenment. The hyperrationalism of modernity has seen the devaluation of affect, an attribute which is associated with the colonised and not the coloniser. Indeed, the distinction between rational, male, and white as contrasted against emotional, female, and non-white persists to this day and continues to form the basis for neo-colonialism. Affect's resistance to quantification and reason, and the world of possibility that it offers, offers alterity to modernity. By problematising our embrace of modernity at the expense of enchantment, especially since it is in wonder that we are open, compassionate, and humbled, we can break out of, 'the attitude of "We've seen it all"' (Curry 1999, p. 407). Though this gives purpose to enchantment, it does not limit it to its instrumentality alone.[23]

I identify enchantment in the context of art to have inherent values of its own (Curry 2012), rather than an instrumental approach that sees enchantment for its functionality or a means to some end. By being in society, touched by society, and challenging and shaping society in return, art is inherently social, both in its production and reception. Adorno (1997) argues that art is a vehicle of ideology because,

> ...art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it

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[23] Weberian disenchantment is positioned to refer to the loss of religion, or belief, in a secularised modern world which positions enchantment to refer to religion/belief. This reference to enchantment is not my intention here, nor do I intend to present a critique of secularism in modern secularised societies.

criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. (p. 225-226)

Adorno's conception of autonomous art refers to the artist as unbound by any direct purpose and, freed from any social function, their art is an end in itself. Adorno's (1997) aesthetic theory stems from the reconciliation of art's functionlessness (p. 227) as its function.

Art's unshackling from the highly regimented social systems of post 18th Century Europe also reflects the artistic freedoms that *Kabuli* artists are experiencing following civil war and the Taliban regime. This is not to suggest that there is a linear evolutionary process to art's reception that Europe leads and the South follows. Rather I offer a parallel between parts of the world otherwise thought to be separated by time and place. In doing so, I challenge the linear model of development. Filmmaker Mohammad reflects on how much Kabul society's focus has changed in the last few years to be more accommodating to arts:[24]

I mean the type of conversations you would be able to have with a friend and that conversation and the way you would have it is determined by larger factors that create that space. So, you know, you wouldn't be able to have the opportunity to talk about movies if you lived here in 1996. As a young person you probably thought about just food. And even if food wasn't an issue you probably cared about the length of your beard, if you were a man. (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018)

Mohammad refers to the imposition of context into art's place in society, indicating that during the Taliban regime you might be worried about food or length of your beard. The space to have conversations about cultural products, for Mohammad, signifies a positive step.

Though I argue that art's enchantment both facilitates and signifies social change, this too is intended to highlight further its value as intrinsic to itself. Even the artist knows that

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[24] Even in so far as Adorno argues that autonomous art and its commodification are simultaneous processes, artists in Kabul too express a desire to actively create and nurture a market for it, as Omaid explains, 'at the moment I'm encouraging a lot of businesses to buy artworks. All of them are buying these Pakistani or Chinese... art in their offices and home, so now I'm encouraging them to buy Afghani paintings, murals, and such like that. I think that's changing. The moment we create an economy for art, it will really change the whole narrative. That's one of the aims of ArtLords. We have been pushing for this. We have provided jobs for artists. We have really encouraged a lot of Afghan businessmen to buy art. Some of them have done it, and encouraged others to do so. This is one of the ways you can really change the arts scene' (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018).

they cannot simulate the moment of enchantment (Curry 2012), but it is what they seek to achieve. Shamsia expresses this understanding when she says, 'even if they don't know the meaning of my work, at least they have a feeling because of it' (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018). The aesthetic experience is a non-utilitarian moment which binds cognitive perception with the sensual, a moment 'to which we surrender' (Junker and Balling 2016, p. 240), and during which we are enchanted.

Distancing from Cartesian duality deconstructs dichotomies such as high and low art, bodily pleasure and rational thought, and accounts for the dynamism of art as experiential. To feel, to be touched by the artefact, and to make meaning, and to project back one's own understanding of the artefact, occurs within the singularity of the self. 'In other words, we feel beauty, attraction, or allure not merely as affect or as intellection – we feel them materially as processes, as events of the body' (Ellsworth 2005, p. 25). Rather than simple binaries of body and spirit, to feel engages the body as much as the soul.

The enchantment of art is both primal and instinctual and it is these innate qualities in us that can circumvent cognitive functions to reach into the heart. Tyng et.al's (2017) study into the influences of emotion on learning and memory express that, 'emotion modulates virtually every aspect of cognition' (p. 1). The binarity of affect and reason is far more complex. By challenging the binary, we challenge the assumption that societies evolve linearly from being 'moved by the blind force of custom...under the burden of charms, spells and prodigies and resistant to change' (Mbembe 2001, p. 4) to societies of rationality and progress, like those of the colonial metropoles.

> What a certain rationality, claiming to be universal but in reality mired in the contingent and the particular, has never understood is that all human societies participate in a *complex* order, rich in unexpected turns, meanders, and changes of course, without this implying their necessary abolition in an absence of centre. (Mbembe 2001, p. 8, author's emphasis)

Modernity captures only a portion of how, as humans, we make meaning and experience the world. Affective impact is as primeval an attribute of reality as the material world. The two exist, entwined, together. Apollo, symbol of rationality, and Dionysus, symbol for emotion, were brothers after all.

Art allows for 'empathic participation' in the subjective reality of another. It is a medium through which alterity can be explored and where 'the affective domain...is a salient

dimension' (Barone and Eisner 2012, p. 9). For Kabir, art is a medium through which taboos can be addressed because of art's affective reach into what he calls the 'subconscious level' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). The circumvention of rational mind permits the circumvention of social norms and taboos.

In Kabul the enchantment of art, universally known, yet situationally experienced, is a moment that is almost escapist from the violence that consumes the primary world. Curry (1999) notes that 'while Enchantment is not itself an act of will intended to produce certain effects in the primary world, it may well have such effects indirectly' (p. 404). It is unique because within the Enchantment of the secondary, imagined, world, the potential for what could be 'outside' in the primary world is broadened. As Stein and Faigan (2015) argue, 'art has a value for its own sake', its significance lies in what it 'evokes about the human condition' (p. 71).

As reflective of modernism, rationalism[25] has achieved a primacy that comes at the expense of enchantment, and as Curry (1999) notes, if,

> this dominance is responsible for rapidly escalating and in some cases irreversible degradation in human, ecological and spiritual terms, then it follows that Enchantment has become uniquely precious and important as a resource for resistance and for the realisation of better alternatives. (p. 405)

The triumph of rationalism and reason, advantages the individual over the collective. Yet *Kabuli* artists' works of 'irreducibly personal' self-expression (Hein 1996, p. 1), are public invitations into the personal, to point at a commonality of experience, desire, and hope. Here the individual and the collective can be balanced through art. In an increasingly utilitarian world driven by commodification,[26] the audience is stirred into feeling through the encounter with art. To draw on Curry once more, 'here and there, if often of necessity,

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[25] Curry refers to rationalism as magic. I understand that it is common to find Enchantment and magic used interchangeably (such as the Weberian conceptualisation of Enchantment). Here, however, Curry's use of magic, the world of science, is used to refer to our acting upon the world, whereas Enchantment captures the world's acting upon us, such as through arts acting upon us, such as through art. Magic represents the quantifiable manipulation of the primary world and the totalising capture of the primary world by reason (Curry 1999). It is the measured acting upon the world to create an intended effect. This use of magic and Enchantment, primary and secondary worlds, is useful in representing different experiential moments. For magic to occur, a set of planned and predefined steps must take place in which something in the world is acted upon to cause an intended and measured effect. Magic is the absence of sensual abduction.

[26] Curry (1999) refers to our passing from rationality to rationalism and from science to scientism, a move he explains reflects 'the dubious and self-interested claims of scientific spokespersons to have transcended states of magical enchantment…and describe the world "as it actually is"' (p. 403).

secretly, Enchantment survives' (1999, p. 407). In Kabul, following war and conflict, the same distancing from affect, or enchantment, has occurred and it is matched by the blooming of art by an up and coming generation seeking to reclaim their world despite the dangers.

Through their works, artists insist on shaping their own identities, constructing their own narratives, and reminding us all of the necessity for imagination and creativity. They do so by blurring the boundaries of the self and the community and the body and the mind. Rohina, a writer with Free Women Writers (FWW), refers to the internal and external processes of experiencing art, articulating it as affecting the mind of the individual as well as the culture:

> Whether it is painting or writing, [it] has this value on human mind, or at least in our culture or the culture that I have experienced, is on our psychology, that it has some weight and it stays with the person. And this is my experience so I think the impact of arts or poetry is a, it's like that water on the stone…[after] thirty years or so it's very soft <laughing> and it takes time but it, it works. (participant interview, 20 Jan 2018)

Artists create spaces, or moments, through their art, which insist the presence of self within the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. Beyond the moment of enchantment, and as cognitive processes begin, the art continues to speak through affect. Through the noise of political and economic chaos, the next generation's aspirations for their lives and their country can create ripples with the affective power of art.

Death of the artist and art's agency

Despite the devaluation of affect as 'real life work', art continues to draw spectators and enthusiasts, whether popular culture or high art. As Heine (1996) puts it, 'We have turned to artists in moments of distress as we formerly turned to religion, and then science, for public enlightenment and private satisfaction' (p. 5). Leo Tolstoy's (1995 [1897]) assertion that art must be defined as anything that captures expressions otherwise unattainable, produced by a superior, creative person yet whose creation is accessible to all, speaks to its ability to captivate and bridge difference. It is the life that the artwork takes, independently of its creator, that I turn to next.

Art anthropologist Alfred Gell 1998 argues for an enchantment theory which diverges from the conceptualisation of enchantment offered above. Gell (1998) applies some level of admiration for the technical or imaginative expertise of an artwork. Appraisal implies some level of cognitive processing. Yet, enchantment here refers to the precognitive moment prior to appraisal. Gell additionally attributes definitional perimeters to art through the enchantment theory which, as Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini (2010) also explain, tends to broaden 'the notion of art to the point where it becomes (potentially) coextensive with everything that exists, [therefore] Gell tends to empty it of all meaning' (p. 136). As such, it is not Gell's enchantment theory that I wish to employ but his argument for art as social agent[27], or as extensions of their makers (Layton 2003).

Agency, for Gell (1998), is defined as being, 'attributable to those persons (and things…) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences' (p. 16). Gell's (1998) conceptualisation of volt sorcery, for example, helps to express how art may have agentic properties. Volt sorcery is, 'the practice of inflicting harm on others via their images' (p. 99). That is, harming an image representing an intended victim from a distance in place of harming the victim (Bowden 2004, p. 313). The art representing them thus has an agency of its own because it invokes an emotional response. Gell (1998) gives the example of suffragette, 'Slasher Mary', or Mary Richardson, who attacked the *Rokeby Venus* in 1914 on ideological grounds as a protest against the treatment of British political activist Emmeline Pankhurst. He calls this a reverse volt sorcery because 'the sufferings of the victim [Pankhurst] cause a change in the appearance of the representation [the Rokeby Venus]' (p. 64). Interestingly, Gell further points out that the Venus's heart was target of the deepest slash, 'Venus has been stabbed in the back – a very political way to die' (p. 64).

Given this definition, then, art's ability to enchant, though uncontrollable, and untameable, renders it agentic. As an index, the art-object steps in for the artist, as a secondary agent and the observer can infer the intentions of another (Gell 1998, p. 13). Through the art, we know that the artist was present, and it is this presence, actual or implied, that delivers a point of view of the artist, hence the secondary nature of the art-object's agency (Gell 1998). Artworks, therefore, 'enmeshed in a texture of social relationships' (Gell 1998, p. 17), offer the subjectivity of the artist. The connection between artists and audience has a profound influence on both, 'defining who people are to

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[27] "The immediate 'other' in a social relationship does not have to be another 'human being'" (Gell 1998, p. 17).

themselves and as part of a wider community; and in this sense, the "personal" often implicates the community' (McGrath and Brennan 2011, p. 348). Subjectivity, as a political stance delivers its message through affective reach and in the absence of the author (artist) of the work.

Barthes (1977) argued for the death of the author, explaining that 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (p. 146), later adding that 'to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (p. 147). He stipulated that writers and their literary creations ought not to affect the reception of a work, and that it is the reader that must make sense of the material to the exclusion of the author's intent. He levelled his critique on those who sanctioned an author's intent to colour their perceptions of a written piece.[28] Barthes' insistence of the exclusion of the author and the insertion of the reader in meaning making reflects Berger et al. (1972) who argued, 'our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing' (p. 10). In his later writing Barthes laments that the semiotics of non-textual art is even less accessible than the written piece and that one cannot attempt to systematise a way to set signified and signifier to a picture, adding, 'Semiology as a science has not managed to make inroads into art' (Barthes 1985, p. 149). What any audience makes of an artwork or textual artefact can be any number of interpretations or meanings. Nearly all participants indicated art's ability to reach beyond difference across all strokes of life. Shahnaz, for example, a student of the traditional miniature technique at Kabul's Turquoise Mountain art school, explains that her attraction to art as a communication medium comes from the fact that she can reach people who are not literate (participant interview, 26 Dec 2017).

Appropriating Barthes' severing of author/artist's intent from their art is a challenging proposition. Though empowering for the audience, in whose hands now rest the task of making meaning, we may ask how might the art of Kabul's artists have been received if they were not from Kabul, not women and/or not practicing in post-conflict (and often conflict) environments? The participants commonly place themselves in their contexts, such as Shamsia relaying the dangers inherent in her being present in the street, ArtLords' performative presence rallying volunteers, and Jahan, a visual artist and co-founder of

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[28] It should be noted that far from the author's subjective intent being omitted, there is an abundance of news articles online which highlight Shamsia and her being an Afghan woman producing graffiti in Afghanistan. Who she is often appears more interesting than the work she is producing. Examples from online media articles include Dierckx (2018), Frank (2016) and Furino (2016).

Berang arts, who asserts that, as a female artist, she is distinguished by her gender, rendering her and her work as falling outside of the norm:

> It goes back to our community issues, cultural issues, and our political issues. I believe the society has a great impact on an individual's spirit. We live in a society where we are faced with many problems and our art addresses these problems. (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018)

Their art is positioned in a Kabul that has seen decades of war, continues to struggle with insurgents and where women, in particular, have carried the brunt of gender discrimination over the years.

To what extent then can the author (read: artists) be dead in Afghanistan? The anonymous submissions to Free Women Writers would suggest that as Afghan women, they have self-omitted, through necessity, from their writing, rather than self-censor. Nevertheless, given that the site is set up for Afghan women to contribute their writing, as readers we still know that a woman and an Afghan has submitted this work, even as we do not know the individual. This challenges the death of the author, given that the message is both the language and the mind that produced it. Jahan:

> I wanted to give my message through my paintings. So, people who are on the other side of Afghan borders, could see that behind the destroyed and burnt walls of Afghanistan, *there is an Afghan woman who is an artist, and who has great thoughts.* (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018)

If the meaning of work is socially constructed rather than an ontological component of the work itself, then this would include the artist and the work in the case of Kabul. Even so, I would caution that too often 'Afghan women'[29] as victims are presented as spectacle, like objects performing otherwise mundane tasks that surprise the world. Nevertheless, the production of the work is a contextualised assessment of art's ability to create the political subject.

Art, I argue, is art-in-context. Berger et al. (1972) establish the importance of context using the example of a painting presented on television, 'The painting enters each viewers house...it enters the atmosphere of this family...it lends its meaning to their meaning' (p.

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[29] I have added quotation marks here to highlight the Afghan and the woman as a complex which has a meaning different to woman and Afghan on its own. The 'Afghan woman' complex has been the rallying cry of Western interventions which is elaborated on in chapter five, *Feminism as Praxis.*

19-20). Though Berger et al. refer to the situatedness of the work's reception, what the observer knows, experiences, and expects forms part of this situatedness. The interactions between the artist, the context and the audience are therefore interdependent and 'part of the art itself' (Caris and Cowell 2016, p. 468). Take, for example, figure 2 below, a photo of Shamsia creating an art piece on a broken wall in Kabul. Would the interpretation of the image below change with context? The knowledge that it is painted on a wall in a street in Kabul in an area called *Karte Seh* must shape the reception of this piece as a comment on insurgent bombings and not, say, traffic pollution. Papastergiadis (2014) explains, 'We receive the image through our sensory faculties but our sensory awareness of the image cannot exist on its own, it provokes and depends on a system for organising aesthetic expressions' (p. 12). The meaning making incorporates the context, beyond sensory awareness. Shamsia herself explains that when an event occurs, such as an insurgent attack, she sketches it and though posting it online receives much praise, Afghans who know of the context of her drawing understand it more, 'it's an ordinary sketch', she explains, 'and it has drawn so many people, that an artwork that I worked on for days didn't pull so many since it [the simple sketch] has given feelings to people, feelings that everyone had, that's why' (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018).

Figure 2. Shamsia working on a wall in an area called *Karte Seh* in Kabul (Hassani 2017). Reproduced with permission from Shamsia Hassani.

The audience's response to the work is shaped by the context in which it is found. The active engagement with meaning making through the encounter with art has been theorised by Jacque Rancière. In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Rancière articulates this potential to challenge 'the sensible', explaining that, 'every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification' (p. 49). For Rancière, the 'distribution of the sensible' refers to those in society who can be sensed, who are recognised, perceived and who have some form of political importance. In the art world, it is the sensible who define the perimeters of 'good' and 'bad' art, high and low art. Consequently, the distribution of the sensible refers to a community's social hierarchies which define whose voices are heard and conversely who is rendered insensible.

Rather than the docile bodies of Foucault's conceptualisation (1977, p. 135), referred to later in this chapter, Rancière's audiences can engage and critique the status quo. Drawn to the work, or enchanted by it, the spectator must engage with it. To put the experience into words, or articulate a love or distaste for it, even to admonish it, requires a cognitive process of appraisal which, by virtue of their engagement now, must follow their prior enchantment. Papastergiadis (2014) explains that art is a sensory awakening which 'is a means of breaking down pre-existing habits of association and categories of classification.' He adds, 'it contributes to understanding by offering alternate ways of seeing and speaking' (p. 8).

This moment of dissensus, conceptualised in the case for Kabul as the encounter between the viewer and the artwork, creates potential for political action. Dissensus occurs when 'the reigning configuration between perception and meaning is disrupted by those elements, groups or individuals in society [the insensible] that demand not only to exist but indeed to be perceived' (Panagia 2014, p. 96). Subjectivity becomes political and it insists on its own narration, which in the moment of enchantment, cleaves open the possible to become the probable. Shedding the assumption that the modern spectator is a passive one, thus represents the emancipated spectator who, given 'the equality of intelligences' (Rancière 1991 in Papastergiadis 2014, p. 9), part-takes in image-making and in doing so disrupts the sensible.

The hierarchy, or distribution of the sensible, therefore also creates potential for its own dissolution. Art provides an avenue through which the sensible is challenged. For

Rancière, the subordinate position of aesthetics, or affect, under intellect is therefore challenged through the democratisation of art's reception.

Rupture and reclamation

In arguing for art's effect on habitus, the norms with which individuals navigate their social worlds, the assumption that the viewer is critical and conscious must hold. Like Rancière's emancipated spectator, Paulo Freire (2005) argued against the 'banking' approach to education as a system of oppression in which people are assumed to be empty receptacles of top down messaging (see also Braden and Mayo 1999, Freire 1971). Freire's (1998) theory of conscientisation, a human process of self-knowing and acting upon the world to change it, considers the learner (audience or spectator in this case), as capable to be engaged in the work of meaning making. Though removed from the educational setting that Freire referred to, the participatory art praxis of *Kabuli* artists, through eliciting affective moments and discursive spaces, represent conscientized publics who, now as political subjects, can act upon the norms of that society.

Artists offer alterity through their works. They create continuity and traditions that, through war and upheaval have corroded social cohesion and trust. *Kabuli* artists challenge the status quo of social and cultural rupture, through the presentation of what is possible or by a reference to a time in the past, albeit reified as a golden period. This pre-war period acts as an anchor of common experience. ArtLords, for example have images of Queen Soraya, wife of the progressive King Ammanullah Khan, on murals. Co-founder, Kabir, explains, 'You want so badly to actually belong to an ideology or to a period or to anything, really, and the nostalgia is always there, always. This is throughout history. Even the West is talking about golden times' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). Kabir refers to the thirst for a shared narrative, whether heritage, identity, or ideology. As Yin (2018) explains, '...historical memory provides a source of cultural identity, social cohesion, and sense of permanence amid change and a means of invigorating the present and shaping the future' (p. 199). Parwez, a calligrapher, stipulates, channelling Maya Angelou, the importance of knowing heritage,

> We cannot understand our present status, where we are and where we are heading without knowing where we have come from. And our culture, our works of art, our cultural heritage is exactly the same...So, yes, if we want to shape our culture, we

have to understand what our culture used to be like. (participant interview, 24 Dec 2017)

Noorjahan, Founder of Free Women Writers, identifies the tradition of volunteering which has also disappeared,

> you know there was a lot of voluntary activities within the community that was traditionally accepted and part of the culture and now we don't have that anymore and partly it is because of war because war broke down neighbourhoods, it broke down communities, there isn't a sense of trust anymore. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Just as Noorjahan's nostalgic description of the past helps us to understand what has been lost, it also helps us to understand what is aspired for, an indication that some shared narratives persist. Hawke (2001) offers a framework for articulating culture which 'refers not simply to a society's values, but to the way these values are developed and expressed. In fact, we cannot know what a society's values are, except by observing their manifestation...which is why, fundamentally, the arts are such an important aspect of a society's culture' (p. 23).

Hawke (2001) prioritises the daily interactions between people, interactions also found in volunteering, and which can occur outside of formal settings, in the streets or other public spaces, explaining that, 'by our behaviour are we known – this never-ending public process is a society's signature' (p. 23). The loss of volunteering for Noorjahan represents the break down in social cohesion, trust, tradition and culture. She speaks of a rupture to identity, of knowing what, as Afghans, we stand for. Clammer (2015) illustrates the link between culture and its potential to impact change. He explains, culture is 'deep play' which is 'both serious and legitimate (especially for adults)', and that it is 'the realm in which a society's most fundamental values are exhibited...subjectivities both form and are formed by participation with culture, and those subjectivities do not remain as individual attributes, but express themselves socially' (p. 10).

In a context where many traditions have eroded (particularly around women's place in society as the product of extremism) and where continuity of social stability is ruptured, new traditions are created brought on by survival practices. The utilisation of cultural products for emergence of (new) traditions creates new intended ruptures. ArtLords co-

founder Omaid makes this observation and explains how he attempts to suture breakages with the past by reintroducing well known historical role models:

> ...by putting murals of these people on the streets, you're sort of encouraging this young generation to go and read about those characters in our history, how they lived their lives. They were so respectable, they were kind, they were brave. I think that's one way of doing it. All these people from our history is coming back to life on the streets of Kabul, and people are stopping to know about them and read about them. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

The time and space for repetition, passing on and in effect continuing a tradition, must be re-created. In the same way that cultural products create culture, define publics and communities, they also, with time, shape traditions. I do not argue that artists want a return to the past as it was, as some expressed explicitly. Rather the call to the past acts as a unifying anchor, or as Berger et al. (1972) explains, 'The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act' (p. 11)[30]. It is a powerful moment when people, particularly the next generation, are aware of their role in creating culture in this way, namely 'as a motivating factor in the creation of social identity with considerable potential for creating cohesion and solidarity among community members' (McGrath and Brennan 2011, p. 344).

I have utilised rupture here in two ways: to mean the rupture to social cohesion through war and the intentional rupture created by cultural products to make way for new ways of being. The latter was earlier referred to as the Rancièrian conceptualisation of dissensus. Lampert (2017) articulates the rupture to norms through art, more specifically, the application of dissensus to art,

> The experience of art and literature is not one of organising movements or even building "communities of sense", but rather lays the foundation for such organising and building by first throwing the individual radically back upon him-

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[30] Here Berger et al. (1972) went on to critique the intentional mystification of the past referring to 'a privileged minority...striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms. And so, inevitably, it mystifies' (p. 11). In Kabul, the past is used by artists to unify and though elites in the country have used the grandeur of past kingdoms and connections to past monarchies to justify their superiority, particularly Pashtun groups, here I refer to the utilisation of the past as a unifying anchor.

or herself. But this is to say that art and literature do not build communities, but rather work primarily by taking them apart. (p. 191)

Dissensus catalyses the disruption of what makes sense in a given moment. The norm is brought into the sphere of reconsideration (the secondary world mentioned earlier). The concept of the normal, that unseen, implicit set of values which define what is considered appropriate and what is not, are disrupted by the art practice of Kabul based artists, particularly artists whose works bear a particular performativity, being produced in public on public spaces. Art has an often-subtle way of challenging those values that a society comes to consent to and perpetuate. This internal process of the pre-cognitive enchantment, when the observer is pulled from the normal and every day, for a moment, to be captured by the affective reach of the artwork, and the internalisation of social norms meet at the moment of enchantment.

Capturing the internalisation of established norms, filmmaker, Mohammad sees film making as a tool for social change. He explains that it is through the reconstruction of values, rather than people, that impediments to progress can be removed, adding, 'I am very interested in creating central values through my work. Hopefully in the years to come that will contribute to creation of this identity' (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018). Mohammad speaks of dismantling and disrupting, through the discourse of constructing and creating. Contributions to the field of opinion works to disrupt systems assumed natural and 'normal'.

Indeed, social, and cultural norms, as constructions, can be dismantled. For Michel Foucault, there is nothing innate about the norms we come to embody. Rather, norms are manifestations of power to which we unknowingly consent. Different from the powers exerted in slavery, service, religion, military or vassalage, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault conceives of a disciplinary power which 'produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies' (p. 137).He articulates the nature of disciplinary power:

> The 'invention' of this new political anatomy must not be seen as a sudden discovery. It is rather a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and *gradually produce* the blueprint of a general method' (p. 138, my emphasis).

Disciplinary power as a gradual codification of normal reflects a system of 'minor processes' which, to be dismantled, would require similarly a system of gradual decodification. There was a general consensus that art has a 'soft power', as offered by Kabir, which delivers a message in an indirect or nonconfrontational way, as an affective medium. Similarly Rohina's use of the imagery of the stone, mentioned earlier, that is smoothed over by exposure to water with time. The effect of art through a sort of *aesthesis*, or sensed enchantment, is the source of its impact. The art's aesthetic affect is taken with the spectator, away from the site of the art and the artist, into life and reality, to challenge the common sense.

For Antonio Gramsci, common sense refers to the hegemonic cultural and hidden force, which defines the boundaries of the normal. Accepted as 'the taken-for-granted "knowledge" to be found in every human community' (Crehan 2016, p. 43), *senso comune* or common sense captures the seemingly unquestioned truths which, though may conflict even within the individual, are nevertheless maintained by individuals for the sake of conformity. Gramsci (1971) explains,

> Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the "folklore" of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent, and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. (p. 419)

For Gramsci, common sense reflects an assemblage of beliefs accumulated over time, the products of a milieu adopted by the people living in it. Art is thus a form of knowledge that need not be confined to the halls of high art, but a vantage point from which individuals become complexes of opinion. In Gramsci's (2007) words, offered in *Prison Notebooks (vol. III),*

> What matters is not the opinion of Tom, Dick, and Harry but the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in society. It is these collective opinions that must be refuted by confronting their most representative theoretical exponents – those most worthy of respect for the high calibre of their thought and for their "disinterestedness" in immediacy. (p. 347)

Here the phenomenon of the generally accepted and osmotically consumed systems of norms work as a potential source of countering the norm. Like Rancière (2009), who argued for the equal distribution of intelligence, Gramsci's view democratises knowledge. This is particularly relevant in the Kabul context where cultural products bind the art, the artist and audience.

For Bourdieu, the system in which 'the natural and social world appears self-evident' is referred to as the *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977, p. 164). This definition establishes the internalisation of 'the most ineradicable adherence to the established order' (p. 164). By definition, then, *doxa* is not an explicitly recognised set of values but rather, as outlined by Deer (2014), they exist outside of orthodoxies and reflect '*unconscious* inherited physical and relational pre-dispositions' (p. 115, my emphasis). Though I concur with Rancière and Freire of the *potential* for the engaged learner-spectator, I also argue that societies have succumbed to docility and unconscious acceptance of the doxa, or established order.

The assumed naturalness of systems and norms makes change particularly difficult. Art, therefore, has particular bearing. Its ability to reach into the unconscious speaks to the spectator through the same avenue as *doxa*, evading rationality, to capture centres of habit and docility, through its enchantment. It is through the universe of discourse, and the alterity and empathy offered by art, that *doxa* can be known and thus challenged, as Bourdieu (1977) adds, 'The truth of *doxa* is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted by the constitution of a *field of opinion*, the locus of the confrontation of competing discourses' (p. 168, author's emphasis).

Both the established norm, or established order, as well as the enchantment of art, speak to our pre-consciousness. Both leverage subtlety, or 'soft power', like drops on a stone over time, which gradually converge and produce a 'blueprint' to penetrate our world views and become established order. The amorphousness of cultural products which can speak to the sensual over the rational opens the realm of possibility. The language of norms can be equally applied to describe the affective reach of the arts as a soft power.

Existence is resistance

Culture outlines who we are but also acts as 'a project, a design for living' (Worsley in Braden and Mayo 1999, p. 131). The cultural products of *Kabuli* artists rupture the common sense through the enchantment they offer as well as by merely existing. By nurturing the

development of arts and culture, as Omaid from ArtLords suggests, a way forward can be opened which can 'really help the society to stand up' (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018).

The absence, as much as the presence, of cultural producers and their artefacts shape society. Absence of art and artefacts of cultural expression stifles the creativity needed to imagine more or leaves its deployment in the wrong hands. The ideological opposition to music, as was the case during the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan, is a case in point. Bergh and Sloboda (2010) argue that 'not utilising music for peaceful purposes will leave it open to abuse...either by performing music that emerged during a conflict, by creating new music that commemorates a conflict or through music that highlight latent conflicts' (p. 4). In the case of Afghanistan when during the Taliban period, music was entirely banned, nothing existed to counteract the Taliban *tarana*s, or chants. There were used as a propaganda tool which leveraged and adapted Afghanistan's familiar centuries old musical and poetic tradition (Johnson and Waheed 2011, Pelvin and Weinreich 2012). In emotive tones and imagery, the chants refer to subject matter which locals can relate to, and as such, 'the chants are gaining the attention of an increasing number of Pashtun youth, especially in (rural and urban) areas where the Taliban have substantial presence' (Johnson and Waheed 2011, p. 5). The *tarana*s' ability to reach the common Afghan populous can be contrasted to US and NATO forces who 'developed objectives based on *their* view and desires for Afghanistan, not based on the views and requirements of the common Afghan who represents the 'centre of gravity' of the conflict' (p. 27, author's emphasis). That Afghans have a particular affinity to Taliban chants, or that the poetry of the chants is able to reach the Afghan psyche reflects the transformative potential of the creative space.

In his work at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM), founder and director Ustad Ahmad Sarmast[31], strives against a world without music like the world the Taliban sought to create just a few years prior. Sarmast's music school makes room for an alternative music culture which combines genres of music from endogenous traditions to Western classical compositions. Music persisted through pressures to shut down the schools by traditionalist and Islamist groups, including an attack at a concert in 2014 which nearly cost Sarmast his life. This persistence not only ensures music's continued role in

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[31] The title *Ustad* in much Central and South Asia as well as the Middle East, is given to masters or virtuosos of the arts. It is also applied to university educators. Ahmad Sarmast received his doctorate from Australia but returned to Kabul to set up ANIM.

Afghan society but by its very presence it resists the conservative ideologies opposed to music. Sarmast explains:

> one of the reasons for the extreme interest of young people in music is in itself a practice in defiance of Taliban and Taliban politics who are people who banned music. In my view this is itself a way to say no and to subvert the Taliban and Taliban ways. That's why I have witnessed in Afghanistan that every time the Taliban have committed an atrocity, the answer of the people has been in the most beautiful way. (participant interview, 18 Jan 2018)

The intersection of cultures through the music compiled and performed at ANIM demonstrates an ideology of openness. Howell, Pruitt and Hassler (2019) argue for an approach to urban peacebuilding which 'works to transform both material and immaterial expressions of identity-based divisions' (p. 333). Music has a transformative role in Kabul, an ethnoscape - defined as a city divided along visible and psychological ethnic barriers (Howell et al. 2019). As audible expressions of peace, music offers 'sounds that model cooperation and creative responses to difference and division' (p. 344). Music transforms ethnoscapes into peacescapes by creating neutral and cosmopolitan zones which disrupts etchicised spaces and 'invites the exploration of alternative identity and discourses and practices' (Howell et al. 2019, p. 343). Music's transformative potential reaches into gender divisions too. Reflecting the importance of music in society, or the importance of eschewing its absence, ANIM student with a key role in *Zohra* orchestra, Nasrin, talks about her freedom to play music synonymously with freedom more broadly, like music were the litmus test, a tool which she uses to pave the way for freedoms for girls,

> And so, I thought that we 10 girls must do something to open the doors for the next generation because if we don't do it, everyone will just sit there, they will say 'well never mind, girls are just staying at home, that's what their job is to do', and we must be the people to open the way for them. (participant interview, 8 Feb 2018)

The act of doing art in Kabul serves as critique of a society which condemns, or regulates artistic expression, especially for the women I interviewed. Art serves society by existing in resistance to it. Artists and art organisations take risks to exist through ongoing resistance to artistic expression from conservative elements in the country. ArtLords' Omaid explains,

There has been cases they come to the places which we paint and trying to convince us not to paint faces or not to paint statues, but we continue doing that because I think the more we continue to do what we do, the more we help people to change their attitudes and behaviours. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

The struggle is not just an insistence to be, but to resist the absence of the artist. In their persistent existence, they also resist a world without cultural products such as art, literature, and music. It is a response shaped by a near past. In essence, artists demand space to critique and contribute to the field of opinion. Omaid helps to connect the role of art, the purpose of addressing taboos and how these build culture, explaining that,

If you look back in Europe during the Renaissance, art and culture really played a big role. It completely changed the communities and societies in Europe. I think it can really play a vital role in Afghanistan as well, and it has been neglected for many decades...I think this is a very effective tool that can really change perceptions, can change attitudes and opinions, and can really help the society to stand up and challenge all those taboos and old behaviours or the things which are really stopping them to progress. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

Art thus creates a space for 'uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories and languages. In short, they contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2011, p. 36).[32] It is through art that we can find a potential space to challenge the world of the sensible. Art in Kabul poses an interruption and thus becomes political. Kabir illustrates the change that art offers with 'every brush stroke',

Every brush, every stroke of brush and paint that you leave on the wall, you're actually doing something for Afghanistan, you're getting rid of the wall, you actually transform the wall into a bridge. And the processes is in that..., in every area that they colour in, and when it's completed, when they take a few steps back, they look at this picture that they have done, and they own it. So, one of the other things that I had in mind was the ownership of the world by people themselves you know. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

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[32] Distribution of the sensible is a Rancièrian term defined as, 'a logic (and implicit set of rules) governing what is seen and heard, what makes sense, things taken for granted, etc' (Lampert 2017, p. 183).

Antonio Gramsci conceptualises the 'passive revolution' as a movement for social change by a new order who, lacking the means to instigate a full revolution will opt to employ 'small doses, legally, in a reformist manner' (Gramsci in Chatterjee 1993, p. 211). According to Jahan, 'the arts are a fighting mechanism. What we can't express in words, we express through arts and drawings' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). In Afghanistan, we see the passive revolution as a gradual shift against the legacies of war on a social and cultural level, and towards a reclamation of peace and trust with the aim of nurturing an indigenous selfhood not based on orientalist tropes of warrior or villain, war monger or victim. Kabir, in explaining the potential for art, adds that art addresses taboos that people may otherwise not speak of because 'art is dangerous, art is not a beautiful thing, it's not a fluffy thing. You're actually hugging a cactus... you have to bleed, otherwise how are you gonna water that thing?' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). For Kabir, like the other cultural producers I spoke to, their art practice is intentional and purposeful. Berang arts' co-founder Naheed, explains

> We tried to use arts for changing society...and we wanted people to be more introduced, more engaged with the atmosphere of peace and art... we tried to be people who brought a positive change through art, to be people who brought people's thoughts towards positivity...That's why we tried through arts, and through cultural activities, that's why we created exhibitions, and seminars, and workshops. (participant interview, 12 May 2018)

Jahan shares these sentiments of using art to address taboo issues as a way of shaping culture and challenging traditions. She expresses that given the insecurity of the country, she is in danger if she fights wholeheartedly for what she believes in but even so, adds that 'My work is always about addressing the non-spoken issues that are experienced and felt in their surroundings' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). Change will take more than violence and domination, but the steady and patient hand of culture and the arts. It will take significant perseverance to suture ruptures caused by war and replace with ruptures created through art.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy wrote in *'The End of Imagination'* (2016),

> what is happening to the world lies, at the moment, just outside the realm of common human understanding. It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers,

the filmmakers who can make connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding. (p. 192)

This extract captures the two key themes of this chapter, that art can reach us through a primal pre-conscious connection, and that a bridging through affect which leads to a politicised subjectivity, rupturing the normal, is created in the moment of enchantment.

Art's role in Kabul as reflective of a city in transition is as complex as it is essential. Together, these roles fill a cultural vacuum which both captures elements of the imagined past and future. There is no denying that the impacts of years of conflict are felt through the reconstruction efforts of an art scene which was all but erased following the Taliban regime in particular. Though a long-term process, and often a subtle one, the change has been pushed and driven by artists themselves. Homaira, an artist and poet, explains that 8 or 10 years ago, 'it was like art was dangerous for our people, like because they don't know art and they don't know the benefits of art but now it's not like that, everything has changed now. Now we can see that many families like that their young generation to learn art' (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018). These changes have been hard fought and continue to be so, employing art as the 'back door' of consciousness. It is here that internalised structures, like the common sense that Gramsci articulates, are taken for granted as natural. Where reason and rationalism fail, the creative tools that artists employ pick up the baton. Though modernity has cast the emotions aside as non-essential, the reach of enchantment proves persistent. There is no denying humanity's pull toward affective sensual stimuli, and the openness that can be found there. I return to Rohina who explained the process of art's impact on society as the water that, with time, slowly smooths the stone. This impact of art offers counter-narratives both locally and abroad.

Chapter Four:

Art as counter-narrative

It is 17th March 2019 as I begin to write this chapter. My social media feed and various news notifications echo the social and political commentary that has resulted from last week's massacre in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Australian senator Fraser Anning has pointed the finger at New Zealand's immigration policy. Online and offline, the conversations on everyone's lips are centred on this abhorrent murder of 51 people killed for their faith in their place of worship, unarmed. The perpetrator has released a 74-page manifesto, titled 'The Great Replacement', in which he shares his white supremacist reasoning for this heinous act. Many of those killed had escaped violence in their countries of origin. I am numb at first.

The first killed was a 71-year-old man, an Afghan refugee, who was greeting worshippers at the entrance of the mosque. His photo and interviews with his kin circulate on social media and news channels. The reports about him permit space for his existence outside of stereotyped media frames of refugee or brown body or Muslim. For now, he is humanised, the details of his life articulated. There is room for empathy and compassion for this man. His name was Haji Daoud Nabi and he had escaped the same war my family had escaped several decades ago. Images of his smiling face are everywhere by now. The numbness makes way for shock and sadness. I find myself projecting my own family's experiences as I imagine him packing up his life to flee all those years ago. In his brown smiling eyes and the strands of greying hair, I see my father.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the enchantment of art and its ability to speak to its immediate audiences in Kabul. Yet the impact of the work is far reaching, both geographically and in terms of their contributions to global discourse and narrative construction. *Kabuli* artists I spoke to intend for much of their works to reach global eyes and ears. This chapter applies an alternative media lens to artists' works and their employment of social media as a tool for global reach. As alternative media, the cultural products of artists and writers challenge mainstream media in the North, which has perpetuated caricatured or villainised narratives of Afghans. They self-narrate despite the persistence of a colonial centre (the North) which creates knowledge and a periphery (the South, the Other) which provides the subject matter for that knowledge. Alternative media provide counter-narratives which challenge Northern mainstream news media frames as well as the discourses of cultural artefacts such as Hollywood films and novels (Bose 2020). Through social media, artists contribute their own subjective realities with nuance and consideration. These perspectives reflect the self-identity of Afghans as Afghans in the world, countering the siloing effect that media representations tend to suggest.

Contemporary reporting employs colonial tropes to conflate Muslims, Afghans, terrorists and refugees (Ghani and Fiske 2019). Inside the country too, the history of the press in Afghanistan is littered with moments of colonial intervention. In his analysis of communications and mass media in Afghanistan, Rawan (2002) provides an account of the development of communication in the country, explaining that, 'Throughout the countries of the Middle East, the development of the media is intricately linked to the development of colonisation and decolonisation' (p. 156). Though Afghanistan has had its own internal disruptions to forming its fourth estate, it has not been for lack of trying. Historically, intervention by colonial powers have hampered Afghanistan's ability to form a free press, to create an informed populace and to develop politically, socially, and economically.

Today, however, media inside the country, especially television, can be contrasted with the tightly government-controlled television broadcasting of neighbouring countries such as Uzbekistan, China, Iran, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. Broadcast media in Afghanistan, unlike its neighbours, is proving to have counter-hegemonic potential. With its national reach, television has become a powerful institution, and it is not therefore surprising that

as a site of social contestation, the 'hopes and fears about the future of Afghanistan, expressed by everyone from media executives to government officials, religious leaders, and international governmental and nongovernmental consultants, are being funnelled into this medium' (Osman 2014, p. 878). Yet the unidirectional broadcast delivery of television and the danger it has posed in recent years, to female reporters in particular, hardly constitutes a safe forum in which a dialectical sharing of ideas can be nurtured (Eide, Khalvatgar and Shirzad 2019).

There is certainly an appetite for freedom of expression. The right to free speech was vehemently defended during my trip to Kabul in November 2017 when the government proposed a temporary ban on WhatsApp and Telegram, citing national security reasons. I was surprised at the public outcry at the banning of these social media platforms. Poet and editor of the nation's largest independent newspaper, *Hasht-e-Subh,* 8 AM, Parwiz Kawa dedicated the front page of the newspaper to the story. The BBC published, 'Prominent newspaper editor Parwiz Kawa told the BBC that Afghanistan was finally an open society after years of censorship and any ban on social media would not be tolerated', and quoted Kawa saying,

> The public reaction - including our own front page - is to resist. We can't tolerate any ban on social media or any censorship. If the Taliban or others are using these services, find out who is using them, don't ban them - that's very sensitive at this stage of Afghanistan's development. (BBC News, 4 November 2017)

The Ghani government, yielding to public pressure, soon lifted the ban.[33] Technological advancements provide an avenue for citizens to become at once consumers and producers of content. The backlash against the proposal for any type of censorship reflected the country's demand for accountability. As Hamelink (1993) says, 'A plurality of non-state and non-market media...[is] needed to provide adequate public space for citizen's expressions and interactions, for the promotion and defence of human rights, and for the public accountability of political and economic power holders' (Hamelink in Husband 1996, p. 212).

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[33] I met Parwez Kawa, editor of *Hashteh Sohb,* 8am, national newspaper when I was in Kabul. He expressed the importance of arts and poetry for social change and we spoke at length about his ambitions for the newspaper. I have not included him as an artist in this research as he was unable to make time for an interview after we met, even though he expressed to me his own joy of writing poetry.

Writing in 2001, well before the boom in social media we have today, Pippa Norris outlined the potential for technology, namely the new connectivity that the internet was projected to provide:

> Observers hope that digital technologies will shift some of the global disparities in power as well as wealth, by fostering a worldwide civic society countering the role of the international agencies, strengthening the voice of the developing world, dissolving some of the boundaries of the nation-state, and reinforcing the process of democratisation...By connecting disparate social movements, coalitions can be formed that mobilize a global civic society.... (p. 8).

The 'dissolving of boundaries' referred to by Norris have real and tangible effects for *Kabuli* artists. Their art carries affective valence across borders and they invite their global audiences to experience another side of Kabul. Comments acknowledging the works and the efforts of the artists abound. Through these networks, artists get invited to various countries to contribute to projects abroad. Enacting their 'right to be understood', *Kabuli*s complicate narrative frames of Afghanistan as only a nation rife with violence and inequity (Husband 1996). Shamsia explains:

> One of the reasons why I travel is that I want to show people a new Afghanistan, to show people something that until now they didn't know about. I don't want to come and say again there is war, politics has problems, like this and like that. Everybody knows these things from the news, and I always tell people that of course you know about all the bad things of Afghanistan, then I have come to tell you the good things... When you tell these things to people, then they newly begin to think that it is possible that this type of person might exist in Afghanistan...yes media has a big influence, 100 per cent... (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018).

Media representation

Shamsia's excerpt above invokes a sense of wanting change. Implicit throughout her interview was her desire to be heard and to self-represent. In addition to a history of external interventions to media inside the country, today Afghanistan faces a war of representation outside its borders (Stabile and Kumar 2005, Edy and Meirick 2007). Louw (2003), for example, refers to the PR-ization of warfare to foster support for military interventions, arguing that, 'the military [has] become increasingly sophisticated as agents of hegemonic coercion; agents skilled not only at killing people, but at using the media

(especially television) as a powerful tool of warfare' (p. 216).[34] This sentiment was captured in interviews with *Kabuli* artists too. ANIM director, Ahmad Sarmast, for example, is critical of media outlets, placing them within the global political and economic players vying for power,

> ...the biggest enemies to Afghanistan today are the media outlets outside of Afghanistan. The way that they present Afghanistan outside of Afghanistan, not only is it not conducive to lasting peace in Afghanistan and for relations between countries, it is also against these things. No investor, no tourist, no sort of culture will, after seeing a daily paper in the West, have the courage to come to Afghanistan. (participant interview, 18 Jan 2018)

Sarmast's indictment of media reporting on Afghanistan reflects imbalanced and politically charged media representation. He spends his time between Kabul and Melbourne, Australia, so experiences first-hand the difference between reality and representation and how they subtlety shape narratives about the Other. Referring to the media, Silverstone (1999) expresses the power media have to influence,

> ...it is about the drip, drip, drip of ideology as well as the shock of the luminous event. It is about the media's power to create and sustain meanings, to persuade, endorse and reinforce. The power to undermine and reassure. It is about reach. And it is about representation: the ability to present, reveal, explain; and also the ability to grant access and participation. It is about the power to listen and the power to speak and be heard. The power to prompt and guide reflection and reflexivity. The power to tell tales and articulate memories. (p. 143)

Silverstone helps identify the quotidian nature of media, its pervasiveness into how we think and what we believe. The reporting that delivers the perspectives of power has an inevitable silencing effect on those in the periphery of narrative construction, namely Afghan civilians and Afghan women in particular (Wright 2019). Campbell and Howie (2015) capture this lopsidedness when they argue, 'While a tame US military refuses to do body-counts and a tame Murdoched media landscape brings the suffering of young white people into clear view, there are gaps in the continuously unfolding stories of life during and after terror and war' (p. 335). Artists expressed these portrayals as points for resistance.

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[34] Louw (2003) lists these wars: 'the Falklands (1982), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), the Persian Gulf (1990), Somalia (1992–3), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1992–5), Kosovo (1999), Timor (1999) and Afghanistan (2001)' (p. 216).

The absence of the human experience is drowned out by formulaic news media packages and sound bites, devoid of texture and nuance. For many following events outside of Afghanistan, the simple narrative offered by news media about a people far away proves sufficient (despite the mounting Afghan death toll[35]). TV codes, explains Wright (2004), assist in the oversimplification of complex people, places, and events. These codes create a formulaic approach to news reporting through use of generalised non-specific images which cater to audience expectations. Narrative constructions therefore become self-perpetuating as orientalist stereotypes in the service of efficiency and capital, that 'limit understanding to a fixed set of concepts...which does not allow the viewer to get close enough to the individual behind them' (Wright 2004, p. 102). In her analysis of intervention narratives of the Afghan war, Purnima Bose (2020) identifies how the US produced cultural artefacts like film to construct and circulate simplified narratives about Afghans. These narratives, argues Bose, are presented from the American perspective, 'such that Afghans recede into the background of their history and the political economy of the war is obscured' (2020, p. 2). Specific ideology, groups, governments, or individuals are favoured by politically conservative leaning media, through framing, priming, and agenda-setting, despite the views of journalists themselves (Entman 2007).

The issue is a systemic one embedded in neoliberal valorisation of capital over the human experience. Pavlik (2001), in his examination of storytelling tools to alter news framing, explains, 'where once a culture committed to great journalism flourished, a culture dominated by MBAs and financial accountability has taken its place. Accountability to shareholders has replaced accountability to democracy and the citizens it serves' (p. 313). ArtLords co-founder Omaid, says,

> I think it's as they say good news is no news. Anything which is not about explosions, about death or injuries, or about drugs or war, it doesn't make any news...our culture is more than a war culture. So whatever happened, post 9/11, so whatever perceptions they have is because of the headlines on CNN, I don't know, BBC, so whatever they portray, and the only thing they portray is negative news about war and violence and other things. I think that is the base of judgment for a lot of people. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

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[35] Bose (2020) asserts that while numbers of dead in Afghanistan are difficult to find, one estimate places 111,000 Afghan deaths (including 31,000 civilians) between October 2001 and August 2016. Bose adds, 'For US armed forces, the Pentagon places the death toll, from 2001 to May 5, 2017, at 2,216' (p. 1).

Omaid's observations reflect his awareness that what constitutes newsworthiness, specifically, are events which fit into a narrative that benefits some at the expense of others. It is a cycle in which he too, as a *Kabuli*, is trapped.

Daily, even hourly, news cycles demand ever decreasing production turnaround times. Moeller (1999) offers the 'newsroom truism' that, 'One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans' (p. 22), suggesting how compassion fatigue dictates news coverage. The use of images, explains Moeller (1999), lead to both an overstimulation and boredom for the audience, and so 'It takes more and more dramatic coverage to elicit the same level of sympathy as the last catastrophe' (p. 14). Wright (2004) adds that, 'There is an inverse relationship between numbers and distance'. That is, large numbers of refugees, or distant people and places have warranted less nuance in media representations. This rings true in the case of Afghanistan, particularly post 9/11 (p. 99). Without a personal experience or exposure, media accounts are taken by audiences as expert truth, and their agendas adopted as their own. In the absence of nuance, audiences are left with partial accounts, at best, and incorrect information at worst. This is a greater disservice to those citizens too marginalised to contribute to mass media.

Like Omaid, Artlords co-founder, Kabir, is aware of the formulaic way that media as entertainment is produced and adds that the media are interested in a specific type of news:

> It's real interesting because a lot of media came from outside, from PBS to Al Jazeera and even the Chinese, the state television...They were saying that's the only positive story that we have heard from Afghanistan in such a long time, which is really sad, but that's the reality. But a lot of really good things are happening here. Good news is not known news. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Conversely, artists in this research leverage cultural products to subvert orientalised depictions of them and their history by offering the human experience through art and music. Contrary to media representations of Afghans as isolated and backward, *Kabuli* artists are connected and in dialogue with the world.

Narrative can be constructed through image too, creating a shared experience of the world, even if out of context. Fahmy (2004) analysed content from the Associated Press's depiction of Afghan women, in the months prior to the US airstrikes on Afghanistan in

2001 until just after the ousting of the Taliban regime from Afghanistan. The study highlights that even if the images themselves are not staged, their selection and portrayal can have enduring effects on narrative construction. These 'decontextualised photographs' of Afghan women as interactive, free and involved, seem more natural and are more quickly overlooked than the verbal/textual frames mentioned above (Fahmy 2004, p. 93). Though Fahmy (2004) suggests that this conflicts with Said's (2003) conclusions in *Orientalism* that the West portray Islamic cultures as immutable, I would argue that they reflect Western interests in portraying the betterment of Afghan women's lives as a justification of war and Western intervention. Maintaining a Western public's support of war was paramount (Louw 2003) and this support was contingent on the discourse of freeing Afghan women to justify a costly war. Rather than contradicting Said's argument that Islamic cultures were orientalised as stagnant, the depictions in Fahmy's (2004) analysis fit with Said's observations. The narrative is that without outside interventions, the Orient would continue to stagnate. It is through deconstruction of grand narratives, through self-narration, that the humanity of Afghanistan's everyday can be reached.

Permission to narrate

Edward Said's 1984 work, 'Permission to Narrate', argues for the power and importance of narrative. Problematising the absence of a 'present actuality', Said (1984) says, 'Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them' (p. 34). Australia's political response to asylum seekers and refugees presents a case in point. The language in these narratives are intended to incite suspicion against peoples seeking asylum from wars often started by Western allied forces and has resulted in the current incarceration of refugees and asylum seekers in offshore detention. Reflecting on the Howard government era in Australia, Fiske (2006) writes,

> The public lexicon came to include terms casting the arrivals of refugees as akin to an invasion of Australia, so that what was a humanitarian crisis was cast as a national security and sovereignty issue – playing on the fear of invasion buried not so deeply in the collective white Australian psyche. (p. 220)

History has countless more examples to offer which illustrate how narratives are constructed and the purposes they serve. Testimony, argues Said (1984), challenges the ideological consensus promulgated by power, adding that, 'it seem[s] crucial as a starting-point to furnish the world some narrative evidence, over and above atomised and reified

TV clips…' (p. 38). *Kabuli* artists contribute their 'present actuality' to global narratives about them and their culture through their cultural productions. Images and poems laced with reality provide an alternative to the mainstream depictions of them. These creative outputs symbolise a reclamation of what it means to be Afghan. They speak to the 'spiritual domain', one of Chatterjee's (1993) two domains of nationalism. In speaking about colonial India, Chatterjee argues that the materialist domain of rationality manifests as Western nationalism and that Western intervention should not violate the spiritual domain. Applied to the Afghan case, it is a defensively positioned nationalism, that 'declares the domain of the spiritual [over the material] its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain' (p. 6). As such, through culture, despite past, current, and possibly future interventions, peoples can insist on sovereignty. In today's Afghanistan, cultural products on a global stage speak to the sanctity of their creator's nationhood, a testimony about existence. Writer and activist Sahar is resistant to the undermining of local voices, and wants instead

> not to minimize and underestimate local knowledge and wisdom that people have in those places and women in our country like Afghanistan…make it easier for them to actually have a voice and have their own authentic voice, not having to say what the certain organization is asking them to say you know…, but I definitely mean that it should not be with the idea of underestimating the wisdom and understanding of women in countries like Afghanistan. (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

Authentic voice is a theme that appeared several times through the interviews, always among the female participants, whose comments reveal a desire to self-narrate. Rohina, a contributor to Free Women Writers, for example, explains, 'having that authentic voice of Afghan women, like you know we talking about ourselves instead of someone else talking about us and telling our stories, we tell our own stories…'. Rohina elaborates what authentic voice means for her, 'going beyond what media covers…but we give the things that we want to represent, the issues that we want to talk about, the stories that we have' (Participant interview, 20 Jan 2018). For Shireen, also an FWW contributor and poet, her writing is a way of correcting the record, and voicing her experiences:

> it is a way for me to express my voice…And the only way I found available to me is the way of the pen, the only thing I can do through writing articles, and stories and poems, I can capture the conditions of women today. I think this is a resistance

that can at least make a generation aware and informed about what our days [lives] were like. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

Shireen's audiences are primarily the young generation in Afghanistan. She sees that there is a gap in the history of a generation who did not experience the roots of today's unrest in the country. By informing them of the horrors that have led to the constant fear of conflict today, she denormalises it:

...the current generation are unaware of history, so they should become aware of history. I even had people, when the story was being distributed online, people contacted us asking, 'these horrors that you have portrayed, is that even possible or was it real?' So this shows how much our current generation is unaware of history. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

These testimonials reflect the core of Said's (1984) argument. Their self-narration offers an alterity to the dominant narratives about Afghan women expressed above. In essence they offer the world the 'narrative of their present actuality – which stems directly from the story of their existence' (Said 1984, p. 30). In doing so, *Kabuli* artists contribute to revisionist histories about them, and do so from the margins of dominant discourse.

Afghan women in the world

Travelling through Kabul in late 2017, I found an abundance of smart phones, loaded with data plans, and Facebook profiles. The young man who would be my local guide lamented that the internet had corrupted young people in the country, even as he uploaded new photos of his tattoos to his newsfeed. In what was, I suspect, an unintended confession, he added that if he ever had a daughter, he would take her smartphone off her when she turned 17, about his own age. For this young man, online spaces were harbingers of impropriety, even as he encouraged me to support him by hitting 'Like' on his exercise group's Facebook page. There was a consistent tension in our conversations between a reverence for tradition and his struggle to reconcile his rapture with these elements in *Kabuli* society today, namely, the easy access through social media to other young men and women. Wacjman (2004) articulates the tension between online spaces as, 'new spaces for undermining old social relations' (p. 3) versus 'use of the web by transnational corporations, financial markets, global criminal networks, military strategists, and international racists' (p. 4). In the context of Kabul, its potential is considerable, particularly for women and girls.

Online women's writing group, FWW, for example, depend heavily on social media to maintain group cohesion and the group's premise is to unite Afghan women across difference, time, and proximity. The focus is on what Afghan women share, so that they know they have allies who understand them. Issues of street harassment and cultural rigidities came through strongly in the interviews I conducted and so, as Wajcman (2004) explains, 'In this virtual world the tyranny of the flesh and of distance is overcome, as the old divisions of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are dissolved' (p. 58). The online space is an opportunity for embodied woman to become disembodied. The physical body which holds women and girls back is shed, and in its place are Facebook posts and Instagram pictures of their creative works expressing love, anger, political presence, and the sensual self. They testify to their presence in the world, as a form of global counter-narrative. Visual artist Jahan explains,

> The arts are growing in Afghanistan. There are artists in Afghanistan who are able to show their talent through their work. So those who are overseas should not think that there is only suffering in Afghanistan. We have artists who work hard...*I want to tell everyone, through my work, that I exist, that I'm here in a destroyed Afghanistan as a female artist, with great thoughts.* (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018, my emphasis)

Women's voice finds its platform in the digital space and it manifests as art, poetry, film, and music. The online space creates existences beyond the body and young artists leverage the connectivity it offers to transcend the local limits to their freedom of movement as young women. To narratives of victimhood or virginal piety, young Afghan women offer a response, and on a global scale.

The orientalist case for liberating women of colour under a neo-colonial logic has been argued with particular gusto. As aforementioned, Partha Chatterjee's (1993) postcolonial investigation of nationalism, for example, offers the case of Indian women under colonial rule. Chatterjee (1993) explains, 'By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country' (p. 118), while simultaneously signalling the superiority of the coloniser. The same can be seen in more contemporary examples, such as that of Afghan women and by extension, Afghan culture. It was six years into Taliban rule in Afghanistan when the US found new interest in Afghan women's liberation, suggesting

that their involvement was one of self-interest. The language and perspectives around this intervention are complex. Stabile and Kumar (2005), for example, see this response as 'a cynical ploy – it served as one of the pillars on which elites sought to sell the war to the US public' (pp. 765-766). Noorjahan articulates the no-win situation that this logic places on Muslim women when considered against the expectations of their own communities as being 'caught between a rock and a hard place. You either confront sexism in your Muslim community and be used by Islamophobic right-wing crazies or you don't confront it and be oppressed by your Muslim brothers. And those are not choices' (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017).

Afghan women, like Spivak's (1988) articulation of Indian women caught between the demands to be pious women at home and subjects of colonial narratives abroad, are caught between two sets of power, each demanding of them piety or victimhood. '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 modernisation' (Spivak 1988, p. 306). Already suffering from Taliban brutality, Afghan women then bore the brunt of external imperial designs, positioned between Northern representations of victimhood on the one hand and essentialising nativist conceptions of womanhood as inherently linked to male honour on the other. Crehan (2016) articulates this predicament as 'the meanings of women's actions being argued over by men, with the individual women themselves rendered mute' (p. 12).

Spivak's (1988) discussion of *sati,* or widow immolation, provides a useful example of how critique of indigenous customs through the logic of women's rights can be used in the service of colonialism, as a tool to justify intervention and as evidence of inferiority through homogenisation and essentialisation of a diverse and complex culture. In Edward Said's (2003) words, 'The modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished' (p. 121). The accounts of *sati* in the Northern imagery, also analysed by Uma Narayan (1997), 'not only erases its temporal context but also blurs other important contextual features of the practice with respect to its variations across class, caste, religion, and geographical location' (p. 49). The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was for Afghan women what *sati* has been for Indian women, an anchor to justify imperialist aspirations, codify brown bodies as barbaric, present Afghan culture as static over time and maintain

the hegemony of Northern epistemologies, or what Mohanty (1991a) calls the 'the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship (p. 54).[36]

Kabuli art offers alterity, complexity, and nuance to established structures of knowledge. Reference to subjugated knowledges by Foucault (1980, p. 81) helps articulate the weight of universalist knowledges that *Kabuli* artists, particularly women, contend with in their efforts to speak. Through the silencing monolith of Northern modernity and its privileging of reason, emerges the voices of the local. As Jahan explains, 'The Arts is a fighting mechanism. What we can't express in words, we express through arts and drawings' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). The artists represent the subjugated knowledges, 'those disqualified from the hierarchy of knowledges and sciences' (Foucault 1980, p. 82), now globalised through social media and which offer a rich tapestry of counter-narratives. Sahar, activist and FWW contributor, further conveys her eagerness to contribute to history:

> I firmly believe that it is important that women who are in Afghanistan right now working here should definitely write. I mean I think women everywhere should write, because what we go through is going to be a part of history because people forget things. (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

FWW writer, Rohina's comments also echo Sahar:

> We just want to also document things that are happening or that have happened and just have those stories as part of our heritage, of our culture, not always to preserve it because we want to change but also to be aware of it and make people aware of it, like a lot of time people are just not paying that much attention.... (participant interview, 20 Jan 2018)

Said's insistence on the power of self-narration, mentioned earlier, is evident in these young women's accounts. Both Sahar and Rohina express the importance of writing into history their own perspectives. These perspectives will be discussed as feminist praxis in the following chapter, but they serve here to highlight the importance of testimony and the unfettering of voices that cultural production allows, as voiced by next generation female writers and artists.

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[36] See also Lata Mani (1987) who also refers to *sati* as 'the occasion for struggle over the divergent priorities of officials and the indigenous male elite' (p. 152). Spivak (1988) offers *sati* as the case to illustrate the condition of subalternity, namely the position in which Indian women are absent from discourse about them.

Art offers a means through which subjective expressions can be shared. It is the representation of selfhood. When I asked Homaira, a poet and mixed media artist, about who she imagined as the audience of her works to be, she responded,

> For my people [and] for myself, especially for myself. It's for myself because sometimes I think I am like a country…I'm like a world, yeah…and I have many people, I have many things in myself, and because of that I can say that all of my artworks are because of myself, at first. Then it's because of my people and especially for girls that they should start from something and they should never give up. (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018)

Homaira's work reflects the act of testimony and re-presentation. For her, art is the means through which she can express the full complexity of her selfhood, 'like a world' within the world she inhabits. Jahan's words express similar sentiments, 'My artworks represent me. Those who know my work, know me' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). For Jahan, the art signifies the artist. The art and the artists are entwined. In the case of these Afghan women, this self-representation is more than just indulgence or curiosity, it contains within it, subversive elements. Jahan's account of art's role in subverting the *sia sarr* label reflects this. *Sia sarr* is assigned to young women in Afghanistan. Translated directly as black head or hair, it refers to the ungreyed hair of young women, indicative of youthfulness. Jahan explains,

> Another thing that has always affected women in Afghanistan is that they always say to them 'go, you are *sia sarr,* do not get involved in these issues'. In my opinion, being *sia sarr* means that your brain is inactive, there is nothing there. I believe women and girls who want to work in the area of arts, want to get rid of this stigma of being *sia sarr* and because we are women with objectives, smart and highly motivated, and we are able to showcase our talent and abilities. And I believe the arts are the only tool that we can use to present ourselves to others and this is very important for young women. (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018)

The term *sia sarr* captures a layer of disadvantage, namely youthfulness, that young women have that as married older women they shed. Through my own experience of this term, it links with valuing virginity which assumes naivete about the world, a positive trait for an unmarried Afghan girl to possess, and thus in need of male protection. Having not experienced intercourse, the *sia sarr* is both innocent and ignorant. The term therefore not only places undue value on virginity but implies that knowing sexual penetration by a

man is the path to knowing the world and to adulthood. Through their works, young women artists resist this way of defining what it means to be woman. Jahan's works, for example, challenge innocence and naivete through the use of self-portraiture, for example, which look directly back at the viewer (figure 3). They can be dark, sensual, and heavy with affect. Their voices challenge essentialising constructs of womanhood, youthfulness, and *sia sarr*, both at home and abroad.

Figure 3. Facebook post of self-portraits by Jahan (Ara Rafi 2020). Reproduced with permission from Jahan Ara Rafi.

Cultural products are an important medium through which female artists contribute to history and knowledge about them and offer shades of grey to otherwise black and white simplifications of them and their culture. Against the tide of popular (mis)representation, art offers a space for self-narration and the medium for communicating it. Jahan's reference to art captures this sentiment:

> an artist is like communication medium for the society. It's an artist who represents and builds the culture of their country. In my opinion, it is very important to have girls and women involved. Let me give you an example. Imagine a girl who is facing a lot of problems in her family life, she can choose arts, different branches of arts, as a tool to express herself. Specifically, from my experience working with my students, art is a way for them to find themselves. (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018).

Homaira also expresses the communicative role that art has for her, adding that while Kabul is 'not good for our young generation, for our people, we don't have a good security, we don't have a good economy, but the people are trying to know, to show their abilities, their feeling by art' (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018). For Homaira who refers to art as 'the language of sight, something that you see, you feel it', art is a form of self-expression

of things she is otherwise unable to express: 'with art I always want to show my feeling, my mind, my...something that is in my mind but I can't tell the people, I can't show the people.'

Through art, young women have a public presence. Co-founder of ArtLords, Omaid, adds that the public art murals addressing women's rights are, 'really changing the narrative'. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018) Though the change is gradual, as Rohina puts it 'like drops of water on a stone', it is worth the investment and signals a sense of hope for the future. More than communication for informational purposes, art thus becomes a reclamation exercise through which subject positions are shared. It identifies the role that alternative media has in contributing challenges to the 'drip, drip, drip of ideology'.

Communicating from the margins

The cultural products of *Kabuli* artists emerge from the periphery and dismantle normative narrations about them. Spivak (1988) sees the subaltern as excluded from history and their perspectives silenced. For Antonio Gramsci (1971), once the subaltern, 'becomes directive and responsible,' they become the protagonists and no longer the subaltern (p. 336).[37] The *Kabuli* artists here are not, strictly speaking, those of Spivak's conceptualisation of the subaltern. They are literate and educated and have access to global media. Yet in terms of global hegemonies, they speak from the margins. Their presence as Afghan women in Afghanistan means they must navigate representations about them as victim; voiceless or exoticized, from a position in the periphery. That they use English is symbolic of how far they must try to fit to Northern centres of knowledge to be heard. They exist in a space between subaltern and non-subaltern, complicating the category proposed by Spivak. Gramsci's articulation of the necessity for organic intellectuals suggests that a conduit is needed between the subaltern subjectivity and the dominant narratives that silence them. We have seen from artists' accounts that they are aware of media's representation of them. Challenges to hegemony, or the 'countersentence' to which Spivak (1988) refers, comes in the form of art (p. 93).

Free Women Writers, mentioned earlier, was founded by Noorjahan Akbar, developed when she noticed a proliferation of fundamentalist materials being sold by kids in the

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[37] Gramsci (1971) explains further: 'basically, if yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but an historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was responsible, because resisting a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking initiative' (p. 337).

streets of Kabul. She developed an online space to act as a source of countering the perspectives promulgated by this material. The website invites Afghan women to contribute works and read each other's work. Stories are then shared through their Facebook pages where members, as well as other global readers, can respond. Noorjahan explains that through the group, women realise that they are not alone in their struggles. This digital community creates a space for Afghan women sharing local experiences to a global audience.

> When you publish, for example, a work of art or a piece of poetry and other women say they feel the same way, that just breaks isolation. I think one of the ways that patriarchal societies are abusive towards women is by isolating them, by giving us the [impression] that we are alone in our oppression and our oppression is our own fault... I think when you write your poetry or when you share your art and other women come up and say, "hey! I know this, this is familiar to me", I think that's really empowering. (Noorjahan, participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Free Women Writers consists of an international community of Afghan women who are connected with the world around them and who have a means to contribute to the global narratives about them. Through cultural products, *Kabuli*s engage in a dialogic interaction with domination. This is particularly true of female artists whose art in physical spaces and on social media lends them visibility. They become sites of resistance, whether as physical bodies or digital personas, by being present where they normally would not be. Their art forms a protest that speaks of taboos through its creative medium, as street artist Shamsia articulates

> Art is a friendly protest, I mean it resists and also it is very friendly, you can't fight back with it, you accept it, so I mean it is a fight that you surrender to. That's why in my opinion art is one of the best ways of protest since always influence the audience the audience accepts it, *their soul listens without their body finding out*. That's why it has an effect on everyone. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

The poignancy of the affective reach, the moment of enchantment, is captured in Shamsia's words 'their soul listens without their body finding out'. Fernandes (2017a) cautions against the use of curated storytelling to cater to political and neo-liberal agendas. The proliferation of narrative making for purposes, other than to offer rich and contextualised alterities, adds to the essentialised constructions of peoples and cultures. Yet it is not simply this instrumentality that Fernandes objects to 'but rather of a utilitarian

approach to stories that seek to reduce experiences and histories to easily digestible soundbites in service of limited goals' (p. 3). Fernandes's critique that these accounts obfuscate through omission could be applied to social media posts by *Kabuli* artists too. Indeed, social media posts about life in Kabul, or an artist's latest artworks, or projects leave little room for 'the fullness and complexity of experience', advocated for by Fernandes (2017a, p. 4). The need for such accounts cannot be underestimated as they offer pertinent leverage against existing structures of power, whether contemporary neoliberalism or the legacies of colonialism. Participants repeatedly expressed their intentions to deliver a positive message to a global audience. However, *Kabuli* artists reach out to the world with their accounts of life in Kabul (and elsewhere). They represent the perspectives which present a different side, not fashioned to fit a colonial narrative. This organising across borders and connecting across distance is as important as the work being presented in these posts. As Fernandes (2017a) says, 'If we want different kinds of tropes, subjectivities, storylines, and narratives, we need new kinds of organising that is going to open the spaces for those' (p. 170). Artists' social media posts are not the products of foreign development agencies or political motivations, like those analysed by Fernandes.[38] The posts challenge the monolithic narrative structures that Fernandes critiques, poking holes, not only in Northern narratives about them but in how narratives are constructed, namely 'as prototypical narrative formula as based in conflict' (Fernandes 2017a, p. 4). Through their social media activity, artists become demystified and humanised as young people displaying their creative products, commenting on each other's works, and encouraging each other. They are reflections of 'the social networks and everyday life of the storyteller' which Fernandes (2017a) argues is missing from those created for political ends (p. 11). It is a generative process which offers alterity, rather than a reductionist narrative of conflict or victimisation. They reflect hope and optimism and the self as subversive agent. In their own way, they complicate external homogenisations by offering their own realities, replete with space to create and desire. They are the 'grassroots political organising work' that Fernandes (2017a) argues are otherwise diverted by externally mediated storytelling projects (p. 9). Nevertheless, Fernandes (2017a) argues that sources of 'soft power' (p. 9), such as storytelling, given their ability to penetrate cultural norms and define narratives, are not always utilised for giving voice. Artists find

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[38] Fernandes (2017a, 2017b) offers a considered critique of the activities of the Afghan Women's Writing Group (AWWG) and their funding source being the US State Department. I mentioned this work to Noorjahan who expressed that this is the reason why she is dubious about externally funding the FWW group.

the space to 'nurture alternative projects, forms of storytelling, and subjectivities' (Fernandes 2017a, p. 168). The proverbial big picture is textured and coloured through these contributions.

Local voices, global dialogue

In the absence of gatekeepers and formal institutions, access to art on a global level has seen audiences interact with artists and their works, bridging distance and difference. Shahnaz, a young female artist at Turquoise Mountain in Kabul, explains, 'The message that causes change is for the attention of those outside Afghanistan, because the help for Afghanistan, now and previously, didn't get to where it needed to' (participant interview, 26 Dec 2017). Shahnaz, who also has a blog, is committed to reaching out to the world. She tells me that her writings are expressed in English

> so it attracts global attention because outside of Afghanistan, most people know English and easily know what my intention of a poetry or piece I write is about that's why most of my writing is English because I want the problems to attract attention. (participant interview, 26 Dec 2017)

The desire to convey local messages to a global audience was a common theme among *Kabuli* artists. Shamsia posts digital works and photographed images of her graffiti on her social media page. She articulates this intended effect:

> My drawings will not be as effective for society if it's hanging on a wall at home so I thought to myself when my work has an idea in it, it must impact on people's thoughts, it must change people's thoughts, in this society a solution must be found. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Building on the application of Rancière's (2009) emancipated spectator from the previous chapter, which considered art's reception in the immediate locale, here the interlocutor exists thousands of kilometres away. Through social media, *Kabuli* artists identify, contribute to, and enrich global discourse. Art offers counter stories, helping to reshape, challenge, and disrupt knowledge, and make space for narratives otherwise omitted. Network theorist Manuel Castells (2004) observes, 'the more communication happens in the electronic space, the more people assert their own culture and experience in their localities' (p. 30). ArtLords' co-founder Omaid offers his perspective, reached through his travels:

I think we are the most misrepresented people in the whole world. The world really does not know about us. We are always misjudged, looked at very differently. I think there is so much room for writing about us, knowing us, and that also applies to us. The responsibility's on us to connect with the world and the people who we really are. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

The response of young *Kabuli*s to the #MeToo movement, for example, highlights their embrace of and adaption to global discourses and languages. The movement, once in Kabul, was transformed by the local in the language of global discourse and through social media speak. Figure 4 below shows an article titled '#MeToo at home and family gatherings', posted on FWW's page, shares the author's experience of social gatherings. The author (name withheld), relates to the #MeToo movement in her own context, 'There must be a level of precaution taken, even at an ordinary family gathering, to avoid experiencing the next #MeToo story', she explains.

#MeToo at Home and Family Gatherings

April 2, 2018 / FWW Admin / ✎ 0 Comment

Figure 4. Image of Free Women Writers blog article titled '#MeToo at home and family gatherings' (Free Women Writers Blog 2018), Reproduced with permission from FWW.

The hashtag has also evolved in the Afghan context to become #MeTooAfghanistan (figure 5) and #hearmetoo, such as in figure 6 depicting video of ANIM director Ahmad Sarmast on ArtLords twitter feed. Sarmast and the founders of ArtLords, Kabir and Omaid, engage with the Me Too movement in the country as allies to Afghan women, and to women

around the world, further dismantling the charge made against Afghan men as violent (further explored in chapter six). The #MeTooAfghanistan tag also has its own Facebook group which advocates against the sexual harassment experienced by the Afghan female football team. Young men like Omaid also publicly support the movement (figure 7). In another post, Jahan uses art to refer to the #hearmetoo movement and address gender violence. She speaks to a global audience about a local exhibition leveraging the global #MeToo movement which has been adapted to #hearmetoo. The #myvoicematters campaign, depicted in figure 8, reflects metonymic use of the #blacklivesmatter movement which leverages the familiarity of a global movement in an attempt to be heard. As Afghans they can relate to being a racialized minority globally and are subject to state violence at home.

Figure 5. Metoo Afghanistan Facebook post detailing the campaign (MeToo Afghanistan 2018). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.

Figure 6. Omaid Sharifi from ArtLords tweets a video with ANIM founder Ahmad Sarmast with the #hearmetoo hashtag (Sharifi 2018a). Reproduced with permission from Twitter.

Omaid Sharifi ✔ @OmaidSharifi · Mar 7

Girls mini-circus, live painting, #Attan dance, live traditional music, exhibition of paintings, distribution of #MeTooAfghanistan materials are all part of our street festival on the occassion of #WomensDay - a partnership between @unwomenafghan & @ArtLordsWorld

0:04 765 views

💬 2   ↻ 13   ♡ 57   ✉
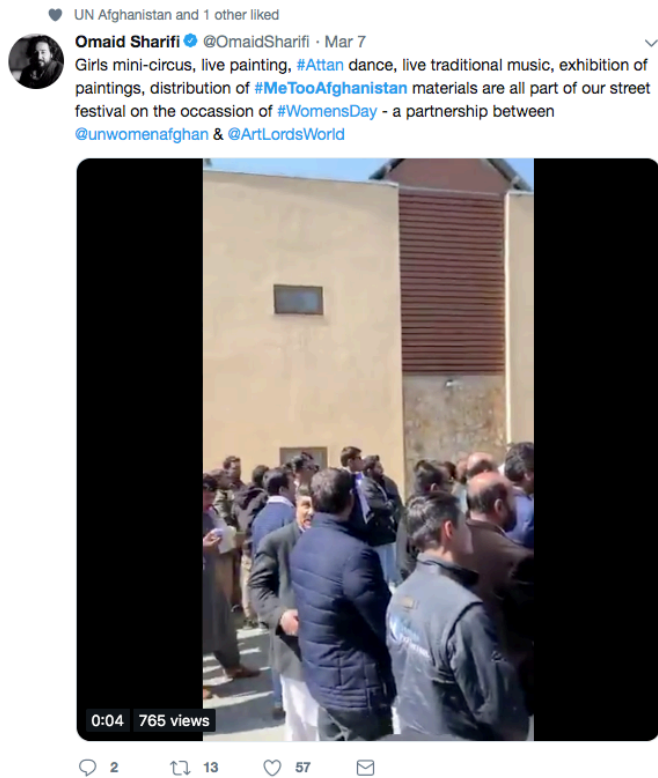
Figure 7. Omaid Sharifi twitter post with #MeTooAfghanistan and ArtLords Partnership with UN Women Afghanistan 2019 (Sharifi 2019a). Reproduced with permission from Twitter.

Omaid Sharifi ✔ @OmaidSharifi · Mar 10

Women in #Afghanistan stand for their rights and raise their voices to create the future they want. #MyVoiceMatters
A glimpse of the Street Festival for #WomensDay 1000+ people joined us for Girls circus, live painting, live music, and exhibition.

UN Women Afghanistan, Aleta Miller and ArtLords

💬 3   ↻ 4   ♡ 26   ✉

Figure 8. Tweet by Omaid Sharifi of ArtLords on International women's day 2018 with #myvoicematters (Sharifi 2018b). Reproduced with permission from Twitter.

More contemporaneously, Shamsia's work in figure 9 (below) shows a globally aware person who cares about and engages with the world. The picture is a homage to Australia's 2019/2020 fires and the devastation to homes and wildlife which surrounded discourse about climate change. Her creative dedication to Australia reflects her global connection and reach, not just as an Afghan woman in Kabul, ossified in time and place, but as Afghans in the world. Through her work she contributes actively to current global dialogue about climate change.

Clammer (2014) points to the circulation of art and ideas and the permeability of borders,

> Artistic ideas travel, as indeed do artists, and developments in one part of the world frequently have significant impact on art in another...These influences change ways of seeing, of representation, of ideas about the role of arts and the artists in society, which at a particular historic juncture may embody the form of modernism in that place and time. (p. 104)

Figure 9. Shamsia's dedication to Australia's bushfires in summer of 2019/2020 (Hassani 2020). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.

Shamsia's work is a bridge between peoples, around a common theme, with a focus on empathy over difference. Her homage to an event as distant as Australia, and empathy with the pain of losing an ecology she has never seen speaks of her own cosmopolitanism. Naweed's (2013) account of art in Afghanistan, explored in detail in the introductory chapter, reflects on the change in art praxis of young Afghans,

> ...in some ways contemporary artists convey stronger concepts and messages in abstraction through varied media. Besides dealing with subject matters that reflect the new realities of life, the artistic creations of the rising artists celebrate the changes that the younger generation wants to embrace. (p. 319)

It is through an embrace of online media, principally social media, that young Afghan artists contribute as expression of identity by bridging across time and space.

Art *re-presents* the generation of young women and men, who live within a context that is transient and transitional. The context is transient because of the unremitting diurnal presence of danger and potential for death and transitional given the breadth of identities that Kabul reflects and their interminable dialogue with the world. For young women artists, art offers a platform for voice and self-expression.

Alternative media

There is both excitement and ambivalence at the potential of internet and social media. While it connects people across the world and harbours immense potential for sharing ideas, thoughts and creativity, the ambivalence is because the digital divide has grown exponentially more complex.[39] Yet, as I have indicated, it is not uncommon to find smart phones in the pockets of most young *Kabuli*s, with access to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter accounts, along with multiple local and international media outlets. It is used prolifically by young female artists to communicate and share their art to the world. Through Facebook, I met many of them for the first time. Young artists use social media, not just to broadcast their works, but to be in dialogue with artists and others everywhere. More importantly, their artworks become a form of self- expression and a signifier of the subjective self as subversive agents. Kidd (2017) argues that social media should be considered as art, and not relegated to the categories of media or communication. 'Art

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[39] The digital divide refers to disparities in access to information and communication technology (ICT), skills in digital literacy, and differences in gender and motivations to use ICT (Antonio and Tuffley 2014, Khan et al. 2012).

refers to disciplined, creative work that may be performed by both artistic professionals and outsiders or amateurs. Art is distinguished not by its sacredness, but rather by a sense of integrity of the process' (p. 6). The definition is broad enough to capture social media. It is a democratised meaning of art which blurs the boundaries between media, art, and communication, as well as between artist and observer. This suits the contemporary age of network societies and is demonstrated by *Kabuli* artists. Increasingly, through the proliferation of online media, communities, and networks, what constitutes art and who can participate in it is becoming more and more fluid. With online mediums increasing the visibility of artworks, 'the result is a grassroots creativity operating at a scope and scale that would have been unimaginable at earlier moments' (Jenkins and Bertozzi 2008, p. 175).

For Omaid, as seen by his post and images of ArtLords headquarters in figure 10 below, art plays a pivotal role for society, and his audience is intentionally a global one. The photos in his post show well known Afghan singer Farhad Darya's visit to ArtLords headquarters. In my interview with him, Omaid explains his aspirations to me,

> I'm really thinking of being the first art organization in the country who is really connecting with artists all over the world, and then sort of engaging in different art projects around the world. Yes, the primary target is Afghans. We have a strong base here, and that will continue, but with the vision that it can grow really big. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

ArtLords reach their global audiences through a consistent and coordinated social media presence. In my own newsfeed, an ArtLords post is a moment of dissensus among the abundant news reports of conflict, death, and turmoil in the country. The alterity that ArtLords and other artists offer through their online presence adds nuance to mainstream media.
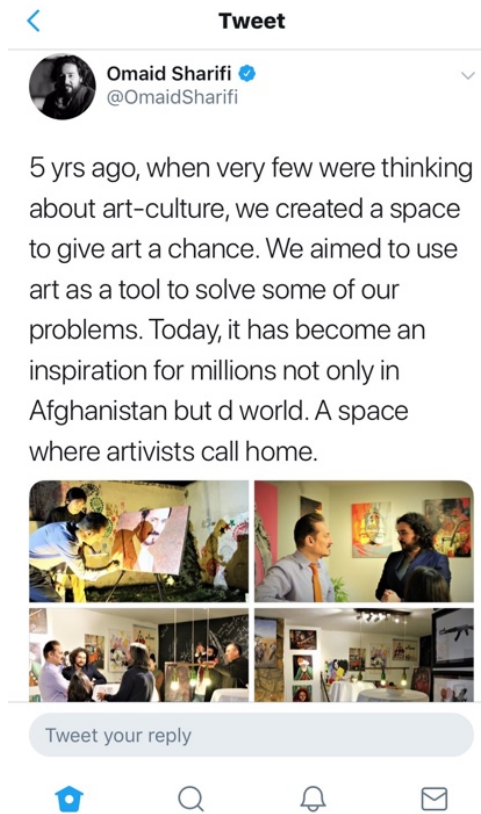
Figure 10. Tweet by Omaid Sharifi about setting up ArtLords (Sharifi 2019b). Reproduced with permission from Twitter.

Alternative media has had many definitions, from oppositional to transformational, ranging in scope between cultural studies and social theory to journalism and media studies (Lievrouw 2011). John Downing (2001) prefers the use of the term 'radical media' to draw focus to the role of non-mainstream media to contest the mainstream. 'By *radical media*, I refer to media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (Downing 2001, p. v, author's emphasis). Couldry and Curran (2003) define alternative media as 'media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations' (p. 7). Both Downing and Couldry and Curran define alternative media through its oppositional role, either political opposition in the former or as mass media opposition by the latter.

Through alternative media, subjugated knowledges can be expressed, and in the contemporary context, streamed globally. Chris Atton's (2002) approach to alternative media captures the transformatory potential of media as a medium of communication, specifically its counter-hegemonic potential. He explains, 'I define alternative media as much by their capacity to generate non-standard, often infractory, methods of creation,

production, and distribution as I do by their content' (2002, p. 4). The definition for alternative media is a broad one and is further elaborated as being, 'crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production' (p. 4). Atton (2002) develops a model of alternative media which 'encourages a hybridized field that comprises cultural (artistic, literary) practices and journalistic practices' (p. 30).

The cultural products explored in this research offer alterity to what the world witnesses about Afghanistan and its people. Atton's (2002) definition can be adapted to allow for creative expression to be considered as alternative media, combined with Rodriguez's (2001) acknowledgement of alternative media as grassroots movement and its role in identity construction. This compound conceptualisation of alternative media is a useful resource for making linkages between *Kabuli* artists and the world, particularly given the democratisation of access to media through social media sites and internet more broadly.

Atton (2002) explains that alternative media's role in enacting social change can occur at the personal level through the production process. This is in addition to the potential for discourse around a topic that they may foster:

> Position and attitude both may argue for social change at a number of levels. The change that is looked for need not be structural on a national level or supra-national level; it may be local, even individual...If the personal may be political, then the personal may be of social consequence. (Atton 2002, p. 18)

The association between social change and self-identification (Duncombe 1997, in Atton 2002, p. 18) echoes the subject position of *Kabuli* artists. Their presence on the stage of Kabul society is as important for social change in Kabul as the content of their creative products. The spectator is invited to become the producer, blurring, as Atton (2002) observes with regard to zine culture, the distinction between producer and consumer (pp. 23-24). Anyone has access to critiquing and contributing their subject position, including *Kabuli*s whose creative displays of written and visual artefacts carry an additional affective reach. Fuchs's (2010) conceptualises alternative media as critical media and captures the creative zeitgeist in Kabul:

> Critical media product content shows *suppressed possibilities of existence*, antagonisms of reality, potential for change. It questions domination, expresses the standpoints of the oppressed and dominated groups and individuals, and

argues for the advancement of a co-operative society. Critical media product form aims at *advancing imagination*, it is dialectical because it involves dynamic, non-identity, *rupture and the unexpected.* (p. 183, my emphasis)

Cultural products from Kabul express 'suppressed possibilities of existence' to the world and they do it through 'advancing imagination'. As art forms, 'their functionless character can be considered a protest against the capitalist world of instrumental reason' (Fuchs 2010, p. 188). As such, both in content (though not necessarily) and form, *Kabuli* artists' creations reflect alternative media. Fuchs's suggestion of 'rupture and the unexpected', echoes Rancière's distribution of the sensible, explored in the previous chapter, and the dissensus that art can cause, both tangibly and to the pre-conscious.

The self-projections of *Kabuli* artists through social media to the world disrupts the 'common sense' about them. Shamsia expresses the entanglement of artists in the workings of society, using the metaphor of the systems of the body which must coordinate to function:

> a society must have everyone, not just artists, like when the parts of the body, it has to have all the parts, it should have hands, it should have legs, it should have a heart, it must have everything, so that it can be complete. Now for a society to be complete it must have everything. For example, it has doctors, it has engineers, it has bricklayers, it has stonemasons, they have everything and artists is one of those things that it must have. And even now in people's lives, art is present but they don't know it themselves. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

For Shamsia, the artists position in society is part of a functioning, organic whole. It is precisely art's ability to be at once of and outside of society that permits it to contribute. Rodriguez (2001) offers insights into the complexity of the role of alternative media for its protagonists. She sees it as more than a mode for challenging mass media. For Rodriguez (2001), the alterity of alternative media reflects the personhood of its producer. She explains that alternative media 'implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies becoming one's own storyteller; regaining one's own voice' (p. 3). In the accounts of Jahan, Homaira and Sahar, mentioned earlier, their art are representations of them. By knowing their art and writing, we get to know them

and it is their cultural products that bear witness to the full complexity of their lives in Kabul and as young women.

Omaid reflects on social media in Kabul and its influence in government and policy:

> Social media is so big, it even sets agenda for the government. If something comes in Facebook in the morning about a certain issue, for example, security, or social life, or health, or anything, the moment it comes out on social media, on Facebook for example, the whole government sets their agenda... They make decisions based on those rumours, or words, or news in Facebook. It's incredibly powerful, and I think every day more Afghans, young Afghans, old Afghans, they're joining the social media... (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

In the Afghan context, social media has broadened reach and increased the frequency of interactions between artists. Social media has increased social capital. Friendship networks now include contacts overseas which in turn provide opportunities for knowledge exchange. As networked societies spurred by technological advancement, there is cross fertilisation of subjectivities, 'transcending historical limits of networks as forms of social organisation and interaction' (Castells 2004, p. 6). Shamsia helps to express this:

> When you go to social media, many people encourage my work, they are not on the streets but they are in this society and through internet they see it and the internet has a large impact so more than the artwork, the impact of its image on the internet is greater among the people. Because a person may pass by a piece and don't see it or only people who are in Kabul will see it, but when I put it on the internet, then everyone can see it. And this influence people's minds a lot. Now for example, the number of artists increases daily. And for me this is very interesting, as the situation gets worse, we get more artists. I think it is the situation that's makes one want to speak through art, I mean, in a society with lots of challenges, there is more for you to say. That's why you always have a subject, you have an idea to make artwork from it. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Shamsia's correlating the increase of artists with the abundance of social challenges highlights her own use of art as critique. Additionally, her use of spray can, her murals on public spaces and her presence in the street as a young woman provides another example of the alterity of her art practice and the subversion it represents. While her work is often

fantasy, absent of explicitly political content, it is still impactful, an example of 'content that is not explicitly political or that has an avowedly non-political content, where the processes of production enable the 'position' of the media and its producers to be radicalised' (Atton 2002, p. 23). According to Shamsia, as artists in conflict spaces, their work necessarily carries a valence that other works may not,

> when someone comes to Afghanistan or countries with difficulties, you see that there are more messages in their works. Maybe their works will be weak on technique but it has a lot of message, it's very deep in its messages, it has a lot to say, it has feeling but for example when you see the graffiti work of a *khareji* [outsider] artist, its beautifully worked that is like perfect, but it doesn't make you feel anything, you just see that it's been done well, it doesn't put you in any thought process. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Rather than observers and consumers of media, the art produced by artists reflects a dialogic contribution to audience, power structures, to global events (far from the silent victim narratives of popular culture and mass media), and as collectives who challenge the individual as an object of media and documentary construct. Where Downing (2001) refers to 'radical media', Atton's (2002) alternative media does not necessitate an oppositional character, though that is not to say none are oppositional.[40] Despite not being oppositional, the art is still alternative for its independence in production, intent, and voice. As a medium of participatory cultural production, the art produced by *Kabuli* artists is alternative, in their content, context and narrative.

Conclusion

As explored in the previous chapter, art is community forming at the local level and on the global stage, it challenges hegemonic epistemologies and established narratives about Afghans and Afghanistan. Fahmy's (2004) concluding remarks again articulate the potential of Kabul's artists in offering a counter-narrative: 'With the development of transnational mass media, and mass media structures and satellite technology in Asia the media in the US may be challenged with diverse representations and perceptions' (p. 110). I would add that in 2019, 15 years after Fahmy's analysis, internet connectivity and by

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[40] For an example of oppositional alternative media through blogging, refer to Fahmi (2009) whose study looks at Egypt's online activism and Cairo's.

extension social media can be added as an alternative media which offers, not depictions of the 'Orient', but grassroots re-presentations by them.

While some participants denied that there is an arts subculture in Kabul, the social media accounts of artists reflect personal connections beyond those formed by a group or organisation. Where an artist will post their own work, other fellow artists will comment and encourage. This online support of each other represents crucial connectivity and community. For ArtLords, social media is used extensively as a tool to communicate to the outside world. They use 'non-standard' styles in public spaces to deliver liberal, democratic, and/or feminist ideas to passers-by and to audiences globally through their social media channels.

The desire to offer alternate interpretations can be met through the creative process and delivered to the world. Yet the effectiveness of such routes of alternate narrative delivery can be justifiably questioned and may even be found wanting. How many people see posts by Kabul artists? Does it provide a counter-narrative that would disrupt dominant portrayals of Afghans? These are worthy questions and should be explored. But my contribution is not to provide this analysis, which I hope will be part of future research. Rather, I offer a deontological perspective, one centred in intentions. I offer the step directly preceding such an analysis, namely, the linkage between Kabul's creative art products as alternative media for counter-narrative.

Kabuli artists use contemporary media channels such as blogs, websites, and social media to offer counter-narratives to global mainstream media. These alternative media avenues distribute their art and their identities as *Kabuli* artists to the world. Arts existence matters for reasons to do more with the self-identity of Afghans, as Afghans in the world, than it does with the global perceptions of them.

PART TWO:

Contextualising Gender

Chapter Five:

Feminism as praxis

As a school student I used to work a casual weekend job in pharmacy. I enjoyed speaking with our elderly patients most of all. I was curious about the stories they would share. They had no idea that my curiosity sprang from having never met my own grandparents who were left behind when my family fled the war. On one occasion I was specifically requested for by one of our regular customers who confidently asked for 'the little dark girl'. To everyone but me, it was clear to whom she was referring. Until that day, I had not perceived difference and yet it had been there all along. I began to see this perceived difference in unassuming jokes, made affectionately, and the questions I was asked, heavy with assumptions, as they searched my response for confirmation.

And yet these subtle interactions during which my difference was tested and my heritage was put under a microscope, unbeknownst to me, would become even more complex. I recall a time when I would tell people I was from Afghanistan, and it would be the first time they had heard of this country. It was a blank slate upon which my footprints would be the first. I would tell them of my family who fled during the Soviet occupation, of my grandfather who was a prolific writer, poet and artist, and whose huge fountain sculpture of galloping horses once beautified the centre of Herat city where I was born. I often wondered what it might have been like to say I am from Afghanistan and it be a country familiar to all. They say be careful what you wish for. Almost overnight, as we watched our television screens portraying planes flying into the twin towers, everybody became an expert. Suddenly the narrative of my heritage was being inscribed for me, on television screens, political blogs, and radio commentary. Now my cultural background was met not with curiosity, as I had assumed, but with suspicion. Not only was I 'the little dark girl', but now I was dangerous too.

In this chapter I take back the narrative, embrace my difference and leverage the bicultural and liminal positionality of my standpoint.

Introduction

In this chapter I present the perspective of Afghan women artists' experiences and critiques of liberal feminism as encountered through NGOs operating in Afghanistan. In their challenge to feminism as label, participants challenge homogenisation of Afghan women and reconceptualise their agency. Their experiences cannot be reduced to one of gender alone but comprise a complex sociohistorical context which demands equally complex responses. I suggest that *Kabuli* art practice contributes to a feminism as praxis. In essence, artists 'pivot the centre', that is, they reconfigure feminism as intersubjective women's rights work (Aptheker 1989).

The task of positioning my work within the existing scholarship about women in the margins of Northern epistemologies requires caution. The use of *third world feminism* is heavily weighted with the assumptions of third world homogeneity across a diverse range of histories, cultures, and realities. It is 'that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most of if not all the women in these countries' (Mohanty 1991a, p. 53-54). While the same caution applies to Western liberal feminism too, the tendency to homogenise subaltern voices and the cultures and experiences of people of colour reflects a particular history of disadvantage and colonisation, the hierarchy of whose phraseology is normalised and therefore pervasive. As Mohanty (1991a) points out, while there is good reason to avoid homogenising Western feminism, 'it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of "the West" (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis' (p. 52). Identifying the South's tethering of feminism with Westernisation, Narayan (1997) points out a further complication from the standpoint of a woman of colour, namely, the 'suspect location…[that] our perspectives are suspiciously tainted and problematic products of our "Westernization",' and identifies, 'the attitude that our criticisms of our cultures are merely one more incarnation of a colonised consciousness' (p. 3). It was a position I was aware of throughout the interview process. My questions about feminism may be perceived as the product of my 'colonised consciousness', both by participants as well as my own reflexive process.

Having been educated in Australian institutions, and spent most of my life in Sydney, albeit embedded within the Afghan diaspora, I am aware of my own positionality and how it informs my worldview. The tendency to homogenise or to perceive marginalised women of colour through the lens of liberal feminism is not confined to Western feminists alone

(Mohanty 1991a). I understand that as an Afghan woman writing about Afghan artists still requires vigilance. Elsa Barkley Brown (1989) points out that, 'One of the central problems that confronts those of us who attempt to teach or write about non-white, non-middle-class, non-Western persons is how to centre our work, our teaching, in the lives of the people about whom we are teaching and writing' (p. 921). The nexus of cultures can be demanding and yet offer a rich multiplicity of perspectives.

Hybridity, as theorised by Homi Bhabha (1994), refers to a liminal space between cultures and identities, neither coloniser nor Other, but existing within the interstices of both and neither. Bulbeck (1998) recognises 'the major writers on hybrid identities are academics of so-called third world backgrounds now living in the West. They experience their different cultures more acutely than members of a dominant culture do, especially members of an anglophone culture living in the West' (p. 54). The liminality of identities navigating the interstitial spaces between dominant identities can be explored through the conceptualisation of hybridity, though it presupposes a reification of identities which merge to create the hybrid. I understand that hybridity has had valid critiques, but my use of hybridity here is intended as hybridisation, to highlight the active interchange between cultures rather than a reification of cultural boundaries, through time and space, and the resultant hybrids that are created when they meet.

This *in-betweenness* is like being 'caught in a time and place where our identities, our selves cannot be fixed, secured. We are caught in a zone in which we must recreate our past, our present, our future identities, as well as our imagined communities' (Singh 1994, p. 95). In these spaces, the ontologies of dominant conceptualisations can be reflexively approached, particularly those with roots in post-Enlightenment rationalism such as individuality, agency and freedom, or Western liberal feminism like gender and sexuality. Said (1994) discusses it as the 'oddly hybrid' experiences of cultures and histories which 'partake of many contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries...' (p. 15).

Feminism in Afghanistan is rooted in context, which complicates feminist discourses positioned as secular and individualistic movements. Women employ coping strategies and navigate situations which respond to the challenges they face. As Rostami-Povey (2003) explains, 'Survival strategies are deeply embedded in the material conditions of life' (p. 269). In this particular context, men and women are seen as allies in the struggle for peace through war time, even as they understand patriarchy as embedded in masculine

identities. Eisentein (2002) explains that many women from Muslim countries including Afghanistan are tired of war and 'have been sorting out their own democratic conception of Islam for decades' (p. 81).[41] This is not to take a cultural relativist stance and I am wary about cultural essentialism tarnishing the feminist agenda (Narayan 1998). Significantly, it is Afghan artists who have identified the paternalistic role that some women's rights work, such as those of NGOs, have assumed in the country. Ironically, it was through the US's support and funding of Islamic fundamentalists that gender inequality became accepted as a 'natural' attribute of Afghan culture (Schütte 2014, p. 1179). As Russo (1991) argues, 'When we cease to make women of colour fundamentally different and opposed, then I think we can work more effectively *with* women, not *for* women of colour' (p. 303, Russo's emphasis).

Feminism can be the verb without the label, a way to reconsider the lens through which Afghan women contribute to feminist epistemologies and which are equally valid to Western liberal feminist discourses. In this chapter, I discuss a progressive feminist politics which reconceptualises agency and which looks beyond feminism as identity construction to a feminism as praxis through the unprompted sentiments of the *Kabuli* artists with whom I spoke.

Problematising NGO-isation of women's rights in Afghanistan

> I think the kind of definition we want for sisterhood is that not to minimize and underestimate the local knowledge and wisdom that people have in those places and women have in our country like Afghanistan...Make it easier for them to actually have a voice and have their own authentic voice, not having to say what the certain organization is asking them to say you know...I definitely mean that it should not be with the idea of underestimating the wisdom and understanding of women in countries like Afghanistan. (Sahar, participant interview, 20 Jan 2018)

Sahar is a writer and activist, based in Kabul at the time I interviewed her. Above, she is responding to her encounters with external NGOs and their women's rights initiatives. These feminist initiatives carry assumptions springing from broader prejudices and essentialisms tied to Western narratives about Islam and Muslims (Hirschkind and

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[41] I understand that men and women experience war and violence differently. Women and girls are subjected to 'rape, forced marriage, torture, killing, fear, domestic violence, social exclusion, and separation from their home and family members' (Rostami-Povey 2003, p. 268).

Mahmood 2002). They represent the imbalance between Afghanistan and the US which become embodied in a sophisticated neo-colonialism masked as peace building. Sahar's comment above expresses an acute awareness of the undervaluing of Southern knowledges in the global North. Still she seeks a global 'sisterhood' that supports rather than hampers women's rights work in Afghanistan.[42] Women's rights have become highly politicised, particularly following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan which was framed as women's rights interventions (Abirafeh 2010). As Rostami-Povey (2007a) points out, 'Feminist rhetoric used to justify invasion has led to a near wholesale rejection of feminism in Afghanistan and has had a polarising effect' (p. 142). Founder of FWW, Noorjahan expresses how NGOs do feminist work:

> So I think even the criticism of 'you're getting paid by the US', it exists because women's right in Afghanistan have been in NGOised, they have been militarised...so if you are an Afghan woman or man, who have seen how women's right has become this public agenda, without any real change happening in the grassroots, or a lot of, or noticeable amount of change happening in the grassroots level, you would have sense of, you would question somebody who's working for women's right and I question the NGOisation of women's right in Afghanistan, I question the fact that you know the way women's right work has been done in Afghanistan is in short term projects of one year for organizations that get funding again and again and again it's like 5 or 6 organizations who get funding, who do the same project, with the same women being trained in the same things. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Noorjahan identifies the damage caused by NGOs' lack of continuous, consistent, and prolonged in-depth engagement with communities and Afghan women. Their repeated inefficacy, corruption (whether perceived or real), and alien value systems superimposed over existing structures of virtue and honour have detrimentally strengthened the link between feminism and Western intervention, often itself military, extractive and oppressive. Shahnaz, a young visual artist, told me, 'we are not interested in wearing short skirts or anything but we want the freedom that allows us to study and be educated and some of the restrictions mean that women are harassed at home and outside and this impacts the mind of a person a lot' (participant interview, 26 Dec 2017). Graffiti artist

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[42] See McLeer (1998) for a discussion of a global feminist sisterhood which bridges Western and Indigenous feminisms.

Shamsia notes 'for me, freedom is the freedom of a person's mind, people's minds must be freed, not that they must reveal their hair and go around, this isn't freedom. Or to wear free clothes, that's not freedom, freedom is in the mind' (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018). Both critique gender equality as being based on superficial appearances. Both young women dismiss modesty as a central concern keeping them from freedoms. Short skirts and revealed hair, as representation of Western liberal feminism's contribution, do not provide the answers to their desire to be educated and safe.

The approaches to addressing gender equality in Afghanistan stem from the 'cultural dissonance between values advocated by many Westerners and those that Afghan women fight for (based on tradition, culture, religion etc) …. particularly where this has involved sanctioned aid' (Barakat and Wardell 2002, p. 910). These approaches are contrary to the values expressed by participants. In a conversation about NGOs in Afghanistan, writer and poet Shireen highlights a perceived duality:

> I don't want to be from either group, I don't want to be someone who profits in the name of women and I don't want to be from a group who sits completely quietly... (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

She later clarifies for me that many NGOs have made great profits through the cause of women's rights, resulting in more harm than good. Shireen identifies two typifications of women in Afghanistan that hamper their cause. The first she says are those women who sit silently, either they are unable or unwilling to speak out against injustice. The other type of women use the language of women's rights but actually exploit women. Shireen says that some NGOs utilise the case for Afghan women for personal benefit with very little of those benefits reaching the intended communities. Clearly suspicious, she adds,

> The projects that are taken, the work that is done, either from the Ministry of Women or by women who have NGOs in the name of women, all of this is a type of corruption, in reality nothing reaches Afghan women and this itself makes me very upset, that I see those women who talk about rights, exploit those rights. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

Through her writing, Shireen distances herself from both typologies, explaining that she recognises the importance of speaking out about issues but not necessarily with external groups and programs. Beath, Christia and Enikolopov's (2013) study of the effects of development programs mandating female participation across 500 Afghan villages found

that more entrenched female roles in the family, and society more broadly, were left unchanged. Whether real or assumed, Shireen's two options speak to the situation of women's rights in Kabul; one either profits from women's rights work or becomes a victim of it ('sits completely quietly'). The third option, which Shireen prefers, is more subversive - the work of women's rights for and by Afghan women.

Noorjahan emphasises the importance of Afghan feminism as done by Afghan women,

> We really have to listen to Afghan women and let Afghan women be drivers of that [feminism], which is not happening right now. I think a lot of work in Afghanistan right now, especially around women's rights but in every field, is very very donor driven and not necessarily driven by the needs and reality of the people we claim to serve. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Noorjahan's comment also speaks to a disconnect between Afghan women's rights work and women's needs. She seeks a feminism shaped by Afghan women responding to their realities but identifies instead one shaped by donor priorities. Noorjahan resides between the US and Afghanistan and is US educated. She ensures that her volunteer run organisation, Free Women Writers (FWW), is not funded by external sources as she feels this would compromise women's voices. This mistrust is explicit in Sahar's comment too when she discusses Western influences in the country,

> Their kind of feminism is we go and we free women in the Middle East, we free women in countries like Afghanistan and we give them voice and we try to help them.... Like what I'm trying to say is that it actually makes it more difficult for the local voices to actually come out and be there...My problem is that if you are coming with the idea that you are coming to Afghanistan or Middle East or Asia to liberate women from this country, then this is a problem. (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

Sahar's comment expresses a resistance to being 'freed', seeing the incursion as hampering works rooted in context. Liberation narratives employ imperialist discourses of protecting Afghan women as justification for war and which devalue Afghan women's agency. Stabile and Kumar (2005) highlight, 'The historical narrative of Afghanistan's record on women's rights is selective and does not examine Afghan women's own struggle for equal rights' (p. 774). This heightens mistrust of foreign intervention, military or otherwise, muddying the waters for women's rights campaigners in the country, 'by rendering women the passive grounds for an argument aimed at imperialist domination, the discourse of protection

used by politicians and media alike – like the very fundamentalism it purported to attack – denied women any agency in the decision-making process that affected their everyday lives and futures' (Stabile and Kumar 2005, p. 770). That Afghan women are shaping their own responses to local gender inequality should come as no surprise and yet it is not uncommon to find representations of Afghan women in the global North depicting ahistorical subjects (Khan 2001). Sahar speaks about the legacy of feminist work and is acutely aware of its erasure from Northern epistemologies and considerations,

> To me I am a bit critical of when feminism is only seen from the Western world, Western women, white women. It bothers me because I have seen how my mother and generations before them, the other women, though they were really, really limited…they didn't have a definition for what they were doing, but they were real feminists and they were pushing for changes and they had very limited power that they had within that…I don't know what to call it but… (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

Sahar denies that her mother and the generations before her were the 'younger sisters' of Western women, an analogy offered by Sinha in a discussion of the British and Indian women between the 1870s and 1930s (Sinha in Bulbeck 1998, p. 24). As Khan (2014) puts it, '…the desire to save the oppressed Afghan woman disregards the fact that she and her sisters, mothers, and grandmothers have spent decades resisting the violence and dislocation resulting from decades of war and conflict. In a sense they are veteran resistance fighters…' (p. 107). Yet the discourses and approaches that shape women's rights work in Afghanistan do not account for this complexity. Sahar's perspective contests a linear narrative model of women's rights and highlights the contextualised response to local issues. As Bulbeck (1998) notes 'a simple developmental logic from 'backward' to 'modern' does not describe the history of women beyond the West, any more than it captures the history of Western women' (p. 44).

Kandiyoti (2009) identifies three strands in the types of discourse around women's rights in Afghanistan. These include those that occur between Northern Feminists and public intellectuals, those that occur between UN agencies and various donors through which top down global prescriptions are meted out, and finally those that manifest between local actors such as clerics, NGOs, parliamentarians, and the media. She explains that unlike the absence of gender awareness elsewhere, 'In Afghanistan, by contrast, I found myself in a situation where there was an abundance - even excess - of analysis and commentary, descending, at times, into "gender chatter"' (Kandiyoti 2009, p. 1). Gender conversations

have been usurped by external and internal players for political gain. Even if this is merely perception, Afghan people may still think that feminism is a strategy for further Western incursions. Barakat and Wardell (2002) explain that Western aid organisations, 'rather than seeking genuinely to understand and harness the traditional mechanisms that women have established for leadership in the past' have employed a one size fits all approach (p. 911). Women's rights have become the battleground between neo-colonialism and its insistence on superimposing Western style democracy and internal nationalist responses adopting protectionist agendas as a way to guard against imperialist cultural colonialism. As Eisenstein (2002) says, 'Afghan women walk the tightrope between too traditional and too modern while neither choice is one of their making' (p. 92).

The legacy of having being excluded from feminist discourse and being the object of speech (Ayotte and Husain 2005), adds to the suspicion against NGOs. The next generation Afghan artists both reject the label of feminism and own it at the same time. Sahar talks about feminism in Afghanistan as having always been around, though not labelled feminism,

> We still don't have a definition or a name for it [feminism in Afghanistan], but it definitely is there. I think it's very unfair to like especially for women like us who are now not only dealing with the issues inside the country, but also, we are struggling to find our voice outside and try to make others understand that it's not that these concepts are given to us or these ideas as the female power, woman power is given to us. We understand it, we fight for it and all of that I think it's our responsibility. It's very unfair for us to close our eyes and be like 'no we just got it from 2001 or after 2001'...I think it's very unfair we are actually not seeing the power of Afghan women who are actually fighting with the limited resources that they have. They don't understand, they don't have a name for it, they don't have a definition and of course they are not, I mean my mum could not fight like me. I cannot fight like her. It's a different timing, different opportunities, and all of that. What I try say is they have done their part not knowing what they were doing actually I think or not having, I mean maybe not having a definition for it. (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

For Sahar, the praxis of feminist work predates its labelling as such. That feminist work that sits outside of NGOised women's rights work is not recognised as feminism further indicates the centrality of Northern epistemologies in defining what constitutes feminist

work. 'For the majority of people in Afghanistan women's rights is not just about challenging male domination, it is also about challenging the imperialist domination, militaristically and economically, as well as culturally' (Rostami-Povey 2007b, p. 308). Kandiyoti (2009) adds, 'When it came to gender issues this discontent had the additional bonus of carrying the charge of being Western and therefore alien' (p. 6).

Not that kind of feminist

Sujatha Fernandes (2017b) explores the use of storytelling in the service of neoliberal and US imperial agendas. Funded by the US State Department and founded by an ex-staffer of the US Embassy in Kabul, Fernandes points out that the inception of the Afghan Women's Writing Project (AWWP) was a result of a leaked confidential memo calling for Afghan women's stories to manipulate public opinion in favour of military interventions. She explains, 'The entanglements between the US State Department and a women's creative writing project in Afghanistan are part of a history of alignments between imperialist interventions and the language of feminism that scholars have referred to as colonial feminism', (p. 644). The utilitarian use of women's narratives brings them into the fold of US narratives about them. Presenting them as voiceless victims erases their struggles and resistance.[43] The actual realities of these women are far more complex. Fernandes (2017b) gives the example of an Afghan writer, Marzia, whose account to a public audience and private account contradicted each other. The first was positive about US-intervention and the second, a poem, 'spoke about the realities of the experience of war' (Fernandes 2017b, p. 662). The two accounts reflected a 'strong disconnect between her discourse of women's improved lives and her poetic account of how war is leading to violence and poverty and contributing to the power of warlords' (Fernandes 2017b, p. 662). This disconnect can be seen in the feminist agenda too (Eisenstein 2002).

Western liberal feminists, in the US in particular, have depicted Afghan men as dominant and traditionalist (Rostami-Povey 2007b), and at times fetishised the *burqa*,[44] equivocating it simplistically with the oppression of Afghan women. This position neglects the US's own contribution ignoring the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan for many years and their

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[43] Zillah Eisentein (2002) convincingly argues for the incongruency of the U.S's women's agenda, arguing that it is contradictory and politically motivated, particularly when she adds, 'There is no simple position here to analyse because the [US] government's stance has continued to shift and change' (p. 86).

[44] *Burqa* is the blue face covering commonly depicted in images of Afghan women during the Taliban occupation

active support for *mujahideen* groups in the pre-Taliban period. Their turning a blind eye to the patriarchal leaning of the resistance movements becomes lost in the folds of time and foreign policy (Ayotte and Husain 2005, Basu 2010). Yet Afghan women navigate a context replete with additional challenges of conflict, poverty and hardships associated with every day survival. Visual artist Jahan highlights the precarity of life:

> The security issues make you feel hopeless, not only in the area of arts but also in general. People are not very optimistic about life in Afghanistan, and particularly in Kabul, because of constant security-related incidents, I'm talking from my own experience, I'm personally very fearful at the moment. (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018)

Concerns over the *burqa* diminish into the background of a situation in which the *burqa* is far less a threat than landmines, hunger, and warlords. While the word feminism may be tainted by virtue of its association with Westernisation, this does not translate to a rejection of its tenets. In some ways, the Kabul context epitomizes feminism as the rights for all struggle that it should be, given that patriarchy which feminism seeks to dismantle harms men too.

Feminism in Afghanistan is contextualised in conflict, cultural rupture, political and financial insecurity, social mistrust, lack of community cohesion, poverty, corruption and more. All these have heightened women's vulnerabilities (Kandiyoti 2007). Participants' perspectives on feminism were broadly varied, however, they all worked in their contexts to disrupt structures impeding their movement, their choices, and their voices. This definition of feminism focuses on feminism beyond membership of any formal or informal feminist movement, even for those who identified as feminist. They understood their feminism to be dissimilar from feminisms found in the West. Sahar and Noorjahan articulate their own analysis of liberal feminism, aware of its paternalistic tropes:

> Our oppression is obvious so at least we understand that we are oppressed, and we understand that, it's very obvious that we are oppressed but we are trying to fight about it. We are trying to change the narratives, but they [Western liberal feminists] have it, but most of them come with this mentality that 'we are not oppressed' and 'we try to liberate oppressed women', which I think makes this issue even bigger, you know, make the problem exist there for longer. (Sahar, participant interview, 2018)

...the reality is that women in the West also deal with femicide, women in the West also deal with physical and sexual violence, women in the West deal with sexual assault like women around the world and I think we sometimes, not always, some feminists pay a disproportionate amount of attention to the microaggression at the cost of forgetting about physical and detrimental and lethal aggression that many women face. (Noorjahan, participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

These women are not only critiquing Western liberal feminism in Afghanistan, but also highlighting its shortfalls for the global North. Noorjahan, explained this ambivalence about feminism's blind spot to disadvantage:

I think sometimes, and this is not a bad thing and we do need to talk about symbolic violence and covert violence against woman. But sometimes I think Western feminists can fall into this obsession with symbolic and covert violence and completely forget that women less privileged than themselves are facing overt violence...I think the risk we run, not just in Western feminism, but in feminism around the world is that the most privileged set the agenda and that's a risk and I think that can be really really detrimental to women who are less privileged... (participant interview 18 Dec 2018).

The key for Noorjahan lies in connecting Afghan women with each other. Through sharing experiences, they offer each other support and comfort. *Dokhtarana Rabia*, Rabia's girls, is a writing group founded by Noorjahan's FWW. It is an example of Afghan women talking to and for Afghan women. The approach is designed to bridge the social isolation experienced by many women in Afghanistan who may not realise they have allies in other Afghan women. The narratives are not curated for a Western audience and men's contributions are moderated. It is a space created for a specific purpose, to share stories that are relevant to the participants.

Shamsia is disenchanted with the global North. She expresses cynicism about the perception of Afghanistan in the world, articulating the world's disconnect with the Afghan experience. Implicit in her statement is the global North's perception of Afghanistan and the fetishization of the *burqa* mentioned earlier:

People who have never come to Afghanistan, and have seen only TV or have heard from people, they have seen these things and, in their minds, they have created an Afghanistan in their minds, they see two women with *burqas* and they say that's

all Afghan women, they see a couple of tents and say these must be Afghan homes...
(participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Shamsia critiques the absence of experiential knowledge. Her mention of 'people' refers to audiences in the global North who observe the spectacle of the Afghan woman. Shamsia also alludes to the homogenisation of representations of Afghan women as an imaginative construct 'in their minds'. Daulatzai (2006) refers to a 'substantial lack of current knowledge on everyday life and subjectivity of Afghans,' and questions the 'privileging of gender as the primary axis along which the experience of being a woman in Afghanistan can be understood and attended to' (p. 293). Experiential knowledges offer an intersectional subjectivity embedded in context, one rooted in the local (Crenshaw 1991). Superimposing Western liberal struggles upon Afghan women discounts their own struggles. Lugones' (2008) 'coloniality of gender' calls for a decolonising of feminism and highlights the persistence of coloniality in conceptualising what is good for the South. As Lugones (2008) highlights, 'It is only when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we actually see women of colour' (p. 4).

This was particularly pertinent in Shamsia's recounting of a trip to the US. During the trip people tried to teach Shamsia how to use an elevator or explain what a pistachio was (ironically, the pistachio tree is native to Central Asia, including Afghanistan). They did not realise that they were seeing her through a lens as a woman from Afghanistan, but it was apparent Shamsia. Despite their intentions, however well meaning, Shamsia called for empathy:

It's true that my country has fallen behind, but I haven't fallen behind you. My country is behind yours but I have not fallen behind you. When this happens I get frustrated, so I think humanity shouldn't be racist <chuckles>. When they are not racist and see all humans as humans, and see themselves without being tied to a country, for example, this person, see themselves, as a person living in a country that doesn't have an elevator or a country whose technology has not developed, put themselves in the place of the other person, right? Now, when you are in a place where things are not possible, you are still the same person as when you were in a place with possibilities, so why are you a racist? Because of things that your country has already built, but why? That's why I want humanity to not be racist.
(participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Shamsia's aversion to being shown how to use an elevator or identify a pistachio and her defensive use of the racist categorization comes from her own experience as an Afghan woman in the world and her acute awareness of how she is perceived. Shamsia justifiably sees the assumption of inferiority and superiority as racist. Shamsia's response echoes Nasrin's, from ANIM, when asked if she had any messages for the rest of the world:

> that which you think Afghanistan is, it is not, like they [developed countries] always think that it's the people...it is right that we are war ravaged, it's right that we have challenges, but they mustn't think that we are thinking of killing someone, because that's what they think about us. (participant interview, 8 Feb 2018)

Both Shamsia and Nasrin are aware of external perceptions of them. Shamsia demonstrates a cosmopolitanism and worldliness which she feels her interlocutors in the West do not expect. Her response to encounters while in the US reflect her understanding of the oppression narratives associated with Afghan women. As Rostami-Povey (2007a) explains, 'For Afghan women, the Western imperial account of their oppression is based on misrepresentation and political manipulation. The history of Afghan women's resistance and struggles against the injustices of their indigenous cultures is rich' (p. 131). The complexity around Afghan women's responses to patriarchy must contend with local pressures and global misrepresentation, in addition to Western liberal feminist expectations of individualistic agency and freedoms, which do not consider the full context[45] (Schütte 2014).[46]

My interview with Shireen highlighted the contentiousness of feminism in Afghanistan. Its negative social tropes of sexual promiscuity and unchecked freedoms sullied the important work of gender equality in Afghanistan. Shireen explains:

> Here, feminism mostly means those women who have *other types of attractions*, they call themselves feminist, or there are women who show freedom in a different sort of way...I don't know in what way they want to defend women, they call themselves feminists, but for me it has a totally different meaning and description. In my view, feminism, or women's rights in Afghanistan, with the nuances that

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[45] For a critique of liberal feminist conceptualisations of agency and choice, drawn from case studies from Japan and Bulgaria, refer to Borovoy and Ghodsee (2012). Saba Mahmood's (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject,* discusses the women's mosque movement in Egypt as a critique to secular conceptions of agency centred on Western liberal feminist discourses.
[46] For recent first hand feminist voices from women of colour, see also *Hood Feminism: Notes from Women White Feminists Forgot* by Kendall (2020) and the edited volume *Colonise This! Young Women of Colour on Today's Feminism* by Hernández and Rehman eds. (2019).

exists in this country, should be in agreement with women, they must see themselves as feminists, they should be of good character so that they can protest decently and in the right way... And unfortunately...it is also performed that way for example a young woman who is feminist mustn't wear a scarf, she must go around without decency, she must not marry, she must change her boyfriend every six months and I think this is not feminism. If we think this is feminism and a feminist should be like this, then this is completely wrong. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018, my emphasis)

Later, Shireen highlights the importance of virtue in women's rights advocates, arguing that they must be in sympathy with those that they claim to represent. Shireen's hesitation about feminism is associated with her suspicion of NGOs who she previously noted have historically misused the plight of Afghan women as a source of profit. Whether she agrees with the tethering of feminism to Westernisation or not, she must still contend with the negative attributes of feminism in the country. The feminist label becomes one that calls into question her own cultural allegiances. Arguably Shireen's wariness is strategic. Uma Narayan (1997) says, 'Many feminists from Third World contexts confront voices that are eager to convert any feminist criticism they make of their culture into mere symptom of their "lack of respect for their culture", rooted in the "Westernisation" that they seem to have caught like a disease' (p. 6). Shireen navigates this tension, continuing the work of gender equality as way of protecting herself. She explains:

I work with *Dukhtaran Rabia* or with Noorjahan - for what reason? Because I have seen in Noorjahan that decency, good character, and genuineness that she truly works for the rights of women. If it was some other women's NGO or some other group of women who advocate women's rights who wanted me, I may not work with them because I see the businesses that are going on here and I shouldn't...and this is Noorjahan's conviction that she says she doesn't want to work with any other organisation, any other project that would bad name my advocacy or to risk the decency of the process. Over here, I mentioned earlier too, that there are businesses here that, in the name of feminism, they use it for business. I can call myself a feminist but with the description that I have for myself, not with the translation and description that Afghanistan has. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

Again, Shireen identifies one type of feminism that is foreign and therefore suspect. She

imagines a feminism which is more suited to the context in which she works. Kabir, co-founder of ArtLords, makes similar observations about the need for women's rights campaigners to fit the context. He explains,

> A lot of women who represented themselves as the women representatives fighting for the rights of women and stuff, these people behave really badly and they really damaged the reputation...I mean, you see them at parties and drinking and other things. So they don't have good reputation. If you want to do something for a cause, you have to actually watch out. It's not you...but you're kind of claiming, representing a population. So they really damaged the reputation and the struggle itself. So it's kind of taken a backseat a bit, especially nowadays. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Kabir's comments come across as contentious, given that he is a man calling on women's rights campaigners to 'behave'. Yet, from our conversation, I would position his comments as strategic. His observations do not come from roots in religious piety but an acknowledgement of what the context needs. For example, when I question him about his use of religious tropes to advocate for women's rights, he explains that it is to help him reach religious conservatives: 'You have to go there and stand with them and show them' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). He points out a tension between pushing for change in a context like Kabul (Afghanistan more broadly) in which arguments perceived as Western influenced are resisted. Kabir acknowledges that there is a balance to be drawn between relating to the people you are trying to reach and pushing for change. When Kabir mentioned, 'It's not you...' in his comment above, he takes into consideration the movement as a whole, beyond the individual. Both he and Shireen express a nuanced understanding of women's rights work in the country. Implicit in both their accounts is the thin line between pushing for enough progress to better lives, but not so much that you are discredited or cast aside as too Westernised, a charge that also implies an abandonment of Afghan culture.

Rohina, an FWW contributor, outlines the social negotiation required to be impactful,

> you have to sometimes [do] that negotiation with the society, do things at certain level in their way to be able to do things our own and then come back and change that. So you are not keeping the society the same way, you are just buying time for yourself in some ways. (participant interview, 20 Jan 2018)

Rohina's navigation of her context alludes to her understanding that this labour requires some degree of finesse. Her approach is captured by how Bourdieu (1977) recognises 'the legitimacy of the dominant classification in the very fact that their only chance of neutralising those of its effects most contrary to their own interests lies in submitting to them in order to make use of them...' (p. 165).

Intentional or not, it is the absence of label that permits artists in Kabul to do contextualised feminist work. Artists can better deliver messages using the language of rights for all, virtue or 'good character'. They leave behind individualistic notions by leveraging more familiar communitarian ones. In doing so, they can contribute to constructions of Afghan-ness or us-ness that better suit them.[47] Jahan, for example, distances herself from the label feminism, while aligning her work with broader basic human rights,

> I don't have any particular views on this [feminism]. I know that it's a movement by some women to fight against problems, and issues that they are faced with in the society. They fight to get their basic human rights...Women generally fight for their rights. This can have different aspects...there are some of our artists who express this through their work. (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018)

Jahan does not equate human rights with Western rights (Bulbeck 1998, p. 69). Her usage of human rights implies the rights that all humans should have, but are denied to women. This seems simple until one realises that she has stripped this concept from its Western centric value proposition. Jahan's conceptualization, though arguably a Northern-centric construction, is nevertheless one which signifies her understanding of the inalienability of those rights. Indeed, it is arguably more universal than the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which 'in many respects applied to men's rights' (Bulbeck 1998, p. 70). Jahan continues, 'I am [feminist] but as I said I don't look at my work from only one specific dimension' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). Feminism for Jahan falls short of capturing complexity. Her art, like her feminism, is multi-dimensional and its meanings do not fit within neat categorizations.

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[47] A clear example of this is ArtLords murals that explicitly reframe Afghan masculinity, covered in the next chapter.

Composite subjectivities

The functionalist usage of feminism and its call for individual agency as a means to political ends in Afghanistan has proven contentious ground. Saba Mahmood (2005), in her ethnography of the women's piety movement in Cairo, defines agency as not just resistance to norms but how they are navigated. While Mahmood's pitting of Islam as a counterpoint to secular society is problematic (Bangstad 2011, p. 44), her suggestion of agency as beyond an 'agonistic and dualistic framework' (Mahmood 2005, p. 23) is apt. Rostami-Povey (2007b) defines agency as reflected by Afghan women's activities during the Taliban regime. Even during the harshest of periods, under Taliban rule, Afghan women resisted enforced seclusion and domesticity, defying conceptualisations of them as passive by continuing clandestine activities such as teaching and social gatherings and 'hiring' a *mahram*, a male relative, so that they might leave the house (Rostami-Povey 2007b, 2004). Indeed, a study of feminism in the Afghan context offers an avenue to further decolonise concepts like individual agency.

Lucas (2018) responds to calls for individual agency by third wave feminists, by arguing that without context and acknowledgement of power relationships, it is problematic to expect a forceful independent feminist subject. An agency modelled around a self with minimal or no attachment fails to account for the impact of structures of subjugation and marginalization. 'Individual "empowerment", as a result, is usually achieved in bad faith and is the prerogative of the already privileged' (Lucas 2018, p. 124). In her analysis of women's agency and terrorism, Auchter (2012) articulates agency as theoretically and practically problematic because 'the way agents are defined acts to exclude certain individuals from possession of agency' (p. 125), as in victim narratives about Afghan women. Conversely, the capacity to create meaning in generative and relational ways lies in the dialogical relationship between self and society, as the ontological foundation of agency. There is no purely agentic individual.

Agency is not absent nor redundant in the Afghan context, but the centrality of individuality and conceptualisations of freedom require some level of historicity and context. Looking at feminism after September 11, Eisenstein (2002) points out, 'context matters before women's agency can be known' (p. 90). As Sahar, above, suggested, Afghan women's work in navigating patriarchy has pre-existed the Western world's (namely the US and its allies) politically driven interest in them. Despite the failure of many development initiatives and constructions of oppression narratives, Afghan women have

always employed social and cultural tools to shape their worlds (Abirafeh 2009, p. 30, in Schütte 2014).

Without giving up aspiration for agency or freedom as a feminist agenda, it is possible to conceive of freedom in ways other than as individual ones dependant on an agonistic agency or a reified binary between subversion or submission. Weir's (2013) conception of freedom encompasses the practice of belonging or connection, 'to a defining community in which one feels supported to explore and to strengthen one's relationships to one's ideals' (p. 336). Freedom, more carefully nuanced in context, acknowledges the individual in community as intersubjective agent without the cultural essentialist trap of immuring women within their own cultures. Being a devout Muslim and struggling for gender rights or existing within an Afghan context while advocating social justice for women do not reflect contradictions for Afghan women. As Rahman (2017) says, 'It is within this "borderland" that they [Afghan women] begin to negotiate their gendered identity' (p. 183).

Through art, next generation Afghan women re-inscribe what it means to have agency by employing affect to relay subjectivity to the communities with whom they share a turbulent history. That is not to argue that there is no agency in the individual, but that it exists in plurality and in relation to others. This challenges the foundationalist, common sense conception of autonomous individual agency. By conceptualizing the self in socio-historical context, 'we can change structures from within through the collective interplay of narratives: we can recognize, rearrange and reframe norms through the collective creation of meaning' (Lucas 2018, p. 125). Approached in this way, art in Kabul, particularly as creations by next generation *Kabuli* women, represents an invitation to collective meaning making. Creative artefacts as unique world views, suggest ruptures to the common sense and constitute the subject's unique agency as constructed intersubjectively. Lucas (2018) further elaborates, 'an agent's uniqueness allows her to create meaning from a point of view that is hers and hers alone. New norms (which are articulated and reproduced through narratives) arise out of the exercise of narrative agency by each individual member of a plurality' (p. 126). This selfhood is one borne of community.

Yin's (2018) theorising of non-Western selfhoods contrasts the Western 'multi-dimensional individual identity' to 'shared collective identity' (p. 193). She argues that Western individualism, even in postmodern theorising, is unable to conceptualise the self

in non-Western cultures in which social networks are central to a person's identity. Though postmodernism challenges the sovereign immutable self, by offering innumerable options for construction of self, it perpetuates individualism and reinforces the 'individual-social binary…[making] it impossible to conceptualise a self-concept that is sensitive to social solidarity, communal good and equity and justice' (p. 198). Yin (2018) further argues that in non-Western societies, individualism does not form the ontological and epistemological foundations of the self (p. 195). As such, 'It is necessary for non-Western peoples and cultures to go beyond Western paradigms and embrace their own cultural traditions in their quest for self-understanding, self-definition and self-assertion' (Yin 2018, p. 195). In the Kabul context, Yin's (2018) articulation of alternative forms of self-ness, those not rooted in Western paradigms of individualism, opens spaces for epistemologies of the South. Though, as Roy (2018) points out, the west-non-West comparison of Yin's argument reinforces overly-reified binaries depicting vast peoples (both Western and non-Western) as homogenous groups,[48] she nevertheless proposes an argument for constructions of identity positioned within social networks – rather than in spite of them - that serve well in contexts like Kabul. Rather than forgo a notion of selfhood, the self is constructed as 'individual-in-relationship, or the person-in-community' (Yin 2018, p. 204).

Narrative agency for Benhabib (1999) is a conceptualization of agency which precedes individual identity formation and refers to the most basic capacity for sense making. Applied to Kabul, narrative agency reflects the positioning and articulation of the artists in this study within their society's structures of power, which shift in time and space. As identities in dynamic interaction with their societies, *Kabuli* artists challenge individual centrality. They function intersubjectively with others, articulating their internal and external realities which include complex conflict situations in which poverty, violence and political and economic upheaval plays as much a role as patriarchal structures. This narrative agency accounts for participants' fighting for women's rights in Afghanistan is a project with many moving parts, in dialogue with men. It is the 'web of interlocution' between members of a society. 'Narratives, [which] cannot have closure precisely because they are always aspects of narratives of others' (Benhabib 1999, p. 348). Importantly, the narrative agency model approaches identity construction as responsive and as changing

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[48] Yin (2018) touches on this issue when she explains that, 'It is mistaken to assume that the present project is seeking for one global non-Western notion of the self…this article strives to promote interactions and dialogue among non-Western cultures through comparative research on non-Western cultures. One can easily find common themes among diverse and culturally specific non-Western visions and versions of the self' (p. 214).

in time, echoing Lucas (2018) who defines narrative agency as a mutable 'I' in relation to others which paves the way for narrative identity construction. It challenges the cultural and social stagnation attributed to the global South (Narayan 1997, Mbembe 2001).

Yet the attribution of community strength to marginalised communities is a symptom of the Orientalist binary of self versus society (Bulbeck 1998). Problematising individual agency is not intended to pit one against the other. Rather, the complexity of the systems of oppression result in complex bonds and relational social dialogue. Singular subjectivity and its idealist roots in the global North are not universal (Fowlkes 1997). The individual is in dynamic, complex, and relational dialogue with society through coalition building. This process is not unique to Afghanistan, but manifests in a dynamic uniquely Afghan. Afghans navigate 'complex domination', through a 'standpoint of intersubjectivity', a convergence of subjectivities that construct meaning, challenge norms, and create room for alterity (Fowlkes 1997, p. 107).

Composite subjectivities are identity's articulation of ideological elements encountered experientially. In Kabul, this articulation, as a linking between responses to local challenges and global feminist discourses, has a temporal necessity which may unlink to respond to new encounters if required. This application of Stuart Hall's approach to articulation as ideology construction,

> ...enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position. (Hall in Grossberg 1986, p. 53)

Kabuli artists do not see this moment in contemporary Afghanistan as isolated but in continuity with its recent and distant past. As Bulbeck (1998) explains, 'The requirement to confront the oppression of not only themselves but also their menfolk commends community action to some women activists' (p. 68). Next generation *Kabuli* women advocate for women's rights while expressing empathy with Afghan men as also having endured war. Shamsia, for example explains, 'men and women, all of them, the society that live in this country, all of us have the same problems. It is true that difficulties of women are more, but men are not without their difficulties either' (participant interview, 10 Jan 208). This historicity offers a nuanced and considered approach which accounts for the legacy of war and the resultant breakdown in family and community.

Bonds of solidarity become the building blocks upon which identity is formed and agency is enacted. Rather than 'utilise the framework that has subjugated women by transforming it into a tool to be wielded in the name of feminism to achieve political emancipation' (Auchter 2012, p. 124), Afghan women seek to transform what it means to have agency by inscribing themselves as culture makers in new ways and on their terms upon their social and cultural landscapes. Agency is an ontological necessity of feminist struggles in the global North, and signals progress towards gender equality (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007 p. 20 in Auchter 2012 p. 123, Bulbeck 1998, p. 63). Its anticipated centrality in women's rights, however, has been overly reified. The tensions expressed by artists articulate the overlaying of liberal feminist assumptions over existing religious, social and cultural ones.

This agent/victim dichotomy essentialises and over simplifies women's subjectivities. By recognising and disrupting a 'fixation' with individual agency, also reflected through the Western fetishization and repulsion to the *burqa* as a counterpoint to individual agency, a space may be created where 'letting the actions speak for themselves could possibly be the ultimate act of agency' (Hudson 2016, p.202). Afghan women rupture individualistic positioning and embrace their own positionality at the same time. It is not the content of the story but rather, 'in the language of narration...one's ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and to other' (Benhabib 1999, p. 347). The narrative model of agency articulates the feminist praxis of *Kabuli* artists. As Weir (2013) concludes, 'What we need perhaps is an ideal of freedom as the condition of being supported in our care for one another, a freedom that is the capacity to participate fully in our relationships with one another, with whom and with what we love' (p. 337).

Feminism as praxis

Through her art, Homaira, a young mixed media visual artist and law student, was able to explore sexuality in general and her own sexuality in particular. Raised to see her body as a source of temptation, to be hidden from the young male cousins with whom she lived, she learnt to hate her body. Through art, she became able to appreciate the physical form of both the female body and the male body:

> When I started drawing, I hated my body actually, at first. I felt low self-esteem, for example I didn't like my breasts to grow, I did not like to have a bottom, I did not like to have a waist, for example...I recall during school, I used to play basketball and I would bind my breasts so they wouldn't grow, wouldn't show. And

how much we girls torment ourselves so that others do not torment us. These were the difficulties that were always in my mind...so when I learnt to draw, I realised that in drawing, the female body is very beautiful. And shoulders, neck, for example, hands, breasts, waist, spine, defined legs, fingers, these are very beautiful. And I became interested in this beauty and I said for how long are we to hide our beauty so that a few people won't be tormented, or tempted, what do I care if they are tempted or not, we have to live for ourselves. And slowly my views changed in relation to everything, in relation to women's bodies, in relation to men's bodies, I am not saying only women's bodies are beautiful, men also have beautiful bodies... It was a time that was very interesting and I was very confused in that year... I felt like 'why am I like this?', for example, that four years ago, I learnt what is masturbation, what is orgasm, sexual relations, what is it? (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018)

Homaira explores her sexual curiosity through the process of art making. Female sexuality is considered a taboo subject and Homaira tells me about this experience in whispers. Her caution with this subject matter reflects her navigation of what she has been told about her own sexuality. Her active engagement with such a taboo topic defies norms of virtue and piety for women. When I asked her about feminism, however, she responded with a resounding 'no', adding,

I love men! <laughing>...They [feminists] have dragged everything through filth, they come and say we are feminist. They all have husbands! They are oppressive to their husbands. Then feminists think, this is how feminists think, all the abuse that men have done on women, if they do that to men and then that's feminism. But it doesn't work that way. You must destroy the root, not come and be cruel to men. (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018).

Yet Homaira also asserted that,

You don't need to be dependent on some man or some woman, so that you would say I am a woman, I am a second sex, I am weak, I need a man. NO. I don't accept this. But yes, I accept that women, not just women but men too, do need the opposite sex because sometimes they feel sad, sometimes they need to talk, they need someone they can share their feelings with, speak to, and I feel that the opposite sex may be better able to empathise or understand. (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018).

Homaira's response to the term feminism and her own beliefs are in obvious conflict here. She believes deeply in the equality of the sexes, even as she attributes divine and separate purposes for each. At the same time, she muddies these distinctions but the essence of her convictions are inherently feminist. She approaches patriarchy, as a set of structures that limit movement, agency, and the voices of women, separately from the role of men in her life. Her praxis as a feminist does not need the label of feminism, nor does it require her to identify as feminist.

Jessica Pabon's (2013) study of female Chilean and Brazilian graffitera crews serves as a useful lens through which to explore *Kabuli* artists' responses to feminism. Through a series of interviews and extensive time spent with each crew, Pabon identifies a key difference between the Chilean and Brazilian crews. Unlike the Brazilian crew who explicitly identified as feminist and actively sought to participate in feminist movements, the Chilean crews' understanding of feminism manifested in ways that did not fit common and explicit conceptions. She argues that, in Chile, the artists themselves do not call themselves feminist, often rejecting the term outright even though their art exists in direct opposition to the highly masculinised graffiti culture, as well as in its content,. For them, argues Pabon (2013), feminism is action, not a label,

> Graffiteras perform feminist acts on the stage of everyday life when they take public space, exceed gendered expectations, raise each other's consciousness, and support one another's artistry...these graffiteras model a kind of being through doing that disrupts static hegemonic representations of what feminist movement "is" and what a feminist "looks like"...Passionately produced against static hegemonic feminist identity...[which] exemplify the future of feminist movement. (pp. 91-92)

Pabon (2013) adds, 'Their disidentification with a feminist identity and their strategic negotiations with dominant Western liberal feminist ideologies suggests that feminism is not dead despite being disowned in name, but rather exists as a "failed" politic that is kept quite alive through performances of feminism by graffiteras' (p. 92). Like Pabon's graffiteras, *Kabuli* artists have made art their point of connection and the means through which to communicate feminist messages. For groups such as Berang Arts and ArtLords, their feminist praxis centres the art, not the cause, or the feminist label. They speak to society as members, rather than as activists or feminists. As Pabon (2013) comments,

> The "work" here is not defined by the "direct" feminist action traditionally associated with feminist movement, but instead activates the ideologies of feminism through visual and lingual discourse, *through ways of being*...This dynamic reverses one mode of feminist collectivity whereby individuals gather to address an immediate yet external social concern... (pp. 103-104, my emphasis)

Many of the young women with whom I spoke responded with at least a little ambivalence, if not outright rejection, to my asking if they identified as feminist.[49] Antisa, a female graffitera interviewed by Pabon, responds to a question about gender equality and feminism in very much the same way as Homaira's comment above: 'Feminism is extreme...I am not a feminist, I believe in equality...' (Antisa in Pabon 2014, p. 102). Another of Pabon's interviewees, Gigi, explains that her art practice of graffiti in public spaces is a way of making herself appear (p. 102). Gigi, like Homaira, 'qualifies her rejection [of feminism] by using the language of feminism' (p. 102).

For Homaira, the root causes of the challenges she faces require more than demonising all men. Like Homaira, Shamsia also empathizes with men and though she doesn't explicitly reject the feminist label, she is ambivalent,

> I don't want to say no because as I said before, the female character that I have chosen in my works was because I needed a person, I couldn't do two, a man and a woman. But since I am a woman myself obviously I have some empathy/feeling for women. But I have it for men too for example I see that men in this society that the things that happen to me, happens to them too. But since men put additional limitations on women, in that way I am feminist. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

For Homaira and Shamsia, who are conditional or ambivalent about being called feminist, feminism is what they do, not how they identify. Homaira fought continuously with conservative family members who admonished her, sometimes violently, for writing poetry. Homaira and her friends caused a stir when they set up their art studio in Kabul. Neighbouring shop keepers argued that the prolonged presence of four girls in the shops would encourage loitering and unvirtuous behaviour. For the first year at least, Homaira had to deal with daily reprimands by shop keepers who claimed that they were unable to

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[49] It should be noted that not all participants fall into this category, with a portion of them embracing feminism and expressing a broad understanding of Western liberal feminist theory, which they critique from their own standpoints.

handle the task of paying rent and keeping shop and that they represented temptations that the shop keepers did not want to face. Homaira's persistence paid off and many of the shopkeepers are now their friends and more artists' studios, where young men and women coexist, have popped up in the area. When I visited these studios, I observed a level of decorum, like an unspoken agreement between artists to abide by cultural norms and in exchange be able to stay unhindered in their small artists' nooks. Arguably, their continued presence as artists in their studios has become increasingly normalised, exhibiting the fluidity of these norms. Had they taken a less diplomatic route, the group may have faced more prolonged challenges. The change initiated by these four women, using art to create a public space for themselves, represents an act of challenging gender boundaries without directly engaging feminist discourse.

Feminism in Kabul is a feminism as praxis. It is imagined beyond a label through which one self identifies or is identified as, and beyond a mass and organised movement. Rather, feminist work informs the micro and macro interactions of everyday life. As such, feminism as praxis is distinct from feminism as identity and feminism as practice. The praxis of feminism reveals the logic of gender equality, real or aspired, shaped by the everyday challenges that women in Kabul face and in continuous evolution. This is differentiated from feminism as practice which captures the intentional and premeditated act of identifying as feminist and participating in feminist movement. Feminism as praxis is a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by circumstance. Here feminism manifests as a lived synthesis, at the nexus of theory and life. In the case of Kabul's artists, this has helped them navigate their culture and history. '...The search for security is at the forefront in the minds of people, women and men alike' (Schütte 2014, p. 1185).

Gender equality work in Kabul is not perceived as feminism, given that it does not fit within the Northern traditions of work associated with feminism. It is here that the 'coloniality of gender' in defining feminist work becomes most apparent. Pabon (2013) explains that in the case of her participants, 'These graffiteras are rendered invisible as participants in, or leaders of, feminist movement because of their difference as disidentified feminist activists, third world women, and subcultural (sometimes criminal) actors' (p. 91). Combining this with Shamsia's experience as an Afghan woman in the US, mentioned earlier, what is expected of her is not feminism. Her feminist praxis is particular to the Afghan context. Mohanty says, '...suffice it to say that our definitions, descriptions, and interpretations of third world women's engagement with feminism must necessarily be simultaneously historically specific and dynamic, not frozen in time in the form of a

spectacle' (Mohanty 1991b, p. 6).

Antoinette Burton's (1992) 'history is now', speaks to the need to historicise feminism. She explains 'anyone invoking the history of feminist movements as a prelude to reflections on current feminist theory is obliged to demonstrate her/his awareness of the existence of non-Western feminist movements. Such movements were, in historical terms, co-incidental with Euro-American suffrage and other Western feminist currents' (p. 30). Art can offer a space to make visible the historicity of women's lives and to co-narrate a differently perceived future. Artists leverage the gender liminal place of art and emerge from the invisibility imposed by local context and global white noise. 'My concept of narrativity', explains Benhabib (2006), 'weakens that sharp divide [between reason and imagination] by revalorising the work of the imagination in continuing the project of culture' (p. 384). This is especially so in the case of Kabul artists who use art to construct culture and challenge widely held conceptions of what it means to be Afghan or feminist or woman, both within Afghanistan and outside. In doing so, they resist a cultural colonialism that they feel has been imported through external interventions, as bodies on the ground in the form of military personnel and through media.[50] *Kabuli* feminist praxis neither fully includes nor excludes Western liberal understandings of feminism, but rather reflects an articulation of feminist movement as contextually responsive. They employ feminist work through the art, music and writing they offer their societies, in dialogue with their societies, through the creative process without a strictly feminist discourse.

Feminism as a label is discarded as a Western construct in the *Kabuli* context, feminism as praxis in which the work, more than the identification with 'feminism', shapes the movement. To return to Pabon's (2013) observations, feminist action is 'performed without or against a named feminist identity: feminism is what they do, not how they identify' (p. 91). They approach the work they do as bettering a society impacted by war and conflict than doing strictly feminist work or engaging the discourse of gender specifically.

Conclusion

Kabuli artists shared a nuanced and considered approach to understanding gender in context, beyond the good vs evil, with us or against us, narratives prevalent in the West. Experiences with feminism through NGOs has caused a mistrust of feminist principles by

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[50] Such as Laura Bush's saving Afghan women speech in 2001 (Stout 2001). For a response to this speech titled 'Dear Laura Bush, this is not the way to help oppressed women' see Ahmed (2016).

Kabuli artists. Problematising the contextuality they have experienced with women's rights NGOs in particular, artists spoke of their need to engage with their societies. They contend with societies and cultures that have suffered through conflict and violence and navigate complex domination daily. Artists reinscribe agency in terms best explained by Benhabib's conceptualisation of narrative agency by working collaboratively with society, as converging subjectivities. *Kabuli* artists distancing of feminism as label, therefore, does not reflect a distancing of the work of gender equality.

Like Pabon's graffiteras who challenge the frameworks through which we define feminism, Afghan artists, young and female, have opted to navigate through the 'gender chatter', and on their own terms, using cultural products as their medium. For them, their feminism is based in experiential knowledges and one of praxis, a relational and dynamic navigation and dialogue with their communities. As Rostami-Povey (2007a) contends, 'They [Afghan women] want all those people who hope for gender equality, peace, security and development in Afghanistan to know that they are able to struggle against local male domination in their own way and according to their culture' (p. 129).

This chapter argues for a *thickening* of what it means to be feminist, to add to the layers of history which underpin modern day feminism. Kabul based artists echo those same sentiments that South American graffiteras in a different time and distant place articulate. Feminism is *about what you do*. To truly forward the plight of women in Afghanistan, external movements need to engage earnestly with them, and to centre the visions of the women and men already working in those contexts.

Chapter Six:

Complex Masculinity

At the height of the Taliban's occupation of Afghanistan, my aunt, now unable to oversee the school she had been the principal of for many years, began to hold clandestine lessons for girls in her basement. Living with her father, brother and husband, these men became a willing resource for her. They would answer the door when Taliban suspicions grew, ready with the next lie, utilising the language of namus* as the reason why searching the house would be dishonourable. In his letters to my mother, my grandfather would refer to flies that roamed about without purpose. Fearful that his letters were being read by Taliban authorities, he used analogy to communicate his discontent. An artist and belletrist, the poems in his letters would convey the hardships they endured under the Taliban regime.

I write this chapter for the fathers who facilitated their daughters' clandestine education during this dark period of Afghan history by working with women like my aunt, and for the men in my own family who helped my aunt teach. More recently, I write with my father in mind, who would have done the same for me had he and my mother not risked their lives to smuggle us out of Afghanistan in 1982.

Introduction

Narrative constructions of victimised Afghan women, explored in the previous chapter, necessarily require a victimiser. Historically, the conception of the Afghan man, with gun, beard, and turban, has filled this role well (and without differentiation between Muslim, Arab or Afghan). Talhami (2011) argues that while Islamophobic worldviews have utilised the image of the Muslim woman to serve their arguments, 'This reality places enormous pressure on Muslim men and women, since the former are confronting a war of ideas, while the latter are confronting a war of images' (p. 441). Orientalist discourses about Muslim men persist and have constructed a villainous monolith (Krayem 2017). Gerami (2003) expounds the importance of debunking hero and villain narratives, and though she refers to masculinity as represented in the roles of clergy or guerrilla fighter in the Iranian context, the relevance to the Afghan context is clear when she asserts, 'A beginning step is the debunking of masculinity as normative in Islamic cultures' (p. 260). News reports about the Taliban, September 11, Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and so forth, have inspired the Western imaginary to project these narratives and natures onto Afghan men with gusto. Kabul based ArtLords co-founder Omaid explains:

> Sometimes when I got outside Afghanistan, and I encounter people, and I introduce myself from Afghanistan, they can't believe I'm from Afghanistan because they have their pre-judgments. Oh, you will beat your wife, you're violent, all of those misjudgements. I think what can really change this is people like us. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

As with the catchall use of 'Islamic cultures' or 'Afghan women' as a blunt instrument for uncritical discourse, I am equally wary of essentialising Afghan men, or Muslim masculinity.[51] Mohanty (1991a) comments that, 'it is only when men and women are seen as different categories or groups possessing different *already constituted* categories of experience, cognition, and interests as a *group* that such simplistic dichotomy is possible' (p. 70). References to 'Afghan men' homogenise a complex and diverse group of people, especially given Afghanistan's ethnic and religious make up. Access to the world beyond their borders through social media offers Afghan men (and women) a smorgasbord of possibilities, while their roots in tradition and culture anchor them in the dignity and

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[51] While I refer to masculinity, I don't assume a simple binarity of gender in Afghanistan. Non-binary gender identity falls outside the scope of this chapter.

inclusiveness of community. This adds the weight of recent history; their elder relatives having been involved in the *jihad* against Soviet imperial designs or the fight for secularism. In focusing on a specific group of participants, positioned in Kabul, and who identify as artists, I avoid the simplistic dichotomy to which Mohanty refers.

In this chapter, I offer nuance to the idea of masculinity in Afghanistan, extending on the previous chapter's argument that Afghan women perceive Afghan men as also subjected to the harsh realities of war. I explore components of gender in Kabul, specifically, the concept of *namus,* and its interconnectedness with *nang, sharaf, qairat,* and *sharm,* translated loosely as honour, honour (again), dignity, courage, and shame. Translating these words into English proves an imprecise endeavour and the definitions of them in reality are complex, multilayered, and have long histories. This chapter will contribute to a broader understanding of these concepts, but these crude translations will suffice as an entry point. The meanings and translations of these concepts are by no means straightforward. *Namus* is used in the region for honour and forms an integral part of masculine identity. Its role in defining gender dynamics in Afghanistan is complex and can sever as well as serve efforts for gender equality.

Given that much of Afghanistan's troubles have been associated with a particular kind of masculinity, it is important to analyse what else Afghan masculinity may be and what in fact are men's relationships to women and to society and its troubles. The investigation of masculinity to understand patriarchy (Connell 2014b, p. 530) shows us that structures like honour may have a dual purpose, limiting men and women's movements but which can also be utilised as a tool to open barriers. Connell (2003) argues, 'patterns of gender inequality are interwoven with social definitions of masculinity and men's gender identities' (p. 4). It becomes possible to use social tools already accepted and available by employing the language of honour and religion to reconstruct masculinities. Definitions of honour, *nang* and *namus,* are reconceptualised by men and women to navigate strict gender constructs. The complexity of systems of honour provide the grey area from which change can begin. For Noorjahan, the founder of FWW, who believes it needs to be 'done the right way', change must penetrate men's spaces,

> I need men to go out, to go to your mosque, to go to your school, to go to your
> religious language centre and to talk to other men, to make the spaces that are

insanely predominantly male, to make them more feminist towards women, my space is already feminist. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Noorjahan places responsibility on men's navigating masculinised spaces, situations where women like her do not have access to and which actively exclude her.

Constructed masculinities

The articulation of gender can be better understood as having ties to region without being bound by it. Conceptions of masculinity can be approached as neither static nor as existing in any pure form. Individuals navigate diverse situations to 'create, draw on, and are implicated in networks of material and symbolic relations through which something approximating the 'local' and 'the global' are made' (Johnson, Jackson and Herdt 2000, p. 367). The changing symbolism of the beard, for example, illustrates this. When scores of mujahideen began to move to Kabul following the toppling of Najibullah's communist government in 1992, local Kabuli urbanites, who considered themselves modernisers, began to resist the import of the new mujahideen-inspired culture. Issa and Kohistani (2007) explain this difference from the *Kabulis* in 'physical appearance as they wore traditional clothes – Pirahan wa Tumban (long trousers with a long shirt) with a Pakol and Dastmal (round hat and scarf), which were the symbols of Afghan mujahideen during their armed struggle against Soviet occupation' (p. 56). These symbols, against a beardless, urban dwelling culture, reflected the meeting of tradition and modernity. But this would be too simplistic an explanation. Issa and Kohistani (2007) explain, 'The young Kabulis used to shave their beards but the older inhabitants kept theirs – as a symbol representing greatness that attracted other residents' respect for their elders *(Rish Safed)*' (p. 56, author's italics). Where once beards reflected the wisdom of advanced age, the young *mujahideen* were more likely to grow their beards as a contemporary act of allegiance to the *jihad*. Not only did the demographic of those with beards change but the symbol of the beard became one of piety associated with the logic of jihad over the wisdom associated with age. Interestingly, as a symbol of Islamic (and therefore assumed traditionalist) affiliations among the young, the beard represents a contemporary reification of religion commonly attributed to modernity (Ahmed 2013). The assumed binary between tradition and modernity are blurred and, as illustrated by the example of the beard and its shifting meaning, simple binaries of tradition and culture, especially in a place like Kabul, are redundant. Narayan (1997) calls this the 'colonialist stance', so

named because, 'it reproduces a Western tendency to portray Third-world contexts as dominated by the grip of "traditional practices" that insulate these contexts from the effects of historical change' (p. 49). Orientalist caricatures of Afghan men as either violent and excessively religious or heroic and warrior like, but no less violent, permeate the Northern epistemological imaginary. Noorjahan and Mohammad, a film maker, shared their thoughts on the 'Afghan warrior' tropes:

Noorjahan:

> We have a lot of historical context to Afghan masculinity being built around violence and it wasn't something that we just came up with on our own, there are scores of books written by British colonisers about how brave and warrior like Afghan men are. Our entire identity of masculinity in Afghanistan has been tied to war and war in itself normalises violence. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Mohammad:

> I'm curious just to understand where that glorification comes from. I wonder if this is something Afghans branded themselves as or if this is something that came from elsewhere? (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018)

For Mohammad, the Afghan warrior trope was a constructed peculiarity. Throughout our conversation, Mohammad rejected the war-like attributes of this trope, expressing his belief in a more peace-loving side to being Afghan.

Within the country, a tension persists between the competing demands of masculinity. Rostami-Povey (2007a, p. 77) identifies conflict between the norms of Afghan culture and the imposition upon Afghan men and women of an alien culture wrapped in development and security rhetoric. As a response, she adds, 'For Afghan men, only two options have been available: being engaged in the fighting and becoming more aggressive, or failing to protect and provide for their family members, which they consider as an assault on their masculine identity' (2007a, p. 132). Both imperialism and patriarchy intersect in Afghanistan, as 'the collision of tradition and modernity and unwanted changes, particularly in the status of women' (Moghadam 1993, p. 122). Many interviewees also reasoned that the lack of trust, the thirst for security by any means necessary, the turn to fanaticism and the fear of neighbours are all new behaviours. ANIM student, Nasrin, makes the following observation,

If they don't respect each other, it's because of war, it's the lasting effect of war until now for them. Like now those people who still have the effect of war, they are not kind, they dislike each other, but the future generation, it doesn't make a difference for them… (participant interview, 8 Feb 2018).

Nasrin's reference to social rupture illustrates to some degree the contextual complexity in which masculine identities are formed. Only war narratives have lasted to fill the vacuum of community, culture and identity. Amidst this break down of ties and community, Nasrin's comment suggests a hint of optimism when she talks about future generations letting go of past grievances and the 'effects of war'. Violent and nationalist narratives of defending the homeland have created hegemonic conceptions of masculinity embodied in tropes such as the soldier, fighter, or defender.[52] Kandiyoti (2009) argues that the traditional structures of honour that guided proper male behaviour have corroded,

> The disjuncture between "honour" as a normative discourse and the material realities of Afghan life are evident everywhere - in the destitution of widows reduced to begging and prostitution, in the sale of girls to settle opium debts, in the trafficking of boys and girls for sex and labour, in the gang rape of young girls by local strongmen in full view of their families. Most Afghans would recognize these phenomena not as extensions of their culture but, on the contrary, as a comprehensive breakdown of the informal rules of trust, decency, and reciprocity they would like to see restored to the lives of their communities and polity. (p. 9)

The violent legacy of the past four decades, and particularly the hypermasculinity of the Taliban regime which sought to remove women from the public sphere entirely, has ruptured the 'respect and reverence of women [which] were historically considered an important aspect of Afghan culture' (Gilani 2008, p. 54). The traditional mediums of 'employment, educative institutions and familial relationships' (Gilani 2008, p. 56) through which masculinity have been expressed in Afghan society have been ruptured. These traditional roles – Nancy Hatch Dupree (2002) calls them the 'warrior-poet: brave in battle, eloquent at the village council' (p. 979) – were not unproblematic but their breakdown has left room for hyper-conservative influences to shape a new system of

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[52] The embodiment of women as homeland, its borders and sovereignty to be defended (King 2008), was a theme that emerged in the interviews. While defence of homeland, as country and as woman, is important in conceptions of masculinity, the topic's richness necessitates deeper discussions which include the biology of reproducing the nation (Yuval-Davis 1996), conceptions of nationalism and anticolonial response in Asia and Africa and as distinct to the West (Chatterjee 1993) and the nation as the beloved (Najmabadi 1997), to name a few.

honour with ontological roots in war, political and economic uncertainty and fear. They only vaguely, if at all, echo Hatch Dupree's (2002) definition of honour in the Afghan context, as 'a positive pride in independence that comes from self-reliance, fulfilment of family obligations, respect for the elderly, respect for women, loyalty to colleagues and friends, tolerance for others, forthrightness, an abhorrence of fanaticism, and a dislike for ostentation' (p. 978). Yet honour, with its disavowal for fanaticism, is used to fanatically reject anything vaguely Western.

Masculinity, in the Afghan context, reflects a continuous negotiation of overlapping scripts. These scripts are informed by historical events, during and before the war, colonial interventions of Afghan society and culture and global circulation of Western masculinities. At the same time they contend with contemporary sociocultural expectations of honour and men's relationships with the feminine. As Gilani (2008) points out, 'Experiences of decades of extreme violence, and civil and political unrest – where death has become very unpredictable and state-instituted violence seems arbitrary – has led to a situation where masculinity is continuously being challenged and oppressed' (p. 58). Drawing attention to the geopolitics of gender, Bahri (2014) articulates the perceived foreignness of gender definitions in Afghanistan, explaining that 'Afghan men feel defensive about foreigners dictating how they should manage their families and relationships...their masculinity is a response to imported gender norms that have been part of the US-led "war on terror"' (p. 164). Bahri's interviews with young Afghan men revealed that many were staunchly opposed to gender equality and some expressed this with gusto, having attributed it to Westernisation. As Bulbeck (1998) argues, 'Indeed westernisation may be a form of castration or dismemberment, in which those who have lost their ancient history fetishize and long for a past that cannot be retrieved' (p. 51). In this case, the fetishization could be for codes of honour that signal back to what they expect gender relations to have been without Western intervention. Unlike the responses from Bahri's participants against 'feminists', the fathers of the young women I interviewed as well as the male artists I spoke to took risks to support their daughters and fellow colleagues.

Bahri's (2014) interviews conducted in 2012 with Afghan men in Kabul revealed that in their view, 'Gains for women mean losses for men' (p. 177). However, among the arts community I interviewed, gains for women represented a greater pool of creative minds contributing to shaping society and culture. ArtLords co-founder Kabir, for example, recounts a conversation he had with two young women about creative options for an

installation. He encouraged them to be creative and to consider their subject position as women in society:

> And I was saying to them, as a contemporary subject, you have these skills, they're beautiful skills, why don't you contemporize it?...That's how you get people introduced in art, that'll work on a subconscious level. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Kabir hints at ways of breaking through taboos with art by engaging symbols and by employing their subject position as women. As artists, they continue to identify as Afghan men, but employ the language of *namus* to construct socially acceptable ways of working together. Stuart Hall explains that where a domain is socially valorised - such religion in Hall's example or structures of honour in this example - then, 'Social movements have to transform it, buy into it, inflect it, develop it, clarify it - *but they must engage with it*...it is the arena in which this community has come to a certain consciousness' (Hall in Grossberg 1986, p. 54, my emphasis). Rather than ignoring social formations, like honour, religion, virginity and sexuality, male artists engage with them and consequently support women colleagues in also engaging with sensitive issues. This is exhibited clearly when Kabir suggests that the young girls use a pomegranate in their installation work as a symbol of sexuality. This may also include referring to female counterparts as sister or mother. By making the relation non-sexual, they can pose as a type of pseudo-*mahram*. They also use the cultural work as justification for collaborations across genders or explore alterity using Islamic tropes or arguments.

By thinking of masculinity as relationally constructed, its composition is responsive to the local and the global, as well as temporally and spatially dynamic.[53] In different times and different places, masculinity is constructed by intersubjective selves as response to psychosocial demands. The construction of masculinity contests the modernist approach centring the individual, and is ontologically relational. In Connell's (2005) terms,

> Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition. This holds regardless of the changing content of the demarcation in

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[53] This argument relates to composite subjectivities discussed in the previous chapter.

different societies and periods of history. Masculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation. (pp. 43-44)

Nang and *namus*, crudely translated as the honour system, helps to define the social and cultural basis of this relationship. In Afghanistan, this structure has been impacted by external and internal events.

Complex masculinities

In the Dari (and Persian) language, *nang* and *namus* are often used together as a phrase. In English, *nang* and *namus*, imprecisely translate to honour, or more accurately, imply a structure of honour. Even so, the English word 'honour' does not fully capture the meaning of *nang* and *namus*. In 1976, Meeker referred to *namus* among Turkish clans as 'sexual honour' (p. 244), distinguishing it from *sharaf* (*seref* in Turkish). Certainly *namus* is lost through sexual indiscretions of female kin, perceived or real, but *sharaf has* a much broader definition of honour, and one that I argue is closer to dignity or shame, though not excluding honour. To possess *sharaf* is to possess dignity, to have shame. As van Eck (2003) explains, 'From time immemorial, it [*sharaf*] has derived from qualities such as courage [*qairat*], reliability, honesty, and his ability to protect his possessions (his land, wife and children)' (p. 19). The two terms, *sharaf* and *namus* should not be assumed mutually exclusive. 'The two concepts [*sharaf* and *namus*], are in fact tightly interwoven. A graphic representation of namus and seref [*sharaf*] would involve two separate circles, but rather a large circle (*seref*), containing within it a smaller one (*namus*)' (van Eck 2003, p. 20).

Both *sharaf* and *namus* are constructed by community in their meaning and implementation. They require a community of observers, the collectives of tribe or ethnic group, whose opinion is crucial for the reputation of the man (van Eck 2003, Meeker 1976). The 'construction of collectivities' make reproduction of communities more than simply biological; it is deeply tied to identity. Pitt-Rivers (1965) identified honour as, 'the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society' (p. 21) and so it provides 'a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual' (p. 22). This conception of honour sees the role of society as distinguishing *namus* and *benamus*, dishonour, as pivotal and deeply intersubjective. It is between members of the collective that honour is defined, internalised, and maintained. The honour system functions much like the Foucauldian panopticon in which the potential to be spotted doing something

inappropriate, *benamusy*, is as threatening as doing it. The cultural force with which conceptions of honour are defended often outweigh the force of the law. Baldry, Pagliaro and Porcaro (2013) point out that, 'there are two existing sets of rules in Afghanistan: the rule of law and the 'informal' rule of masculine honour' (p. 368). It is the social embeddedness of masculine constructs that makes change so hard, even for men for whom change would advantage.

There is a paradox in that women are both agentic, needing to be controlled for the potential damage their behaviours may cause to masculine honour, but also non-agentic, in need of male guardianship. The woman, in this perspective, is not unintelligent, and potentially dangerous. Sahar, a writer, and activist, thinks otherwise. In an extended interview, I asked her about the dynamic between men and women and the *nang*/*namus* power structures:

> I mean I wish we had enough power to hold[54] their *nang* and *namus*, the issue is that we don't have that so we are being seen as their property, *molkehshan* [their country], *zaminehshan* [their land], k*haneshan* [their home], *heywaneshan* [their animals], everything right...Somebody else is attacking our personal space, is raping us and then the person who is our owner is being mad. Who we are here? We are no one; we are the victim and aside from that we have no other definition, an agency, a name...I think the issue of owner and *nang* and *namus* and everything is man-made and is made by men and also is in their hands. We have nothing to do there actually. (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

Sahar identifies a tension. These social formations are constructed by men, and requires men to deconstruct them. Men who hold power are also the victims of it. They must also be the catalysts of change. This would require that men cease to benefit from historical structures, particularly their role as heads of households and protectors of kin, and denounce deeply embedded structures of honour by doing so.

Far from being free of societal gender expectations, Afghan men experience restrictions that test their *nang* and therefore right to remain part of their kin groups. As Hakimi and Wimpelmann (2018) outline, 'Men are not exempted from the controls imposed on sexuality in Afghan society and by the Afghan state, even if such controls are applied somewhat differently to men than to women' (p. 2). This shift may have economic

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[54] Sahar's reference to holding power means to have enough control over the application of *nang* and *namus*

groundings as much as social and cultural ones. With precarious employment prospects, today's Kabul proves hostile to the status quo. This is particularly the case for young *Kabuli* men. They do not have the benefit of age nor the stability of employment, and status. Elders have the advantage of rank by virtue of their age in the community, yet young men carry the responsibility of looking after families (and elders). While structures of *nang* and *namus* may have benefited the older generation, these constructs have had to respond to social changes. Today, for example, educated daughters are worthy of pride not censure (Alikozai and Mohammad 2019).

Even within patriarchal honour structures like *nang* and *namus*, violence emerges out of a lack of control and a level of disorder in the country, and Kabul in particular. van Eck (2003) explains that, 'Social control is such that loss of *namus* leads to social isolation. For men who derive their status from *namus* alone, the loss of *namus* is even more dramatic' (p. 221). Violence becomes the recourse for a man who has lost control of his female kin, a disproportionate and heinous response to give the community the impression that he is actively righting a wrong or to nip talk of his dishonour in the bud. Men experience the same pressures to conform to social expectations of masculinity lest their identities as men are compromised in societies where masculine honour is tied to female fidelity (Vandello and Cohen 2003). The male members in particular, of the family must be able to remove the source of indiscretions which compromise *namus*, to project an honourable masculinity which also reflects upon the family unit. *Namus*, as sexual control, renders male kin who do not act to protect it *benamus* and *beqairat*, dishonourable and cowardly. This places extraordinary pressure on men to conform.

It is the appearance of lack of control that threatens masculinity in Afghanistan. For example, a woman's dishonour may not by itself be the cause for loss of face if the men respond swiftly to conceal it, even with disproportionately violent action. The violence would portray control. Shireen's story provides an example. A prolific poet and writer of prose, she explains that poetry is still seen by Afghan society in Kabul as the expressions of the self, and as such taken literally, 'I don't know why at first he [her husband] had such thoughts that he would think that I feel love for someone else that I wrote these subjects' (participant interview, 2 Jan 2018). She adds that while her husband was initially against her poetry writing, fearing that she was writing about unrequited love for another man, the situation has now changed, 'one of my best supporters is my husband'. As his *nang*, that she may be telling of her indiscretions to strangers, and that they may be assumed to be true (even if he knew they were not), or even that she experienced such feelings,

challenges his honour. His perceived lack of control over his wife who might appear to have divided affections would be a source of dishonour.

This fear of women's self-expression is because of the danger it poses to *namus*. As in Shireen's case, even the suggestion of indiscretion can discredit it, 'For women and girls, *namus* means chastity, while for men it means having chaste female family members. A man is therefore dependant for his *namus* on the conduct of the women-folk in his family... gossip alone can impugn *namus*' (van Eck 2003, p. 9). Losing face to an ever-present watchful community is a consistent threat. Masculinity, as with many attributes of gender and identity, is product of sociocultural, historical, and political contexts (Ouzgane 2006). The standards imposed on women to conform are produced by a fear of what is at stake, namely the rupture of masculinity, in the public eye. A woman's 'indiscretions' represent the failure of the men of her family.

State sanctioned regulations about women's dress, conduct, rights, and obligations also challenge men's control over their households.[55] The Taliban's strict policies about women's behaviour or the Mujahedeen's threatening of Afghan women (and by extension their male kin) with rape and violence are examples. The 'liberating' of Afghan women, as in the case of the Soviet occupation (Moghadam 1993) or the strategic changes during the regime of King Ammanullah Khan and his father Habibullah Khan or the Western intervention of later years, is equally problematic as it was seen by Afghan society as incursions into the private sphere. They were emasculating Afghan men by placing control of their womenfolk into the hands of unknown men of power. During the Taliban era, this emasculation also came in the form of public humiliation, arrests and threats of death for minute infractions, extinguishing the ability of men to protect their families (Gilani 2008, p. 59). More than only humiliation, these events threatened Afghan manhood through *sharam*, shame, and a challenge to *namus* (Chiovenda 2020). Additionally, the fear that a Taliban commander, or a *mujahideen* leader during the civil war period, would spot a young daughter of a household, and forcibly take her as a bride was a constant threat of emasculation. The *namus* of every man was now threatened by non-*maharam* men, non-

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[55] I refer here to the state's imposition at the micro domestic level. I acknowledge that this is a trickling down of masculinised state institutions at the meta level, or as Connell (2014b) articulates, 'Postcolonial states almost all inherited patriarchal institutions and laws from colonial empires, took over masculinised military forces or built them with Northern aid, and now operate under the shadow of superpower wealth and violence' (p. 533).

relatives, whose conceptualisation of masculinity was violence.[56] The *namus* that the Taliban propounded ruptured the previous *namus* of Afghan men. Strict codes of honour, especially those forced by the Taliban, have a pervasive way of interfering with private space and, by extension interfering with men's *namus*, the domain for which they are responsible. The same codes of honour, whether to educate women or to keep them hidden, become the source of their dishonour, when they are forced upon men. The state sets the parameters of movement and behaviour for women, and husbands are forced to comply. The *namus* structure, as top down impositions, violates its own rules of conduct, namely the strict separation of public and private spheres, where women embody the private. The state's regulation of the private sphere means that Afghan men have to become increasingly protective, to show *qairat*.

I have translated *qairat* as courage but it can also be used to mean pride, as Kabir does below. I agree with Kabir that *kokah* proves more difficult to fix into a single English translation,

> You know, you always hear about Afghan *qairat*, the pride. I actually witnessed the pride, you know. Now looks like it was a lie, but back then, it existed. One of the things which actually interested me enough to come back [to Kabul] and reintroduce these values was through art. To actually show people that we had a past, and that we were quite okay. I always say to people, it was a very poor country but a very proud one, really. And a very *kokah* one, I can't find any other words matching this in English. (participant interview, 1 Mar 2018)

Qairat is intrinsically linked to conceptions of masculinity. Manhood requires that you have the courage to do what needs to be done. To be called *beqairat*, without courage or cowardly, is a deeply emasculating and offensive suggestion. *Beqairat* is a man who does not take action when his *namus* is challenged, whether through dishonoured female kin, disrespect in a public space or failure to protect family from harm or his nation from war. In Kabir's use, 'Afghan *qairat*', he employs nationalistic logics to imply a unique type of *qairat*, which he seeks to reintroduce through art. *Qairat* has meant the courage to do what needs to be done to maintain *namus*. The removal or broadening of it as an Afghan

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[56] My father once referred to the fear he had that his daughters or his wife would be 'dishonoured' should they fall prey to Soviet soldiers or Mujahedeen fighters. His use of the term was a polite way of referring to rape and sexual abuse. It was the main reason we left the country, his duty to protect his family. His protection of us came from a sense of duty embedded in love.

trope, beyond attributes of masculinity, as the narrative of the courageous Afghan, not just the courageous man, creates room for women to be courageous too.

Kabir mentions *kokah*, which can refer to a combination of the colloquialism 'cool' and proud. They are both primarily male qualities, though they can be used for women too. Like words such as 'courageous' or 'brave' in the English language, they are typically assumed to connote masculine properties. Interestingly, in his reflection of *Afghan-ness* above, Kabir's language speaks to masculine qualities while his language around Afghanistan as a state are put in feminine terms,

> Afghanistan was our motherland. Afghanistan was referred to as mother, the mother that they sold to everyone...it's really introduction of the Islamism and this fanatic culture which came from Iran, Pakistan. And now, Afghanistan, it is actually a raped nation in every sense that you can think of...(participant interview, 1 Mar 2018)

As Afghans, as men, they needed to protect Afghanistan, women. Like Kabir who looks nostalgically at a past when, 'we had all these values', Omaid, co-founder of ArtLords, also expresses similar sentiments:

> This notion of chivalry and this *kokagi*[57], this is really part of what Afghanistan is about. Those are the lost values I would say, because the war and poverty really forced us to forget all those lost values. Right now, we really need to reintroduce those values. Chivalry, hospitality, kindness, respect, and all sorts of stuff is coming back. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

Interestingly, neither Omaid nor Kabir refer to *namus* as a value to keep or bring back. Instead they refer to a cultural vacuum, one void of chivalry, *qairat* and *kokagi*. Conversely, Noorjahan sees *kokagi* as a reflection of patriarchal and hypocritical social structures that not only does she want abandoned, but argues have never left. Noorjahan explains,

> You know like there have always been men in Afghanistan who slept around, who are, you know, *kokah*, men who then were extremely devout when it came to the women of their family and whether they could go to school or not. This hypocrisy

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[57] *Kokah* is what you are. *Kokagi* is to do *kokah* acts. It is the same relationship as polite and acting politely.

I think, again it's a marker of patriarchy more than a marker of modernism or tradition. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Noorjahan's reference is clearly different to Kabir's and Omaid's usage. Many of my female interlocutors reject, as symptomatic of sexism, the tropes that young, arguably progressive, men use as self-identification, seeking to reintroduce a chivalry, *kokagi, qairat,* the loss of which has created the current social ills. The honour system is still very much internalised, as evidenced by this difference between Kabir and Omaid's nostalgia at masculine *kokagi* as opposed to Noorjahan's. Though *Kokagi*, much like the English translation 'cool', can be used in different ways with negative or positive connotations, the participants' divergent responses do not reflect the use of the term in different forms. They each use it to refer to *kokah* masculinity, Noorjahan explicitly. This tension in the contemporary construction of masculinity reflects a complexity in Afghan society and how Afghans see their identities forming. Sharifa, whose work in government sees her navigate intensely difficult situations, offers some nuance:

Anything in the public spaces is not really your domain [as a woman]. Despite this, there is a strange sort of admiration and respect for women who are considered brave, who are considered outspoken, so there is also this fascination with women who go out there, you know, and treat men like normal human beings and have their own voice. You keep hearing, and the way it's defined here is a sexist way, they keep calling these women *mardana* – manly - right? But there is a sort of fascination and admiration for the kinds of women who are not playing that role of or not subscribing to the role of being weaker and being in need of protection. So this is an interesting and contradictory and very delicate situation here, but it's something that I have, I admit I have worked with, I have seen instances when I, being outspoken and standing up, has impressed the very traditional men in a circle because it relates to some nostalgia they have or some fascination they have with the certain image of woman... (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

Sharifa's reference to the outspoken 'man-like' woman can arguably be a description of *kokah* and she describes how she has learnt to make use of it. She creates spaces for her voice to be heard by leveraging the 'admiration and respect for women who are considered brave'. Sharifa's comment echoes the historical reverence afforded to women in Afghan society. Her position and role requires her to maintain a level of professionalism and she uses *namus* as a guide for appropriate conduct to create spaces for her to have power,

It's like a whole bag of tricks I think, as compromises. Constant negotiation. I think as I have grown up I have become more confident about who I am. Hmm and I have become less caring of what people think and it has brought me a sort of freedom because it, it allows me, I don't want to be a hypocrite right, I want to be respectful but I don't want to be a hypocrite. And a lot of times you end up being a hypocrite to be respectful as a woman in this society, as a woman who wants to be herself, you know wants to be strong, liberated and empowered. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

Sharifa's negotiation with the masculine spaces in which she works means she will abide by their ideals of womanhood, namely virtuous and modestly dressed, but she will expect to be heard in return. Her response shows an astuteness of her circumstance and she is strategic with the norms she complies with, at the same time drawing on aspects of *nang* and *namus* and men's *kokagi* to open spaces for her. Her approach begins to rupture conceptions of masculinity and femininity by employing *namus* and being *kokah*, therefore working toward normalising women in masculine spaces, just by being there.

There are two separate but related pressures on men. The first is the intangible social pressure to conform, placed upon men, and includes the risk of losing face, *sharm* and *benomusy*. The second contextual reference is the very real risk to women and girls in Afghanistan, physically and sexually. USAID's Office of Transitional Initiatives' 2005 report offered the following analysis of the insecurity in Afghanistan:

This lack of security impacts Afghans disproportionately. While all are affected, the impact upon women and girls is even more debilitating since a lack of security is considered a valid justification for restricting their movement and denying service provision and access. Moreover, security threats do not have to be imminent. With the pervasiveness of fear throughout Afghan society, even mild intimidation that creates the perception of insecurity is relatively simple to accomplish with devastating results. The mere hint that women could be at risk results in their continued homebound confinement, limiting their access to vital health and education services, discouraging voter registration and blunting opportunities for them to play a larger role in the public sphere. *Afghan men, responsible for protecting Afghan women and their honour, are sometimes powerless to counter the risks women face outside the home.* At times, the only response to

threats against women is that men ask, sometimes demand, that women stay at home. (OTI Afghanistan Program Evaluation 2005, p. 1, my emphasis)

The prevalence of street harassment along with attacks from insurgent groups create an air of constant fear. This creates a heightened masculine protectionism as a response in an attempt to protect the private sphere, embodied by the family's women and girls. Where they go, so too does the private sphere of their male kin. Shamsia explains this increasing protectionism,

> So that their wives can feel peace, since the city has become wild, men say we need to protect our wives, and so they create these things, not just create but all of society comes to believe that, 'yes, nobody should see my wife', ...that's why he tries to make a way for his wife that 'my wife shouldn't be confronted with troubles in society'. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Shamsia's comment challenges simplistic Orientalist interpretations of Afghan men's protectionism by contextualising it within the context of danger, without denying that this protectionism can be problematic. To lose a daughter to a bomb or to have her touched by a stranger on the street is the failure of her male kin, and yet each are constant and real risks. In essence, men carry the responsibility of protecting daughters, mothers, wives, and sisters in a challengingly unpredictable context. Miller, et al.'s (2008) study on the effect of daily stressors and war experiences on mental health in Afghanistan concludes that,

> The years of warfare in Afghanistan, and the civil war in Kabul in particular, exposed most of the city's population to prolonged, extreme violence. Men and women have both had to bury their dead, learn to live with their own war-related injuries or care for injured family members, and deal with the loss of their homes and possessions. (pp. 628-629)

My own experience of walking through Kabul, albeit for short periods of time with the knowledge that I would be returning home, was extremely stressful. Kabir identifies the positionality of women in the public sphere as non-rights bearing non-autonomous beings, who are publicly owned,

It can be intimidating, especially for women...I know Afghanistan males so well...[They] go with this style of hair and everything, you know, even the Taliban, I don't fear. But definitely it's completely different ballgame for women. And they are brave to do whatever they do...the past month, we've done 12 or 13 murals just women, women's rights in Afghanistan, around Kabul. When you are a woman, the minute that you leave your home, you become public. The public owns you. And it's a really terrible thing. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Here Kabir too implies the hypocrisy expressed by Noorjahan earlier as men who take liberties with their own 'style of hair' but expect women to be 'public property'. A woman's presence in the public sphere poses a risk to both her and her family. Shamsia's remark that, 'the city has become wild' captures the dangers a woman feels in public spaces.

War has changed the conceptualisation and practice of *nang* and *namus*. Survival has taken precedence, following continued conflict and violence which has become normalised (Ahmadi and Stanikzai 2018). In the absence of security, masculinity has turned into a hyper version of *namus*. That codes of conduct for men, even as benevolent sexism (Barreto and Ellemers 2005), have eroded through years of war and conflict and created a situation in which the construction of masculinity is tied to female fidelity putting pressure on both men and women to protect men, rather than on other men to act honourably to strangers – men or women. Even so, one young woman I spoke to appealed to the language of *namus* to scold a man who touched her as she crossed the road. As Ask (2005) suggests, this honour system can be navigated,

In the narrow sense, *Nang* relates to the integrity, modesty, and respectability of women and to the absolute duty of men to protect them. In its wider sense, it relates to the duty to protect the Afghan homeland. The measures used by the women to evoke deep-set habitual values of men's obligation to protect 'their' women shares a prototypical resemblance to the process of *bricolage*...The complex dialectic between honour and its contrast, dishonour, is manifest in gender interactions in Afghan tradition on different levels and modalities. (pp. 191-192, author's capitalisations)

While there is an implicit, and often explicit, curtailment of agency on the part of women in the *namus* structure, Ask's (2005) conceptualisation highlights the bringing together and navigation of social formations. Women hold male honour, almost at ransom, such as

the employment of the language of *namus* which instils a sense of shame. It is through this honour system that they can hold men accountable.

Using art

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) identifies the embeddedness of violence in conceptions of masculinity and its acceptance by women (Pilongo et al. 2016). But, as Parwez, a calligrapher, explains, 'when you go for kindness, when you go for brotherhood, the spirit of brotherhood, no one can deny this. You do not expose yourself to danger. To make change, first of all you have to exist' (participant interview, 24 Dec 2017). Parwez is a softly spoken man who enjoys being buried in books. He articulates the difficulty of change amidst the demand for survival. In his demeanour and in his appeal to kindness, he challenges the violent warrior trope of Afghan men.

Groups like ArtLords and their founders Omaid and Kabir are able to use their roles in society to model a masculinity based on art and self-expression. Omaid and Kabir's use of graffiti culture, their familiarity with the world outside of Afghanistan through their travels, their 'hipster' style, and fluency in English builds upon the access they would already have as Afghan men, making them appealing role models to the next generation of boys. They encourage young women to participate and foster an environment in which young boys and girls mix together and interact through art. Omaid explains:

> Having big murals of women on the streets of Kabul, and having female artists on the streets, climbing big ladders, and painting on these big walls. This is really challenging that narrative, that women should stay at home and just do the cooking or the washing, which is apparently happening a lot in the country. That's one way that art really brings out women and puts them at equal level with their counterparts, men in Afghanistan. This is indirectly forcing people to not think of second citizens, or second-rate citizens. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

They use their unique, and privileged, social and gender positions to access public spaces, negotiate with public offices, decide on the subject matter of their public murals, have their art recognised, and extend this to open access for women artists. Kabir explains that they have had many projects focused on women's rights. These include large murals of women and girls painted on blast walls in public spaces. They include school girls, a police

woman and one of Farkhunda who was brutally and publicly killed because a local *mullah*[58] alleged that she had burned the Quran. There is also one of Queen Soraya, the wife of the progressive King Ammanullah Khan who ruled from 1919 to 1926, and a tribute to Fatemah Qaderyan of the all-girls robotics team. There are murals addressed directly to men – the caption through the outlines of men reads, 'There are men, and then there are *men'*. Along the bottom, the caption reads, 'A courageous man is respectful to women and is a head and neck higher than other men' (Figure 11). This image is next to the name of Farkhunda inscribed in large red lettering. The word 'courageous', *baqairat*, utilises the language of honour to reconceptualise masculinity. The implication is that a man who does not respect women is a coward, and not a man. While this may reinforce gender roles, particularly one requiring masculinity be comprised of protectionism of women kin, it nevertheless employs the language and structures of honour as familiar tropes to position masculinity against violence against women.

Figure 11. An ArtLords tribute to Farkhunda in Kabul (Free Women Writers 2016). Reproduced with permission from Free Women Writers and ArtLords.

The use of masculine tropes goes to the heart of reconceptualising what it means to be an Afghan man and reshapes the definition of *qairat*. The language leverages these tropes to reach men at the level of the common sense, and begins to rupture harmful social norms. By using these familiar tropes, the mural engages on a deeper level. Kabir articulated this sentiment eloquently,

> One of the things, actually, I discovered about art, it has a soft power, you know, It's non-intrusive. And especially with visual art. Visual art does not talk to you.

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[58] Local religious leader

You feel it. It's something to do with your senses. A politician can sit there and talk to you for hours, and you won't remember much of it the next day. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

In his short stop motion film, *Star of Mariam* (2015), Mohammad portrays a young girl whose dreams of singing are symbolised by a thought bubble denoting a star and music notes (figure 12). The young girl fantasizes of singing to a large crowd (figure 13). In the other room her mother is sweeping, with a broom image in her black thought bubble (figure 14). Between the girl and her mother is the portrait of a man (figure 15). Enter a man dressed in white, presumably to denote a *mullah* or leader of some description, with a dollar sign thought bubble (figure 16). The screen turns black and white. He inspects Mariam and as he touches her, her thought bubble is torn at her feet and is swept away by her mother. Her mother and the man make an agreement. Mariam's thought bubble now matches her mother's. She attempts to sing but now the notes are gone. In the final scene, both her and her mother are sweeping (figure 17), depicting the cycle of women's subjugation.

Figure 12. Stills from *Star of Mariam* 1

Figure 13. Stills from *Star of Mariam* 2

Figure 14. Stills from *Star of Mariam* 3

Figure 15. Stills from *Star of Mariam* 4

Figure 16. Stills from *Star of Mariam* 5

Figure 17. Stills from *Star of Mariam* 6

Figures 12-17 Stills from *Star of Mariam* (Behroozian 2015). Reproduced with permission from Vimeo.

In *Star of Mariam*, Mohammad depicts the perspective of the young girl and the insurmountable challenges she faces. He also portrays the young girl's mother who is in no position to refuse the selling of her daughter. As the audience, we see the cycle which perpetuates child marriage. The short film uses affect to offer the complexities behind child marriage and how simply banning the practice will not ensure its end.[59] Like ArtLords, Mohammad employs creativity to change social and cultural structures in Afghanistan, explaining that, 'the interest to establish a new mentality and new values in the minds of the new generation of Afghanistan is what lead me to follow children's shows' (participant interview, 2 Jan 2018). When I spoke to Mohammad about it, he said, 'Our stories don't have happy endings. More often when we are women, especially if our dreams challenge norms. Fun point people pick is that the man's clothes are made of tissue paper. Some may interpret this as questioning the male persona. An unintended, yet welcome point' (personal correspondence, 15 Nov 2018). Mohammad refers to women empathetically when he employs the term 'we' to describe women's difficulties in attaining unconventional dreams. The audience for *Star of Mariam* are young parents who have the potential to change how they raise the next generation of young men and women. Mohammad spoke to me about this, '…I thought symbolic representation of death of dreams presented in third person point of view may trigger empathy in the young parents, and for the teenager who sees the undesirable outcome of loss of dreams, rebellion' (personal correspondence, 15 Nov 2018). It is pertinent that Mohammad makes use of his position as a man, through his portrayal of the plight of girls and women and through the example of masculinity that he sets, to raise awareness about girl's and women's lives. Additionally, he's producing a deeply moving piece like *Star of Mariam* contradicts the

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[59] Though of course banning this practice is absolutely essential.

warrior brute or violent terrorist depictions of Afghan men. Mohammad further expresses his support for the *Zohra* girl's orchestra,

> I think they are symbolically a massive achievement for the country so I think substantially and symbolically they mean a lot for Afghanistan, a country, not too long ago, you know ruled by the Taliban now has an orchestra, and a female orchestra at that, and I think that's a very, very meaningful, and symbolic achievement. So that interests me very much. (participant interview, 2 Jan 2018)

For Mohammad, the *Zohra* orchestra, which is formed through Ahmad Sarmast's ANIM, is 'symbolic' as it exemplifies a possible but not guaranteed future. It opens space for women to be seen, their presence to be normalised, and to be engaged in the creation and performance of arts and culture. It is 'meaningful' as it represents the achievement of women in society and the role of cultural production, but that navigate the local in a global way.[60] Both his stop motion film and the orchestra invite people into women's subjective moment, as thinking, desiring, sensual beings. Seeing women on stage, could be symbolically attributed to wider acceptance of women in public spaces. Optimistically, Mohammad explains that there is space now in Kabul for more than survival,

> You would not be able to have the opportunity to talk about movies if you lived here in 1996. As a young person you probably thought about just food. And even if food wasn't an issue, you probably cared about the length of your beard, if you were a man. I don't know what women thought of. Now you do have space, you know, people think about all sorts of things. (participant interview, 2 Jan 208)

Mohammad's comment shows him engaging with women and attempting to understand their perspective. Omaid, Kabir, Parwez and Mohammad represent a new generation of Afghan men who seek more than mere survival. The patriarchy that benefited earlier generations now imposes restrictions on them too. They use art to reach young *Kabuli* boys and girls to build peace and security, retrieve a lost sense of community and make places for girls and women. In doing so, they are also reshaping and reconceptualising

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[60] My reference here to the global refers to the international audiences that *Zohra* orchestra enjoys. As such, the orchestra works dually. Locally, it speaks to Afghan audiences of a possible future. Externally, it speaks to global audiences, presenting a different perspective challenging the 'oppressed' Afghan women through its female performers, and 'oppressive' Afghan men trope, through Ustad Sarmast who founded the orchestra and the music school.

what it means to be an Afghan man. This is achieved while remaining within the socially sanctioned norms of honourable masculinity.

Herzog and Yahia-Younis (2007) extend Kandiyoti's (1988) conception of women's patriarchal bargain to consider men's bargaining with patriarchy. Focusing on Palestinian kin-groups, called *hamulas*, they argue that marginalised men of lower status navigate a patriarchy that favours the political aspirations of older, more educated, affluent men. In doing so, however, 'bargaining reinforces the patriarchal order while redefining masculinity within the Palestinian community in Israel' (p. 580). The modification of the patriarchal structures by men in their favour, however, maintains the gender inequality between men and women. Yet these male Afghan artists navigate patriarchy so as to reconceptualise masculinity. The reverence for elders, mentioned earlier, has excluded Afghan youth keen to be involved in political and social reconstruction, as Schmeidl and Bose (2016) point out, 'In a country where power is traditionally held among elder men with socio-political standing, and where group solidarity and interests trump individual interests, youth have little agency in conceiving their future and that of their country' (p. 69). The young, male artists I spoke with have the privilege of being men, but like their female counterparts, they seek change. This potentially forms a basis upon which they can begin to understand women's demands for equitable gender and age hierarchies.

Men navigate *namus* social structures, not to continue to exclude women, but rather to broaden its perimeters to include them and so change the meaning of masculinity. Broader conceptualisations of masculinities prove advantageous for young men who can now be less violent, more creative and lead more peaceful lives and contribute to society, alongside their female kin. As Shireen explains, changes in the metropoles of the country, such as Kabul, bleed into the culture and norms for regional communities too:

> I have relations with a family that are Pashtun and often I go to the province of Logar, and I see that today, those Pashtun families have also reached the conclusion that our daughters must study, we must have clinics, we must have girl's schools, we must have streets, and in reality these things make me hopeful that if not now, then for 50 to 100 years from now, *inshallah* we will likely see great changes, even if neighbours try or progress is prevented or enlightened people are eradicated, even then these changes will slowly slowly happen. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

Padar and the politics of *namus*

My dad is a very open-minded person and has always tried to do the best for his children. He has supported us through all challenges. I'm proud of him and all my siblings because they have embraced my work. However, Afghanistan is a conservative country.

(Jahan, participant interview, 10 Feb 2018)

Padar, father in Dari, was a reference that organically surfaced throughout the interviews I conducted for this research. I found that many of the participants, particularly young women like Jahan above, attributed their successes, whether for their educational attainments or artistic recognition, to their father's support and sacrifice. This complicated conceptions of masculinity and highlighted the social and cultural challenges faced by men trying to support their daughters. I also found that the example of the father conflicted with images of Afghan men in the media and elsewhere. Fathers contend with tensions between supporting their daughters' unconventional paths, accounting for the real risks that threaten them and the weight of social pressure to 'be a man'. In the relationship between father and daughter, the tension between society's expectation and the father's love become most pronounced.

There is an undeniable entanglement of love and *namus*. Honour is practiced at the interstices between love and the social obligations of manhood. The lines between honour and dishonour become imprecise when affect enters the composition of masculinity through the figure of the father. I have argued in the previous chapter that identities are formed intersubjectively, as dynamic and responsive constructions. Fathers operate within the world and face an impossible task balancing male honour with the desire to see their daughters fulfil their aspirations. They encourage their daughters because of love. The same love propels them to protect their daughters against the violence outside the family home such as death threats and the psychological toll of constant street harassment. Street harassment, a mark of disrespect and objectification, and not unique to Kabul, leaves young women feeling humiliated. Afghan fathers, as any father, do not want to see their daughters harmed in this way.

Sharifa, who has a post in the male dominant government administration, explains that her father faced pressure when he was educating his daughters,

> My father sent us to English classes and I remember people, one of his friends telling him, what are you doing, they can barely speak their own language and you are sending them to English classes. You know like they are barely reading and writing Farsi but that wasn't true because my father taught us classics of Persian literature when we were very, very young when I was like 8 or 9 but still this guy was like, why are you doing this, to these poor kids in this winter and he said, my father said Hazrat Ali[61] said raise your children for 10 years from now, language is, English is the language of science, English is the language of today and future and I always suffer that I have to read books in translation. I don't want my children to have to do that so he is, he, he sent us; he really had a vision for us he sent us to English class when they weren't popular. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

In the face of risks to *namus,* and pressure from family and community, cases of fathers stepping in to assist their daughters offers alternative conceptualisation of Afghan men. Nasrin's story, for example, highlights the complexity of how men and women navigate honour and her ability to improvise through the constraints of her gender. Nasrin is a key member of the all-female *Zohra* Orchestra of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM). Nasrin comes from a Pashtun region outside of Kabul, near the Pakistan border. She explains the many dangers she faced by choosing to study music at an orphanage in Kabul,

> Without telling my family, I went and did the exam and then for winter break I had returned home, when a call came from the orphanage to my mother that 'send Nasrin because she has been accepted to the music school'. My mum was surprised, she was shocked, 'what, music school?! What's this?' I said to her put down the phone and I will explain, they didn't say music school they said private school[62]. So I was waiting for my father, when my father comes I will explain to them. When my father came in the evening, I said father, I have given this exam and I want to go because, I gave my reason that I have selected this because I have not seen any female musicians, and my father also liked music. In Kunar

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[61] Hazrat Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad and a key figure in Shia Islam as the rightful successor to the prophet.

[62] *Musiqi*, music, and *ghususi,* private, sound similar in Dari and could easily be mistaken for musical school or private school.

> sometimes he would play sitar, through his own interest he had learnt. He said
> well this is really fantastic that you have made this selection, that in our society
> that a girl doesn't even have this type of thought, and you have thought of it. My
> father encouraged me a lot but the entire family were against it, that no Nasrin
> must not study music. (Participant interview, 8 Feb 2018)

Nasrin's mother's reaction compared to her father's is pertinent here. Nasrin preferred to appeal to her father rather than her mother. Her father is not only supportive, but also has more power (arguably Nasrin's patriarchal bargain is accepting the father's power over the mother too). Over the years, Nasrin's uncles continued to threaten her life or her family's expulsion from their home. Nevertheless, she recounts how her father travelled with her to Kabul where she could attend music classes at ANIM and where she would be housed with other students. Her father took up odd jobs in the capital and found temporary lodging for a while. This meant that her mother was bound to the extended family's home and unable to position herself to support her daughter. Prolonged periods without her family followed, which, though difficult for Nasrin, meant that the family could pretend she did not exist. Throughout this period she would call her father for support and, like a buffer between her and her uncles, he would continue to encourage her despite the threats posed by his brothers. Nasrin's grandmother disapproved of Nasrin's music education and performance. This tension between women in the family is what Ashis Nandy (1990) has termed a 'weird expression of woman's hostility toward womanhood' (Nandy in Jackson 2010, p. 115). Yet it was the elder woman's eventual acceptance that frees Nasrin from her uncles' threats and taunts. Nasrin's conduct on stage, her modest dress, not dancing or singing, and the acclamation she achieves both globally and locally, offers her grandmother and her family an 'empowering alternative', namely, some degree of social status (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 282).

While women's actions of patriarchal compliance makes them complicit in the systems that oppress them, the conditions in which they operate are crucial (Jackson 2010, p. 113). The intersection of age, gender and status profoundly complicates simplistic unidimensional descriptions of antagonistic gender relations, as evidenced by the difference between Nasrin's mother, who in Nasrin's recounting, is a silent carer of other dependents, and her elder grandmother, whose change in opinion ceases her uncles' threats. Nasrin's mother's position is a difficult one. Caught between her husband's supporting their eldest daughter and the dependence she has on the extended family for food and shelter, she appears to opt out of the struggle. As a rational being, she makes a

decision about the welfare of her and her family (Kandiyoti 2000). Nasrin's grandmother's initial investment in and complicity with patriarchal values, her *patriarchal bargain*, is comprehensible, 'since patriarchies they [women] are subjected to are simultaneously located in specific modes of production, in class structures, and in particular forms of caste-class [or tribal] inequality' (Sangari 1993, p. 869).

Women's access to patriarchal power, as a tension between agency under subordination, reflects the *namus* system in which women are both subordinated, as well as wield some power in maintaining (or rupturing) men's identification as masculine. *Namus* becomes the locus of gender negotiation, charged with an affective valence which penetrates tradition, identity, and ties to family and community.[63]

Shireen, now a prolific writer and poet tells me that she was not always so nimble with the pen and that it was her father who encouraged her,

> My father, since my literacy was very weak, he would give me the task of, during the day whatever you do, writing it down. Then in the evening when he came, he would correct it for me. So virtually, in the form of memory records, it was a practice for me from that time. Unfortunately, from a very young age, I lost my father, and the absence of my father was a very big motivation in my life and it created a big difference from others my age in the same period of time. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

The presence and acceptance of the father lends some level of legitimacy to the daughters' actions. For Sahar, the loss of her father created complications for her. She considers, among her privileges, to have had parents who, despite being illiterate themselves, allowed her the education she wanted. At the time of our interview, barely a year had passed since she had lost both parents, seven months apart. Sahar reflects on this,

> I have been trying to figure out what I can do and what, I mean what's best for our family but also with my siblings but also trying to understand where I want to be after my program is done. Living in Afghanistan by your own as a woman has its own challenges because everything you do is considered and accepted and

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[63] Anecdotally, we grew up with stories of elder women, taking off and laying down their white silk scarfs, a light and transparent cloth often decorated intricately at the borders, at their feet to symbolise her insistence of an end to a conflict between families (read men). Her revealing her greying hair is a point of shame to the men who, by making her reach that point, have failed her.

validated by a man. Now that my father is not alive I've been thinking about that. (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

Rather than create barriers, the presence of her father removed them. In his absence, Sahar is left to navigate patriarchal systems and expectations without him. While she is capable of doing so, her father's support and backing offered some reprieve. When these women artists recounted their stories about their fathers, I could not help but share the relationship with my own father, now deceased. By supporting their daughters, they create a potential place for all women. Like Nasrin, Shireen, Sahar, Sharifa and others, even within rigid socio-cultural conditions that forbid such indiscretions, fathers find a way to create space for their daughters.

One could justifiably argue that patriarchy does not always manifest in overtly hostile forms. Benevolent sexism which, 'takes the form of seemingly positive but in fact patronizing beliefs about women' (Barreto and Ellemers 2005, p. 634) is not always perceived as being sexist but nevertheless does demand that as long as traditional gender roles of modesty and chastity are met, the female is protected and respected. Perhaps fathers would not condone their daughters' artistic aspirations if they were not chaste, pure, and fitting within traditional gender roles. Arguably, their support comes not because they recognises her sexual liberty but because they trust her to maintain her virtue. Though they risk their own *namus*, they do so by arguing, not that she is sexually free to do as she pleases but that she is so virtuous that her place in the arts will not jeopardise the kinship's *namus*. She will not bring shame to the family, wherever she is, whatever she is doing. But this is the father's patriarchal bargain and though he does not break the boundaries of communal norms, he does help his daughter to reconceptualise her gender, and his. I am not arguing that fathers don't want their daughters to fit traditional roles, but possibly their support of their daughters' creative expression, even in public, is a sincere attempt to support their daughters to change society through art. This support for their daughters reflects more than benevolent sexism. If we demand of fathers to accept their daughters' sexual liberation, then we impose Western liberal feminist norms of a society which maintains other value structures. Fathers respond to the competing demands of *namus* and *nang*, the desire to see their daughters aspire in society without being fettered by it, but also worry for the consequences of their daughters' disrepute or the very real physical danger of living in Kabul.

Conclusion

Survival and fear have played a key role in constructions of violent masculinity which have found justification in hyper-protectionist structures of honour. The historical incursions of state founded policy regulating women's movements have served to further compromise masculinities in the country.

The system of honour, *nang* and *namus*, can serve as a tool to justify hyper protectionist masculinities but can also offer the language to loosen it. Male artists such as Kabir, Omaid, Mohammad and Parwez have used their positionality and art to begin to role model, and challenge the restrictive role of women in society. Though conceptions of masculinity may be unclear, with tensions between past and present offering both opportunity and uncertainty, I argue that Afghan men in Kabul are critically rethinking about warrior and warlord tropes. As a definition framed in its relationship to femininity, by reshaping masculinity, artist stretch gender relations, norms and spaces for both men and women.

The honour system, *nang* and *namus*, and the principals that are bound to it, namely *qairat* and *sharm*, are complex and performative. As collective conceptualisations, they are open to interpretation, and reconceptualization. In their complexity, there is ground to employ conceptions of masculinity to benefit men and women. This is portrayed most clearly in the relationship between fathers and daughters. Fathers buffer their daughters from family and society, all the while working within the bounds of masculinity, for their sake and their daughters. The example offers insights into the competing demands of being a father, as man, in a context like Kabul.

Yet it is the same complexities which restrict men's and women's movements, that can be navigated for broadening gender conceptualisations.

PART THREE:

People and Place

Chapter Seven:

From the same blue planet

Though I was born in Herat, my Dari has been inevitably diluted after more than 35 years in Australia. English words sneak their way into Dari sentences and Dari sentences begin to adopt English syntax. Many of the interviews I conducted for this research brought to the fore my own doubts about my Dari speaking and comprehension. I forewarned my interlocutors so they might be ready should I request clarification. More likely it reflected my own feeling of inadequacy. Apologetically I would say, 'please forgive me, my Dari is a little rusty', and await their forgiveness. Words I had not heard of before, used in ways I could not work out would still follow. Naturally, in compiling my transcripts, I sought the help of native speakers, especially my mother, who had both retained her mother tongue and adopted English much better than I had. By now, I assumed, my Dari must reflect a hybridity that also manifests in my culture, my politics, my beliefs, and my worldview. While this hybridity is something I embrace, it has also meant losing something to gain something. Here, it has meant losing parts of my mother tongue.

It did not take long for my mother to point out that my incomprehension of certain sentences often did not reflect my language skills. Influences from diaspora returning to Afghanistan from Iran, Pakistan, India, had begun to change language use in Kabul. It was fascinating that, like opening a time capsule, my mother's Dari and my own would be so different from the Dari of my participants. The most obvious difference was the use of Iranian Persian words and grammar that had created a Dari that was new to even my mother. Kabul has become a hub of returned diaspora, a bustling city of countless rhizomatic identities. It was short sighted of me to assume that I was the only one whose culture and language would change with the years, bringing within its folds the colours and textures of the multiple cultural spaces I inhabit. I have found that the clean lines of Afghan/not Afghan were as elusive in Kabul, as they were here in Sydney. This hybridity, it turns out, is far more complex than I had anticipated.

Introduction

I come from the same blue planet. I'm from planet Earth.

(Shamsia, participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

The exploration and construction of identity, and the search to understand and define *Afghan-ness*, forms one of the key motivations for artists' art praxis. It was important to get to know the individuals behind the cultural products that have formed the thesis so far. In doing so, I begin to unpack how collective complexity intersects, interacts, and manifests in the Kabul context. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) seminal work on intersectionality provides a useful approach through which layers of identity can be considered. Crenshaw argues that features like class, gender, and race work in mutually constitutive ways to shape subjectivities and experiences in the world. It is these experiences that *Kabuli* artists share, and which offer a roadmap of their aspirations for their society.

It would be premature to argue that there is a coordinated artistic movement or scene in Kabul. Turner's (1977) conception of *communitas* best describes the arts community in Kabul since it captures the being and not being of this community. Turner (1977) frames it as 'some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties' (p. 96). What exists is a type of *Kabuli communitas,* or sense of 'we-ness' (Jenkins 2008, p. 175). This *communitas* represents a community of equals engaged in unstructured and informal means toward a common vision. They are artists who know of each other, support each other's works online or on the ground, and express a 'social bond', even if they are fragmented, as Omaid's response to my question about a *Kabuli* art scene illustrates,

> I wouldn't say an art scene. ArtLords, we have a small gallery, very, very small gallery. For example we cannot find a real gallery in Kabul, or the whole Afghanistan. People rarely go to museums. There's not theatre performances in

Afghanistan, which is one of the next things we are doing. Cinemas, there are some but they're really not family friendly or woman friendly cinemas. Music, yes, you can listen and watch through TV channels, but concerts and really those kinds of things are not happening. The art scene is really not vibrant. It was really equal to zero when we started ArtLords. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

Though a coordinated effort across individuals and groups may be absent, there is an understanding that others exist, that they should be supported. There is a shared belief in the arts as a bridge between diverse people and as a medium through which alterity can be conceived.

Kabuli artists navigate the nexus between tradition, culture, religion, 'progress', agency and community, amidst legacies of war and continuing insecurity. The tensions and opportunities between what was and what could be, in terms of identity, are negotiations they make through their art. Much of the cultural production of the participants of this study speak to Afghans inside the country, but there was always present an awareness about the narratives formed about them beyond Afghanistan's borders. Rohina, for example, explains, 'I think we are trying to authenticate a little bit more you know, just like make it real you know...not giving what they want to hear but giving what, who we are?' (participant interview, 20 Jan 2018). Being perceived and self-perception are entangled in an increasingly globalised world.

In Afghanistan, identity is increasingly allied along tribal and ethnic connections, as Ibrahimi (2017) contends, 'societies disrupted by war and state failure also experience severe erosion of trust in state institutions' (p. 15). Where Afghan nationalism is equated with 'a romanticised image of Afghanistan as developed around myths about the Pashtun tribes by the colonial and western officials and historians' (Ibrahimi 2017, p. 14), religious, cultural or linguistic deviations were assumed by elites and powerholders to have ties to various political actors. The civil war between *mujahideen* groups during and following the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan between 1994 and 2001 were a continuation of ethnic and religious divides, with various factions refusing to work together.

Ethnicity as well as religion, language and gender are dynamic and complex 'maps' of identification (Jenkins 2008). I present elements of these maps in this chapter, with the consideration that it would be more accurate to speak of one's identities, in the plural and as 'never a final or settled matter' (Jenkins 2008, p. 17). So far, I have argued for art's generative potential, that cultural products help to create and critique culture. In this

chapter, I focus on the artists themselves and how they identify, as opposed to being identified. In essence, and without reifying a concept as fluid and contested as identity, this chapter introduces these creative strangers to you, artists in a city far away, and allow you to locate them in the social mindscapes. Zerubavel (1997) describes social mindscapes as a rejection of cognitive individualism, and focuses on the 'impersonal mindscapes we *share in common*' (p. 8, author's emphasis). Our commonalities are the product of our being more than just individual but also social beings, but Zerubavel (1997) also warns, 'as we try to avoid the strictly personal, we need to be careful not to equate the impersonal with the universal' (p. 9). Artists in Kabul are also shaped by what Zerubavel (1997) terms 'thought communities' (p. 9), that is, groupings such as movements, generations or other social elements with which we can identify which are 'larger than the individual yet considerably smaller than the entire human race' (p. 9). The arts community in Kabul provides a case in point.

The subtleties of identity construction reach beyond the tangible. In their analysis of the hidden ideologies behind linguistic signs, Khan and Hare (2004) looked at 32 *Time* and *Newsweek* reports about Afghan national identity published in the two months following 9/11. Reading the text through Derridean deconstruction approaches, they argue that news reports create discourses which 'construct a concept of Afghan identity' (p. 49). Reports about the *burqa*, for example, relate to gender politics in the country,

> ...the burka [sic] as a sign has an effect on the whole discourse of this identity formation. It is associated with not only the construction of female identity but also the identity of male as well. In addition, this sign is also associated with the politics and religion of other and othering. However, when the idea that the burka [sic] is a gesture of repression is determined by an outsider (Time or Newsweek), it is perhaps carried out at the expense of ignorance of another people's culture. (Khan and Hare 2004, pp. 58-59)

Burqa fetishization and the artists' responses as feminist praxis are covered in chapter five, but the example here serves as provocation for artists who want to have a say in what it means to be Afghan and what *Afghan-ness* could potentially be, both as response to representations about them as well as contributions to their own societies. Through their art they define and stretch the boundaries of possibility. This potential, however, is challenged by ongoing internal ethnic and intergenerational tensions which intersect with religion.

Artists navigate the cultural residues of the recent past, including the upheavals of the Taliban period, the civil war between *mujahideen* factions, and the incursions of the Soviet era. Each have left their mark on the cultural landscape of Afghanistan. Today, the push and pull between competing groups and powers continue. In addition to political and economic challenges, continued instability trickles into the lives of every Afghan as cultural and social instability too. Constructions of a cultural identity, one capable of bringing the country some level of peace and unity, is difficult to image as long as ethnic tensions and gender inequality persist. Even so, artists have taken up the pen and the brush and the spray can to begin to play some role in nation building and identity construction.

In the Afghan context, the definition of identity is particularly complex. Tapper (1989), for example, explains that popular discourse in Afghanistan has three bases for identity, '*qaum*[or *qawm*], *watan* and *mazhab*...all three are ambiguous, or rather polysemic, but to varying degrees' (p. 236). Respectively, these can be translated as tribe, homeland and sect, and each intersect and can be used differently. Tapper's (1989) observations of Afghan and Iranian identities helps to foreground their fluidity,

> Cultural identities, whether ethnic or otherwise, make sense only in social contexts, and they are essentially negotiable and subject to strategic manipulations. Individuals claim status, present themselves, in different ways in different contexts. How they do so depends particularly on power relations, government policies, and local hierarchies. (p. 239)

By extension, the creation of a national identity has proven especially challenging in Afghanistan, particularly given the population's heterogeneity. Diverse ethnicities, religions, languages, and histories have clashed with centrally administered government since the reign of Amir Abdurrahman Khan in the late nineteenth century (Rasuly-Paleczek 2001). These layers of official state governance and unofficial local authority tied to ethnicity persist.

Any discussion of identity will prove to be far more complex than neat categorisations might suggest. Nevertheless, for ease of presenting, I have split this chapter up into the component parts of artists' subjectivities, the frames, and lenses through which they make meaning of the world. These themes, namely, religion, ethnicity, and the legacies of war, are not the only ones that could have been extracted, but they are certainly the most prominent. Gender also forms an integral part of identity in Afghanistan, but has been

substantively addressed in previous chapters. In the next and final chapter, *A tale of two cities*, I explore Kabul further, treating the city as a protagonist and exploring its interaction with the artists. That penultimate chapter can be approached as a continuation of the current one.

According to Hall (2004),

> One's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity. (p. 3)

Subjectivity, as the intersection of epistemology and ontology, allows us to question how we know what we know about our own existence (Hall 2004), as limited as our understanding might be.

Cultural heritage

When asked about contemporary Afghanistan, ArtLords co-founder Kabir offers the analogy of 'a dragon whose tail is in the past and the nose is in the future' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). Kabir sees a tension in contemporary Afghanistan between its ties to tradition and its push into progress. This is particularly salient given that progress often equates to Westernisation against Afghanistan's history of mistrust of outside interference. Clifford Geertz wrote in 1973,

> The tension between these two impulses – to move with the tide of the present and to hold to an inherited course – gives new state nationalism its peculiar air of being at once hell-bent toward modernity and morally outraged by its manifestations. (p. 243)

Similarly, Benedict Anderson's Janus-head metaphor captures the nationalist paradox, the nation's simultaneous pull toward modernity and antiquity (2006, p. 5). Kabir sees the same, 'It's very hard for me, to be honest and I see those paradoxes even in myself, a lot of the time'. Kabir later returns to the temporal dragon analogy when asked about culture to express its unknowability,

this is really a mishmash of everything. I don't know, really. When you look around, you can't define Afghani culture. What is Afghan culture, really? It was definable when I was growing up...Who is an Afghan, really? (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Like Kabir, film maker Mohammad's explanation of identity captures the fluidity and complexity of trying to define it,

I think that there won't be a unique Afghan identity, just like I think there won't be a unique you know, Iranian identity. I think that we are going to adapt things from our neighbourhood and they're going to adapt things from the Americans and we're going to... it's a mix and match, and I think it is true that Afghanistan does need to develop, that it does need to start that conversation... (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018)

Implicit in Mohammad's comment is an understanding that Afghan culture will inevitably be touched by external influences, whether desirable or not. Kabir's comment also suggests a purity of *Afghan-ness* as a singular and unitary construction. However imagined, Afghan people need not start from scratch. There is a long history of cultural heritage to leverage in negotiating what it means to be *Afghan*.

As founder and director of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul (ANIM), Ustad Ahmad Sarmast laments the breakdown of Afghanistan's cultural heritage, with specific focus on its music,

In 2006 what I saw in Afghanistan made me very very depressed. There was no opportunities for work for musicians in Afghanistan, music had become a stranger in that environment. There was only one channel with music and it was music from external sources, mostly Hindi and Iranian music. That's why there was a danger that Afghanistan would lose its musical identity. (participant interview, 18 Jan 2018)

Sarmast fears the loss of a uniquely Afghan musical identity, a litmus test to Afghan identity, or *Afghan-ness*, more broadly. Although the classical musical traditions of Afghanistan, such as ghazals, overlap with Indian and Pakistani traditions in multiple and complex ways (Doubleday 2000), Sarmast's apprehension also manifests in a fear of Afghan musical identity being replaced by those of its neighbours. Ethnomusicologist John Baily (1994) contends that music can have functionalist features - in that it gives people a

sense of continuity- or music can be thought of as a feature of ethnic identity which, in certain circumstances, can be passively or actively called upon for a specific purpose (pp. 47-48). Musical traditions reflect the country's ethnic diversity, through folk music and its various beats, tempos, and instrumentals. Doubleday (2012) explains that from the 1978 conflict, music in Afghanistan became politicised. Where once songs of lovers, separation, mystical love, and love of the homeland formed dominant themes, from this period, music became a tool for propaganda from *mujahideen* and Soviet sides alike.

Contending with what Doubleday (2012) describes as 'the continuing powerplay between conservative Islamic values and secularised modernity' (p. 279), Sarmast deploys music as a tool to address ruptures in culture and heritage. His efforts to revive music in Afghanistan reflects the discontinuity he perceives in culture in the country. Doubleday (2012) further adds that in post-Taliban Kabul, songs express, 'a desire to feel unified and secure in a national identity' (p. 283).[64] More than an appreciation of music, or even seeking a quintessentially Afghan style of music, Sarmast seeks to reclaim identity. As Baily (1994) explains, 'music is itself a *potent* symbol of identity; like language' (p. 48, author's emphasis). Loss of these artefacts, whether music or other cultural products, reflect the rupturing of 'Afghan identity'. This is reflected in Sarmast's grief and the sense of loss which followed the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas[65] in 2001 by the Taliban, an event that Nancy Hatch Dupree (2002) expresses, 'Many may be weak in their knowledge of history, but the Bamiyan Buddhas were treasured by all' (p. 986).

Like the destruction of the Buddhas, symbols of identity are destroyed through periods of conflict leaving an uncertain and liminal space to be filled. This was echoed by Parwez in chapter three when he explained, 'We cannot understand our present status, where we are and where we are heading without knowing where we have come from' (participant interview, 24 Dec 2017). The contours of culture are known through articles of culture, tangible and intangible. Without these cultural products, a vacuum is left, which for Parwez, can be filled only through an understanding of what has been lost.

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[64] Howell (2018) explores the use of harmony to refer to social and musical harmony. She warns of the simplistic attribution of music to normative conceptualizations of harmony which ignore more nuanced socio-political contexts outside the concert hall or orchestra. Rather, Howell (2018) argues, we must avoid 'semantic slippage', that is, the compounding of 'how music functions and what its properties may afford' (p. 47). This is not to suggest Howell (2018) discards the potential for social transformation through music, but rather that 'harmony's ambiguities and dubious claims point to the need for a deeper interrogation' (p. 47).
[65] The Buddhas were two statues from the 6th-century carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamiyan valley. They stood at 55m and 38m high (see UNESCO website (n.d.)).

The destruction of these symbols has resulted in a symbolic challenge to identity or the loss of a pastness upon which identity could be anchored. As Mohammad explains, the loss of cultural heritage has resulted in a hardening of who Afghans ought to be. For those participants who seek a sense of past to restore the present, it is really a social past that they desire. The distinction between the past and the social past is illustrated by Wallerstein (2000) who defines the social past as the lens through which the past is viewed. While the past is 'inscribed in stone', the social past is 'inscribed at best in soft clay' (p. 301). Mohammad ties identity to a period of time in which he felt creative products such as 'weaving' and institutions like the Behzad school[66] in Herat were more prolific. It is in the revival of creativity that Mohamad feels a gentler past will emerge. As we opened the interview, Mohammad said with reference to my research,

> I hope that this is going to refresh what we have been missing. I do think that, I hope and I believe that we were a softer people back in the day and I think you look around the country, there's a great tradition of, you know, arts in different forms. (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018)

For Mohammad, the past he perceives grants him licence to envision an idealised identity that might inform the future. 'Pastness is a mode', explains Wallerstein (2000), 'by which persons are persuaded to act in the present in ways they might not otherwise act' (p. 301). As a 'moral phenomenon, therefore a political phenomenon, always a contemporary phenomenon', pastness wields great power in contemporary identity construction (Wallerstein 2000, p. 301). For Sharifa, Afghanistan's cultural heritage gives Afghan identities a place in the world, adding that she is 'all for open doors' but that,

> Feeling rooted is very, very important for having a fuller sense of identity and cultural heritage can give us the sense of feeling rooted, feeling like you know we don't have to lose it all in order to be considered a part of the global community. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

Sharifa considers that the leveraging of heritage shapes contemporary identities. This repeat's Omaid's belief that past figures have much to offer Afghans today. He seeks to

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[66] Indeed the Behzad school was held in high esteem and my grandfather who was an Ustad there was also involved in its revival. As such, I have had the privilege of hearing about the role of art produced by Behzad school in Herat recounted to me by his former apprentices (such as Abdul Karim Rahimi who continues to practice in the styles taught to him by my grandfather. Some of his works are presented through The Cross Arts Project (2005).

bring these figures to life on the surfaces of Kabul's blast walls. Again, here pastness is utilised as a 'central element in the socialisation of individuals, in the maintenance of group solidarity, in the establishment of or change to social legitimation' (Wallerstein 2000, p. 301). Conversely, Homaira is less convinced, recalling a history of family violence and restrictions to her movements:

> We, for example get culture from our past and culture is something that is taken from the past and it grows and things are added to it or removed from it but...that has been taken from the past. We do have good culture too, we have very good things, for example, for example...I can't remember because they are so very good [laughs sarcastically]. (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018)

Homaira struggles to identify positive attributes to Afghan culture as expressed through traditions and customs in her own family. This is evident in the excerpt above when she tells me sarcastically that she is unable to recollect positive attributes 'because they are so very good'. Indeed, she shared with me many of the hardships she experienced as a young Hazara woman living in Kabul but also the difficulties of going through puberty in a conservative family, which shunned her aspirations for art and poetry. As one of the younger participants interviewed for this research, Homaira does not have pre-war memories to inform her current aspirations for the future, nor does she have a point of comparison between traditional, often conservative Afghan religious observance and Taliban fanaticism. She attributes her family's mistreatment of her to the values of the past and, understandably, does not share a sense of nostalgia with other older, participants.[67]

The place of cultural heritage thus has a cross generational and gendered dimension. For young women navigating post-Taliban Afghanistan, many of the sentiments and rigidity of the Taliban era have become synonymous with Afghan culture. Afghanistan's religious conservativism is not new and pre-dates the Taliban, but the vehemence with which the Taliban exercised its religious authority is alien to Afghan culture. As Hatch Dupree (2002) explains,

> Of all the assaults that have battered Afghan society over the past two decades, the rise of fanaticism and the creation of an atmosphere of intolerance have caused

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[67] I would not argue that the war alone was responsible for Afghanistan's current inequalities. I contend that various religious conservatisms did exist before the war but that these have been made more pronounced in recent conflicts for geopolitical reasons which fall outside of the scope of this study.

the deepest resentment. The self-appointed arbiters of morality who sought to impose their dogmatic codes of ultra-conservative beliefs on Afghanistan's culture did so with the connivance of outsiders. ...Most Afghans are clearly conservative, but fanaticism is an aberration. (p. 980)

The fanaticism to which Hatch Dupree refers persists, and the role of religion in Kabul continues to be contentious. However, for the younger generation who do not have memories of a period before the Taliban, the understanding of conservative religion is linked to the Taliban and the atrocities of *mujahideen* factions vying for power during the civil war.[68]

Religion: Secular and separate

Religious adherence and beliefs are very much a multitextured experience in Kabul. The tension between secular desires and religious adherence was often reflected in a single person. More than any other time, conversations about religious belief ruptured the binary between traditional and progressive. The subject of religion was the only time that even some of the most outspoken participants became cautious.

One participant asked that parts of the interview not be used as it was too critical of Islam, and religion broadly. This person attributed most of the issues in society to religion. I have not offered further quotes or identifiers, even as pseudonym, to respect this person's request but their concern over their safety displays the reverence of religion in the country and the volatility of the subject. I am grateful for the courage of the participants sharing their thoughts on this contentious topic. I have taken extra precautions in this section and have omitted names, and interview dates, to avoid any chance identification. I have also concealed pronouns, except to say that there was no correlation between gender and religious conviction (or lack thereof).

There was a broad range of diversity in the participants' views on religion. As the capital and one of Afghanistan's most urbanised and cosmopolitan cities, *Kabuli*s have experiences that are vastly different from other provinces which are less cosmopolitan. Their insights help to challenge assumptions of homogenous religious piety among

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[68] During my time in Kabul in 2017, the family I was staying with mentioned this dark period several times.

Afghans, as well as highlight its entanglement with culture. As a component of culture, religion lends societies continuity. With its religious elements, culture,

> acts as a social and philosophical category, which is revealed as a social activity based on a system of historically established religious relations, ideas, knowledge, and practice, religious institutions created on their basis, received material and spiritual consequences inherited and developed by transmitters, who correspond them to historical conditions. Continuity is the basic category of awareness of the historical and religious-cultural development process. (Kabul, Yesim and Velikaya 2018, p. 97)

That Afghanistan is an Islamic country is unhelpful in understanding Islam's role in identity formation in the country. Views on religion's role in the lives of people ranged from complete rejection, it's strategic deployment, or an expression of conditional adherence. One participant, for example, an atheist who argues vehemently against religion, approaches it from a feminist perspective calling it a tool of patriarchy, and expresses scepticism toward other people's observance, saying, 'we have a really fake sense of devoutness to religion'. Angered by the argument that religion can be used to benefit women, and uncomfortable with Islamic feminists' arguments, this person explained that using the Prophet as an example of kindness toward women is insufficient,

> I find that so infuriating, don't be kind to me, I'm not a dog, I'm a human being, treat me with respect that you treat any other human being with. So, I find some of these hadiths and verses from the Quran can be... used to protect women, but it's not long term, because then in ten years women will be educated and they will read the Quran and it says 'women are your plantation' and if I claim to be a Muslim feminist, I don't have an answer for that one. I can't justify that. (participant interview, date withheld)

For this participant, the ideal is a secular country without which any sort of progress is unlikely, pointing blame on religious clerics' interference in law and politics. Warning against the power of religious clerics in the country, they also acknowledge,

> It is not to say that secular communities don't have problems of gender, of course they do, because patriarchy predated religion and will outlive it but I think it's harder to argue against somebody's religious views of where women belong than

it is to argue with traditional and cultural views. (participant interview, date withheld)

The observation that religious adherence has a power that is difficult to fight has proven true in Afghanistan's tumultuous history. Likewise, another participant who identifies as a practicing Muslim, nevertheless expressed a wariness of religious leaders, explaining,

If the *mullah*s did it right, they make fatwas that have nothing to do with religion, they are not learned, to know what to talk about, they come and stand there and make problems. (participant interview, date withheld)

The mistrust of the religious authority figure is a recurrent theme. Yet another participant explains, referring to a film they saw about Islam, 'I mean, art, this film very much has impacted people rather than some *mullah* in a mosque speaking to you every day. [That] won't affect you'. For another participant, the *mullah* is an impediment to progress, but an easily manipulated self-serving agent. They shared an experience of a project in one of the provinces in terms reminiscent of Mullah Nasruddin jokes and folklore (Suresha 2014), popular in Afghanistan and the region which caricature the *mullah*:

The local *mullah* would call on the people, on the grey beards [elders], they would tell people they have become infidels, women who study, you are *benamoos* [dishonourable] people, so on, so he carried on this way for a year, year and a half until one of the organisations [referring to a local NGO]...I'm not sure, but they started a process in which the little girls who went to school every month they would give them a container of oil. In this way, the dear *mullah* sent his own daughters to school, and started to preach that education is a duty for men and women. (participant interview, date withheld)

For this participant who also expressed ambivalence about the incursions of NGOs and their self-serving practices in the country, contempt for the *mullah* is far greater. That he would use religion as a tool to disrupt education for girls, and the belief that the religious convictions of the 'dear *mullah*' are so easily swayed, erodes public trust in *mullah*s. Even though NGOs are mistrusted, they are still represented as allies who could navigate the status of the *mullah* to educate girls.

Resistance to reforms in the early twentieth century by clerics, the winding back of progressive land and gender policies during the *Musahiban* period to keep religious groups on side, the fanaticism of the Taliban period, the *mujahideen* groups' claim to religious

superiority to legitimise their power, reflect a politicisation of religion. People's mistrust of leaders claiming piety is therefore comprehensible, even while they maintain personal religious observance. The reverence for religion and contempt of the *mullah* are not contradictory when viewed this way. Indeed, religious leaders who misuse *deen*, or religious faith, are considered less favourably than even external parties like NGOs. Indeed, respect (lack of) for the *mullah* or any religious authority figure is no indicator of the piety of the follower.

Religion for some is a source of navigating social and cultural rigidities too. This instrumentality is expressed in one participant who identifies as a 'secular minded person' who believes in 'nothing', and who also said, 'I believe in change. That's inevitable'. But rather than abandon religion, they see religion as a way of speaking the language of the society, a tool, and a means to an end rather than an expression of faith. As an artist, they navigate context,

> to stir things up. To get people to think critically about things, to not accept things the way they are, not be satisfied with the status quo. And don't [expect] things from God, because that's very important for them to know that *God is dead.* (participant interview, date withheld)

While they quote Nietzsche here (italicised above), they later refer to another European thinker regarding the effects of religion on society:

> These people, they really need a kick in their butts. Everyone is asleep. The way I look at it, there I can kind of feel the gravity of what Marx was saying about religion being the *opiate of the masses.* That's so true. And it just numbs people. (participant interview, date withheld)

The same person is cavalier about religion, referring to it as, 'something on my palette, that's my trick'. For this participant, as an atheist seeking social change in a non-secular, deeply religious environment, religion is a way of relating to people. The separation of religion and state, a post-Enlightenment modernist proposition, speaks to the permeability of the world, particularly with this participant's use of European theorists. It is a testament to the cross pollination of ideas across systems, states, and peoples.

Another participant expressed similar functional purposes for religion but not as an atheist. They initially expressed a rejection of religion, but had more recently acquired an interest in Sufi mysticism through which religion can be a source of unity,

I think we could use that part that people are so committed to religion or as they say that they are, we could really try to use that instead of bringing it from the Western side, showing a new interpretation of Islam and the different parts of life and yeah to make lives better. (participant interview, date withheld)

Their navigation of the country's Islamic tradition, rather than 'bringing it [change] from the Western side', is an instrumental use of religion, here observed by an atheist and a Sufi. Both advocate for peace in religious rather than secular terms. They recognise religion as a common language. The many shades of religious observance, from pragmatic utilitarian uses to deeply held religious faith, and the intersection of these, are reflected in just the few artists to whom I spoke. Unlike the first participant whose approach to social change excises religion entirely, the last two see some role for religion. Another participant explains the use of religion as needed,

But not something you can believe in. This is a popular belief. Because I need to talk their talk. Because it's hard to bring them to your side of the argument. (participant interview, date withheld)

This participant was one of the less ambivalent interviewees, they do not feel that their irreligiosity is exceptional. As they explain,

People are changing by the day. As much as you see people kind of going towards extremism, there's a lot of other young people who are actually becoming secular and complementary are then sometimes really critical of religion. The population is growing, actually, of the non-believers compared 10 years ago. (participant interview, date withheld)

Other participants expressed a middle ground, neither excising religion nor using it to meet an end. For them, religion remained within the purview of the private sphere alone. For one participant, religion plays a minimal part in their day to day, though this is not to indicate that they have any enmity for it. Rather religion is a personal observance and is open to the variety of ways that people express their faith,

I am not really into religion to be honest. I am a [person] who has not prayed [*namaz*] for several years, I fast [*roza*] if I feel like it, if I don't feel like it then nothing. But I love God and if I see my friends do *namaz*, then I do not annoy them. I always respect their religion, their sect [*mazhab*], their beliefs. Until now I have never had religious discussions with anyone..., if you respect a person, you

must respect their beliefs, their traditions, their opinions, their thoughts, you should respect all of their things if you are human. (participant interview, date withheld)

Reluctance to have discussions about religious beliefs indicates that it is a contentious topic even among friends and one they feel ill equipped to handle. Another participant noted it was difficult to speak about where religion fit in their artistic life. Their response was more pragmatic:

Well, there is something else that we have to consider and that's that we live in an Islamic country and we follow the guidelines of our religion and the holy book of Quran. We should keep religion and arts separate. In my opinion, they each have their own place. (participant interview, date withheld)

My raising questions of religion needed to be handled delicately and at times I would elect to avoid the question entirely if I saw that further probing would cause discomfort. In this instance, the person saw no reason why religion would enter a conversation about art. This is a far cry from the way that expressions of culture like music, poetry and art have been entwined with religion in recent years, either as blasphemous and therefore oppositional, as in the Taliban years, or expressions of religious observance, particularly Islamic calligraphy and the *qawwali* musical tradition more broadly.

The participant interviews I conducted revealed a diversity in identity that suggests a transitional period for *Kabuli*s.[69] I don't argue that this diversity is unique to Kabul, but that the conditions for it are shaped by the past, the anxiety that reverberates through the city (and which will be addressed in the next chapter), as well as ambition for the future. One participant explains that Kabul is made up of returned diaspora who face complexities between identity and religion:

What is their identity? They can't find it here. Luckily for myself, I've never had that problem because identity doesn't mean anything to me, really, you know...What is it to be Afghan, really, with the divisions that we have? Like a lot of people that don't like the term of Afghan. They call themselves Afghanistani, which is really interesting...And then you're Hazara or you're Tajik. So there's a lot

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[69] Unfortunately I do not have any Jewish or Christian participants for this study, though a couple identified as atheist. Many of my interviewees where found as referrals and this limited who I was exposed to. That there are no non-Muslims may indicate an ambivalence to speak out or get involved in public facing art initiatives.

of stuff they're really confused about. They can't find a foothold. Because as I said to you before, they're not concrete values that you can just kind of anchor yourselves with. So you're completely, in a sense you're suspended in air and the only thing which gives you an identity is again religion. So there's the brotherhood and there's the *ummah*.[70] But that's like a glue which combines people, really. Because they hate each other otherwise. (participant interview, date withheld)

This explanation of the role of religion in the country indicates an understanding that unity must spring from some shared source of identity and it is attributed to being part of the *ummah*. Yet for Shi'ite Muslims, such as Hazaras, who have been historically considered not Muslim by more fanatic Sunnis in the country, the *ummah* would fall short of being a uniting banner. For Sikh Afghans whose faith does not sit within an Islamic sect, a conceptualised *ummah* would be deeply exclusionary.

While all the interviews I conducted argued vehemently against ethnic and religious divisions in the country, none reflected on the discrimination against Sikh Afghans. Samir[71], the young Hazara man who was my driver through my trip in Kabul in 2017, pointed out a row of shops whose tenants were *Kabuli* Sikhs as we drove by. Samir's explanation of them as infidels, outcasts and un-Afghan contrasted sharply with his presentation - fashioned jeans, styled hair, and an arm full of haphazard tattoos which he did himself in preparation for becoming a tattoo artist. For Samir, whose own ethnicity as Hazara has historically been the target of discrimination, the desired end to ethnic and religious tensions did not include discrimination against Sikhs. His definition of Afghan had a religious tone which did not include derivations of Afghans who do not follow the Quran. He uses the language of exclusion used against him by Sunni majorities, to exclude Sikhs who are an even smaller community than Hazaras, and even more marginalised. For Samir, infidel and un-Afghan are used synonymously, and in doing so, Samir also defines *Afghan-ness* as inherently linked to religion, a definition that has historically excluded him.

In stark contrast, I was pleased and admittedly surprised to see ArtLords' homage to the murder of Sikhs in 2018, which included the death of prominent Sikh leader Rawail Singh, for whom a mural was painted on the wall of the Governor of Kabul's compound. Pointedly, the mural (Figures 18a and 18b below) addressed the terrorists responsible with,

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[70] *Ummah* refers to the global Muslim community
[71] Not his real name

'You are not going to heaven, you have killed my kind father'. The statement targets the value system of the terrorist fanatics who targeted the Sikhs, an act that is courageous for potentially being considered un-Islamic given that Sikhs do not follow the Quran. ArtLords employ the language of Islam, to express allegiance to a non-believer and in doing so define an inclusive *Afghan-ness* not tied to religion. This inclusivity is also evident in the multiple languages used. It's a statement that reads as a declaration against violence against minorities. The text, in Pashto, Urdu, English and Dari is intended to 'reach everyone' explains Omaid in an interview with *The Indian Express* (Goyal 2018). Omaid and Kabir who lead ArtLords are not Hazara, yet they still have discarded the language of exclusion which favours them.

Figure 18a. ArtLords tribute to Rawail Singh and his daughter – in progress (Mokamel 2018). Reproduced with permission from Kabir Mokamel.

Figure 18b. ArtLords tribute to Rawail Singh and his daughter – completed (Mokamel 2018). Reproduced with permission from Kabir Mokamel.

The Facebook posts dedicated to their Sikh friend filled my newsfeed too. My surprise sprang, not from the sentiments of the homage but its public expression given the experience I had had with Samir, a Hazara Shi'ite. Samir's hostility to the Sikh community in Kabul was probably a reflection of his religious conviction. For him, Hazaras should not be discriminated against because they are also Muslims (and therefore equally Afghan), but Sikhs are not. This thinking uses the logic of his own oppressor, namely the Sunni fanatics (Taliban) who would see all Shi'ite Hazara expelled or executed for their *kufr* (sins). Samir's response to Sikhs identifies a cultural hegemony which regards Sikhs as lesser than Shi'ites, even as the same structure places Shi'ites in the country below Sunnis. By identifying as *Muslim enough* to be Afghan, he is complicit in perpetuating the structures of his own oppression. Even though I considered his elaborate tattoo designs on paper and on his arms a form of art, I did not interview Samir for this research given that I was speaking to people who identified as artists.

Overcoming ethnicity

The leveraging of ethnicity for political gain has a long history in a country with 55 distinct ethnicities which are further separated into tribes or *qawm*[72] (Riphenburg 2005)[73]. Ethnic groups play a pivotal role in social relations, religious observance and have been the source of unity and division (Riphenburg 2005). When we consider ethnicity, religion, and tribes (which can differ between ethnic groups), the branches of diversity in Afghanistan become increasingly complex. Far from a homogenous populace with natural borders, Afghanistan's borders have been forged through decree, force, or foreign intervention (Saikal 2004).

The diversity of Afghanistan was exploited by the British who, following two wars (1839 and 1879), had by the early 20th century fuelled ethnic hierarchies which could be leveraged against perceived risks from Russian interference in Afghanistan. As Cullathar (2002) explains, by cultivating a Pashtun renaissance, colonial agents were able to ally themselves with tribal groups to pacify these elements (p. 517). More than just leverage ethnic identities, the British 'Forward Policy' was designed to keep indirect control over Afghanistan. The incursions into identity construction by imperialist intervention, with complicity from Afghan leaders, caused a proliferation of the ethnic tensions we see today. Cullathar (2002) explains, 'Cultivating Pashtun identity as a unitary "pure" race in contrast to the "mixed" Tajiks, Baluchis, Hazaras, and others with whom they were mingled, colonial officials invented the reputation of the Pashtuns as a warrior caste' (p. 517). In a situation which pitted Pashtuns, as 'sons of Alexander' (and therefore white people) (Cullathar 2002, p. 517), against a diverse majority[74], in effect ignoring the vast diversity

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[72] John Baily (1994) argues, in his explanation of *qawm*, 'The label for this language is problematic, politically and academically' (p. 49). Indeed, the definition I have used above is borrowed from Baily as I believe it captures the concept best, though as he stipulates, the interpretation is somewhat lost in translation. Conversely, comparing it to 'tribe', Ibrahimi and Maley (2020) contend that while *qawm* is more elastic, it best captures the complexity of Afghanistan's social groups (p. 2). Gross (1992) further elaborates *qawm*: 'Qawm, and not political affiliations, explain local politics (p. 76). Tapper (1989) accepts that 'In Afghanistan, the greatest ambiguity is between different *qaum*-names' (p. 238, author's spelling). See also Rasuly-Paleczek 2001, pp. 159-161.
[73] Riphenburg (2005) notes that the Pashtuns alone have 30 separate tribes, a heterogeneity that the British would ignore in their construction of the Pashtun warrior narrative.
[74] Influenced by German National Socialism, a wave of Pan-Afghanism, identifying Afghans (meaning Pashtuns in this case) as Aryans, started to take root in the 1930s (Rasuly-Paleczek 2001, p. 155; Baily 1994, p. 56). As an anecdotal example of the longevity of this identification, I still hear of this reference to Afghans as Aryans and the bonds to the Germans among Afghans in the diaspora in Sydney. It is always spoken of as a source of pride to be connected to 'civilised' Europe. I am

within Pashtun groups[75], the repercussions of this division continue to be felt. Malik (2016) argues that Islamism has been attributed in the West as a '*Pashtun* problem' such that, 're-orientalised Pashtuns became the poster boys of whatever is wrong with Muslims everywhere' (p. 2, author's emphasis). Adding to this reputation, the Taliban who were primarily Sunni Pashtuns educated in Pakistani madrasas during the Soviet war years, enacted brutal regimes against the Hazara Shi'ites.[76] In this section, I wish to offer insights into how young artists feel about ethnicity and *qawm* today.

Even though in parts of Afghanistan, particularly in the North, different ethnic groups have historically cohabited, even in the same village (Roy 1992), the ethnic divides that have been formative in contemporary Afghan identities certainly persist. Overcoming these long-held affiliations will prove challenging.[77] Against the backdrop of continuously fuelled ethnic divisions and conflict, there has been increasing mistrust. Sharifa articulates the difficulty of overcoming what she calls a 'trust deficit',

> So every word that come out of someone's mind we try to figure out, which ethnicity this person belongs to and is he saying or is she saying this thing because he or she belongs to this ethnicity. So it's very difficult to have a constructive political conversation that can lead to social and political trust. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

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reminded of Franz Fanon's (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks,* 'The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become' (p. 2-3).

[75] One example of Pashtun heterogeneity is the non-violent movement led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan against British oppression. Pashtun Muslim 'Servants of God', or *Khudai Khidmatgar,* were mobilised to resist and swore an oath of non-violent resistance, '6. I will live in accordance with the principles of non-violence' (Johansen 1997, p. 59). By swearing the oath, Servants of God employed the language of honour for non-violence instead of violence. Also referred to as the 'Islamic Gandhi', Ghaffar Khan rejected many of the Pashtun tribal codes which involved violence in favour of a non-violent interpretation of Islam (Rowell 2009). See also Yousaf (2019) on the Pashtun Tahafuz movement.

[76] This is not to argue that civilian Pashtuns were immune to Taliban brutalities, especially Pashtun women whose mere presence outside the home was cause for violent retribution. My mother who recounts experiences of her trip to Afghanistan during the Taliban occupation tells of seeing a woman who stopped to take better grip of her groceries in the street. Upon doing so, her *burqa* flipped slightly back to reveal her wrists. Very quickly this was met with the switch of a Taliban official coming down on her wrists (recounted with her permission). Letters during the Taliban occupation from my grandfather tell of the harassment by Taliban who regularly came into his home for 'check ups' and whose artwork in the Herat Townhall, his life's work, was whitewashed for being blasphemous. Nevertheless, Hazaras in the country have been a particularly easy target, given their Asian features and that their being Shi'ite can be justified as *kufr.*

[77] Even among the diaspora in Sydney I have come across sentiments that favour ethnic superiority of one group over another by my own generation who were very young, or not yet born, when their parents came to Australia.

Though privy to the identity tensions of the past, many artists expressed their refusal to continue sentiments of ethnic division. The challenge they navigate is to advocate for the end to ethnic tensions within the social and cultural structures that benefit from them. The early British Pashtunisation program mentioned in chapter one, for example, allied colonial powers with the majority Pashtuns in Afghanistan at the expense of internal ethnic division. The artists I met contended with ethnic disunity regardless of their own ethnic lineages. The denunciation of ethnic division was expressed by Homaira, a young Hazara woman, Nasrin, a young Pashtun woman and Shireen, who like myself, is half Tajik and half Pashtun:[78]

Homaira:

> I am Hazara and I am Shia, right. Most of my friends are Tajik, Pashtun, they are Sunni and like I go out with them, sit with them, come and go, there is no problem but sometimes, people have such a repulsion that they stop me and say to me why are you hanging out with this Tajik guy. Well 'none of your business! Because he is my best friend! So they say like this to me. And they say 'no its so bad that you are hanging around with him, it's very inappropriate. (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018)

Nasrin:

> we are very war ravaged and some their minds have not changed, in that rough way... like for example Hazara thinks Pashtun is my enemy, they have killed my family previously, or like they are against Hazaras or like that's how Hazaras think, Pashtun thinks that Hazaras have been [the same]...If they don't respect each other, it's because of war, it's the lasting effect of war until now for them...but the future generation, it doesn't make a difference for them, for example this friend is Pashtun, this friend is Hazara or this friend is Tajik, it makes no difference at all, because they were not around at that time... (participant interview, 8 Feb 2018)

Shireen:

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[78] It was not until I was much older that the concept of ethnic divisions were even discussed in my home. My father argued vehemently against discrimination against ethnic groups in the country and understood it for the divisiveness it fostered as a barrier to the country's development. As such, my siblings and I were raised not aware of being different to other Afghans in terms of ethnicity. This may also reflect the privilege of not appearing to be Hazara, who have been hugely discriminated against.

> I love both, I am Pashtun and I am Tajik and I couldn't write against either of them. The only community/group and the only place that I could go and contribute to their poetry reading events was the group of writers at *Karteh Seh* of Kabul that was from the Hazara *qawm* of our people and I am appreciative of them and truly with much affection and much kindness and much loyalty they accepted me. (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018)

Homaira and Nasrin are among the youngest participants of this research, born after the collapse of the Taliban. Their insistence of maintaining mixed ethnicity friendship groups is a source of danger for them. Both Homaira and Nasrin, one Hazara and one Pashtun, experienced particular violence at the hands of their families, uncles in both cases, for pursuing poetry and music respectively. While they don't know each other, they recounted experiencing expectations shaped by ethnic norms in similar terms. The similarities they share, namely challenges to pursue their art form and a desire for peace, far outweighs the differences that their ethnic identities will allow. For Shireen who sought support for her poetry from the Hazara community, the structures that demand 'purity' of ethnicity, whether Pashtun or Tajik, discriminated against her, such that she was forced to seek support elsewhere, away from the values that also exclude Hazaras. Though she feels an allegiance to both Tajik and Pashtun groups she opts not to preference one over the other by 'writing against either of them' as was expected. She reconciles her love of her ethnic identities with the divisiveness that certain groups impose. In aligning with the Hazara groups instead, she disrupts both Tajik and Pashtun expectations of her. Shireen now publishes her works prolifically in local newspapers and with Free Women Writers, an online platform led by Noorjahan.

The frustration over ethnic divisions and the repulsion towards foreign opportunistic game playing is reflected in Lahmann's (2018) study of 15 Hazara youth. Interviews with this cohort similarly found that much of Afghanistan's troubles stem from disunity between Afghans as well as foreign interventions which have used Afghanistan like a game of *buzkashi*,[79] to quote one of Lahmann's (2018) interviewees (p. 393), in which Afghanistan is the carcass and the horsemen foreign powers.

Though none of the young women above have ceased to identify as their own *qawm*, they nevertheless reject the notion of the inferiority of others. They seek identities based on

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[79] Buzkashi: 'players mounted on horseback try to get a headless goat or sheep carcass into a goal or scoring area' (Lahmann 2018, p. 393).

shared values of inclusion, insisting on friendships with mixed ethnicities. In an environment steeped in ethnic division, these artists offer those of us in the diaspora hope for Afghanistan's future and a direction upon which we can anchor our efforts. As Sharifa says passionately, 'I think the people that make me most angry are the ones who keep the fire of ethnic hatred on' (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017).

In their articulation of identity, artists navigate through the divisiveness of ethnic and religious tensions as well as the unitary conceptualisation of a homogenous *Afghan-ness,* even as they seek to understand what it means to be Afghan. Mohammad explains,

> Given that there are no specific shapes to an identity, there are no unique Iranian or Indian identities. I think that this is a long-delayed conversation that Afghanistan needs to have, needed to have, it was just something that was delayed by the conflict or distorted by it. (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018)

Yet the two propositions are not oppositional. Artists expressed a multiple *Afghan-ness* perspective which did not depend on a singular conceptualisation to survive. As expressed by Mohammad, the complexity of establishing a unity not fixed in singular *Afghan-ness* has the added difficulty of years of war disrupting social networks. The reference to a 'long delayed conversation' suggests a navigation, or a searching for all that *Afghan-ness* could include, for the shared purpose of peace, and as fertile ground to find commonality. Tapper (2008) argues that despite the years of war, there is 'a general assumption too that there are certain basic elements, patterns of life, important and deep-rooted, that survived, have indeed re-emerged in recent years; and there is a tendency to label these with the term "Afghan Culture"' (p. 2). The sentiment allows for both one and many Afghan identities simultaneously.

Generational drift and contending with conflict

At the time of writing, it is Ramadan and the world is gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. A *Médecins Sans Frontières* run maternity ward in Kabul is attacked by gunmen targeting newborns, mothers, and staff.[80] The peace talks between the US and the Taliban and the US and the Afghan government, purporting to bring an end to violence in the country, are riddled with contradictions. US peace envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, has pointed the finger at ISIL. While the Taliban avoid condemning this heinous

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[80] See Jones (2020).

act, artists, the next generation of *Kabuli*s, come out in force on social media, creating, commenting, expressing their sorrow.

Though particularly shocking, this is not the first act of violent excess inflicted on innocent civilians in Afghanistan. Yet, in the face of disempowerment and instability there is hope, even among the most critical of participants. War is a lens through which the next generation see their future. Young *Kabuli*s exist in a world where their identities as young Muslim Afghans, in Afghanistan, have been deeply touched by the war on terror discourse on the one hand and their traditions and self-identification as Afghan, on the other.[81] Omaid, for example, talks about meeting people through his travels who hold prejudgements about him as an Afghan. He explains that because of 'headlines', he can understand where they are coming from and is tolerant of them, adding that, 'Then the moment they really get the feeling of who I am, I think they will certainly change their whole idea of who an Afghan is.' Omaid further explains,

> Nobody [in the West] writes about their [Afghans'] experiences and their lives, so people outside our borders, they never had the chance to read about us. They never had the chance to meet us and know who the *real Afghans* are. So whatever happened, post 9/11, so whatever perceptions they have is because of the headlines on CNN, I don't know, BBC, so whatever they portray, and the only thing they portray is negative news about war and violence and other things. I think that is the base of judgment for a lot of people. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

Omaid's comment expresses a sense of frustration and an eagerness to set things right. His reference to a 'real Afghan', is telling of how he positions himself and the vast majority of Afghans as the challenge to negative stereotypes about Afghans. For Omaid, the real Afghan is not synonymous with the terrorist; the majority of Afghans renounce fanaticism. Omaid is not alone, he speaks of 'this new generation' who, like him, are reaching out through their travels and writing to contribute to the global discourse about Afghanistan and Afghans. But these challenges exist internally too. Noorjahan illustrates how young people in Kabul are pulled in multiple directions:

> The government specifically continues to call on young people and on women to be brave but when we do and did, we do go out and be brave we have no support systems, so they tell us, women, join the police force, join the AMP, become

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[81] Nilan (2015) connects the global discourse on anti-terrorism to the complexities of youth identity formation in Muslim societies.

doctors, become engineers but when we join the police force and we are harassed nobody will stand beside us. When we are brave and become doctors, there are no employment opportunities so, a large part of it is because of lack of security, because people are not investing their money in Afghanistan especially the ultra-rich, they are taking their money out of the country, they are investing it in Dubai, in Turkey, in you know in Europe, and I think that lack of security is really, umm, I'm often afraid that we will lose much of what we have accomplished through lack of security. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

Artists have fashioned strategies to cope and to actively contribute in shaping their societies amidst precarious conditions. This is vital given that conflict continues to tear away at what tenuous measure of peace the country maintains. The ever-lingering potential of violence in Kabul creates as much tension as the violence itself and fosters a sense of fragility to life and circumstance. Noorjahan again recalls,

I remember when we moved to Kabul, my mum wouldn't buy a fridge for like five, six years because she was so afraid that there would be another war and she would have to leave her fridge. It was sort of symbolic of investing in the country and starting up a new life, it's so scary and it is hard to be completely rooted and you feel everything is so takeable, vulnerable, fragile. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

The pervasiveness of war as it threads through the mundaneness of the everyday is a clear theme. I asked Mohammad if this was a sort of resilience, a way to continue on despite the threats to life. He disagreed preferring to call it 'emotional detachment', given the sheer volume of bombs 'these things have turned into numbers for me' (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018). The proximity of death to the uneventful humdrum of everyday life was common to many interviewees who expressed their morning ritual as consisting of getting ready and leaving the home not knowing if they will return, but nevertheless, going about their day. Mohammad further adds,

To be honest with you...it might very well be some sort of a disorder that you develop under prolonged stress, just becoming numb to the conflict that goes around you. I could be in the shower and hear a bomb and then, you know, continue with my shower. It's just because it's part of life here. You go out and you uh, you know that, you know, this is part of your life. (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018)

Rohina mentions the 'survival mode' of the people around her. For Rohina, the unpredictability of the situation is disempowering and poses a 'constant fear that people live with and some level of hopelessness that they are not in charge no matter how much they try, the forces [are] against them' (participant interview, 20 Jan 2018). She takes to writing to try to work through some of her experiences as a 'coping mechanism' or 'stress relief'. Rohina became upset during our interview when we spoke about the daily loss of life around her. The impact of conflict on people leaves them feeling powerless, like Sharifa:

> It is very hard for me to deal with terrorism, with attacks on, especially on Kabul because I live here and this is how we humans operate, something that's closer hits you very hard so I have minor episodes of depression after every major attack because I think of all the amazing lives that are being lost every day. But my bigger, the bigger shadow on my mind and on my life is the fragmentation - that worries me more. The fact that we are failing to connect with each other as a broader movement that stand for the same values, that worries me even more and makes me pessimistic at times. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

Living in Afghanistan does not make terrorism any more comprehensible to Sharifa. She reminds us that terrorism evokes as much fear for her as anyone else, if not more, given that it is so close. Though there is a level of normalisation, as indicated by Mohammad, the attacks are no less horrific for Afghans. That social fragmentation is even a greater source of worry for Sharifa than the terrorist attacks indicates that it is through unity that the country can address violence in the country. The intersecting of religious, ethnic, and linguistic alliances, and further fractioning of society into an increasingly wide cleavage between rich and poor, and against the backdrop of historical legacies of division and contemporary political instability and suspicion of authority, has led to a society unable to heal.

Like Shireen, also a writer, who says that 'the war has left its own deep impacts, especially in the area of culture' (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018) and Parwez, a calligrapher, who explains 'several decades of war ruined everything and calligraphy was not an exception' (participant interview, 24 Dec 2017), the war is not something in a distant past, but a very real and felt reality. Both Shireen and Parwez identify the rupture to the foundations of identity, such as cultural expressions. Sahar, for example, expresses the mutability of her feelings:

> There are days here that are really hopeless, but there are days that are really good. I mean generally I'm hopeful person and I want to remain positive and I believe in our actions and our contribution in making things better. The sense of responsibility and all… (participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

Artists live in uncertainty and they tap into the 'healing powers' of art, to which Omaid refers, to resist feelings of disempowerment. Placing the current situation in its larger geopolitical map, and in an expression of hope, Nasrin outlines the connections between political stability and the flourishing of culture:

> But slowly slowly, I have seen positive change from about 2009 when we started until now. Today, for example, there are associations and institutions, cafes that have artworks and artists gather there and work there. And if there is peace in terms of political security I think without a doubt not just in other areas but in the areas of arts and culture, we can have a very good and positive change in Afghanistan. (participant interview, 8 Feb 2018)

Nasrin's comments reflected a hopefulness for the future that was not one of blind optimism but a nuanced understanding of the power of culture. She sees the flourishing of creativity and creative spaces as symptomatic of peace. Where there is peace, cultural products follow, and where there are cultural products, peace begins to find expression. Her sentiments were shared by the vast majority of participants who, despite mounting uncertainty, instability, and violence, continue to hope.

As young *Kabuli*s, they expressed an optimism for the future of the country that ran contrary to the disempowerment created by impacts of conflict on their lives. Mohammad, for example, who laments the numbness he feels as quoted above is nevertheless confident about the future - 'I firmly believe that despite all the setbacks we are on an overall positive trajectory' (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018) – and Homaira tells me, 'In my opinion Afghanistan will not turn back, rather it will go forward, it will progress. It will get better' (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018). When speaking about the future, their views change from a sense of helplessness and despondency to hope through wilful and intended contributions to their society. Rohina shares this hope as a desire to 'plant seeds and wait for them to grow, and keep nourishing that', even if, 'it is very very slow process' (Rohina, participant interview, 20 Jan 2018). Shireen, too, says, 'I am not hopeful that I will see change in my lifetime but I am hopeful that future generations will likely change a lot' (participant interview, 27 Jan 2018). Both are willing to work for a peace they may never

see. In effect they are doing the work of nation building from the ground up, where their governments have failed to do so from the top down. Their hope is rooted in reality, persistent against the odds, and they express an understanding that this is just the beginning of a long process. This hope, despite the reality is not naïve or formless wishing, but grounded, measured and a response to trauma.

Youth in Afghanistan reflect the intergenerational nature of war and trauma. Omaid, in his early 30s, says, 'Like if they ask about my stories, my stories are all from the time of war, violence, and like my kids would only hear that. Nothing else' (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018). As shared in comments about ethnic divides above, many attribute the ruptures in their culture to years of war which they associate with previous generations. Sharifa explains that youth in Kabul today are driven to have positive long-lasting contributions to their nation's rebuilding,

> There is now a strong sub-culture of politically motivated and engaged young people who want to make a difference, who want to have a say, who no longer want to be soldiers or the burning wood for the ideological difference of the older generation. They want to voice their own opinion, they want to be the decision makers and they are in the government, they are in key positions in government now, they run key stations in private sector, they are all over the place, so that's a very strong sub-culture as well. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

As an expression of the potential that young people hold, Sharifa further describes 'our generation as a generation who has probably done less to hurt each other'. Yet this distancing from the former generation does not entail a distancing from heritage or tradition. Rather their efforts to create an inclusive *Afghan-ness* and to work hard for their country positions them as 'the real Afghans', mentioned by Omaid. Lahmann's (2018) study once more closely resembles the perspectives of the artists with whom I spoke. Youth identified 'the lingering pain of Afghanistan's history but linked it to the past and the older generations' (p. 394). Nasrin describes the tensions between the generations,

> Now those people who still have the effect of war, they are not kind, they dislike each other but the future generation, it doesn't make a difference for them, for example this friend is Pashtun, this friend is Hazara or this friend is Tajik. It makes no difference at all because they were not around at that time. They think about now, they see now, they don't see that period. (participant interview, 8 Feb 2018)

Like the desire for unity within Afghanistan, both this and Lahmann's (2018) data identify that youth consider the generations prior to be complicit in Afghanistan's troubles today. Cleavages between generations are not unique to any time or place but as young people living in a country with internal and external challenges to peace and security, they must navigate a complexity in their immediate worlds far beyond their years. Their grievances are about life and death. The United States Institute for Peace report in 2014, titled *Youth Mobilisation and Political constraints in Afghanistan: The Y factor writes,* reported that, 'In exploring the nuances of political activity among young people in Kabul, it is crucial to avoid generalisations about them being, "enlightened", "elite", "educated", or "Westernised", as international actors often describe them. These labels tend to conceal *the intricate realpolitik that more often determines how youth mobilise* in and around the city' (p. 2, my emphasis).

Generational cleavage is particularly marked given that events of the last forty years continue to cost them a future. Where once the U.S inspired[82] banner of *jihad,* incited young and old to fight, today 'You talk to people on the street, no one is going to brag about their grandparents having been a, you know, a fighter of sorts', explains Mohammad (participant interview, 21 Jan 2018). This creates points of tension between generations, as outlined by Sharifa:

> There are three generations roughly right, the generation of kind of where modernism came to Afghanistan and there was a lot of my father's generation, there was people in the left and people in the right, people in the right were mostly from the villages, but overall this whole group of people, they were more I think more probably more familiar with the ideas of women in public space, somewhat more. And then there's the middle generation who basically mostly fought and I think that's the generation that's a little more confusing to me and to themselves, to see who was on which extreme and then our generation is whole different story of course. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

The 'whole different story' that Sharifa refers to is one of juggling the legacies of war, ongoing insecurities, access to information, ambition to modernise, and navigating

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[82] That the Afghan-Soviet war became a holy *jihad* rather than a war over Afghanistan's sovereignty, served the interest of the US and its allies, as Ahmed (2012) explains, 'it was with massive US, Saudi, and Pakistani assistance and encouragement that the tradition of *jihad* as a just war was revived after a period of over four hundred years of nonexistence in South Asia' (p. 284).

religious and cultural expectations. For Naheed, the cleavage is expressed as a rigidity and reluctance to evolve their art techniques, '...people who are older, as in they are not young, they subscribe to an earlier system, a perspective from past years...' (participant interview, 12 May 2018). She tells me they don't belong to the 'world of today', which by extension would be one of change and flexibility. Jenkins (2008), articulates the interconnectedness of 'today' that Naheed attributes to her generation: 'Whatever we think about globalisation's history, it has had an impact on the nature and salience of identification in the modern world...people are aware of living in a global rather than a local context...' (p. 32). Indeed this reflects Omaid who advocates for greater cross-cultural sharing through art. Naheed explains that the internet is also a way for information exchange: '...today some artists try to use new techniques and styles, and invent new artistic forms, mostly for the elevation of their own awareness which they search for on the internet. For example, they see the works of an artists in America or Germany or Italy, when they see their works, it's natural to learn new things from them' (participant interview, 12 May 2018). Naheed adds that the reverse can happen too, that people can become familiar with Afghanistan through the internet.

It is between hope and fear, the interstices between wanting and trepidation, that reflects the 'unfolding generational narrative' of youth in Kabul (Fromm 2012, p. xv). Fromm (2012) argues that 'what human beings cannot contain of their experience – what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable – falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or a chaotic urgency' (p. xvi). The continuity of the war narrative from generation to generation is evident. Sharifa explains, 'Well this generation is still, to be completely honest with you, this generation is still very fragmented, we do carry the wounds of the past', adding that she would rather speak of 'our need for healing' and a 'desire to live in an Afghanistan where people are not persecuted for what they believe in. (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017)

My participants reflect a group who have chosen to stay in Afghanistan. Inevitably this reflects some degree of hope for what Afghanistan could be. When asked if given the chance, would you leave Afghanistan, 58% of Afghans surveyed by The Asia Foundation in 2018 (p. 202) answered they would not. Of those, 'Some 83.7% of respondents who say they would not want to leave the country give reasons that reflect a sense of connection to Afghanistan, such as "It is my country," "I love my country," and "I feel comfortable here"' (The Asia Foundation 2018, p. 214).

Conclusion

It is in the shadow of war and violence that artists of this research strive for an *Afghan-ness* that is both plural and unifying. The artists whose works have formed the analysis in this thesis construct their identities through their cultural heritage and their interpretations of ethnic divisions, legacies of war and responses to secularity.

In the Kabul context, identities are negotiated in a cultural context which is itself in transition, shaped largely by an atmosphere replete with the potential of violence at any moment at the same time as the creativity that runs like arteries through the city. This creativity is the manifestation of hope, as 'civic courage and its ability to mediate the *memory* of loss and the *experience* of injustice as part of a broader attempt to open up new locations of struggle, contest the workings of oppressive power and undermine various forms of domination' (Giroux 2003a, p. xviii, author's emphasis). The encounters with the world outside and the persevering narratives of identity are both echoes of the past and desires for a future. These encounters pull at identity constructs. Hall (1992) explains the de-centred self as the crisis of identity. He defines this as the double displacement of 'de-centring individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves' (p. 275). In some ways, young people in Kabul both belong to and are separate from their contexts. Rather than identities bound to their social locations, identities are dynamic, multiple and contextually responsive (Bottero 2010).

Young *Kabuli*'s identities, their hopes, and grievances, reflect better than any other generation the Janus-head, looking back and forward. Among the competing ebbs and flows of expectation and ambition, the definition of 'Afghan' is dynamic and in flux. Contending with the intersecting features of identity – religion, ethnicity, a cultural heritage that is as much imagined as it is real, a legacy of war which continues to threaten life and pressures to address their place in the world – young *Kabuli*s represent a complex existence. They are liminal because they both fit and don't fit with their families' ways. They are not stagnant but changing with time like everybody else. They are keen and ambitious for a future some expect to be absent for and yet express a connection to place and continue to strive to better it.

Chapter Eight:

Kabul - a tale of two cities

Kabul 2017

I am greeted at the gate as I step out of the four-wheel drive by an armed, albeit friendly, guard standing by a metal fence. The fence breaks the monotony of a concrete wall which seems to continue forever. Behind the wall, I find an oasis of art and young Kabulis going about their daily tasks of running ArtLords. Omaid is answering my questions, he is also taking calls and responding to the various people who come to his office door. He is also trying to eat his fried tomato and egg breakfast. His barely touched breakfast goes cold as he pops up to show me around. I catch myself smiling in the silence of the creaking steps as we go downstairs to see the small gallery they have set up. Omaid offers me a small sculpture of a blast wall with a Banksy-esque print on it. I decline, feeling guilty that I might take away some potential income, even though he has multiple on display. I now wish I had been a little more selfish.

Several days earlier I am at the compound of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music where I meet with Ustad Ahmad Sarmast, its founder and director. Again, a metal fence in an endless concrete wall signals the end of the street and the beginning of the school. I am greeted by a female officer in a room to the side where I am patted down and my backpack is searched. Her smile appears both curious and apologetic. As I emerge from the small makeshift room with hanging blankets for walls, I am led further into the compound where I see small children, boys and girls, in untucked school uniform walking freely through the courtyard. I could swear the air within this compound is somehow lighter, fresher. Is it just me or are the birds' songs more distinct in here? We stop outside a classroom on the top floor of the school where a visiting teacher from England is leading a full class of students through their practice. The room is also full of instruments, from drums and clarinets to tablas and sitars. The music and its young players fill my senses. I can still hear it as I write this. I record the rehearsal on my phone before I am led to Sarmast's office for a chat. The music repeats in my head as I try to maintain my composure. I suspect Ustad has seen the one tear that gets away and I smile nervously, a little embarrassed.

Sydney 2018

'So you got the Afghan bug!', says documentarist Travis jokingly. I catch up with him at the cinema stairs following the premiere of his documentary 'Rockabul' in Sydney. It's how he describes the experience of conflicting love and hate of Kabul of those who have visited. He's right, I have caught the Afghan bug and I am going through a bout of what he terms 'Kabul Komedown'. He had warned me before I left and now I know what he meant. I tell him I am eager to go back, only just having returned with a head full of experiences and new friendships. I am not sure how to feel about the terms 'Kabul Komedown' or 'Afghan bug', though I know there is truth in these. Kabul is a city of contradictions. Tense moments of traffic, people, roadside pine nuts on a fire, the ever-present fear of chaos. The kind words of a philosopher-poet turned taxi driver or the generosity of a busy host. And eyes, always eyes mingle with the creativity and peace in those enclaves of cultural production. These swirl, like experienced attan dancers at an Afghan wedding, separate but together, faster and faster, until they are one. This is Kabul.

Introduction

Kabul is in two extremes; Kabul is a very beautiful city because of being able to observe everything like of all the kind of mentalities and all that, but also yeah it's the love and hate relationship we have with the city.

(Sahar, participant interview, 3 Mar 2018)

... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

(Dickens 2014 [1859])

Sahar identifies the two sides of Kabul, hope and fear. Like its people, the city has a sense of expectation about it. One expectation that it may erupt into chaos, the other that peace may well be just around the corner. The sentiment was shared by other participants too. I was reminded of Dickens' well known opening lines above. His two cities of Paris and London could easily be the two sides of Kabul - 'the season of Light' and 'the season of Darkness'. Here, a vendor sells warm chestnuts in front of a rug store, and there, another sells fresh herbs and vegetables. A passer-by carrying her child stops to greet another woman as strangers bustle around them. In this same scene, an armed motorcade of a former *mujahed*-cum-politician speeds by. The ever-present potential for chaos weighs heavily upon the mundanity of the everyday.

I had my own fears ahead of my trip to Kabul. They were shaped by the prevalence of death and destruction narratives I heard and read about in the months leading up to my departure. Before leaving, I spoke with Ahmad Sarmast and shared some of my reservations. In his interview later, he shared his thoughts on my reluctance with generous honesty,

> Even when *you* were deciding to come to Afghanistan you were not sure to come or not. And when you came to Afghanistan and saw that what you see outside of Afghanistan is shown much worse than the realities in Afghanistan. That's why outside of Afghanistan, I don't know if this is a directive from the leaders of countries to show Afghanistan this way to their taxpayers, or is it sensationalist newspapers, newspapers that shock society is the intention of these countries, that present Afghanistan in a very dark way or perhaps those newspapers have consumers. (participant interview, 18 Jan 2018)

For Sarmast, there was both war at his door step and a global war of representation. He is wholly aware of how the country is perceived by the world and he is eager to advocate for Afghanistan. Many participants expressed their desire to be accepted by outside eyes while simultaneously viewing external interferences with suspicion like Sarmast.

In his melancholic account of Istanbul, Orhan Pamuk (2005) talks of the 'love-hate relationship with the Western gaze' (p. 212). He recounts the tug and pull of Istanbullus[83] maintaining 'their Eastern particularism' but that 'even a mild objection [by a Western writer] would break their hearts and wound their nationalist pride' (2005, p. 213). Pamuk captures a tension between a will to progress and a desire to preserve cultural heritage that resonates with the Kabul context today. What Pamuk refers to is not a Huntingtonian clash of civilisations, of oversimplified and reified worlds in competition, but negotiation within the one city. In Kabul, this negotiation has a particular complexity given its recent conflicts and the role of NGOs in the country (Donini 2009, Weigand and Anderrson 2019).

In this chapter, I rely heavily on the public street art of Shamsia and ArtLords as specific examples of public pedagogy. Shamsia and ArtLords transform Kabul's busy streetscapes, that they inhabit with their works, not just aesthetically, but as provocations to reflection and discourse. By using the daily rhythm of the city, artists are able to go to their audiences rather than wait for them in a gallery, a concert or online. In the streets of Kabul, they 'address the challenges of contemporary life within the social fabric of the everyday' (Brady 2006, p. 59). I endeavour to make sense of this process and work at the intersection of activism, education, and art.

Mural art is not unique to Afghanistan and has a long lineage. Marschall (2000) offers a postcolonial reading of mural art in South Africa as a 'highly visible and anti-elitist form of public art' (p. 117) which is intricately tied to the political context of the country and telling of a 'group consciousness' (p. 117). South African mural art also reflects a growing community of art movements, distinct from commercial or decorative art, which works with disadvantaged communities (Marschall 2002). Larkin (2014) reflects on another example, the use of murals and graffiti art on Jerusalem's separation wall. From the first intifada in 1987, the West Bank and the Gaza strip saw a peak in clandestine artworks which helped to mobilise support for the resistance to Israeli occupation. As Rolston (2014) also notes, 'In the relative absence of Palestinian access to forms of mass communication

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[83] Istanbullus is Pamuk's word for residents of Istanbul, much like the use of the word Kabuli for Kabul residing (or originating).

such as television, radio and newspapers as a result of Israeli censorship, graffiti became a form of mass communication...The graffiti acted as a noticeboard, changing daily, telling the population of developments...' (p. 46). As another example, the Mexican muralism movement of the decades following the Mexican revolution, in the 1920s, voiced the plight of workers and peasants. The murals captured an ethos of utopianism, 'a unified national project out of Mexico's diverse experiences of modernity, one that could link in common cause all the nation's inhabitants...' (Greeley 2012, p. 2). These are just some examples of the use of public art in different times and places. The context in which the public murals were created shapes their use, messages, and ultimate purpose.

The city and its publics become imbricated in the works of Shamsia and ArtLords through their publicness and ease of access. Biesta's (2014) definition of publicness suggests a bridging of education and politics not restrained to formalised institutional avenues. For Biesta, publicness is 'a concern for the public quality of human togetherness and thus for the possibility of actors and events to *become public*', as 'forms of political *existence*' (2014, p. 23 author's emphasis). This publicness makes the artist and the physical city components of each other. The city, the artist and the public meet at the site of the art, creating a language that is experienced rather than spoken or heard. People's activities in the city, as presence, become part of the architecture of the cityscape (Simone 2004). Sharifa explains this presence from a gendered perspective saying, 'it's like feeling observed on a constant basis you know. Every time you are in public view but then, then that's part of being a woman here... I am not the only one' (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017). As a female street artist, Shamsia's presence on the street is considerably more pronounced. As an anomaly to the streetscape herself, she senses the space she inhabits as a woman and a graffiti artist as an intersection that is anomalous. She compares this to being a man, explaining the dangers she faces, 'Sure if I was man I could stand there nobody bothers men whatever they do, everyone is proud of them but for women it's much more difficult. And that's how I started graffiti' (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018).

In Kabul, the passer-by experiences art in spaces where they expected rupture. Concrete blast walls as indicators of impending violence or the broken down buildings with scars of recent wars, are converted into murals and art pieces, like palimpsests reflecting the region's history. The expectation and the reality of the art sites are at odds, eliciting an emotional response from the citizen-viewer (Sandlin and Milam 2008, p. 335). Ellsworth (2005) approaches pedagogy as the experiential process of knowledge as it is made. The experience, explains Ellsworth, is 'of being radically in relation to one's self, to others, and

to the world' (p. 2). Approaching pedagogy experientially allows a melding of subjectivities – from audience, to artist, and each as intersections of publics. That spectators become part of the space, marking a transition from passer-by, to bystander, to being implicated in the production of the work. Sandlin and Milam (2008) define this as 'detournement', or turning around, 'wherein people begin seeing their individual lives as intertwined with others' lives and with social issues, and begin enacting "civil labour", which involves individuals engaging politically with the commons in order to increase the social capital of everyone' (p. 341). More than a physical presence, the audience now embodies the message as part of the process of making the art. The process is relational and immersive. The audience, now part of the spectacle, has an audience. In this way public art, 'questions the meaning of that space and that event and draws the public into intelligent discourse with it' (Hein 1996, p. 4).

The relationship between artists, viewers and their city, is far more textured than nation-state building or security strategies. Through their work, artists proclaim their refusal to surrender to forces more powerful than them. The city streets, 'those sites and symbols of democratic protest and politics' (Bannister and Fyfe 2001, p. 811), become commons enabling encounters between people. The artists' physical presence, as well as their art, is therefore a reclamation of public spaces, and reflects the birth of a new urban life in a context of justifiable fears. Claes Oldenburg's 1961 short piece (sometime referred to as a manifesto), *I Am for*, captures sentiments which could be applied to contemporary *Kabuli* artists,

> I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass [sic] in a museum…I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and comes out on top… I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself… (para. 1)

Kabul is the protagonist that works alongside the artists, its contours shaping their art practice. Beyond the physical space and the physical bodies that inhabit it, the city functions like a living organism; complex, intersecting, and dynamic. In its belly, it holds social and cultural meanings, the hopes and aspirations of its people, and the tensions and fears that rupture it. The city is imbued with imageability, an ability to provoke an image in every witness (Lynch 1960). It takes shape, and can be re-envisioned, even through the ubiquity of dominant ideology.

Art and hegemony

Dominant ideology permeates so many aspects of life and masks the potential for alterity. For Kabuli artists, the continuity of violence and extremism creates a context which is particularly challenging. Their struggle for peace must contend with seen and unseen traumas and violent norms. According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony is exercised over ideas and institutions, manifesting as more than explicit violence and coercion. It pervades society as a whole, permeating culture, frameworks of knowledge production, experts, and politicians, policies and processes. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that the 'exercise of hegemony' does not 'leave space untouched'. (p. 11) In Kabul, artists exercise a right to the city, which is not entirely without limits but nevertheless reflects a desire to work with the city for the city.

Indeed, the city is the space where the systems and 'exercise of hegemony' is enacted.[84] Cities have been historically designed to reflect the intentions of those in power. It is also where the battle for its subversion and resistance must take place. The reclamation of the city by artists as a space for co-creation, collaboration and exploration is a conceptual response to the lack of control that more often permeates the streets of Kabul. Art becomes the vehicle through which ways of being can be explored. It is in the physical spaces of the city that artists, as culture makers, can 'resurrect a language of resistance and possibility' (Giroux 2003b, p. 98). They impact the city as the city impacts them. For Harvey (2008), the right to the city refers to 'a right to change ourselves by changing the city' (p. 23). He identifies the right to the city as a common human right to exercising collective power and considers that it has been historically compromised.[85]

While Western theories of urban spaces cannot be holistically applied to a city like Kabul, Harvey's (2008) words resonate like prophecy. Inequities are 'etched on the spatial forms of our cities, which increasingly consist of fortified fragments, gated communities and privatised public spaces kept under constant surveillance' (p. 32). The wealthy in Kabul

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[84] Increasing privatisation is one example of this. The reduction of *truly public* spaces has been the focus of many (Marquand 2004, Biesta 2012, Harvey 2008, Sennett 1993, Giroux 2003b), given the increasing privatisation by neoliberalism and its organs (Giroux 2004b). Bauman (2001), for example, identifies the incursions of the private sphere upon an ever shrinking public and Giroux (2004a) laments 'a discourse that wants to squeeze out ambiguity from public space' (p. 75). For Landry (2008), urban centres are 'neutral territory' in which they can 'function as showcases for creative ideas and activities generated in all parts of the city' (p. 120). As an exercise in reclamation, artists embrace their city, through hope and fear. But Landry too warns that increasing privatisation of public spaces threatens their role as centres of ideas and exchange (2008, p. 120).

[85] Both Harvey (2008) and Lefebvre (1996) give the example of Baron Haussman's Paris project.

can afford to purchase safety amid persistent inherent dangers. In some ways, we see the privatisation of security which only warlords, government officials and NGOs can afford. As Harvey (2003) contends, 'The right to the city, as it is now constituted, is too narrowly confined, restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires' (p. 38). During my time there in 2017, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's motorcade, filled with armed men, appeared suddenly behind us on one of Kabul's most congested streets. As it emerged, the grid locked traffic parted to make way for the motorcade to pass. One moment Kabul's city centre offered hope with young and old going about their business, yet in an instance that same street became a place of fear. My young driver anxiously moved us out of the way, and when I enquired, he explained that he worried about getting caught up with them or the retribution of their enemies. Hekmatyar is a politician and former *mujahideen* leader. His role in the civil war which ushered in the Taliban when it ended was recounted to me by my hosts who still feared his presence in the city. In the street, just by being there, he compromised the right of others to the city, namely their rights to safety and security. Kabul houses the monstrously extravagant homes of warlords, barricaded against the city with blast walls, reflecting luxury amid violence and poverty. The government and warlords vie for control of the country behind the same blast walls which have become the canvas for street artists who depict messages of community, peace and equality.

The 'right to the city' captures the right to be *of* the city and not just *in* the city. However, persistent safety concerns and grabs for power have an undeniable silencing effect on the inhabitants of the city. Homaira recognises , for example, that 'the situation in Afghanistan is not good. Everyone fears for their lives.' (participant interview, 24 Jan 2018). Jahan expresses that 'from a security point of view, I'm fearful. If I'm living in a safe environment, I'll have the courage to work and to fight against common beliefs but because of these safety issues I can't fight wholeheartedly' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). There is an interplay between fear and the city. Bannister and Fyfe (2001) examine crime and the potential of crime as causes of fear and tie fear of the city to declining urban culture (p. 808). Though they refer primarily to cities in the US and Britain, it nevertheless highlights the relational dynamic between people and their city everywhere.

Viewed through a relational framework, that of the city and its people, we understand the love/fear response to Kabul by its inhabitants. As Bannister and Fyfe (2001) articulate, 'fear has been evidenced to exacerbate personal vulnerabilities and to act as a divisive presence where people live and congregate, reducing the desire and willingness to participate in

social encounters' (p. 808). The three theoretical positions elaborated by Bannister and Fyfe (2008), namely fear as 'product of victimisation, as the consequence of a breakdown in social order or as being mediated by the urban environment' (p. 808), help to shed light on the layers of fear in the Kabul context. As war ruptured the social order, Afghans became the victims of violence. The blast walls which symbolise the potential for violence add yet another layer of fear. It is the violence, past and present, symbolised by these seen and unseen walls, that the artists in this study seek to rupture.

In his art practice, Kabir experiments with contemporary installation art and encourages his volunteers to do the same. In recounting his advice to a small group, Kabir expressed how they could dedicate a site, as a homage to Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27 year old woman in Kabul who was publicly and brutally killed by an angry mob in 2015,[86]

> You have these skills, they're beautiful skills, why don't you contemporize it? Go and bring stones from where this girl was stoned to death, bring stones from that. Make huge place ... and make a *tazhib,* [a border filled with delicate miniature art motifs] out of these stones. And inside the stones, what you could do, put a fabric, *desmol,* the *desmol* they use to check if you're a virgin or not...and you can have an open ... under the stone, you could have an open pomegranate...these things are taboos that you can't talk about but you can show them. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Now known broadly by her first name, Farkhunda had argued with a *mullah* about selling what she regarded as blasphemous trinkets, or talismans. He falsely accused her of burning the Quran. The artwork suggested by Kabir mixes traditional styles and symbols such as the *desmol* and the pomegranate, symbols of virginity and sexuality, with contemporary installation formats. Kabir pushes the young artists he is speaking with to engage with events like the death of Farkhunda, but also to engage with highly taboo topics such as woman's virginity. For Kabir, Farkhunda's murder stems from the same traditions that centre female virginity as the epitome of piety in its extreme. This installation is his critique against the hegemony of tradition.

The medium of art, like the architecture of the city, depicys the aesthetic heterogeneity of its inhabitants. As artists they have the tools to reconceptualise the architecture of the city, physical and social, through their art. While Omaid's social media post about

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[86] The New York Times presented video footage depicting scenes of the violence (Rubin 2015).

ArtLords' commemorative mural, depicting Farkhunda, advocates against violence against women in English, because of its global reach (figure 19), the Dari text next to her image on the wall asks 'who killed me?' and is signed 'Farkhunda' (figure 20). The mural with her image, looking back at passers-by, questions them about the lack of justice given that many of her accusers' sentences were reduced. One year later, in 2016, the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan held a commemoration with re-enactments of the event (Faizi 2016), a way to remind people of the horror of the day. A desire to produce change through cultural production was a distinct thread through all of my interviews. Kabir expresses this sentiment saying that, 'this is my dream, to turn Kabul into the street art capital of the world' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018).

Figure 19. Omaid Sharifi's tweet about Farkhunda with image of ArtLords mural 1 (Sharifi 2019c). Reproduced with permission from Twitter.

Figure 20. Omaid Sharifi's tweet about Farkhunda with image of ArtLords mural 2 (Sharifi 2019c).

It is between the interstices of what was and what is, that what could be is born. New ways of being emerge through the ruptures created by art. Art acts as signifier of presence – that of the artist, as well as the messages, subtle and otherwise, of the art itself. By considering people's presence in the city as components of its architecture, artists can 'serve as a counter-hegemonic human architecture' (Joffre-Eichhorn 2019, p. 9). Artistic signifiers add to the mosaic of the city. Art becomes cultural representation of a generation of young Kabuli artists whose use of creative products intends to heal the rupture left by years of war and to create their own unsettling of structures that they want to change.

The ruptures caused by war create moments of paradox and periods of transition and becoming. The performativity of the space, the viewers who pass by, and the context of Kabul and its streets form the 'cultural texts' of the city (Sandlin and Milam 2008, p. 328). Artists' works add to this textuality of the city as they construct and explore what it is to live in Kabul. Art is the construction of reality, not just communication. As Paolo Freire (1972) argues, these processes, 'testify to the emergence of the masses and to their clamouring presence in the historical process in varying degrees of intensity' (p. 15).

Kabul Blooming

Kabir uses artistic analogy to articulate the range of possibilities in Kabul society,

> That palette, I'm finding, when you had two colours on your palette, which was black and white, now you have a variety of colours. Not shades anymore. And I see it's very rich. Because a lot of young guys, being it girls or boys, they bring a lot of

new stuff. You read the new literature, it's incredible, so powerful. And the music, at the same time, food. There's this culture of cafes, actually, growing at the moment. These cafes are popping up everywhere. We see, really, traditional people, you know, going into those cafes. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

He captures Kabul's cultural blooming which diverges and converges in various directions. Satire on television, for example, has taken off in Afghanistan with entire shows such as Tolo TV's *Shabake Khanda* (Laughter Network) dedicated to comedy skits speaking truth to power. Their skits satirise Afghan cultural tropes such as marriage, *burqa*, beards, family and warlords. Kabul's recent bourgeoning of cafés and a nascent café culture, mentioned by Kabir, presents another example. Popularly frequented by locals, these cafes and their youth culture also appear in a number of global media articles and[87] (figure 21). ArtLords have also opened a Rebel Café with a logo, which employs Banksy-esque tropes to suggest a counter culture (figure 22). The café represents the intersection of art, politics, and civic participation (figure 23). Kabir spoke to me of his plans for the café, before it opened, as a place for interaction, 'We are now thinking about creating this ArtLords café for the first time together, all the artists, from philosophers to poets, theatre, cinema and everybody together. So we need a place [for] artists to create that culture. That could be like post-World War II Europe. And they can influence a lot of stuff. So that's sort of what we are planning and thinking about right now' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018).

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[87] See for example: Kumar (2019) and Latifi (2017)

Figure 21. Young people at a Kabul café (New York Times 2019a). Reproduced with permission from New York Times.

Figure 22. The logo for Rebel Art Cafe by ArtLords (ArtLords 2018a). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.

Figure 23. Photo of the Rebel Art Café (ArtLords 2018b). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.

Initiatives have also sought to address the symbolic and physical shape of the city. Since 2011, the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation (AHRDO), has used Memory Boxes to counter 'an elite driven public architecture that celebrates a culture of death' (Joffre-Eichhorn 2019, p. 2). The boxes, into which surviving family place items of loved ones who have been casualties of past and ongoing violence, act as artefacts of remembrance which narrate the experiences of war victims (figure 24). They are a response to the homages (street names, tombs, mausoleums) to warlords displayed as war heroes. Like the public works discussed here, Memory Boxes use 'artistic, sensory, and affective' means to deliver an alternative history and challenge a culture of impunity (Joffre-Eichhorn 2019, p. 2). The Memory Boxes offer a platform for victims and their families a way to resist the drowning of their voices by the elites in the country. The initiative uses art and affect to confront the city with a different version of events. These hundreds of boxes have been exhibited nationally and globally. They reflect aspirations for the future of the country and its people and are not just retrospective mourning.

Figure 24. Visitor to the memory box exhibition (New York Times 2019b). Reproduced with permission from New York Times.

Artists and groups like ArtLords and Shamsia act as social agents, what Gramsci calls 'organic intellectuals', defined 'less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong' (1971, p. 3).[88] As products of their social and political contexts, they are best positioned to navigate them. The sites of art they create are not intended to be consensus raising, in the way that Habermas defined public spaces. Rather, they create what Mouffe (2013) calls 'agonistic public spaces' (p. 213) where hegemony is confronted.[89] In essence *Kabuli* artists offer new subjectivities, by demonstration. Vogel et al. (2020) assert that graffiti, particularly in conflict zones is, 'a valuable source of knowledge for exploring the realm of the everyday' (p. 4).[90] It is in this context that I employ public pedagogies as a framework with which to consider public art pieces by ArtLords and Shamsia.

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[88] Gershon (2010) argues that musicians are public intellectuals because music permeates our lives, it is inherently public, and because it contains knowledge.

[89] Mouffe (2013) defines hegemonic practices as, 'Those practices of articulation through which a certain order is created and the meaning of social institutions fixed' (p. 210).

[90] Vogel et al. (2020) define graffiti as taking various forms, 'from tag and murals to commissioned wall paintings' (p. 2).

Pedagogy of public art

Noorjahan reflects on the Islamist literature she found easily available in the streets of Kabul. Offered in multiple languages, they reinforce the politicisation of religion, already pervasive in the Afghan context:

> [We] were walking in Kabul and we noticed that there were a lot of books being sold by young kids that were very very radicalizing and you know these kids are not responsible for this obviously…But the books were mostly imported from Pakistan and they were you know both in Persian and in Pashto and they were written by Peshawari quote-unquote, religious clerics, and they are still extremely common in Kabul like when you see those little kids selling books in Kabul, it is usually these books. And they are very cheap it is like twenty Afghanis to thirty Afghanis per book[91]. But then I bought a few of these books and we read through them and they were like egregious. They were, you know about women who go to hell for not being obedient to their husbands. Just a lot of crazy stuff, sometimes you might have heard some of these videos by religious cleric. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017).

Indeed, cultural products like these written materials, exert immense influence on the sexualising, gendering and colouring of people. Public spaces are contested spaces where who is seen and represented form our 'normal' in political, social, and cultural terms. The absence of women from public spaces during the Taliban regime or the corporate logos of for-profit organisations are examples of this. As public pedagogies they represent the 'production, dissemination and circulation' of dominant ideologies (Giroux 2004a, p. 74). In defining the perimeters of normal, popular culture wields immense power.

Public pedagogy offers a democratising and subversive role. Sandlin, O'Malley and Burdick (2011) explain that, 'although some informal spaces reinforce dominant culture, others create "counterinstitutional" spaces in which the educational activity of artwork, performative display, and other pedagogical modes contrasts with the established culture' (p. 348). Savage (2010, p. 109) thinks that public pedagogy has potential counter-hegemonic properties, contrary to Giroux's (2004a) assertions that such pedagogy, particularly corporatized media such as 'advertising, television, film, the internet, video

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[91] 30 Afghanis equate to about $0.50 Australian and $0.40 US.

games and other popular press' (p. 77) [92], extend the agenda of corporates and the governments who prioritise them above the citizenry[93]. These spaces carry educational force, both to contest and to conform, 'as spaces of resistive *and* regulatory potential: as dynamic, dialectical, and political spaces through which new visions can and will be forged' (Savage 2010, p. 104)[94]. The public pedagogy of *Kabuli* artists defies this binary.

It is ironic that the works of ArtLords, with their social and political messages, often explicitly presented in inscriptions next to the work, can be found on the outer public facing walls of government buildings. This occurred almost by accident:

> There was a lot of resistance. For example, at the beginning, so, if I would ask a person to give me the permission to paint the pair of eyes on their wall of the ministry, the ministry would think that, "Okay, if these pair of eyes are on my wall, it means that I'm corrupt," so they will not let me paint them. The first mural, they did not know about it, that it's about fighting corruption. I used my personal connections, and a friend was the secretary to the minister, and we went there and we asked her help. She was generous enough. She got us the permission and, the moment it was out there, then they realized, "Oh, my God"… They sort of fired their own rifles at themselves. But what happened after a year when ArtLords was quite famous and everybody wanted to associate themselves with us, then this completely changed. The ministers were calling us to paint these murals because it turned out to be that, if you had these eyes on your walls, it means that you're fighting corruption. (Omaid, participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

Arguable, the shift to which Omaid refers here reflects a co-option or domestication of the social and political critique produced by ArtLords murals by those he is critiquing. Initially their work was radical guerrilla art; now it is being commissioned by government departments. Yet, in contexts like Kabul and Afghanistan more broadly, where presence in public spaces was highly socially regulated, domestication is a rearticulation of norms.[95] The adoption by government bodies of ArtLords methods in an environment with rigid

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[92] Indeed Giroux (2004a) does express the role of culture as 'crucial terrain for theorizing and realizing the political as an articulation and intervention into the social, a space in which politics is pluralized, recognized as contingent, and open to many formations' (p. 78).

[93] Savage (2010) also argues that calling these mediums public pedagogies conceals the different publics and levels of exposure, disadvantage and access that reflect different socioeconomic realities.

[94] O'Malley and Roseboro (2010) refer to this as the 'pedagogical hinge'.

[95] By domestication, I refer to the co-option of otherwise resistance art, or art that critiques the status quo, by power.

traditions (for both men and women), signifies contestation within conformity. I would go so far as to argue that the co-option and push for change runs upwards from grassroots communities like ArtLords, rather than flows down from sources of official power. Commissioned works by ArtLords sit uneasily between conformity and contestation. They enlist government contracts but enact 'the disruption and transformation of dominant and constraining cultural, political, economic, historical, linguistic, theological, and ecological configurations' (O'Malley and Roseboro 2010, p. 641). They evolved from 'defacing' the city to refacing it with their murals (Schacter 2014) and this reflects the complexity of the circumstances in which they work.

While their works are sometimes commissioned, like corporate graffiti, they are also an 'alternative system of public communication' as in non-commercial graffiti (Lee 2000 in Carrington 2009, p. 411). ArtLords' messages are not meant for commercial ends but, as in the case of mural art in the South African context, it 'is not associated only with renewal of the physical urban environment but also, more broadly, with renewal in a social, economic and political sense' (Marschall 2002, p. 48). Shamsia's works, a young woman's unsanctioned imaginings, depict women and offer to challenge structures of gender and power. She injects, into the everyday, challenges to social and cultural norms. 'Graffiti as art for, and in, everyday settings has a distinct opportunity to (un)consciously play a significant role in shaping the people who interact with, view and live their lives in its presence' (Vogel et al. 2020, p. 7). As Shamsia expresses,

> I wanted to work more on the topic of women. Because I had seen there are not a lot of women around for example you go to offices and there aren't much women, you go to school, to uni, there weren't much women, in society, that's why I said we will bring women into society again. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

In an environment where women's movements are highly monitored, Shamsia's work is political representation through art, reflecting her claim to the city 'in a complex dance around identity, power and belonging' (Carrington 2009, p. 419). She manages to do this while maintaining some conformity. The images of young women contest the established culture of Kabul which requires a hyper-modesty of women in public spaces. Shamsia's depictions are modestly dressed, often in traditional Afghan designs, with headscarves in the popular style of the girls in the street, with a little hair showing (figure 25). Averting one's gaze, especially for women, rather than meeting the eyes of a stranger in the street, is considered the more decent behaviour. Rohina's Facebook post in figure 26 below

caricatures this onus on women to prevent seduction and maintain family honour. The figures in Shamsia's murals never meet the eyes of the spectators yet they are present in the street with the passer-by. They are depicted as feeling, existing and present in the street. Even through the averted gaze, the women in the murals speak to passers-by of a common hope and fear. Shamsia explains, 'That's why I started drawing women with *shaderee* [*burqa*] but I changed their appearance, I drew them stronger, their shoulders very large and sharp, with more movement, the size a little larger than actual. To introduce to society a new woman' (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018).

Figure 25. Shamsia's work in response to a bomb blast in Kabul, (Hassani 2018). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.
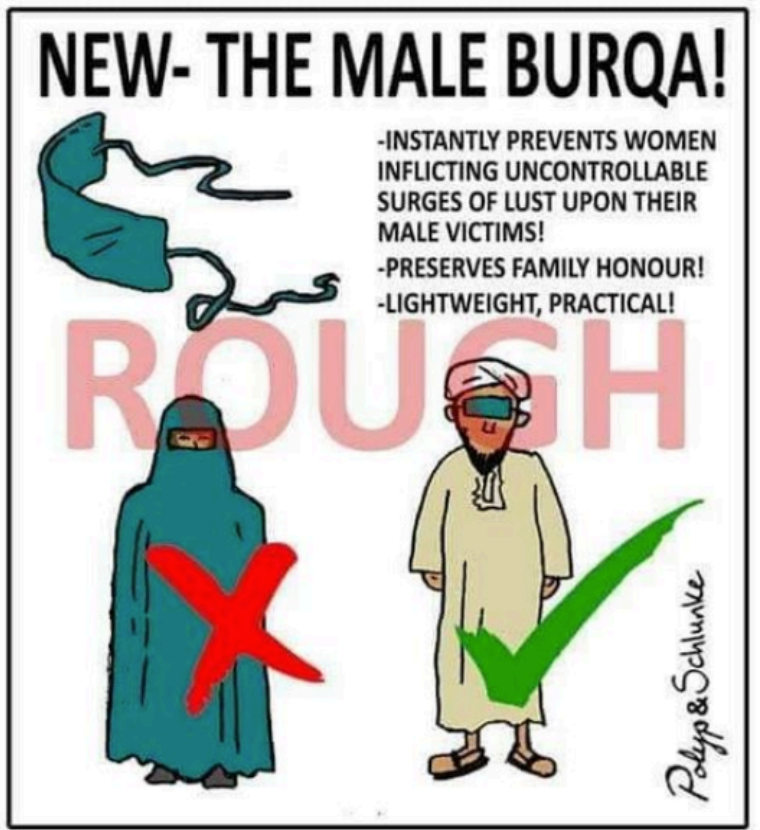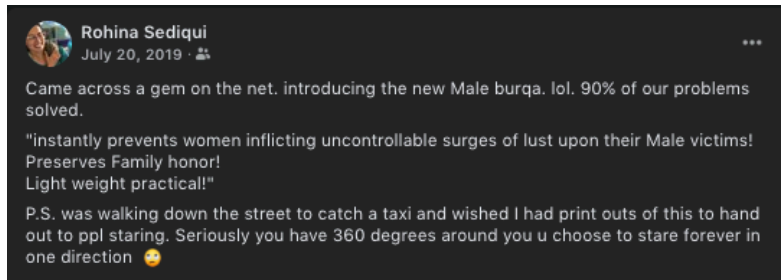
Figure 26. Rohina's Facebook post about modesty and honour (Sediqui 2019). Reproduced with permission from Facebook.

The art site is an institutionalised yet informal one. Although it exists outside of formal educational spaces, its intention is to create a space of learning. In these sites, artists convert the public domain into a space where, 'learning often takes on subtle, embodied mode, moving away from cognitive rigor commonly associated with education and toward notions of affect, aesthetics, and presence' (Sandlin, O'Malley and Burdick 2011, p. 348). The street lends the artist 'spaces that provide a site for compassion, outrage, humour, and action. Such pedagogy disrupts processes of injustice and creates opportunities for the expression of complex, contesting, and subaltern perspectives' (Brady 2006, p. 58). In addition to the risks to physical safety that Shamsia experiences, she represents a rupture, a or moment of dissensus, to the everyday. Both the works of ArtLords and Shamsia use the materiality of the city to self-narrate, in essence, it is the act of 'writing oneself into existence' (Carrington 2009, p. 420). The artists who seek to address the ills of their society

encounter and respond through creative media to existing pedagogies like those found by Noorjahan.[96] Noorjahan founded Free Women Writers to counter the messages distributed by the materials she mentions above. This 'oppositional cultural politics' offers a counter-pedagogy to the dominant ones, and opens up spaces for alterity (Giroux 2003b, p. 101).

In the streets of Kabul, otherwise war weary cityscapes are reimagined and actively reclaimed by artists through their art. Omaid reflects on this,

> ...if you look when Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of *Hezbeh Islami* was coming, there were graphics all over the city showing him as a Dracula, as a person with a lot of blood who killed a lot of innocent civilians in Kabul. So that's somehow being out there and expressing your feelings towards all these injustices that's happening. This is one way of tackling. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

The residual effects of war have been discussed throughout the thesis and tend to linger over many of the conversations I had with artists. Artistic reclamation challenges the legacy of war amid continuing insurgent struggles and political uncertainty. Omaid says about ArtLords murals, 'To see that image on a street of Kabul, this itself is one of the biggest statements you can make' (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018). Through culture, daily existence becomes inscribed in tangential media, capable to be witnessed by passers-by. Murals publicly reflect the participatory culture of Kabul's art scene, and the civic engagement of its artists. *Kabuli* public art sutures parts of the city together. The street is where the encounter between a viewer, possibly resistant, with a concept sprayed on a wall or the presences of a female artist on a ladder, occurs. The public space is the canvas upon which artists explore shared identities or present provocations. The street becomes the site of pedagogical engagement and public discourse. Hickey (2006) defines the street as a transitory location, the space between end points (para. 1) where 'implicit pedagogies' (para. 5) occur. I consider the cultural products in Kabul's streets far more explicit, given that they contrast with the violence of the context from which they were born. The work and the site create a moment of counterculture.

Both Shamsia and ArtLords repurpose space, transforming them into didactic moments of reflection, that speak of shared experiences. Omaid wanted to transform the blast walls, the concrete barriers, symbols of both those privileged enough to have them for protection

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[96] see also Mayo 2002 for some of Giroux's later works

and the need for protection in Kabul. Omaid felt they were 'making Kabul look like a prison'. Like Omaid, Kabir expresses his distaste for 'these ugly walls. What you can do actually, for me, for me, it opened a space for reflection. And to put something on it, and then have a conversation about it' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). Both Omaid and Kabir invoke aesthetics in their desire to transform their city from a concrete prison to an opportunity for discourse about the many challenges faced by its people. Shamsia too refers to the walls in Kabul, but her perspective is different. Her graffiti is a fight against the ongoing war in people's minds,

> What's the point of hanging a picture on a wall inside and I thought I will work on the walls outside. At that time there were many war torn walls, old walls, broken walls and I thought ok, these are all of these are bad memories of war for people, these ruined walls and if I draw on these then the bad memories will be cleaned from their memory they will not be reminded of the war that's why it's good to have an artwork so people don't see the ruined walls anymore and they see artworks instead. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Shamsia's comment highlights a desire to shape the city both by what she adds to it – her artwork – and what she removes from it – memories of violence. She has taken her art to the streets because that is where her message belongs. The ruins to which she refers to, as spaces where people can encounter art unexpectedly, become sites of pedagogical exchange. Ellsworth (2005) refers to the sensational pedagogies which bring together the processes of the mind/brain/body and physical space ('building') in an 'assemblage' (p. 4, see also p. 27). For pedagogy to be powerful, it must 'involve(s) us in experiences of the corporeality of the body's time and space. Bodies have affective somatic responses as they inhabit a pedagogy's time and space' (Ellsworth 2005, p. 4). The pedagogical act transforms the artists too who, 'invent ways to see and say new things through it [which] do not pre-exist it but are rather invented in the process' (paraphrasing Rajchman 2000 p. 121, in Ellsworth 2005, p. 28). Indeed, Shamsia did not intend to become a graffiti artist at first. Pedagogical experience is as impactful on artists as on its audience. Shamsia's practice transformed her into a graffiti artist and 'a conduit for expression of a whole social group' (Lacy 1995, p. 174).

The publicness of art and the art making process employ modes of address that circumvent language. As physical bodies in experiential space, artists, contexts and publics become

part of the performance of creating art on the street.[97] The uninhabited space of the street offers the opportunity to make new meaning, outside the scripts of home, work or school.

ArtLords invite passers-by to contribute to their artwork, often engaging with people as they walk by. They leverage the street, as 'a site of knowledges and discourses, in constant interplay and renewal, presented to us as we pass by' (Hickey 2006, p. 5). They convert the site into a space of discourse where audiences become collaborators (Fryd 2007, p. 23). ArtLords' public art murals are more processual than artefact (or product). The process employed in creating the large images on concrete blast walls, often on busy streets bustling with cars and pedestrians, has a significant performativity to it. The street makes a union of art, context and messaging possible (Fryd 2007, p. 29) and the art has an effect beyond the intended pedagogical messages of the artists. Everyday non-art activities and art practice meet in the streets of Kabul through the art of Shamsia and ArtLords which is political, pedagogical and public.

Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of action, as the exercise of freedom (Arendt 1998) can be applied to the artistic practices of *Kabuli* artists. Arendt defines action as a generative process of beginning. The inherent publicness of action creates the beginning of something. Beginning something without anyone to witnesses it means it has not come into the world. Something comes into the world, as a beginning, when it can be witnessed, experienced, and to which it can be responded. Biesta (2014) explains this beginning as freedom, 'I *do* come into the world, and in precisely this moment – but not before or after – I *am* free' (Biesta 2014, p. 19).

Public art spaces are beginnings[98] and expressions of freedom. Indeed, Shamsia and Kabir mention that work in galleries do not touch enough people. That is, they are not witnessed and not public enough. For Shamsia, the public reach of graffiti shaped her decision to engage more with the genre,

> I didn't think that I would become a graffiti artist, it was just for fun for a day or so and I liked everyone to see my work, people to see it, affect people's mind, make people question what I have drawn and me or the people that pass each day,

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[97] Levinas (1991) refers to the gentleness of the revelation of the Other, 'By virtue of its intentional structure gentleness comes to the separated being from the Other. The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness (p. 150).

[98] In the Arendtian sense of action in public as a generative beginning.

whether they want it or not, art will become part of their lives as they pass. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Kabir adds, pointing to the democratisation of public art, that, 'The galleries are for the elites and a few people to look at your work' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). Vogel et al. (2020) argue that graffiti, albeit understudied, has much to offer about understanding specific and contextual conflict settings, particularly pertaining to peacebuilding. They add, 'graffiti can be used to complement processes of peacebuilding and actively shape spaces as a result of its public, accessible nature' (p. 4). Shamsia and Kabir consider the city the canvas upon which their art is inscribed as it is being painted or sprayed. Understanding their art praxis interprets their navigation of space and the interactions they have with the city and their audiences. The graffiti becomes a 'site of local knowledge production', intended to be witnessed in public spaces (Vogel et al. 2020, p. 5). It is a generative expression of freedom insistent on publicness. Through public art, artists open up spaces for conversations, of the sort referred to by Mohammad in the previous chapter, to occur about identities unbound to conflict and war narratives.

Arendt defines the public sphere in two forms, the agonal and the associational.[99] The agonal is a competitive space whereas the associational space emerges when, 'men act together in concert', a place where freedom can appear (Arendt in Benhabib 1993, p. 102). Kabul has both agonal and associational space, and the boundaries between the two are unsettled. Artists transform Kabul's agonal spaces into associational spaces. They engage with the political and social currents of their time and exercise an agency required for political efficacy.

The blurring of agonal and associational spaces marks the unsettling of the masculinised warrior-hero tropes mentioned in chapter six. Articulating the agonal warrior-hero space, Hartstock explains, 'relations with others take the form of the struggle for victory in battle, a struggle for dominance that requires the other's submission or even death...The body and its needs, even for life itself, are held to be irrelevant...Finally, creativity and generation, issues centring on life, are replaced for the warrior-hero by a fascination with death' (Hartstock 1985 in Benhabib 1993, p. 103). Hartstock's description captures the

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[99] Benhabib (1993) cautions against a hard distinction between the agonal and associational realms, explaining that 'While all genuine politics and power relations involve an agonistic dimension, in the sense of vying for distinction and excellence, agonal politics also entails an associative dimension based on the power of persuasion and consensus. In this sense, the sharp differentiation between these two models need to be softened' (p. 103).

tension in Kabul between fear and creative blooming. From the residue of war, artists create, and 'call something into being which did not exist before' (Arendt 1961, p. 151). What they bring to life is the creativity that war has cost by generating deliberative, discursive sites in public spaces. Sharifa states 'people are more interested in life than death' (participant interview, 11 Dec 2017).

In Kabul, the site of art brings together fear and hope. Artists on the street suture the expected and unexpected, the everyday and the anomalous,[100] the art and the non-art. They create deterritorialisations[101] are formed which rupture the everyday, injecting surprise, alterity, and moments of enchantment. This 'pushing against' offers a pedagogy from the fringes (Gaztambide-Fernández and Matute 2014). These sites have their own publics, who are tied together unintentionally, if only momentarily, not by space or time, but both at once, experientially.

Incidental-ephemeral publics

Omaid intends for his work to create social and cultural ripples. He explains, 'Art can give you this opportunity that with…one painting, with one animation you are really targeting all these people and sort of trying to change their conscious' (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018). Gaztambide-Fernández and Matute (2014) articulate public pedagogy as a 'relational process through which multiple subjects enter – not always deliberately or directly- into a temporal and spatial relationship through which one tries to influence or "push against" the experiences of another' (p. 56). The public is the audience with whom they create opportunities of encounter.

Savage (2014) identifies three types of publics: political, popular, and concrete. The political public belong to a common political field (p. 81). They are the public at large. The popular public are less spatially bound and are defined by 'processes of cultural distribution and consumption' (p. 84) such as popular culture. Savage's concrete publics are bound by spatial borders and can include suburbs or libraries (p. 86). Savage's (2014) categorisations are not intended to represent rigid groupings, but porous boundaries, 'we each belong to multiple and intersecting publics' (p. 89). I would suggest a fourth

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[100] Ellsworth (2005) defines 'anomalous places of learning: peculiar, irregular, abnormal, or difficult to classify as pedagogical phenomena' (p. 5).
[101] Deterritorialisation is associated with Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as separations between practices like traditions, like 'line of flight' from which the practice leaves a place.

categorisation. This incidental-ephemeral *public*, as the name suggests, does not intentionally arrive at the site of the work, nor may they have an interest to stay and engage, and yet pass by Shamsia or ArtLords, by chance.[102] The encounter between the incidental-ephemeral public and the art site represents a moment of potential deterritorialisation. They unsettle the expected scene with the unexpected.

The incidental-ephemeral public is not specifically invited, but is welcome. The moment of encounter between art and spectator may pass quickly but, however ephemeral, it does occur. It is the moment of enchantment, when the affective reach of the work touches the precognition of the viewer. Referring to the abundance of publicity in modern society, Berger et al. (1972) note, 'One may remember or forget these messages but briefly one takes them in, and for a moment they stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation' (p. 129). This moment is one in which the viewer encounters a stimuli which engages the imagination. Having been at the site of the art, this public now share a common memory of it. Like Shamsia suggests, the recurrent incursions of concepts into a person's life through art, with repetition, begin to make an effect. The street provides the accessible space for incidental-ephemeral publics to occur. No tickets need to be bought, no cultural capital leveraged, no specific 'uniform' worn, the incidental-ephemeral public can be anybody, in any space, at any time. The art is an anchor which makes the site stand out among the mundanity of the street's everydayness.

In Kabul especially, the ever-present potential for enchantment or mayhem creates a city throbbing with all sorts of potentialities. The street is 'a space that is inhabited, yet common, invested with multiple meanings and ownerships simultaneously' (Hickey 2006, para. 11). As publics we are engaging with the city and shaping it, while being shaped and observed by it. We are both subjects of the street and objects from it. *Kabuli* street art transforms a space and gives it its own public, the space and the public become each other's pedagogues. Without the streetscape, it is a different piece of work. Shamsia articulates this potentiality of the street,

> that's why graffiti has the highest risks because, not just in Afghanistan but in other countries too, because artworks that are in the street can very quickly change people's minds, wherever it is, it will influence. If it was in an exhibition, then

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[102] Where a person may choose to intentionally return to the site of the art, then I would consider them popular publics. As Savage mentions, the categorisations of publics are fluid and not rigid conceptualisations.

maybe someone will go to the exhibition and see it, but when it is in the street, everyone sees the piece. And if something is written on it, it should inspire people, for example the texts that are written, if they are political, it can completely change people. That's why, everyone is scared, they don't allow anyone to do graffiti. (participant interview, 10 Jan 2018)

Shamsia converts space into an experiential zone, a portion of the streetscape that is made exceptional in the context of its surroundings. In doing so, she creates 'the space in which the life of images and persons meet and merge together' (Gell 1998, p. 64). In Kabul, this is especially pronounced, given that its surroundings often betray the scars of war, a backdrop that makes the aesthetic and pedagogical character of art even more pronounced. For Shamsia who might spend several hours on a street mural, and as a woman, both she and her artwork are anchoring events. In figure 27 below, Shamsia's artwork on the wall to the left of the photo captures the attention of the passers-by. In the background, a crumbled building frames the right of the photo. As incidental-ephemeral publics, though they are unknown to each other, they belong to a moment together. The boundaries of the incidental-ephemeral public are defined by the contact zone (Haraway 2008), the point at which the artist's intentionality and the viewer's unintended attention meet. In a sea of people and street humdrum, the artists' bodies at the work site are amplified.

Figure 27. Artwork in Kabul by Shamsia (Hassani 2019b). Reproduced with permission from Shamsia Hassani.

The scene of the artwork is, for incidental-ephemeral publics, a moment of enchantment. The artists and their artwork are like improvised theatre, they extend the stage and the brush to the audience. It exists outside of consciousness, given its unintended momentariness, without discriminating between gender, race, and age. They are spaces in which gender, class and ethnicity are not bracketed (as in Habermas's public sphere), but eliminated given the anomalous space they encounter in a moment of aporia. Within the street where distinctions matter and continue to hold valence, particularly for young women who are continuously subject to street harassment, the site of the artwork invites invited all to contribute. 'By such experiences we are not only lurched out of the familiar and the taken-for-granted, but we may also discover new avenues for action. We may experience a sudden sense of new possibilities and thus new beginnings' (Greene 1995, p. 379). For ArtLords whose female volunteers can be seen on ladders contributing to murals, they help to create spaces where male allies can use their social capital to encourage participation. Omaid expresses ArtLords's efforts to create a safe space:

> I think they [the audience] really like it. At first they are a bit surprised, because it's something very, very new for them, but then later on I think they appreciate the fact, and they just try to make a conversation with the ladies, sort of support the whole idea of it. Sometimes they feel it might be foreigners doing this, but the moment we talk to them and in Pashto or Persian, so talk to them in their own languages, they really feel sort of comfortable. It puts zero doubt in their minds that when they go back home they will look really differently to us, their sisters, mother, wives. I think that really is helping them think and behave differently. (participant interview, 2 Feb 2018)

Omaid aims to transcend gender and language (read ethnicity), reflecting Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas's bourgeois liberal public sphere in which Habermas contends that social stratifiers such as class are bracketed in the horizontally structured public sphere. She explains, 'it is not possible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of societal inequality', adding that, 'where societal inequality persists, deliberative processes in public spheres will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and disadvantage subordinates' (Fraser 1990, p. 66). Indeed, what Fraser is arguing for is the pervasiveness of habitus in these spaces. The ephemerality of the experience facilitates a momentary distance from the social disparities that *Kabuli*s experience. They are invited into an experiential space which. As Greene (1995) explains, 'Participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us, at the very least, to see more in our experience,

to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured' (p. 379). In this distance, multiple publics meet to create a discursive sphere shaped by a shared experience of an anomaly in the street.

In the interstices of the 'comprehensive public sphere', which Fraser (1990) problematizes for its implicit enforcement of some over others, the incidental-ephemeral acts as an alternative to hegemonic spaces, what she calls '*subaltern counterpublics*' [103] (p. 67, author's emphasis). Fraser's utilisation of subaltern counterpublics serves to 'signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (p. 67). Omaid's comment about the change in the minds of passers-by who 'go back home' articulates the effect of a counterdiscourse[104]. This rupture is best articulated when considering public spheres as spaces where identity is enacted, and where, 'social identities are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed' (Fraser 1990, p. 79). At the site of the artwork in the street, the incidental-ephemeral public, who are also part of the 'public-at-large' (Fraser 1990, p. 68) respond to the artist's enactment of their cultural identity through the lens of their own. The streetscape can thus be viewed as the contact zone of identities and worldviews and the site of art as an opportunity for discursive exploration, enactment, deliberation and contestation. More than just the marketplace of ideas (Gordon 1997), the site of art is a bazaar of identities in which identities are explored, constructed, adopted, or vetoed in aporetic space.

Aporia and the city

Kabul is a city that reverberates with fear and potential. In an expression that captures the aporetic space, between creation and destruction, 'a condition of radical possibility', (Burdick, Sandlin and O'Malley 2014, p. 4), Kabir explains,

> You can actually create culture, you can cultivate it. It's so tangible here... And that's nice, and the other thing...I just love that two days in Afghanistan aren't the

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[103] Fraser points out that counter publics can be both benevolent or malevolent but that they nevertheless 'help expand discursive space' (1990, p. 67).
[104] Sharifa expresses the classes that have formed in Kabul which have replaced former structures. She explains that while previously family name and lineage were important, today it is about wealth and connections to the West.

> same and you can't predict anything, what is around the corner and I really don't want to predict it. So sometimes I when I leave the office, I go and I'm driving and I'm just looking at the car next to me and say, hmm, maybe it will just blow up near me. (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018)

Kabir's embrace of the unpredictability of the everyday includes the possibility of death and yet his, almost light hearted, reference to this possibility is offered in the same breath as the possibility to create tangible culture. The aporetic space is inspired by its use by Burdick, Sandlin and O'Malley (2014), who employ the Derridean position to refer to it as representing a productive space with the potential to create, between knowing and not knowing, between question and answer (p. 1, pp. 3-4). It reflects the liminal and interstitial spaces between the will to create new ways of being amidst the fear of chaos. Indeed, like Kabir's comment, art asks the questions which cause unease. It is its functioning within aporetic space that art can make us uncomfortable enough to question. The possibility for creativity and innovation exists amidst the potential at any moment for violence and chaos. Yet in the face of challenges, artists have created spaces of public pedagogy. In this chapter, public pedagogy refers to creative sites of learning and shaping that occur outside of formalised educational institutions. This can include the gallery, the street, television, radio and internet. In Kabul, these sites of creative output occur alongside sites of violence.

In essence, artists and their activities are an arm of civil society that generate social and cultural meaning where development has more often meant economic development.[105] Kabir refers to this gap as a 'cultural vacuum'. It is the reason why he returned to Afghanistan. Like Kabir, Noorjahan couples the creative process and a violent underbelly to life in Kabul, termed as competing forces of life and death, Noorjahan reflects on art in Kabul,

> it is not necessarily quote-unquote high art but it is very very vibrant and it is very I think full of energy and there's a lot of life and that's so contradictory for Kabul which has the highest rate of civilian deaths in the country...it's a lively city and there is concerts you know, in the summer there is concerts on weekly basis, there's festivals...and I really have come to love and appreciate that part of Kabul. (participant interview, 18 Dec 2017)

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[105] I would, however, argue that a simple cause and effect between civil society and social and cultural cohesion requires more nuance (Schmeidl 2009).

In both Kabir's and Noorjahan's accounts of Kabul, and expressed in ArtLords' and Shamsia's murals, there is love for the city despite the violence, or perhaps in spite of it. The absence and presence of violence exist side by side. These sites of cultural production see the educative process of art's reception 'take on more performative, improvisational, subtle, and hidden representations' which are, 'critical, counterhegemonic and activist' (Burdick, Sandlin and O'Malley 2014, p. 7). The site nurtures aporetic thinking, in which people are challenged to think about their city and culture and to create beginnings in public spaces. In this aporetic space possibility falls apart and new ontological foundations can be explored for meaning making. Artists both work in and open up such encounters. In a society shaped rigidly by convention, artists' works present the questions which do not yet have answers, but foster instead, like the pre-cognitive response I have indicated in chapter three, sensate moments or spaces of aporia.

Conclusion

In chapter three I argued for the affective, pre-cognitive power of art on a receptive audience. In this final chapter, I return to this concept of the unspoken, yet felt and experienced discursive interaction of the passer-by, the city, the artist and the art piece. While in the third chapter, the art is an artefact, here I have taken a slightly different approach and my treatment of cultural production is as a pedagogical process which incorporates the city as a dynamic contributor to the performance of making art. In response to public pedagogies that socialise and normalise dominant narratives of identity, artists invite passers-by to engage with them in sites of contestation and deliberation. In this chapter, the streets of Kabul live, like the artists themselves whose hopes and struggles beautify the 'ugly walls' of war-torn Kabul.

If we take public pedagogy to be defined as the connection or intersection of education and politics, as Biesta (2014) suggests, and as a pedagogical approach which exists outside of and in spite of institutionalised systems of education, manifest in cultural products which seek to challenge, change and begin, in the Arendtian sense, then the works of *Kabuli* artists must be included. Dentith, O'Malley and Brady's (2014) assert that there is an absence of 'discourse related to feminist contributions in shaping a theoretical notion of public pedagogy' (p. 27), The voices and works of young *Kabuli* women who use art as a form of public pedagogy, are challenging this precept.

As an area of the world still experiencing conflict and daily violence, Kabul is inherently a political space, in implicit and explicit ways. Indeed, the art site is a point of intersecting culture and politics. There were moments when felt the polarity of the city, such as witnessing Hekmatyar's motorcade cut through Kabul's busy streets. The diurnal, monotonous activities of life and the incursion of moments of violence existed alongside each other, and the city's people had learnt to navigate these conditions. A sense that anything is possible, peace amid chaos and chaos amid the peace. Indeed, the street is more than the physical, but, as Hickey (2006) expresses, 'We find the street not as a neutral zone of transport, but as a vibrant location of information flows, discursive practice – public pedagogies' (para. 14).

The examples of ArtLords' and Shamsia's works act as anchoring points where passers-by can be in the present, the past and the future. They similarly represent works of culture beyond their immediate sites. As an incidental-ephemeral public, passers-by enter the moment of art making, and meaning making, with the artists, even if momentarily. It is this encounter that artists seek through the publicness of their work. This relational dynamic with context translates into the streetscape and its pedagogical potential. ArtLords and Shamsia employ distinctly different approaches to creating murals, but both use the materiality of Kabul as their canvas to express the intangibility of experiences. Grange (1999) explains, 'time in the street is the continual collision of the past and the future with the present' (p. 109).

Chapter Nine:

Conclusion

I end this thesis the way it began.

With a dedication to my father.

When I began my life, you were risking yours, amidst Soviet rockets raining from above and hidden land mines below. You were looking for a doctor to deliver me but war made this impossible. That didn't stop you though. A pharmacist finally opened his shutter just enough to throw you some medicines to keep mother alive. She was now barely hanging on. Somehow you saved her. And me.

Some nights, in the months after your passing I was lucky to speak with you until the morning, the way we used to. In my dreams, you asked me, 'what are you reading these days Bilquis?' and I would say 'actually baba, I've been looking into this or that...' and you would listen and hear the questions I haven't asked yet and you would answer them. I wish you knew how much I loved you in those moments. During those nights I would hear your voice as if you were sitting next to me. Until the morning came and you were gone again.

These days you visit my dreams less often and I guess that's only normal. It's how endings just happen sometimes, a slow drifting away of one thing, that makes room for other things to begin.

Remember this: Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breathing.

(Roy, A. 2003, p. 127).

As telling as a heartbeat is to a doctor, the arts can indicate the wellbeing of a society. They hold a mirror up to society, inviting discourse, critique, courage and thought. Artists translate intangible systems and values into tangible words and images. They offer us potential ways of being. In essence, cultural producers give us the 'what ifs' we may never have imagined. By making these potentialities explicit to us, as audiences we are invited to see where we are and imagine where we could be. Artists don't describe, but translate the world into a language we can feel. Feeling, as deep knowing, is inherently human. *Kabuli* art leverages a universal human attribute, one of being moved through artistic encounter. In doing so, artists cross abyssal lines, those artificial demarcations which distinguish between North and South. Jahan, for example, reminded us in chapter four, 'I want to tell everyone, through my work, that I exist, that I'm here in a destroyed Afghanistan as a female artist, with great thoughts' (participant interview, 10 Feb 2018). 'Everyone', across the abyssal line.

This research sought to look at cultural production as an entry point into a more nuanced and deeper understanding of life in Kabul by investigating how young *Kabuli*s use art to be visible, to create social change, and to inhabit the world, as more than just 'objects among objects' (Fanon 2008, p. 89). Centring the local and diurnal experiences of artists' praxes draws out the extraordinary from the mundane and 'engages the identities one performs based on place and audience' (Vogel et al. 2020, p. 4). I set out to understand these identities in their complexities, by showcasing the thoughts and aspirations of Kabul based artists and analyse the role of cultural production in humanising the marginalised, whether woman, Afghan, or Muslim, globally or locally. I offer a glance into an Afghanistan far removed from popular simplistic Western portrayals of victims, villains, threats, or terrorists. The chapters have presented perspectives of subaltern peoples at the peripheries of knowledge production. By questioning universalised concepts like agency, freedom and feminism, I decolonise these terms from their Northern-centric definitions. An intersubjective feminism, responsive to the history and reality of its context, is given greater weight than the individualism of Northern liberal feminism. Masculinity in Afghanistan can be similarly pivoted. Rather than conceptualisations of Afghan men as overprotective and violent, with Afghan women relegated to victim by extension, there exists a dynamic and changing masculinity navigating culture and identities forged in

decades of war. The father humanises the complex relationship between father and daughter, for example. Considering the complexity of these relationships and dynamics offers us an opportunity to complicate the understandings of Afghan identities in an effort to amplify the voices of a marginalised people.

The academy must argue for space to be made for affect as a medium through which knowledge is shared, in this case, with art as the vehicle. Simplistic binaries of reason versus emotion, corresponding with good versus bad, and civil versus savage, justified colonial projects. Interventions into the lives and cultures of the South included, and continue to include, subjugating them to these reified definitions. By creating space for affect and complexity, I question the validity of such binaries, modern versus traditional societies.

Culture, as the creative expressions of what was, what is and what could be, generates alternative ways of being. 'Cultural participation explores and invokes the possible. It draws people into liminal spaces in which to explore and interrogate and live temporarily within alternative realities' (Howell 2014, p. 317). The absence of culture in studies of social movements is a significant gap (Clammer 2014, Clammer 2015). Social development, particularly in conflict settings, needs tools with which to interrogate the past, the present and potential ways forward. Through cultural products, artists everywhere offer contextualised and tangible ways of exploring value systems and fleshing out innovative options for the future. Though culture refers to the unseeable and deeply normalised systems and structures of a society through which we make meaning, it is through cultural products that these invisible norms can be explored and transformed. The production of culture has a significant empowering and agentic potential, particularly in conflict zones in which people have more often been the victims of powerholders. In essence, culture should be recognised as, 'a creative driver to society, not merely a reflection of heritage or identity' (Howell 2014, p. 319). Rooted in the real world of conflict, culture can nevertheless rupture and transcend its context through the human imagination.

This research seeks to respond to the gap identified by Clammer (2014),

> The theories that artists (as opposed to critics and outside commentators) have about their own activities and the social and other intentions of their art are often ignored. This is a pity as such ideas form a rich vein of social commentary, and one somewhat different from mainstream sociological theory. (p. 110)

I have developed and employed a sociology from art praxis as a decolonising approach to amplify *Kabuli* perspectives and offer a platform for the artists whose hopes and fears inform their visions for the future. The praxis of making art is a responsive and dynamic process, responsive to context as much as it is shaped by it. Sociology from art praxis positions the researcher outside of any normative sociological standard (produced in Northern epistemological traditions of the social sciences) without compromising rigor in the theorising process. Rather, it demands an openness of the researcher untethered to universalisms of the Northern episteme.

Praxis is a process which is responsive to context and, a sociology from art praxis captures the artist's experiences in context. With a focus on the intentions and dynamic practices of the artist, sociology from art praxis does not take art making for granted, but nor does it apply any exceptionalism. Like the artwork, the process tells of the context in which it appears. Artists' self-reflections about their art praxis have much to offer, giving us a way to see them and a way to be seen by them. It is through art and the creative process that subjugated knowledges can find oxygen. Taken out of our everyday, artists everywhere have the potential to make us question our normal and our common sense. Whether in Kabul, or beyond, a sociology from art praxis asks that we build a responsive approach to understanding context and the artists' subjectivity through the process of making art. The artist is made available through the society they are products of and in turn help produce, their work presenting both the generative potential of art as well as society's influence on the process.

Sociology from art praxis accounts for the ecology of the art's production – physical spaces, values and norms, contextual realities, artists' intentions, relationship with audiences – as a form of sociological enquiry untethered to rigid sociological standards of Northern academia. In doing so, through art, I consider the social within the complex of war, fear and hope. That is, the art and its emergence form components of the contextual field of study (Danko 2008, p. 252). The examination of art praxis in this way has methodological potential for decolonising epistemologies by centring the subject, the artists, in relational and dynamic exchange with society. This exchange is a two way shaping of the praxis of art by society and the shaping of society by the process of art making.[106] As an ecology of art, sociology from art praxis perceives cultural products and the processes of their

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[106] This is inspired by Clammer (2014) who notes, 'Art is not, then simply a social construct: society is also a cultural construct' (p. 10).

creation and evolution as a part of the social and cultural landscape. Combined with a focus on the artists' subjectivity as a dynamic and changing presence, sociology from art praxis resists the quantification and reduction of experiences to their constituent parts and distances the phenomena of art from being merely a social by-product, or as 'separate entities' (DeNora in Clammer 2014).

As a process, art belongs at the centre of sociological discourse, especially where conflict affects so much more than merely the tangible and the material world. Rather, intangible cultural heritage is also ruptured during war, with inevitable impacts on a sense of belonging, identity, and community.[107] Art's role in causing social change cannot be underestimated. It has the ability to touch the lives of whole communities, starting from the individual (Belfiore and Bennett 2010, p. 2). The responses to ArtLords by passers-by who stop to take part in the mural and who see young women and men working alongside each other, is one example.

Veins of creative expression, particularly in conflict spaces, tend to repair ruptures that simply economic solutions cannot. This thesis is also a plea to envision a world through affect and the intangible attributes of being human. The enchantment of art in its many manifestations, has much to offer a material world structured by a system of values enraptured by capital. Through art, we can feel knowledge. It is a knowledge borne experientially. Doing so decolonises the sources of knowledge production as necessarily the preserve of the North and its institutions. Enchantment enriches knowledge and broadens its source. That is not to cast a duality between Northern and Southern hemispheres as each constituting reason or affect, but to invite a broader range of theorising and critique about the world. Affect and feeling decolonise this research, unsettling the centrality of Northern rationalism; speaking from outside of, yet in dialogue with, the formal institutionalised art world of modern Western society and its legacies of Europe-centric Enlightenment. It is a modest contribution to an epistemology otherwise centred on quantitative rationalist approaches to intangible cultural nuances of society and its people. The place of religion, hijab, agency, and women's rights are a case in point. Through my presentation of feminism as praxis, for example, feminism is situated as deeply contextual. The absence of feminist label does not presuppose an absence of the work of gender equality. Instead, feminism as praxis is a complication of what feminism

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[107] See UNESCO (2018) for definition of intangible cultural heritage.

can mean in the South. It is one way that we can begin to understand the complexity of Afghan people's lives beyond frames imported from the North.

Theorised as a public pedagogy, *Kabuli* art illustrates the intentional will of artists to shape society at the nexus of art's encounter with the unintentional reception by a public. This incidental-ephemeral public exists because of the art. Public art wields a power to move the spectator that, as Kabir explains in chapter six, 'A politician can sit there and talk to you for hours, and you won't remember much of it the next day.' (participant interview, 3 Jan 2018). The incidental-ephemeral public provides a frame through which to explore the moment of enchantment, as well as to perceive a subjectively experienced reality. The concept opens the field to affect by capturing the felt moment. There is great potential for conducting decolonising work when we can account for affect as a source of knowledge as it is experienced.

These factors, while central to discourses outside the country which present all Afghans as a homogenous group, faded into the background of the artists' interviews, which shared more pressing concerns about security, survival, education and the future of their society.

I have approached the precarious political, economic, and social situation in Afghanistan today within its longer-term historical context, tracing back to the colonial interventions which fuelled religious and ethnic divisions in the country and which reverberate through today's insecurity. Neo-colonial interventions, in the form of reified and simplistic depictions of Afghans and Afghanistan in the media and the deployment of security language to justify military incursions in the country, persist. All the while, narrative constructions about Afghans and the reasons for their ongoing troubles has been framed simplistically as a country in turmoil despite efforts by the international community to help. The most recent talks between the US and the Taliban, for example, represent US interests over and above securing peace for the Afghan people, a point abundantly clear given the Afghan Government's exclusion from the US-Taliban agreement.[108]

The deployment of cultural products for cultural regeneration and constructions of identities not centred around war and conflict is plausible given Afghanistan's long artistic heritage. Naweed (2013) explains,

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[108] The particulars of this agreement fall out of the scope of this discussion but it is telling that despite the Taliban's attacks on Afghan civilians since the agreement was signed, the agreement has remains intact.

> In Afghanistan, the contemporary artists, besides portraying the ugliness of an era of war and repression, also commemorate the rise of a generation that has come out triumphant from the darkness of a disastrous period. Their creations are powerful, profound, and innovative, with strong messages. (p. 319)

By looking at art's 'soft power', I argue for its socially and culturally generative potential. The question of art's power is best captured by Lahmann's (2018) words,

> Through a process of simplification and amplification, translating ideas into art can function as a kind of 'focused abridgment' of thoughts and emotions, which may be useful for examining themes that are most relevant to the subject matter. (p. 387)

In essence, *Kabuli* cultural makers have their own stories to tell, and their own knowledges to share. Cultural production, as self-narration and as a culturally generative medium works to articulate identity, shift the narrative constructs that carry the residues of violence, and broaden the potential for what could be. Through cultural production, space is opened up. This circumvents language, in which 'old meaning systems no longer quite make sense or seem "old fashioned" when compared to new world views being promoted' (Clammer 2015, p. 5).

Kabuli artists interlace culture and creativity back into the everyday. This cultural re-emergence through art, whether as works of literature and oration or as images on a wall or screen, reflects a generation of *Kabuli*s who take up the task of self-definition and begin to construct their vision of society. It is through art that artists' source of power, in the Foucauldian sense as relational 'like a dense web' (Foucault 1976, p. 96), reaches out to rupture the common sense, both in Afghanistan and abroad.

The artworks' purpose transcends functionalist paradigms of easing stress or generating capital. Cultural products are the materialisation of emotion in tangible form and reflect the *zeitgeist* of a time and place. As the exercise of imagination, *Kabuli* art praxis broadens the scope of possibility, introduces the impossible into the realm of the probable. Laced subtly with pure human desire and concealed by the shroud of fantasy, art creates space where one can dare to want. In the realm of imagination, the common sense is delicately disassembled and reconfigured into alternate ways of being. Utopias are not always utopian once the way forward is brought to life on a canvas or a blast wall. As audiences, we are dared to want more. An implicit power to question codes of morality or common

sense means art and artists are approached by regimes of power with suspicion, censorship and attempts at control. The Taliban regime's banning of cultural products deemed un-Islamic is not that far removed from the Nazi ban of degenerate art and banning of Bauhaus.

As art movements, culture acts as a social pulse, as well as the force which demands more of its world. The absence of culture in studies of social movements is a significant gap (Clammer 2014, Clammer 2015). The cultural activities of artists, film makers, poets and musicians in Kabul is a *communitas*, a loose grouping of young people who reflect a social agenda that incorporates, as its *modus operandi*, the creative process. Intrigued by its mystery, I have gained an appreciation of the power of art more broadly. I am reminded of Buey's articulation of art's role in society and its impact on our ability to imagine for better,

> As our ageing old order muddles its way towards death, it is only by radically widening our conceptual understanding to embrace art, that we will be able to receive the powerful inspiration of art. And it is only such inspiration of creative art that can serve as evolutionary midwife to aid the birth of a new society. Such a society, celebrating liberty, equality, and fraternity, would itself be a great work of art, and every person in it a deeply fulfilled artist. (Bueys 1977, p. 127, in Clammer 2015, p. 12)

Kabuli artists' voices are rooted in contexts of fear and hope. Their efforts speak more broadly to the necessity of cultural products – art, music, poetry – to our lives as human beings. It is through art that they actively build the world they want to see, whether by creating spaces of discourse or rupturing spaces of violence through critique and creativity. Wa-Thiong'o (2004) explains,

> Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (p. 16)

If, as Wa-Thiong'o says, culture is a means of communication, then its erasure is the erasure of systems of communication and connection between people. War refocuses a people toward everyday survival and the threads of culture, connection and continuity are stripped bare. Through cultural production, these linkages are relicensed and their praxis

becomes the act of generating a culture and identity not linked to war but which aspires for better.

To contend that an appreciation of arts reflects a common human compulsion with particular aesthetic valence is not the same as to argue for a common humanity. The former provides a sense of possibilities and challenges hegemonies. The latter reflects the privilege of those cookie cutter hegemonies, and others and racializes everyone else. Besides, who doesn't love to see something beautiful, wonder in awe at a garden or piece of music? It would be difficult to find anyone who has never been moved by a poem, an image or a film.

The efforts of young *Kabuli* artists should be celebrated, not from orientalist positions which view any achievement of subaltern peoples as anomalies in a circus.[109] They should be celebrated for the complexity of challenges they confront in peaceful creative ways. Far from existing in a vacuum, they are in constant dialogue with the world, shaped by and shaping the many touchpoints available to them. Through the actions and aspirations of cultural producers, like the *Kabuli* artists I have presented here, reified, and reductive readings are cast aside in favour of complex social dynamics, intersecting with gender, culture, history, identity, and place. Creative outlets reach out to us where words and rationalisations fall short.

Through their art, artists experiment with alternate ways of being, offering different social horizons, playing with alternate historical trajectories, taking risks by identifying cultural, social, and political brokenness, and offer us what could be. Through their art they offer a diversity of modernities, 'a new way of feeling, and that is the beginning of a cultural age' (Langer in Clammer 2014, p. 116). With roots in local social and cultural configurations, *Kabuli* artists are the artistic vanguard.

One of the main challenges of writing this research was contending with the themes that appeared across the chapters. These themes, like umbrella concepts, had much to contribute to shedding light on everything else. They were indicative themes that suffused

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[109] Yin (2018) explains, 'Occasionally, non-Western individuals or communication practices are celebrated as rare exceptions of non-Western cultures – defying their own cultural traditions and affirming Western values (e.g. bikini wearing Indian pageant participants as courageous feminists)' (p. 231). In his critique of postmodernism as an extension of modernity's Eurocentrism, Ziauddin Sardar (1998) avers, 'The indigenous knowledge of others, along with their history, is now being appropriated on an unprecedented scale to become consumer fodder for the west, to be recycled and exported back to non-western cultures' (p. 14).

into the subject matter on multiple levels. Even as they are presented here as distinct themes, they overlap and run through all the chapters. These themes were war, rupture and hope.

War

The context of war and conflict is a recurring theme throughout the thesis, indicating the complex ways that it has impacted the individuals of this research and the society they navigate. Art is not only an expression of culture but a response to its disruption. Kabul is not unique in this way. Art in war contexts, that is contexts touched by conflict either presently or in recent history, reflect a type of survival and reclamation of culture and space. In conflict zones, space – particularly public spaces, are especially politicised. By inscribing art upon them, as in graffiti or exhibition spaces, artists create 'alternative communication channel[s] when the conflict and conflict-related issues dominate public debate and leave less room for non-conflict related themes' (Vogel et al. 2020, p. 6). There are ruptures that only the inherent humanity of the creative process can mend by depicting reason to hope. Anchored to war are the identities of cultures and peoples left to pick up the pieces. To what extent these identities maintain the residue of conflicts past and present is the battleground upon which artists create works that envision lives and living beyond violence. 'The possibility of envisaging another world is the root of the future' (Clammer 2015, p. 13).

Further, the interviews indicated war leaves feelings of nostalgia and a pervasive sense of loss. Kabul's artists are part of an art movement with ripples that reverberate through the contextual realities of war, taking on a life of their own. While their works are certainly examples of cultural innovation, they are also socially innovative. As social movements, *Kabuli* cultural production holds a torch pointed into both the future and the past. It is also war that binds my family's history to the histories of these artists, however distant and different their lives and experiences have been.

Rupture and hope

The theme of rupture flows through the work and lends itself to two definitions. As discussed in the introduction, rupture is framed in the analysis as both the unintended rupture to society and culture, as result of war, as well as the intended rupture to social norms by artists who wish to create anew. We do not know where these ruptures will take

Afghanistan. Rupture, as dissensus, is an internal process of precognitive disruption or a cognitive provocation. Rupture also comes in the form of challenging norms, around identity, ethnicity, and gender, spurring us to consider the ontology of our beliefs. The audience is us, looking in from the outside, about complex and intersectional identities. In the final chapter, the rupture occurs on Kabul's city streets in not only the immaterial but also in the bricks and mortar of the city. Where passers-by expect signs of war, they are met with art.

I have argued for a rupture to narratives constructed outside Afghanistan through popular discourse, politics and academia, as well as ruptures internally to constructions of identity forged through war and colonial interventions. The intangibility of this rupture is brought into view by cultural products. It is on the canvas, in the concert hall or the film screen that we see the potential for our world as well as its brokenness.

It is art that inspires courage to dream and provides the fertile soil upon which hope's roots can be nourished. Like wounds that have created scars upon a collective narrative of nation, Kabul society and its people reflect the palimpsest of history, aspiration, and hope.

That despite the fear, the violence, and the multiple reasons to give up, artists continue to strive, is, at its heart, hopeful. This hope is astute, and aware, it is not naively optimistic. Understanding that the chances of seeing a world, a Kabul, removed from the yoke of violence, is unlikely in their lifetime, and yet persevering, is as courageous as it is essential. All of the participants, despite their many concerns, frustrations and differences, continue to paint, play, write and create.

Beyond material destruction and political and economic turmoil, war ruptures culture, identity and social structures. The vacuum is filled by an ecology of war necessitated by survival. The rebuilding of the intangible elements required for a thriving society begins with the creative process. Cultural products, as socially and culturally generative tools appeal to humanity's ability for empathy, need for peace and stability, and love. As a rebuke to war and violence, the affective reach dares us to demand more of our societies and of each other.

The artists interviewed here recognize the need for a language that can operate beyond everyday social and political convention, to touch the viewer before their cognition sets in. Where we might expect to find only chaos, we find culture, art, poetry, hope and love. This is what participants have given the world, the silver lining amidst reports of refugees

at sea, terrorist attacks, and hate filled gun men targeting mosques. Art can be understood as a different language, one which elicits feelings and builds empathy, or as Shamsia puts it, 'their soul listens without their body finding out'.

Future directions

In chapter eight I began to look at the publics who encounter art in Kabul's streets. Exploration of such publics and publicness promises to offer new avenues for research in the future, in which further exploration of incidental-ephemeral publics can be theorised. Looking at art's reception promises to test assumptions made about encounters with the arts, particularly outside of Western-centric 'art worlds' conceptualisations. Speaking to audiences can lead to insights about dissensus and the affective residue of art. In this research I have left these as assumptions and theorisations of art's impact and power.

Looking at a sociology from art praxis, which is not constrained to a single society, will help to understand and to contextualise the work of artists in a global dynamic. As Zolberg (2015) explains,

> the extraordinary transformation of the international arena in recent years requires that scholarship move more explicitly outside of the academic world and into the domain of artists and policy makers. Knowledge of their functioning is essential if we are to grasp the future relationships of the arts and society in a world that brings together what had been largely national concerns. (p. 910)

Indeed, there is a cosmopolitanism to artists in Kabul which fell outside the scope of this study but promises to be fertile ground of study in future works, particularly as it disrupts assumptions of *Kabulis* (or Afghans more generally) as isolated from the world. 'Far from revealing an isolated place, "buffered" between superpowers or stagnating in a medieval time warp, new approaches to Afghanistan's past might show how it is securely embedded in an internationalised world, no more able to escape that world than the world is able to escape it' (McChesney 2013, p. 137). Fleshing out explicitly the perspectives that artists portray through their works would help to construct a more specific understanding of their aspirations. By speaking to them about the meanings and intentions behind specific works was an area that I was eager to explore but would have broadened this research beyond the permitted timeline. Additionally, I have argued for artists' praxis as dynamic and contextually responsive. It is exciting to consider how their activities have shifted and evolved and continue to change with the changing social and political climate.

Finally

There is an image in my head. It repeats in my mind, like when someone waves a photo in front of you and then away again. It is the memory of a large television screen in the food hall of Macquarie University when I was in the first years of my undergraduate degree. On it the news about two planes flying into the twin towers is being broadcast with live updates. Students are huddled around it, gasping and upset. I was, like everyone else, in shock. Words like 'Islam' and 'Afghanistan' bounced around tongues and they hit close to home. The perpetrators were not unknown elements of a religion and land that stood unfamiliar and distant to me. The perpetrators claimed to be of me.

Very quickly, I would start to observe changes. The question, 'where are you from' or 'what is your background' were no longer harmless, easy to answer questions. They felt more like a litmus test of acceptability. I recall a time when I longed for my cultural heritage to be a known entity. I did not expect that it would require the tedium of explanations that it did then. Now, I was known before I opened my mouth, before I entered the room, before I opened my eyes in the morning. 'I am from Afghanistan' came to weigh down on me with all the assumptions that hang heavily off it.

And so I sat with guilt for a time, having not been given permission to be appalled at the sight of the twin towers, nor armed with the language and understanding to articulate the realisation that I was not of *this* world like I had thought I was.

As I close this PhD looking at art and the various ways that artists in Kabul use their art practice to tell a story, their story, perhaps, in some small ways at least, they tell mine too.

Figure 28. My family in India circa 1983

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