MEMORIES OF PANJSHIR

by

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“Photojournalism is rooted in the consciousness and consciences of its practitioners. The torch of concern, a heritage of humanistic photography, has been passed from generation to generation, lighting the corners of darkness, exposing ignorance, and helping us to understand human behavior. It bares truth and sometimes it lies. It informs, educates, and enlightens us about the present, and it illuminates the past. It records beauty and ugliness, poverty and opulence.”

Howard Chapnick
Truth Needs No Ally

ABSTRACT

With the recent upsurge of forced refugee migration, there has been an increase in opportunities to study the psychological impact of war and trauma, and the effect on the identities of individuals who have been forced to adapt to societies entirely foreign to them. With a native country that has been subject to over three decades of war and political corruption, Afghan refugees illustrate the notion of the ‘traumatized identity,’ and the psychological issues related to forced flight to a new land.

In the specific case of Abdul Rahman Mohammadi, political refugee and victim of war crime from Afghanistan, a visual narrative is constructed to identify the shift that has occurred between his identity as an advocate/political figure in Afghanistan, and his current traumatized identity in Canada. The psychological consequences that have resulted from his adaptation to Canadian society include: the change in socioeconomic status, the disruption of family ties and social support, language limitations, prominence of physical limitations, alienation, as well as traumatic memories and the fear for his family’s safety in Afghanistan.

Memories of Panjshir is a photo-based narrative that blends both the past experiences and present, day-to-day events in Mohammadi’s life. By documenting him at the mosque, in the hospital, and on the street, while including a continuous reminder of the past life that continues to haunt him, this story is intended to reveal a very private plea for help in a society that is fortunate enough to exist without war. The focus of this body of work is to analyze the potential outcomes of Mohammadi’s current situation and state of mind, while providing insight into the obstacles that refugees face who lead similar double lives, as they try to adapt to life in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Memories of Panjshir is a photo-based project that employs, through intimate testimony, the involuntary recurring memories of Abdul Rahman Mohammadi, a war crime victim from Afghanistan who is struggling to adapt to life as a political refugee in Canada. Mohammadi is recognized in his native country as the president of the Afghan International Peace Federation and Deputy Minister of Disabled People. This makes him a target for the Taliban and other criminal organizations who believe in war-mongering policies and practices. Mohammadi has been a prisoner of war in Afghanistan. He has lost much of his immediate family through violent criminal acts and has been critically wounded three separate times in his journey to discover a life without the threat of violence. In 2010 he was forced to escape from his native country and leave behind his family - who now wait for his unlikely repatriation under the strict surveillance of the government.

Through the fragmented representation of Canada's urban peripheries as unfamiliar territory, *Memories of Panjshir* blends Mohammadi's tangible surroundings with the invisible force of the recollections he is unable to control. By encouraging dialogue about flashbulb memories¹ triggered by the ordinary, this project highlights the problem of post-traumatic stress disorder in victims of war and torture as they struggle to adapt to refugee life in Canada.

¹ www.collinsdictionary.com, flashbulb memory

1. (*psychology*) the clear recollections that a person may have of the circumstances associated with a dramatic event.

PROJECT EVOLUTION

My initial intention for this thesis was to go to Africa with a camera in hand and to discover for myself where, and in what situation foreign aid would present itself.

Through the research I had done prior to taking the trip, I became increasingly interested in issues pertaining to refugee dependency on foreign aid and its continuous circulation throughout the continent. Having never travelled to Africa before, I took advantage of the only connection I had to secure hospitality on the entire continent. A close friend and former co-worker of my mother has had a long history of developing schools in eastern Uganda. I met with him several months before building an itinerary (later to be totally disregarded) and we discussed the potential of organizing accommodation at a Christian convent in Mbale, Uganda. With every intention of eventually making my way to the Kibera slum in Nairobi, I packed my bags and headed for Uganda on the first of August, 2011.

I began my eight-week journey towards Kibera (which terrified me, I might add) with a subtle immersion into an incredible culture and fertile ground that welcomed me into the continent of Africa. After a couple of weeks roaming the streets of Mbale and photographing old dilapidated *World Vision* signs on the side of the road, my intuition told me it was time to dig deeper. Prior to leaving Canada, I had done a fair amount of research into the prevalence of foreign aid in Africa and it was Kibera, an extremely poor district of Kenya's capitol, which continued to appear as reference in the books I had been reading. Not three weeks had passed and I was on a bus headed towards Nairobi and more specifically, the Kibera slum. I was anxious on my journey by bus to Nairobi because of the city's reputation as one of the most crime-ridden metropolises in world.

As it turns out, Nairobi's reputation exceeds its actual current state and "Nairobbery" may very well be an outdated nickname.

During my first day in Nairobi I headed straight for the Kibera slum. Upon arrival, the district's borderlines were very clear as it was only a ditch that separated the poverty-stricken zone from the upper class peripheries. For nearly an entire week I visited and re-visited Kibera in search of foreign aid dispersed throughout the vast expanse of shanty homes and open sewage drains. It was a difficult search and my findings were minimal, though there were always signs; signs for "*Médecins Sans Frontières*," and hundreds of other, less prevalent NGO's throughout the area. After taking these extensive trips to Kibera and witnessing a situation that could, in my opinion, be declared a state of emergency, the position I would take in my analysis of foreign aid efforts in Africa became clear to me.

My findings in Kibera were crucial to the development of my research but my feelings toward aid efforts in this particular area lack justification. At this point I had only an opinion and the district had existed for far too long for me to base an analysis on signs and a lack of visible aid distribution. I wanted to avoid at all costs, photographs that held no separation from those that emerge out of "*poverty tourism*." My opinion towards aid in poverty-stricken zones such as Kibera remains without a particular bias and to enter into a conversation around this topic I would need further experience in not only Kibera, but in many of the other massive slums that exist in Africa.

I wanted to further my understanding of how foreign aid (and aid workers) function in Africa, but just as similarly, I wanted to understand how African people depend on foreign aid given its long history on the continent. The 2011 drought in the

horn of Africa was big news in Nairobi as it made headlines and news broadcasts during the time I was there. Narrowing my focus in on the distribution of aid in the Dadaab Refugee Camps seemed at the time unfeasible considering the stance I would likely be taking in my critique of humanitarian aid, but before wrapping my mind around a particular opinion, I needed to experience it first hand. It was at this point that I decided to make an attempt to reach the Dadaab Refugee Camps - where the largest concentration of humanitarian aid exists in Africa.

The process in reaching the refugee camps was not a simple one. The first step was to contact Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) working in the area and persuade one of them to host my visit. Staying in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) compound was the only reasonable method for reaching the camps considering its remote geographical location and unsafe environment for foreigners visiting the area. Oxfam had agreed to host my visit as long as I was able to obtain a permit from the Department of Refugee Affairs in Nairobi, allowing me to enter the refugee camps. On the same day that I had received a letter of support from the Oxfam offices in Nairobi, I travelled out to the Department of Refugee Affairs in order to obtain my permit that would allow me access into the camps. After successfully obtaining this permit, I hired a driver and left for Dadaab the following morning.

Upon arrival at the UNHCR compound I was surprised to see the reasonably high standard of living for aid workers. If I were searching to find any particular contradiction in the distribution of international donations made to these NGO's, it could have easily been found in the flat screen TV's airing English Premier League Football, or less visibly, their generosity in providing me with an around the clock translator, security to

and from the camps twice a day, everyday and a fully fueled 4x4 with a driver willing to take me (almost) anywhere I pleased throughout the camps. This critique on where the NGO's are spending the little cash they have would not have been a difficult one to make considering my comfortable stay within the Oxfam compound. It seemed ridiculous to me that not even a half hour drive away was the largest, most over-crowded refugee camp in the entire world and here I was, a photographer from Canada sitting on a black leather couch eating slow cooked goat, rice and vegetables, legs crossed watching football and sifting around on a wireless internet connection.

I was not granted a very long stay in Dadaab, or not as long as I would have preferred. I was given under a week and, to make matters worse, my first day and a half were nearly a waste as Oxfam decided not to join the security convoy in their trip to the refugee camps. I had just travelled nearly five hundred kilometers through an extremely dangerous desert (lions, drought, Somali bandits) in a small car that broke down numerous times during the journey and now I was stuck in the compound with Wi-Fi and a flat screen television. My experience up until this point had basically made evident my opinion of foreign aid in Dadaab and I hadn't yet visited the camps.

I had a fair amount of difficulty digesting the sheer scale of UNCHR shelters blowing in the dry, hot wind when I first began to travel throughout them. It had been several hours before I was able to at least partially situate myself within such a massive expanse and begin to focus my attention on key elements within the area. As time went on and I visited more areas in the camp, one element became very clear: that foreign aid agencies were congregated in particular areas and were nowhere in sight in others. There was one vast expanse in particular that many of the aid worker's referred to as "the

outskirts of Ifo 2,” and the refugees living in this area were visibly more desperate than those residing directly within the designated camp zones. The shelters constructed were made of raw materials from the desert as well as fabric and any other loose material that the refugees were able to locate. This particular area had not yet been fitted with latrines, or field clinics although some of the shelters were draped in UNHCR tarps - though it was not clear if they had been distributed to this particular area.

I began to realize that any conclusions I had made prior to visiting the camps had little relevance to what was now presenting itself in front of me. Foreign aid in the Dadaab Refugee Camps has been subject to an incredible amount of criticism; perhaps more than that of praise in dealing with the abrupt and severe drought that produced an additional hundred thousand refugees in 2011 alone. The situation regarding hospitality within the UNHCR compound now seemed so trivial in perspective. Maybe it is true – that there should not be an LCD screen television in such close relation to extreme poverty and famine, but on the other hand, if anyone deserves an LCD screen television, should it not be the aid workers who have travelled to the middle of the desert in order to help those who struggle to maintain the basic necessities of human survival?

By the time I had reached three full days of visiting the refugee camps, it was the outskirts of Ifo 2 that had consumed my full attention. Despite being corralled by Oxfam workers to attend demonstrations on how to properly use latrines and filming the experiences of Oxfam employees who were visiting the camps for the first time, I had made negotiations with our driver to return to the outskirts as much as possible in order to properly digest the current struggles that exist in the area, and document it with as much evidence of the peoples’ plight as possible. During this time I was also arranging with

organizers of other NGO's in the compound to make visits into malnutrition clinics, hospitals and registration facilities. These were important experiences as I was being provided with a first hand account of how several of the foreign aid organizations work in the field and the scale of desperation amongst refugees that they are held responsible for. As my experience with international aid in the Dadaab Refugee Camps came to a close, I found myself with a much more enlightened and less biased perspective on how foreign aid functions under such extreme conditions. There may be no conclusive agreement as to whether or not foreign aid donations always end up in the proper places, and I am fairly certain that they do not, but it is through the research and experience in the beginning stages of this thesis that I have been able to deepen my understanding of such an enormously complicated subject.

Upon my return to Toronto in late September of 2011, I began to feel that the subject matter I had encountered in Kenya and Somalia was incredibly complex and the photography I had produced, represented merely an introduction to a thesis that deserves more time and concentration. I eventually became less focused on foreign aid in refugee camps, and increasingly interested in the state in which refugees live in first world nations such as Canada, and more specifically the effects that leaving their native country have on the stability of their psyche. It was while in the refugee camps in Dadaab that I realized just how anxious these people are to escape the fenced area(s), and make their way to more privileged and free communities. It was through the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) in Toronto that I had been granted the opportunity to dissect both the privileges and struggles of refugees that now live in Toronto. I was first

introduced to a gentleman by the name of Abdul Rahman Mohammadi, a victim of war from Afghanistan who has been residing in Toronto since early 2010.

Mr. Mohammadi was said to have been “on the verge of collapse” when he first visited Ezat Mossallanejad, the Settlement and Trauma Counselor at CCVT. Because of Mohammadi’s severe mental health condition, he had been referred to a psychiatrist for intensive treatment. During the course of his consultations, the specialists became increasingly concerned with the emotional impact of the circumstances that led Mohammadi to seek refugee status in Canada. For the past two and a half years, he has been coping with the constant worry for his family’s safety as they continue to wait for his return to Afghanistan. Mohammadi has stated that his family is in danger, living under the surveillance of the current Government and if he is to return home, he will be imprisoned and ultimately killed.

Since the initial assessment it has been verified that Mohammadi’s psychological condition has worsened. He had become despondent for several months and has confessed to having contemplated suicide. He has mentioned that he feels a substantial amount of guilt and helplessness for having left his family behind and often feels that he cannot go on living with the struggles that consume his life. It was not long after being introduced to Mr. Mohammadi that I realized the severity of his situation and it was on November 19, 2011 that I opted to have his narrative become the core subject of my thesis.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Biographic Information – Abdul Rahman Mohammadi

Mr. Abdul Rahman Mohammadi, 43, is an advocate for the rights of the disabled rights in his home country of Afghanistan. His ethnicity is Tajik, he speaks Farsi and is currently learning to speak English as a second language. Mr. Mohammadi is a practicing Muslim currently living alone in an apartment supported by the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). He is a paraplegic who has lost his left leg and complete functionality of his right, and he currently suffers from a stage-four bullet wound in his lower back that is in need of continuous medical attention.

Mr. Mohammadi was born and raised in the Panjshir Valley of north-central Afghanistan. During his youth, Mohammadi's family was frequently targeted due to their wealth and property, eventually causing them to flee to Kabul and eventually to Pakistan. In 1979, Mohammadi's father was arrested and eventually killed under the false accusation that he was leading the Panjshir Mujahideen, a group that carried out ambushes against Soviet convoys between 1980 and 1985. During Mohammadi's adolescence in Pakistan, an attempt was made on his uncle's life and Mohammadi was shot in the back and legs nine times. He lost his left leg as a result of the injury. In 1992, after being rehabilitated, Mohammadi returned to Kabul in order to advocate for those who had been disabled due to violent acts of war, and it was because of this that he was granted the title of Deputy Minister of Disabled People, and President of the Afghan International Peace Federation. This led him into several years of travel around the

world, in order to promote peace after the violent terrorist attacks that took place in America in September of 2001.

After returning to Afghanistan with an increased profile, Mohammadi began to criticize the government for ignoring the needs of over one million physically disabled Afghan civilians. In response to his popularity, the Minister of Defense (an enemy of the Mohammadi family), General Ahmed Shah Masood, had Mohammadi arrested for disturbing the peace. During Mohammadi's time spent in prison, he was tortured and interrogated in conditions that were extremely arduous because of his confinement to a wheelchair. He was repeatedly beaten on the hands and back with a stick, kicked over in his wheelchair, and rats were placed in his cell so that he would be bitten. He was unable to clean himself or go outside with other prisoners due to his disability, and, as a result, suffered a great deal of humiliation.

After his time spent in prison, Mohammadi continued to speak out against the government in support of his comrades. He was placed under house arrest, but was granted the opportunity to leave the country in order to attend the 2010 Paralympic Games in Vancouver, as President of the Afghan team. He has since been granted refugee status, and will remain in Canada until a viable outcome for his and his family's safety becomes clear.

Now residing in Toronto, Mohammadi frequently suffers from involuntary recurring memories of his lifelong struggles with war. He often dreams of being sent back to Afghanistan where he will be imprisoned and ultimately killed. Because he was expected to already have returned, his family is under increasing pressure from the

government. Mohammadi lives with the fear that without his return to Afghanistan, his family will suffer the consequences of his disappearance.

Recently diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and suffering from symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Mohammadi's condition is believed to have derived from his chronic worry for his family's safety in Afghanistan. With an uncertain immigration status and no progress made towards the safety of his family, it is impossible for Mohammadi to live a normal life. Despite these unimaginable struggles, he has preached peace in over sixty countries and is widely celebrated amongst those who know his story.

CHAPTER 1

1.2 – Victim of War and Torture

As a victim of war and torture, Abdul Rahman Mohammadi has undergone several psychiatric evaluations, as well as counseling sessions at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), in order to support him as he copes with the violent memories of his recent past. Mohammadi has described the flashbacks of the events in prison as being ‘back in the dark,’ and he frequently suffers from recurring dreams of returning to Afghanistan to be punished and ultimately killed. The symptoms with which Mohammadi suffers are found regularly among victims of war or torture as they adapt to a new and unfamiliar society. The process of grieving through memories of past traumatic events, especially when one is grieving alone, can be an incredibly arduous process, “variations or distortions of the normal process of grieving can take place and the usual self-limited trend towards spontaneous resolution should not necessarily be expected.”²

Torture, for the most part, is a method of political oppression that an individual or group uses in order to damage a person’s identity for the purpose of retrieving information, or to send a strong message to a particular public sphere. In many cases, including that of Mohammadi’s, the victim’s life is gravely at risk and to bare the thought of moving on afterwards renders itself impossible. Because Mohammadi has experienced three separate instances of life threatening injuries through war and torture, his psychological state of mind is fixated on the past events and his identity has become

² Berdichevsky, Raul “*The Continuing Ordeal: Long Term Needs of Survivors of Torture*”

completely overcome by these experiences. “Survivors [like Mohammadi] of torture will always see the experience of torture as a reference point. Life will be described as ‘before’ or ‘after I was tortured.’ The individual’s biography will be perceived as broken at that very point.”³

For Mohammadi, his current life has been fixated on past experiences in Afghanistan and because his family and much of his livelihood still remains there, his thoughts tend to revolve around the life he used to live, and the involuntary recurring memories of the time he spent in prison.

“The main characteristics of PTSD are symptoms of involuntarily re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoiding reminders of the experience, and persistent hyperarousal. Symptoms are so frequent and severe that they lead to significant functional impairment.”⁴

Because Mohammadi’s symptoms of PTSD are directly linked to experiences that continue to affect him and his family, they emerge not only as a result of past trauma, but also as a continually evolving disorder that has reached a point of consuming his identity. Mohammadi, before anything else, identifies himself as a victim of war, rather than through the prestigious titles that he has been granted for his public advocacy in the past. This transition in character stands out as an important aspect in this analysis as it highlights the far-reaching psychological implications of war. When considering the long history of conflict in Afghanistan, Mohammadi’s shift in identity allows for an understanding into the mentality of all Afghan war victims and their struggle to find peace. The leader of the International Peace Federation and advocate for disabled rights

³ Berdichevsky, Raul “*The Continuing Ordeal: Long Term Needs of Survivors of Torture*”

⁴ Almerindo E. Ojeda “*The Trauma of Psychological Torture*”

has been physically and psychologically damaged, leaving thousands of Afghans who may once have had hope, without their leader and in turn, without a fighting chance for freedom and stability. While the past is certainly behind Mohammadi, his memories do not remain his sole anxiety as he resides here in Canada.

Through the progression of *Memories of Panjshir*, it has become evident that Mohammadi's mental illness will only worsen if he is not given the opportunity to safely reunite with his family. Because of the constant stress regarding their well-being and the instability of the government who controls them, there is no possible therapy that can heal the issues he faces today. The involuntary recurring memories that continue to haunt him may very well be symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but the negative events that play over in his mind are a result of the constant anxiety of not being able to determine a future for his family and for himself.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 – Project Theme

“Memory is an elastic affair. We remember selectively, just as we *perceive* selectively.”⁵

Memories of Panjshir developed out of my increasing interest in the role that Canada plays as a host nation for refugees, as well as the discourse surrounding photography as a method of raising humanistic, socially driven dialogue. In traveling to the refugee camps in Kenya and Somalia during the summer of 2011, I began to reflect upon the complexities apparent in the shift that takes place in Somali peoples, when they are forced to abandon their native culture for life within a refugee camp. Upon returning to Canada, this question remained with me as I began to research some of the psychological symptoms affecting refugees who have left their country of origin to begin a new life elsewhere. I have since devoted my efforts to photographing Abdul Rahman Mohammadi, and witnessing the daily struggles he faces as a victim of war crime from Afghanistan.

As a former advocate for peace in Afghanistan and a highly celebrated figure amongst his comrades, Mohammadi’s memory of life in Afghanistan is not all misfortune. At home, he is identified as a leader and a companion for the innocent civilians who do not believe in the war mongering practices that their country is most known for. Here, he has no following and nothing left to fight for. He has lost his wealth and his family, and relies on aid from the Canadian government in order to survive. He has been diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and suffers from symptoms of Post

⁵ Morris, Errol “*Play It Again, Sam (Re-enactments, Part One)*”

Traumatic Stress Disorder, due to the chronic worry about his family's safety in Afghanistan. *Memories of Panjshir* strives to depict the psychological shift in identity, and the apparent decline in Mohammadi's livelihood even though his life, for the time being, is no longer at risk.

The title, *Memories of Panjshir*, derived out of a conversation that Mohammadi and I had about the area in Afghanistan where he spent his youth; the valley of Panjshir. He described Panjshir as a place 'just like Canada,' with similar trees, rivers and continuously changing seasons. He spoke of his family's wealth and the considerable land they once owned in the area. This was the place of his and his parents' birth, as well as that of his wife, children and extended relatives. This valley was also the home to the Panjshir Mujahideen ('freedom fighters'); a group that carried out frequent ambushes against Soviet convoys between 1980 and 1985. In 1979, Mohammadi's father was arrested and eventually killed under the false accusation that he was leading this particular group. The government began to question the involvement of the Mohammadi family and their ties to the Panjshir Mujahideen, eventually targeting them for their wealth and land. Mohammadi was forced to flee Afghanistan for neighboring Pakistan, where he was critically wounded and disabled by Afghan enemies, before re-entering his country nine years later.

Memories of Panjshir works appropriately as a title for this thesis as it speaks to the birthplace of both Mohammadi's fortune and misfortune. In this valley, his family was born, and it was here that they were lost. The title is meant to bring the viewer to a point of contemplation and ask the question of how Mohammadi remembers the place where so much of his life unraveled. Now living in Canada and separated from the threats

that he faced in Afghanistan, is he still willing to make peace with the place that holds his true identity?

CHAPTER 2

2.2 – Project Methodology

“Political subjectivization occurs when those who are typically excluded from the public realm assume a voice in the struggle for equality.”⁶

The general structuring of this work began first with an introduction to Mohammadi in October of 2011. Prior to our meeting, I had contacted the Canadian Center for Victims of Torture (CCVT) with a project proposal describing, generally, the intended trajectory of the project. A short while later, Settlement and Trauma Counsellor, Dr. Ezat Mossallanejad, mediated an introduction between Mohammadi and myself, and translated in Farsi, the intention of the project. Mohammadi, being a devoted advocate for peace, enthusiastically agreed to partake in the project.

In order to effectively convey the intimate testimony of Mohammadi’s lived experience, it was essential to begin by gaining his trust. For approximately six weeks, I visited Mohammadi at his apartment complex on Davenport Road in Toronto without taking a single photograph. Each time I visited, I brought my camera with me, but we occupied our time together by engaging in conversation regarding the complexities of his life in Afghanistan. These conversations were essential not only for the purpose of recording all necessary information, but to gain the trust necessary to photograph him during moments of vulnerability. I began the visual documentation of the project on an early morning of November 23, 2011, when Mohammadi invited me to attend a visitation from his nurse. Mohammadi suffers from a stage-four bullet wound on his lower back

⁶ Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography: Between Poetry and Politics*, 132.

that hasn't been able to heal since he was wounded over a decade ago. The intimate accessibility of attending the procedure of the nurse tending to his wound marked the beginning of a very delicate process, of revealing the struggle that Mohammadi faces behind closed doors. Over the months that followed, I accompanied Mohammadi at home, at the mosque, at the hospital, to Afghan cultural affairs and through it all, witnessed his continued state of paranoia for his families safety in Afghanistan.

Throughout the six months that I photographed Mohammadi, I attempted several modes of representation for portraying his past experiences. The first attempt was to have him hand write, in Farsi, the moments in his life that led him to criticize the Mujahedeen government, as well as those that led to his escape from Afghanistan. These notes would then be translated to English and presented together in the exhibition. The main issues that I had with this portrayal was that the amount of wall text would overpower the visuals and overly mediate the viewer's interpretative experience. Also, the photographs themselves would read too much like a conventional photojournalistic essay, and not enough as a documentary work of art. The second representation of his life in Afghanistan that I considered including were several screen captures taken of his wife and children during video calls via skype. This attempt was soon disregarded as I felt it could be viewed as overly intrusive in relation to what it was able to contribute to the project. It wasn't until near the end of the production phase that Mohammadi had revealed to me an entire archive of video footage taken during both his peace advocacy in Afghanistan, and during the funeral of both his father and his uncle. I then sifted through the footage on a large monitor and photographed each of the moments that Mohammadi had mentioned earlier as significant, life altering experiences.

It is important to note that *Memories of Panjshir* remains a work in progress, though the public exhibition was executed to the fullest of its current potential. Because Mohammadi's life is currently in a state of flux, there will likely be a second chapter to the project, which will highlight the result of Mohammadi's livelihood, together or apart from his family. With the uncertainty of his immigration status, the future will likely hold one of three ultimate outcomes. If Mohammadi is granted the status of Permanent Resident, he may have enough support to have his family join him in Canada. If he is not granted this status, he may either continue to try and live here as a refugee and hope for the safety of his family, or he may risk returning to Afghanistan in order to be with them regardless of the outcome.

CHAPTER 2

2.3 – Image Content

The twenty-one images presented in the exhibition *Memories of Panjshir* co-relate in a manner that creates a non-linear narrative depicting Abdul Rahman Mohammadi's past and present life. The series can be identified in two separate parts that together, make up the entirety of the work. Five of the twenty-one photographs depict moments in Mohammadi's life, during the time he spent as an advocate in Afghanistan. The additional sixteen photographs depict Mohammadi's life as it currently unfolds in Toronto. These photographs were taken at the following locations:

- 1) Mohammadi's home, Davenport Road, Toronto
- 2) Sojourn House, 101 Ontario Street, Toronto
- 3) Kabul Farms Supermarket, 240 Parliament Street, Toronto
- 4) Saint Michael's Hospital, 30 Bond Street, Toronto
- 5) Sherbourne Health Centre, Sherbourne Street, Toronto
- 6) Masjid Toronto, 168 Dundas Street, Toronto
- 7) Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, 194 Jarvis Street, Toronto

The content used for *Memories of Panjshir* serves as a direct record of events as they unfolded in Mohammadi's daily life. Because the focus is on one individual without a particular climactic attraction, the work undermines conventional constructs of western-minded photojournalism and the documentation of war in relation to Afghanistan. In contrast to the approach taken with *Memories of Panjshir*, Afghan related conflict is almost always depicted with a sensationalist attempt for capturing the 'jaw dropping'

photograph of a moment (often violent) in history. “Conflict photography remains a largely conservative area, dominated by tradition and commerce, and driven by a desire to capture action, particularly when it has spectacular material and physical consequences.”⁷ The importance of capturing frontline conflict is undoubtedly crucial information that contributes to the overall outcome of a particular dispute, but it is the intention of the photographer that often distorts the mediation between the sensationalized depiction of reality, and reality itself. Just as we watched Afghanistan fade to the background with the emergence of war in Iraq, it became evident that photojournalism and the physicality of conflict are, more often than not, congruent activities. In support of this argument, Verchueren writes

Interest in Afghanistan began to decrease as early as 2002 and this decline accelerated when the war in Iraq began in 2003. Although the number of casualties in Afghanistan steadily grew, Western media decided to follow the political agenda and shifted their attention to Iraq.⁸

Rather than developing a body of work that reiterates the physical, desctructive nature of war, *Memories of Panjshir* focuses on representing the invisible presence of conflict in its victims, and the psychological implications that are revealed in its aftermath.

⁷ Paul Verschueren, *Picturing Afghanistan: The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, 77.

⁸ Paul Verschueren, *Picturing Afghanistan: The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, 86.

CHAPTER 2

2.4 – Documentary Relevance

“Our broadcasters tell people what they saw out there in the world today.’ The wilderness is the world, and it inspires us... both anxiety and perverse fascination, two varieties of response to a spectacle.”⁹

It was in the stories of Abdul Rahman Mohammadi that I found the history of modern war in Afghanistan. The political and social upheaval of this war have been documented innumerable times, but it was Mohammadi who revealed to me a traumatic past through his subtle testimony. My intention in beginning this thesis was to reveal the psychological implications of war. In essence, I wanted to acknowledge the invisibility of psychological trauma in victims of torture, and the reaches of conflict in countries where war crime does not exist.

The photographs that construct this narrative have been chosen in order to reach beyond the confines of the photojournalism genre, in order to immerse the viewer in something slightly more spiritual, something that works to surpass the two-dimensionality of reportage. In a 2008 publication written by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin for FOTO8, they spoke of a new territory for photojournalism, one that “transforms the photojournalist from an event-gathering machine, into something slightly more intelligent, more reflective and more analytical about our world, the world of images and about the place where these two worlds collide.”¹⁰ They go on to write about the possibility of “a new language in photojournalism – one that presents images that are

⁹ Brothers, Caroline, *War and Photography: A cultural history*, 141.

¹⁰ Broomberg, Adam and Oliver Chanarin, “*Unconcerned but not Indifferent*”

more aware of what they fail to show; images that communicate the impossibility of representing the pain and horror of personal tragedy.”¹¹

Memories of Panjshir is a project that speaks as much about the importance of documentary photography (in contrast to the photojournalism genre), as it does to Mohammadi’s lived experiences. The relevance of including this conversation in the thesis project lies in the stigmatic strings attached to the journalistic relationship between text and image, often referred to as ‘exemplification.’ Paul Verschueren writes in his book *Picturing Afghanistan: The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, that exemplification “occurs when a text generalizes a picture, or vice versa. When captions generalize a depicted participant, the viewer is invited to engage with social categories rather than individuals.”¹² He goes on to state that this “tends to promote stereotyping based on categories such as gender, class, and nationality, especially when specific visual elements are routinely singled out to homogenize a certain group.”¹³ Because this body of work surrounds one individual, it was crucial to include all of the complexities that have led him to his current situation, while avoiding any tendencies towards the exemplification of his identity.

For the public exhibition *Memories of Panjshir* at Toronto Image Works Gallery, I thought carefully about how the inclusion of text would play into the viewer’s experience of the work. In the end, I decided that the most efficient way of avoiding generalizations apparent in photojournalistic essays, while still providing enough context to follow the narrative, would be to include cut vinyl text that does not belong to each individual image necessarily, but to the entirety of the series. Each image was given a

¹¹ Broomberg, Adam and Oliver Chanarin, “Unconcerned but not Indifferent”

¹² Paul Verschueren, *The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, 33.

¹³ Paul Verschueren, *The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, 33.

title, but I decided that a caption with certain images could diminish the viewer's own personal interpretation of the work. Verschueren writes that "A minimal caption leaves ample room for interpretation and has therefore been used widely to position photographs as forms of art rather than forms of photojournalism."¹⁴ He continues on to reference Clive Scott from the book *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language*, noting that "it is only when the photograph moves from being photojournalistic to documentary that it 'assumes an autonomy, speaking for itself, without the prejudicial intervention of a commentator.'"¹⁵

The selection process that led to the final sequence of twenty-one images exhibited in the gallery was based on a particular standard of censorship, as well as a balance between objective and subjective images. The importance of including subjective content derived, as stated earlier, from my attempt to disassociate the project from conventional photojournalism. This is not a project intended to reach as wide an audience as possible, but one that is aimed towards those who are willing to renegotiate their understanding of the narrative driven photo-essay, and the political perspective(s) they have adopted towards a current social issue. The work is intended to address issues related to the often-misinformed industry of "socially aware" visual reportage, while blatantly referencing the inability to excuse manipulation to any photographs that deem themselves a credible representation of reality. Yves Michaud writes in his essay *Critique of Credulity: The Relationship Between Images and Reality*, that presentation "involves selection, editing, and framing, as well as captioning, page layouts, the rhythm of the design, and the choice of articles surrounding the image." He continues by stating,

¹⁴ Paul Verschueren, *The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, 33.

¹⁵ Paul Verschueren, *The Photography of Foreign Conflict*, 33.

“contextualization offers endless opportunities for manipulation.” And that it is as “true for images presented in a journalistic medium as it is of photographs displayed in an exhibition.”¹⁶

Questions are continually raised around the credibility of documentary work that is aimed towards a humanistic and/or political agenda. Further still, because of the social and realist framework on which documentary forms are constructed, the entire genre finds itself in conflict with both worlds - the journalistic, and the artistic. To be artistic is to be too speculative and open-ended for reportage, and to be journalistic is too conventional and uncritical of the photographic medium itself for the art world. Okwui Enwezor writes, “it is the tendency of documentary practices to animate and privilege considerations of the political, whether visually or discursively, over conventional regimes of art.” And on the contrary “Art, it is often said, must stand apart and outside the real in order to penetrate the reality with its subversive interruption of society’s received truths.”¹⁷

A prominent example of dissecting the components that are in support of “documentary works of art,” is the exhibition entitled *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib*, which was held at New York’s International Center of Photography in September of 2004. Firstly, these photographs of American military torturing Iraqi prisoners cannot be excluded from what is considered acceptable within the genre of documentary simply because the images were taken by amateurs for personal reasons. There have been many instances in history where amateur documentarians created highly celebrated works (e.g. the Zapruder film of the Kennedy

¹⁶ Michaud, Yves “*Critique of Credulity, The Relationship Between Images and Reality*”

¹⁷ Enwezor, Okuwi “*What is it?: The Image, Between Documentary and Near Documentary*”

assassination), and then the strength of the content furthered the work's celebrity in the art world (e.g. *Report* by Bruce Connor, 1967). But, in the case of still photography representing an accurate depiction of reality, the discussion around what makes it plausible in both arenas is much more complex. The Abu Ghraib photographs, prior to entering the gallery, were used as material evidence in convicting the military personnel of the crimes. André Gunthert explains that the "images were correlated with testimony enabling the identification of the photographers, the date and the conditions in which they were taken." He continues by stating "the images had the status of evidence, explicitly referred to by the prosecution as proof of the charges."¹⁸ With this understanding, it is easy to label the photographs as accurate depictions of reality, and ultimately a variable within the field of trustworthy reportage. So when the photographs were put on exhibit at the International Center of Photography in New York, was it simply a display of realistic representations of a horrific event? Or were there aesthetic choices made about the photographs and their surrounding environment that deemed them suitable as a documentary work of art?

It is important to note that the majority of arguments aimed at the verifiability of visual reportage raise questions about the selective decisions made by the photographer and his/her ability to select content that may deviate from the actual truth. The photographs from Abu Ghraib could or could not have been the objects of conscious alterations in what they depicted, but it is undeniable that the images were tampered with during the process of their publication.

¹⁸ Gunthert, André "Digital Imaging goes to War: The Abu Ghraib Photographs"

“One can demonstrate that the series of photographs broadcast by CBS and *The New Yorker* are not identical documents but two distinct sets of prints on paper.

The difference in colour dominance, the alterations in framing of the CBS set and the visible traces of printing lines in the *New Yorker* set all suggest that the pictures used by the editorial teams were inkjet prints or reproductions via a colour photocopier.”¹⁹

Although the images had been used as evidence, there can be no certainty that they accurately depicted reality. It is this fact, along with the understanding that the images were not taken by professional journalists for press use that allows them the title of a documentary work of art.

In support of the claim that the Abu Ghraib photographs belong in an art gallery just as they do in press publications, is the apparent aesthetic attractiveness of the images. Just as art is capable of producing humanistic and socially constructive dialogue, it is equally capable of producing visually attractive form. Susan Sontag argues, “Nobody ever discovered ugliness through photographs. But many, through photographs, have discovered beauty.” She continues “Nobody exclaims ‘isn’t that ugly! I must take a photograph of it.’ Even if someone did say that, all it would mean is: ‘I find that ugly thing... beautiful.’”²⁰

It is this example of the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib that help to contextualize both the dissemination of *Memories of Panjshir*, and its relevance as a documentary work of art. The visual stimuli added to the project are used as a method of bringing viewers to engage with the narrative, as well as dignify the life of Mohammadi,

¹⁹ Gunthert, André “*Digital Imaging goes to War: The Abu Ghraib Photographs*”

²⁰ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 85.

despite the tragic experiences he has had to endure. The body of work incorporates both monochromatic and colour photographs as a method of heightening the contrast between the images of Afghanistan and the images of Canada. I feel that the images representing Mohammadi as he currently lives in Canada present themselves more effectively in black and white because he is further immersed in his surrounding environment; playing on the aspect of the invisibility of his current struggles. The photographs taken of amateur video footage from Afghanistan remain in colour as an attempt to signify their relevance in Mohammadi's current livelihood. This particular approach was taken in order to avoid the relation of monochromatic photography with romantic connotations of the past.

The tie between aesthetics and politics is also presented through the compositional elements of each photograph included in the series. The visual obstructions are used as a mode of symbolizing the near-invisible subject matter and the impossibility of documenting a subject that is mainly psychological. The instability of the content is what allows for a diversity of readings from viewers and "places in doubt the presence of a singular incontrovertible truth."²¹ Although Mohammadi's current struggle is very much a true and conceivable reality, the documentation of it is conveyed more precisely through the interpretive dialogue depicted in each photograph, and together as a complete body of work.

²¹ Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography: Between Poetry and Politics*, 132.

CONCLUSION

Memories of Panjshir speaks not only to the realities from which the narrative has been constructed, but also to the subjectivization of its content, and through the interpretive manner in which it introduces its viewers to the lived experiences of Abdul Rahman Mohammadi. This particular trajectory is used in order to reclaim a perceived ‘truth’ when learning about the complexities of Mohammadi’s life, and to reconsider the claim(s) that the photographic medium is inherently inauthentic.

“At a moment when the visible world is increasingly subjected to surveillance, re-enactment and management by its reduction to uniform and interchangeable electronic units, it is simultaneously opened to a web of broad and instantaneous dissemination and dispersal of meaning, such that identification and culpability, the very ethics of representation, are as well compromised.”²²

The most important underlying aspect of this thesis’s success is, in my opinion, its ability to express as truthful and accurate a correlation as possible to the information that Mohammadi has been willing to share. The project is intended to shed a new light on conflict in Afghanistan and to identify the Afghan people who have fallen victim to the conflict, as well as those who preach peace in a country that has largely been burdened by war. By looking into the echoes of previous trauma still present in Mohammadi’s current life in Canada, *Memories of Panjshir* looks not at the militarized role of America and Canada in Afghanistan, but rather at the lasting effects that the war has produced.

In the end, the body of work that I strived to accomplish was one that carries a unique voice within the vast proliferation of images that we find online, on billboards, in

²² Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography: Between Poetry and Politics*, 97.

print and, ultimately, in our minds. The balance between the subjective and the objective, the journalistic and the artistic is where *Memories of Panjshir* finds itself as a documentary work. While it may very well be a manipulation of what is considered an accurate representation of reality, its purpose is to paint a truthful portrait of a human being who deserves recognition for his struggles. Where Sontag claims “Contrary to what is suggested by the humanist claims made for photography, the camera’s ability to transform reality into something beautiful derives from its relative weakness as a means for conveying truth,”²³ Tim Hetherington argues “If photographs do not reflect something of an objective truth, then nothing does, and we are left with an endlessly subjective, nihilistic understanding of the world.”²⁴

Memories of Panjshir works to produce another form of conflict photography, a form that does not necessarily focus on the physical attributes to war but, instead, reveals the psychological impacts of its aftermath. The struggles that Mohammadi has faced, and continues to face is in itself a product of war, and carries just as much relevance today, as ongoing documentation of conflict in Afghanistan. The subjective material included in the series, and the fact that Mohammadi’s situation can be expanded into a much larger conversation, allows the viewer to take an interpretive approach to understanding the work. The value in this approach for addressing a social issue is that it does not chase the headline news. Instead, it works in the opposite direction, flying slightly under the radar in order to attract the attention of its viewers.

Word Count: 8,429

²³ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 112.

²⁴ Hetherington, Tim “*By Any Means Necessary*”

APPENDIX A - Pathology

Debra Stein, M.D., F.R.C.P.C
Consultant Psychiatrist, Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture
Staff Psychiatrist, Mount Sinai Hospital
Toronto, Ontario

Psychiatric Opinion:

“Given what I know from both Mr. Mohammadi’s personal narrative and my interviews with him, I feel I have had an adequate opportunity to offer an opinion about whether he suffers from any psychological effects relating to his experiences in his home country:

Mr. Mohammadi meets criteria for Major Depressive Disorder of moderate severity. His symptoms of Depression include chronic low mood and tearfulness, diminished interest in and enjoyment of attending school and being with others, and intermittent feelings of hopelessness. He also describes poor sleep and appetite, as well as difficulty concentrating. Significantly he also endorsed suicidal impulses which he did not act upon. Mr. Mohammadi also struggles with chronic worry and anxiety about his family. He also endorses symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), for example intrusive memories and nightmares about his violent experiences back home, without meeting full diagnostic criteria for this disorder.”

Multi-axial Diagnosis:

Axis I: Major Depressive Episode, Major Depressive Disorder, chronic

Axis II: Deferred

Axis III: Paraplegic; back and leg pain

Axis IV: Victim of violence; separated from family; uncertain immigration status

APPENDIX B – Exhibition Photographs

Apartment Building
Toronto, Ontario
30"x40"
Inkjet Print

Untitled
Toronto, Ontario
30"x40"
Inkjet Print

Untitled
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Untitled
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Public Advocacy
Kabul, Afghanistan
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

In Prayer #1
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Funeral #1
Kabul, Afghanistan
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Untitled
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Blood Work
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

ESL Class
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Speaking with Taliban
Kabul, Afghanistan
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Funeral #2
Kabul, Afghanistan
20"x30"
Inkjet Print

In Prayer #2
Toronto, Ontario
20"x30"
Inkjet Print

Afghan Market
Toronto, Ontario
20"x30"
Inkjet Print

Saint Michael's Hospital #1
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

President Karzai
Kabul, Afghanistan
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Angels
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Saint Michael's Hospital #2
Toronto, Ontario
10"x24"
Inkjet Print

Balcony View
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Underpass
Toronto, Ontario
18"x24"
Inkjet Print

Remembering
Toronto, Ontario
20"x30"
Inkjet Print

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