

“We Are Farkhunda”: Geographies of Violence, Protest, and Performance

Her hair matted with blood, arms reaching up, eyes beseeching someone outside the frame, the young woman pleads as several men close in, attacking her with punches, kicks, stones, and large sticks. This iconic image of Farkhunda went viral in March 2015, emblematic of the unfathomable attack and brutal murder of a young woman, a religious student, in broad daylight, in the center of Kabul, Afghanistan. Drawing on feminist political geography and analysis of gendered violence in Afghanistan, we examine the social and political geographies of violence, protest, and performance. The first section of this essay provides a description of Farkhunda’s death and its immediate aftermath, followed by an analysis of the geographies of gendered violence. The second section examines Farkhunda’s funeral and street protests by civil society organizations (CSOs). Analyses of these public events elucidate the gendered geographies of embodied and performative expressions of anger, sorrow, and empathy for Farkhunda. The third section examines the theatrical reenactment of Farkhunda’s murder on the fortieth day of mourning.¹ We conclude with analyses of gendered violence in contemporary Afghanistan.

The descriptions and analyses in this article are contextualized through a triangulation of research methods. Drawing on Gillian Rose (2016), we conducted a content analysis of the publicly posted videos of Farkhunda’s murder, her funeral, pro-Farkhunda and justice-seeking protests, and the theatrical reenactment of her death. Based on prior research, we situate these acts within Afghan sociocultural contexts (Kandiyoti 2007a, 2007b). In the summer of 2015, three months after Farkhunda’s murder, we interviewed male and female civil society leaders and activists, those involved with organizing and orchestrating Farkhunda’s funeral and the demonstrations that followed,

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¹ Forty days is the customary period of mourning for Muslims.

and those involved with the investigation of Farkhunda's murder ($n = 40$).² The organizations included in this study represent a wide variety of groups with disparate methods, beliefs, and practices. For example, several groups receive funding from international organizations that seek women's rights through liberal-feminist ideologies, while others address women's rights through the lens of Islamic feminism. Additional approaches to gender equality include leftist politics, which addresses intersectional inequalities of gender, ethnicity, and class. Therefore the interview data included in this article includes a diversity of thoughts, analyses, and opinions about Farkhunda's murder, while the disparate groups came together in protest and solidarity in the aftermath of her death.³

We also interviewed Leena Alam, the actress who portrayed Farkhunda in the theatrical reenactment of her death. These interviews provide sociocultural context and social reflections on the murder, funeral, protests, and dramatic reenactment of her death. Additionally, we conducted a content analysis of Afghan and international media coverage along with comprehensive reports conducted by the international research organization Afghanistan Analyst Network, which seeks to understand the motivations and reasons for Farkhunda's murder. The Afghanistan Analyst Network's analyses provide context for the political and sociological underpinnings of Afghanistan in general and Kabul in particular. There are several different and conflicting versions of the events leading up to Farkhunda's murder in written accounts and from our research participants. Therefore our analysis attends to the gendered geographies of place, embodiment, and performance of violence, grief, and protest through feminist geopolitical theory.

² Organizations included in this study: Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Humanitarian Organization for Local Development, Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan, Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, Organization for Promoting Women's Capabilities, Afghan Women's Network, Afghan Women's Education Center, Mothers for Peace, Voice of Women Organization, Integrity Watch Afghanistan, Development and Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan, Afghanistan Women Council, Social Association for Afghan Justice Seekers, Peace Training Research Organization, Women for Afghan Women, Equality for Peace and Democracy, Training Human Rights Association for Afghan Women, Shuhada Organization, Research Institute for Women Peace and Security, Afghan Women Service and Education Organization, Support Afghan Women Organization, Afghan Women Skills Development Center, Afghan Women Council, Afghan Women's Resource Center, and Education and Training Center for Poor Women and Girls of Afghanistan.

³ These interviews were part of a larger study on Afghan women's civil society organizations and their roles in peace building and conflict mediation. Therefore, the interviewees are referred to as research participants.

Killing Farkhunda

On March 19, 2015, Farkhunda, a young female student at a local madrassa (Islamic religious school), covered in a black abaya, admonished Zainuddin, the attendant and *tawiz* (amulet) seller at a shrine near the Shah-e do Shamshira Mosque in Kabul. This mosque, one of the most famous in the entire country, is located in the center of the city. Behind the mosque is a shrine, a popular area for women to pray and where individuals sell and purchase *tawiz*.⁴ The selling, buying, and wearing of *tawiz* remain common throughout Afghanistan (Dam 2014; Foschini and Esar 2015), but Farkhunda objected to its sale, identifying *tawiz* as *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. The Ulama (religious authority) continue to debate whether or not *tawiz* are acceptable or *haram*. The primary issue about *tawiz*, among Islamic leaders, focuses on the concern that the amulet is imbued with divine powers rather than attributing the divine only to Allah/God. Farkhunda, believing that *tawiz* were *haram*, implored the merchants to stop selling *tawiz* and attempted to dissuade customers from buying the amulets.

It is incumbent on all Muslims to prevent other Muslims from committing acts against Islam. Farkhunda returned to the shrine over the course of several days, imploring worshippers at the shrine to stop purchasing *tawiz*. Eventually one of the *tawiz* merchants, Zainuddin, in an effort to silence her, publicly accused her of being an American and of burning the Qur'an, an act that is considered extremely defamatory to Islam. Islamic belief views the Qur'an as divine because it is the direct word of Allah. Therefore, any injury to the Qur'an is viewed as abusive to Allah and considered a punishable offense. Islam, in practice and as stated in the Afghan constitution, remains the most coveted and legitimized authority over individual and collective behavior in Afghanistan.

March 19, 2015

The following passage combines secondary and primary source materials into a single narrative about the murder of Farkhunda, and as such is set in the present tense. In response to Zainuddin's allegations against Farkhunda, several men surround her, accusing her of being American (or sent by Americans) to burn the Qur'an. Farkhunda denies these claims and retreats to an enclosed shrine. Several men demand that she be taken outside and beaten. The police arrive and attempt to escort Farkhunda to the precinct for questioning. She demands a female police officer, and in the interim the police lose

⁴ A *tawiz* consists of written words, verses, or prayers from the Qur'an, which are then wrapped in a cloth that is worn as an amulet or talisman by the recipient. Some *tawiz* are consumed by dissolving them in a drink; a *tawiz* can also be dispersed through smoke, when burned.

control of the growing swarm of men poised to extract “justice” from her body. Soon they begin to push, punch, and kick Farkhunda. She falls to the ground screaming “Allahu Akbar.” The male abusers and onlookers also chant “Allahu Akbar.” In an effort to disperse the crowd, police officers fire their weapons into the air. The crowd disperses a few meters from her body, allowing the police to shield her from abuse. Her body and face are bloodied, her headscarf fallen to her shoulders. A female officer and male colleague guard Farkhunda, while several men beg the police to “let them take her.” Eventually, the growing crowd of over one hundred men storms the shrine and drags Farkhunda to the street and up onto a (one-story) rooftop. Approximately twenty men beat her with sticks and throw stones against her body. Her body is thrown from the roof to the ground below. Farkhunda, still conscious, stands, attempting to readjust her headscarf and reaches out for assistance from the crowd of men who surround her assailants. Another blow knocks her down as the men continue to throw stones and beat her with sticks; she stands and is again knocked to the ground. Several men seek higher ground on the surrounding rooftops for a better view and to hurl rocks, sticks, and other debris at her now limp body. The crowd cheers, “beat her, beat her!” “kill her, kill her!” and “long live Islam!” The police watch among the spectators while shouts of her death ring among the crowd.

Several men drag her body into the main street and place it in the path of a car, where the driver proceeds to run over her body and drag it approximately ninety meters. Several different men start shouting and suggest that they throw her body into the river. Eventually they lift her dead body over the bank of the Kabul River and drop it about fifteen meters to the dry riverbed below. Newcomers to the scene rejuvenate the crowds, and many repeatedly throw large rocks against her body. As a final insult, clothes and trash are piled on top of her body and set aflame in an attempt to burn her corpse.⁵ Soon both the flames and crowds dissipate.

Many of the male onlookers and cheerleaders snapped photos and filmed the public beating and defilement of Farkhunda’s corpse on their smartphones. These videos and images were soon posted to social media, particularly Facebook. The murderers and their spectators bragged about their successful destruction of an American sympathizer and violator of Islam. Social media provided a forum for these men to virtually abuse her person and corpse further. It would later be used to recount the events of her death and to find, arrest, and prosecute her killers.

The above description of Farkhunda’s murder illustrates several spatial, situational, and gendered tensions. First, her body: she was dressed in jeans

⁵ Burning of corpses is considered *haram* in Islam.

and a long-sleeved shirt under her overgarment—a black abaya, headscarf, and face veil exposing only her eyes. These clothes generally signal corporeal privacy in public space; a woman wearing this form of clothing expresses piety, and her body should not be touched. Second, time and space: the murder occurred in the capital city and in what is considered the center or heart of the city. It also occurred in the afternoon during daylight hours. Farkhunda's presence at the shrine during the day was appropriate and *in* rather than *out* of place, because it is common for women to pray at shrines. Finally, the perpetrators were strangers to her. Gendered violence in Afghanistan remains relatively common, but it occurs primarily in domestic spaces and is committed by perpetrators known to their victims. These three combined aspects of Farkhunda's murder categorize it as exceptional and unconventional, which sparked public outcry and activism organized by women's rights leaders both at her funeral and through public protests. The following analysis will explicate the exceptionality of these three characteristics within the sociocultural context of Kabul.

Gender and geographies of violence

Feminist geographers' research on gendered violence addresses the paradox of women fearing public spaces although there is a much higher likelihood of experiencing domestic violence by a known assailant (Valentine 1989; Pain 1991, 2014b; Mehta 1999). Feminist geographers have begun to draw more attention to the issue of domestic interpersonal violence, pointing to its ubiquity and invisibility within public discourse and academic analyses (Pain 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Tyner 2016). In Afghanistan, gendered violence is largely perpetrated by family members, in the privacy of domestic spaces (Kandiyoti 1988, 1998; Smith 2008). Despite efforts (both legally and culturally) to end domestic and interpersonal violence, it continues to be a generally "acceptable" form of disciplinary power within many families. In Afghanistan, the newly implemented Elimination of Violence Against Women Law criminalizes violence against women, while enforcement of this law is challenging because police are less inclined to intervene in matters of domestic violence (Baldry, Pagliaro, and Porcaro 2013). Prosecuting domestic violence also remains difficult because judicial authorities have often ignored laws that protect women and have subsequently punished women or returned them to abusive households.

Several women's rights and civil society organizations have established shelters to assist women who have run away from abusive households. However, shelters remain precarious spaces because of limited funds—which are provided mostly by international donors—and the need to operate clandestinely to protect women from retaliation. Shelters, and the NGOs that run

them, are under threat—often from the family members of the women being sheltered. Family reputations are tarnished when a woman flees. For many, domestic violence is largely perceived as a private matter that should be arbitrated within families and sometimes communities, rather than by the state or internationally funded agencies or shelters. Among international aid and development organizations, violence against women in Afghanistan is often blamed on tradition and religion (UNAMA 2012). However, this form of blaming does not often extend to discussions of structural violence in Afghanistan and gendered violence more broadly (Ahmad and Avoine 2018). The significance of state and structural violence in shaping and maintaining intimate violence should not be separated from analyses of social, political, and economic violence. Corruption and lack of justice for men and women in Afghanistan pervades daily life as a form of continual and endemic structural violence. Afghans without the power or means to bribe judges in the formal court system are disadvantaged and rarely win cases brought before the courts. Several participants in our study stated that judicial corruption has rendered justice available only to those who can pay. Other respondents identified that “only the poor and weak seek justice through the government courts,” because if they had powerful family connections they would work within existing informal or customary legal systems. The weak and poor experience marginalization in both informal and formal systems of justice because they lack influence within the informal system and cannot pay the requisite bribes in the formal system.

Disenfranchisement of many outside the social elite and the enduring occupation by international troops is another form of war-related structural violence that permeates everyday life. Institutionalized forms of victim blaming further underscore structural forms of gendered violence. For example, cases of violence against women often lead to questions about dress or behavior, suggesting that the victim may have done something to provoke or warrant the use of violence against her. The privilege of male authority has legitimized male violence to control or punish women. Women’s access to justice is often stymied by misogynistic institutional structures and by popular discourses that negatively associate changing gender roles with foreign occupation (Datta 2016). Linking women’s rights activists with foreign occupation has been an effective method by the Ulama and other conservatives to discredit or challenge gendered reforms that seek to change entrenched gender roles and relations. The inability of the police to attend to the needs of female victims of domestic or public forms of violence was evident in the case of Farkhunda. Their failure to effectively protect Farkhunda provides another example of gendered structural violence in Afghanistan.

The pervasiveness and general acceptance of domestic violence as a private family matter highlights the exceptionality of Farkhunda's murder, which occurred in public and was committed by men outside her family. The murder of Farkhunda reinvigorated social fears about women's safety in public space, subsequently reinforcing popular beliefs that private and particularly domestic spaces are safer and more appropriate for women. Yet public and private forms of violence against women are continually interrelated and discursively represented by comments on women's dress and behavior. These comments extract additional violence by reinforcing victim blaming and calling into question women's proper place in society. The Farkhunda case exemplifies that, "security is never fixed or evenly situated by spatial location for the accouterments of disparate security apparatuses," including dress and comportment (Fluri and Piedalue 2017, 540; see also Faria 2017). Elizabeth Sweet (2016) reminds us to move beyond the public/private binary by focusing on bodies, because they traverse and challenge the construction of these spatial boundaries (see also Ahmad and Avoine 2018). By examining the exceptionality of the violence perpetrated against Farkhunda within the everydayness of gendered and political violence, we analyze existing systems of oppression along with activist methods of tactical resistance.

Private bodies and public space

An outer garment such as an abaya or Afghan *chadri*/burqa is expected to shield a woman's body from public exposure. These garments signal corporeal privacy in public space. Because this sartorial cover represents a mobile version of the home, a site of respected discretion and shelter, it projects a modicum of security and protection for a woman's body (El Guindi 1999; Barlas 2002). While domestic violence may occur in the home, the mobile representation of home through the *chadri*/burqa or abaya identifies a woman's body as off limits to men outside her family. Since women embody the honor of the family, their dress and comportment are often publicly scrutinized.

Women's honor is vested through piety and virtue. Male behavior must also be virtuous, with the added expectation that men will ensure family honor by protecting and controlling women (Kakar 2002). Afghan masculinity is therefore inextricably linked to preserving family honor. For some men, performing masculinity includes the use of violence against women in their family as illustrative of their ability to maintain control (Marsden 2005). Women are viewed as more vulnerable to dishonor, and therefore their vulnerability has the potential to bring shame upon the family. Corporeal covers provide a method for women to shield their bodies from harm, public shame, or cen-

sure (including gossip). However, gender politics in Afghanistan places veiling practices under scrutiny from multiple perspectives, liberal to conservative.

Corporeal geographies

Farkhunda wore an outer garment that covered her entire body; only her hands and eyes were exposed. While verbal street harassment remains a significant problem in Afghanistan, it is taboo for men to touch a woman in a public space, especially if she is fully covered. An outer garment (e.g., *chadri*, burqa, or abaya) represents public security and corporeal privacy, allowing women to traverse public space without being touched, molested, hit, or abused for the most part. Thus, corporeal covers situate the body as private even when traversing public spaces (Barlas 2002). Despite the murderers' and spectators' belief that Farkhunda had committed an offense against Islam, both law and custom prevent men from touching or abusing women publicly if the men are not related to the woman. While many feminists and women's rights activists support the belief that women—irrespective of their sartorial choices—should not be touched or abused in public space, victim blaming prevails in most cases, such as calling into question the way a woman dressed, moved, or acted in public space. Thus, religious and political leaders initially blamed Farkhunda for the attack, prior to her innocence being confirmed by the Minister of Haj and Religious Affairs.⁶ For example, local Mullah Abdul Rahman Ahmadzai stated that if Farkhunda had burned the Qur'an and was a non-Muslim, then the actions of the people who killed her would be justified. A few other mullahs expressed similar sentiments in their Friday sermons and on social media (Osman 2015).⁷ Therefore, her expected corporeal protections were nullified by her alleged actions, and she was rendered killable for being perceived as a Qur'an-burning non-Muslim agent of America, the foreign occupier. By othering her, as an enemy of Islam and the nation, Farkhunda's killers rendered her body—irrespective of her clothing—killable.

Initially, local authorities pressured Farkhunda's parents to say that she was mentally ill in order to protect them from further retribution. However,

⁶ The Minister of Haj and Religious Affairs is responsible for various religious affairs in Afghanistan, such as sending Afghans to Haj in Saudi Arabia; collecting donations and endowments; providing Islamic teachings to mosques and holy places; ensuring strong diplomatic relations with organizations focused on Islamic giving and welfare and foreign embassies; issuing fatwas; ensuring that imams and mullahs are properly trained through testing, coordinating teaching, and preaching in mosques; and raising public awareness about religious issues nationally.

⁷ See Radio Free Europe and Tolo News's report at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqWckMQsm0c>. Note that CNN news correspondent Lynda Kinkade identifies crimes against women in Afghanistan as "all too common," while this was an exceptional act of violence against a woman in public by a group of men.

Farkhunda's conservative dress and her defense of Islam by chastising the *tawiz* sellers, along with the announcement of her innocence by the Minister of Haj and Religious Affairs, changed public discourse from victim blaming to shock, horror, and public criticism of the men who killed her. Farkhunda eventually became a "perfect victim" based on her gender, the proclamation of her innocence, and public outcry against her murderers. The following section examines the time-space of her murder and its aftermath in an effort to explain the transition from blaming Farkhunda to shaming her murderers and the male bystanders who cheered it on rather than stopping it.

Time-space

James Tyner (2012) argues that when violence occurs against vulnerable and innocent bodies and in places that are considered protected or safe, public shock and outrage are more pronounced. Therefore, while Afghanistan is easily identified as a site of protracted political conflict, and domestic spaces are probable sites of gendered violence, the location and method of violence used to kill Farkhunda was strikingly shocking because it did not resonate with existing forms of everyday violence. Farkhunda was well within the sartorial parameters of acceptable public presence and mobility for her gender. The time of day is significant because the murder occurred during the day rather than in the evening or night, when a woman's presence in public space is perceived as less legitimate. Furthermore, Farkhunda's killing was not an act of domestic violence and it did not result from the tools of war and political conflicts such as gunfire or bombings.

News of bombings in Kabul is often met with a mix of grief and acceptance, because political violence has become common in Afghanistan. For example, several times while we were conducting interviews, a bomb would be heard in the distance. Everyone present at the interview paused, checked their phones for news, and depending on the location of the bombing, called loved ones to ensure their safety. Once everyone confirmed their loved ones were safe, the meeting resumed within minutes. The poise with which Afghans handle news about a bombing illustrates the ubiquity of this violence and that its infiltration into the everyday is met with a refusal to allow the sound and news of bombings to severely disrupt daily actions and interactions.

The occurrence of Farkhunda's murder in the capital city presented another spatial conundrum for Kabul residents, investigators, and journalists. Afghans generally consider the capital city to be relatively more liberal, open minded, and accepting of new ideas, including changing gender norms, in contrast to provincial and rural areas. Most Afghan women's rights activists, as well as women-led civil society and nongovernmental organizations, are headquartered in Kabul. The capital city is the epicenter for national politics,

with the highest density of international humanitarian and development organizations in the country.

Kabul is an exceptional place within Afghanistan, because it is considered to be the center of progressive and liberal thought in the country. Kabul is further known as a center of Afghan intellectualism, with many primary and secondary educational opportunities and several private and public universities open to both genders. This exceptionality was reinforced through various expressions of disbelief that something as horrible as Farkhunda's murder could happen in *this city*. Some individuals, in an effort to make sense of the murderers' actions, stated that they were not Kabulis but rather individuals from other provinces or vagrants living in the city. *Kabuli* is a term used to identify someone from Kabul who embraces a particular form of cosmopolitanism and liberalism. Therefore, stripping the murderers of the *Kabuli* label further distanced their corporeality and identity from the geographic sanctity of Kabul as a relatively safe and progressive place for women and men.⁸

The violence of strangers

Men touching women in public spaces remains taboo, which is extended to hitting and other forms of abuse. However, street harassment occurs against women wearing various types of clothing. Women who dress less conservatively tend to receive more street harassment, while women fully covered in a *chadari*/burqa (or equivalent) have also experienced unwanted contact in crowded places, where it is difficult to identify the male perpetrator. The disciplining of women through physical abuse by family members within the privacy of homes is a generally accepted practice, while touching or harming "appropriately" dressed women in public space is looked down upon. However, once the men began to hit, kick, and punch Farkhunda as punishment for her alleged crimes, they were performing masculinity in defense of Islam. The spectators, too, performed masculinity by cheering on the murderers and filming the event on their smartphones. Integral to performances of masculinity are in-group endorsement and validation among men; the use of violence serves both as punishment and gendered social control.

Most of the responses by government leaders, CSOs, and from the individuals we interviewed firmly stated that Farkhunda should have been taken to the police in order for official authorities to verify whether the accusations against her were true. Most research participants reinforced this by stating that even if she had burned the Qur'an, her crime did not merit being beaten

⁸ The exceptionality of Kabul was regularly reinforced by research participants who viewed the city and their experiences of relative progress, education, and affluence through comparisons with rural places that were identified as economically and educationally disadvantaged, backward, or ignorant.

to death. Rather, she should have been apprehended and brought to the authorities in order to receive a fair trial. Our research participants therefore identified the murderers—who took matters of punishment into their own hands—as performing a delegitimized form of violence. Interestingly, they cited formal legal procedures as a better option despite the pervasiveness of police and judicial corruption. The expectation that Farkhunda would have received a fair trial counters other concerns identified by research participants and in general public discourse, which often maligns the judiciary because of its endemic corruption and overall ineffectiveness (Foschini and Esar 2015).

The geographies of Farkhunda’s death and the public response explicate the ways in which place-based understandings of gendered violence were inverted. Many research participants viewed the murderers as a perversion, identifying these men as wild/savage (*washiana*). Several further clarified that while these were savage acts, only humans could have committed this crime, because *animals are not that cruel to each other*. Describing the actions of Farkhunda’s killers as human rather than inhumane or animalistic provided a discursive method for both blaming and shaming the perpetrators. The men who abused Farkhunda, killed her, and mutilated her corpse identified their actions as legitimate under the guise of defending Islam (as evidenced by uploading videos of the murder and bragging about it on Facebook) because they believed that she had burned the Qur’an. Once the Minister of Haj and Religious Affairs proclaimed her innocence, stating that the burned pages found at the scene were not the Qur’an and that she was defending rather than defiling Islam, public discourse changed. Public discussion, in an attempt to understand this horrific action, transitioned from victim-blaming Farkhunda (identifying her as mentally ill, and in the case of some religious leaders, justifying the actions of her killers) to elevating her to the status of Islamic martyr. The Ulama promptly joined in to hail Farkhunda as a martyr and a champion of Islamic teachings who challenged superstitious practices such as *tawiz*, “turning her, within a week, from a . . . Western emissary to a highly acclaimed martyr of the faith” (Osman 2015, 5).

Video images of Farkhunda being beaten to death confirm that during the entire ordeal of her murder she was surrounded by male perpetrators and spectators. The growing concentric rows of men who encircled her actively cheered on her murderers or documented the event on smartphones. The dragging and mutilation of her dead body, attempts to burn her corpse, and uploading of images and videos of her killing were public forums (physical and virtual) of posthumously and repeatedly continuing to kill and dishonor her.

The emphasis placed on her appropriate attire and her defense of Islam provided a means of deflecting any form of victim blaming, which (as we dis-

cuss above) remains a common response to most cases of gendered violence in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Therefore, her adherence to social and religious conventions of gendered corporeal mobility reinforced her innocence once the Minister of Haj proclaimed it. A male religious authority was required to declare her blameless, which was subsequently necessary to transition her from an immoral criminal to a victimized martyr. Yet Farkhunda lacked the authority to defend Islam against the *tawiz* seller because of her gender. Zainuddin, the male shrine attendant and *tawiz* seller, could easily and convincingly accuse her of burning the Qur'an, rendering her ability to defend herself void.

Farkhunda's gender and age, combined with the false claim of her American identity, made it impossible for her to effectively counter the accusations against her. By identifying her as American, Zainuddin made her an other, an outsider, and an infidel. Once her status as a Muslim was obliterated, she lost all the physical protections her covered body should have evoked to the men surrounding her. Identifying her as a non-Muslim other and an embodiment of the US-led military and development occupation positioned her body as a space upon which misdirected violence could be executed. She was killed and posthumously defiled, her body providing the battleground for these men to claim a false victory—in defense of Islam and against infidel occupation—under the guise of their self-appointed religious duty. During the time-space of the men's violence Farkhunda's personhood was erased, while in the aftermath of her death she was transformed into a symbol of Islam, the nation, and those who seek justice and rights for Afghan women.

Farkhunda's funeral and demonstrations for justice

More than one thousand people gathered for Farkhunda's funeral three days after her murder. A shadow of shame, grief, and disbelief engulfed the people and streets of Kabul. Several women's rights activists, in response to the brutality of her murder, chose (with the permission of Farkhunda's parents) to carry her coffin through the streets of Kabul to the cemetery. This was a deliberate and unprecedented act of gender switching. This gender switching was not so much a performance of maleness by the women but rather an opportunity for activists to engage in public political performances to ensure the protection of Farkhunda's body and highlight the failure of Afghan masculine protection. Thus, Afghan men were denied the privilege of performing their customary male duty of carrying the coffin for burial. Women carrying Farkhunda's coffin sought to shame all men as representatives of the bystanders who had filmed her beating and death but did not attempt to intervene to protect her. On the day of the funeral, when men tried to help the

women carry the coffin, the women refused and asked them “where were you when she was murdered?” Several male supporters held hands and encircled the women carrying her coffin in an effort to protect them, while onlookers filmed and photographed these events on their smartphones.

At the funeral women leaders led the crowd in chanting, “We are all Farkhunda.” Others expressed grief through tears and took turns lying in her grave before she was interred. Lying in her grave conveyed empathy. As one woman expressed, “Yes, [they lay in her grave] to feel very sad; [it was] an emotional response. It’s not normal to do that in the grave” (Female CSO leader). Following the funeral, protests were organized in Kabul and several other locations throughout the country. Thousands of men and women marched, shouting “We are Farkhunda.” The protest signs included slogans such as “Supporting crime is treason,” “We want justice,” “I am Farkhunda,” and “Martyr Farkhunda”; others identified the perpetrators as “national traitors.” Several larger posters included images of Farkhunda’s bludgeoned face. Some protestors wore the image of her bludgeoned face as a mask over their own faces. Others protestors painted their faces red to call attention to and empathize the brutality of the murders. The march ended at the Supreme Court, where the crowd demanded justice for Farkhunda.

The funeral and protests provided a counterspectacle, with women and men protesting together. For some, these protests were connected to larger goals of eliminating (or mitigating) violence against women in Afghanistan. Identifying the murderers as national traitors scaled up Farkhunda’s murder to represent the defilement of the nation. Representing Farkhunda’s death on a national scale illustrates how the aftermath of this social catastrophe became a method for signifying national identity (Sabhlok 2010). Nationalism in this instance can be categorized as both hot and banal, with hot nationalism defined as perilously irrational and banal nationalism constructed through the everyday life of citizens (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2015). Farkhunda’s murderers can be seen as acting in a misguided form of hot nationalism; the protestors challenged this irrationality through other acts of hot nationalism (e.g., civil disobedience, flag waving, and physical performance). Farkhunda’s legacy in Afghanistan, as discussed below, illustrates her transition to a symbol of banal nationalism.

The visual representation of Farkhunda through images (or embodiments) of her bludgeoned face resonates with existing social idealizations of male and female acts of courage, suffering, and self-sacrifice (Billaud 2015). While Farkhunda’s death was not one of self-sacrifice, she exemplified courage and suffering in defense of Islam—as symbolized through the ubiquitous print-outs of her bludgeoned face and outstretched arms seeking assistance, which were worn as masks and placed on signs and banners by protestors advocating

for justice on her behalf. These ideals are further expressed through poetry, which is a universally respected and omnipresent form of art and expression in Afghanistan. Both literate and nonliterate individuals memorize and recite poetry as a form of collective social and political expression.⁹

In addition to public protest, Farkhunda's murder provided a focal point for activism and the coming together of groups with divergent ideas, agendas, and methods for action. Several participants identified the funeral and protests as the first time that women's rights activists and CSOs had come together, without input, direction, or meddling from the international community. Other female leaders believed that positive outcomes could potentially come from the death of Farkhunda: "I have to say, I told . . . the president that it is a waking point. We have a proverb in Persian, [when] something bad happens, the outcome will be good (*shar-e bekhizad khayr-e mo boshad*). Of course it was really sad, but I think if we can manage, and when I say 'we,' I mean Afghans, the government, the civil society, [and] the activists, if we can manage it properly, we can really have a positive outcome" (Female NGO leader).

In their examination of Farkhunda's murder, the Afghanistan Analysts Network noted three events between December 2014 and March 2015, all before the murder took place; an "unnamed and unknown woman pictured walking bare-legged (and bare-foot) in Kabul (her motivation remains unknown) and two public protests against the harassment of women: a group of Afghan men wearing burqas [to advocate for women's rights] and a female artist who wore a home-made suit of armor designed to protect her from and as a protest against being groped in the street by strangers" (Osman 2015). Borhan Osman argues that the Ulama used these events to suggest a growing backlash among religious conservatives against what they perceived to be outside influences. Therefore, when shouts of a woman burning the Qur'an were heard, men sprang into action to defend Islam.

As civil society leaders and women's rights activists, our research participants cited the incidents mentioned above to underscore their shock at Farkhunda's murder. They also regularly discussed the work of the artist Khademi (identified in Osman 2015). Khademi made a version of body armor in the shape of a woman's torso (with breasts, stomach, and buttocks prominently displayed). She wore this body armor over her clothes (and she wore a loose-fitting headscarf) as a form of performance art. Wearing the "armor," she walked through the streets of central Kabul and had the event filmed in an effort to call attention to the problem of street harassment. Khademi re-

⁹ See Abu-Lughod (1986), Filmer (2003), Caron (2013), and Billaud (2015).

ceived jeers and unwanted attention from men as she walked on the street. However, her project challenged the expectation that women are not to be harassed in public space by addressing the reality of street harassment that many young women experience when wearing a loosely tied, colorful headscarf and traversing public space unaccompanied by a male relative.

Khademi's use of performance art further called attention to the ways in which women's sartorial choices are categorized and scrutinized in public and do not always provide expected protection. For example, a woman wearing a headscarf that reveals some hair, along with clothes that fully cover the body but are not loose fitting or are brightly colored and do not include an outer garment, may attract more unwanted attention and harassment than a woman in a *chadri*/burqa or abaya and/or a woman accompanied by a male relative. These sartorial borders mitigate how female mobility in public spaces is socially scrutinized. Yet despite the taboos against touching or harassing women in public spaces, women experience street harassment: in some cases based on their clothing choices, but in other cases women in conservative attire will experience unwanted touching in crowded areas where it is difficult to identify the perpetrator. Even when men are acting inappropriately, women's sartorial choices and presence in public space, rather than the behaviors of men, become the fodder for public scrutiny, censure, and victim blaming.

Other research participants were concerned that activist fervor and demonstrations against Farkhunda's killing would be short-lived. Even though civil society came together in protest, research participants explained that some organizations and activists used Farkhunda's death for self-promotion rather than for long-term or systemic cooperation among activists and civil society organizations. To underscore this point, some research participants compared the protests on behalf of Farkhunda to a case in Paghman, a town just outside of Kabul, where women had been raped: "In the case of Paghman [the protest] was temporary; it was for a month, and then it disappeared [and] became silent. And in the case of Farkhunda, I think it will be temporary like Paghman and other cases. In civil society, some [people] want to be famous, self-promotion, they want to be the spokesperson. In protest they want to be the talker and spokesperson. So there is a lack of unity among them. They are not a strong, clean [uncorrupt] civil society" (Female CSO leader). Another example addresses the problem of taking credit individually rather than working together toward common goals such as improving women's lives and access to justice. Research participants discussed a lack of cooperation or coordination as part of general worries about female-focused CSOs and NGOs in Afghanistan. The following interview with Parvana, a women's rights activist, exemplifies these concerns:

Parvana: We agree on issues. It's not that all these different groups of women activists are not agreeing; we all have a common issue, we all have a common recommendation for improving women's condition in this country. *There is this issue of taking credit and being recognized.*

Interviewer: So you would say that taking the credit is sometimes more important than agreeing?

Parvana: Unfortunately, yes.

Interviewer: Or getting the job done?

Parvana: Yes, or getting the job done, unfortunately, unfortunately.

Additional comparisons focused on the heinousness of Farkhunda's murder and its exceptionality as compared with other cases of violence against women, which mainly occur within families. For some research participants, Farkhunda's gender was identified as having secondary or tertiary importance in order to highlight that she was killed because the men accused her of being an American/foreigner and infidel who had burned the Qur'an. The following quotes exemplify the tenor of these discussions.

This is bigger than a violence against women case. It has a different aspect. In [a] violence case, the husband or one or two persons [in the family are the] abusers because of family issues. . . . But this was a mass of people. This is not the kind of thing we expect people to do. It is quite different. One person—a thousand people on the other side just violate her. . . . *This was not only violence against women, it was violence against humanity.* It was violence against religion. Is this what Islam says? No. Whatever [their] justification for doing this, . . . there is no justification. This is misuse, misinterpretation of Islam. These people should receive serious punishment. (Female CSO leader)

By focusing on the motivations of the perpetrators—to defend Islam—several research participants reinforced the exceptionality of this kind of public violence by *not* labeling it as gendered violence. Diverting attention away from Farkhunda's gender permitted an alternative understanding of the men's violence against a person accused of burning the Qur'an and being American rather than understanding it as a case of violence against women. Respondents who did not view this killing as gendered further reinforced their beliefs by stating that the same thing would have happened if a man had been accused of burning the Qur'an. However, they further stated that the public outcry would have been less if Farkhunda had been a man. While

they did not view her gender as a primary reason for her murder, they identified the public response to her innocence as directly linked to her gender. This analysis suggests that her gender became an issue after the fact, which is plausible because of the many ways that her body was othered. By depicting her as an infidel (a non-Muslim) and agent of America (a non-Afghan), Farkhunda's killers rendered the expected corporeal protections for her gender in public space null and void. Therefore her gender may not have been a primary reason for her death, but it became a central feature of the protests and activism organized by women's rights groups in response to her death.

Empathy for Farkhunda and her martyrdom

Discussions of Farkhunda's murder, funeral, and protests reinforce the need to empathize rather than merely sympathize with Farkhunda. The use of the slogans "We are all Farkhunda" and "I am Farkhunda" provided discursive methods for making an empathic connection to her, viewing her death as a social failure. Articulations of empathy were buttressed by concern for one's own safety in public space. Most research participants expressed sentiments of concern such as "if that could happen to Farkhunda [a conservatively dressed Islamic student,] then what prevents a similar violence from happening to me [a women's rights activist]?" In addition to outrage and a desire to protest, Farkhunda's death produced significant anxiety among women leaders and activists. The following quote exemplifies these articulations of empathy and anxiety: "[Her death] made us depressed. It killed us like it killed her. For one week I was not fine, could not go to the office. I was feeling very depressed. I have written in my Facebook that maybe I am the next Farkhunda. I could not stay at home, I could not make myself calm, but going out and shouting made me a little [more] comfortable" (Female CSO leader).

Farkhunda was also identified as an Islamic martyr once her innocence was proclaimed by a male religious authority, the Minister of Haj and Religious Affairs. Naming her a martyr both elevated Farkhunda's death to a transcendental status and generated empathy for her and her family while bestowing posthumous fame upon her as a martyr.¹⁰ Once she was classified as a martyr rather than a defiler of Islam, her name resonated beyond the

¹⁰ A martyr is defined as "one who suffers or loses his or her life in the process of carrying out religious duty. Death during pilgrimage, from a particularly virulent or painful disease, or in childbirth is also considered an act of martyrdom. A martyr is believed to have been rendered free from sin by virtue of the meritorious act. Due to their purity, martyrs are buried in the clothes in which they died and are not washed prior to burial. They are entitled to immediate entry to paradise and enjoy special status there, since their faith has been sufficiently tested" (Esposito 2014, 193).

chants of “I am [we are] Farkhunda.” A “Murder of Farkhunda” Wikipedia page was created, newborn girls were named after Farkhunda, buildings were named for her, and the government renamed the street where she was killed “Martyr Farkhunda Street” (*jada-ye shahid Farkhunda*). The placement of her name in the built environment reinforces her innocence and martyrdom. The honorable status of martyr positions her as a social heroine by linking her death to transcendental Islamic philosophy. Place naming reveals the significance of spatial and situational politics in Afghanistan and is a form of social and political place *making* (Karimi 2016). By naming the street after Farkhunda, the government claimed her as a national martyr of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Near Martyr Farkhunda Street, and at the site where her killers attempted to burn her body, a makeshift shrine has been created. The shrine includes protest signs, poems, a green flag symbolizing Islam and her martyrdom, and a tree with ribbons tied to the branches. These expressions of place making further exemplify her status as a innocent victim who lost her life in defense of Islam, earning her the status of martyr. Naming individuals and places after Farkhunda reinforces the sanctioning of her martyrdom by the national government. Thus, both the Ulama and women’s rights/human rights activists took part in the political performances that laid claim to her murder and death as Islamic martyrdom and reinforced the continued need to secure women’s rights. The government claimed Farkhunda through place naming, which is a method of identifying its own representational power and authority (Karimi 2016).

Theatrical reenactment of Farkhunda’s death

Forty days after the death of Farkhunda, a theater group, as part of the Justice for Farkhunda committee, staged a reenactment of her murder in front of the Shah-e Do Shamshira Mosque in Kabul. Kabuli actress Leena Alam was the only woman on the stage, surrounded by male actors. The men simulated the beating with props that resembled the large sticks and stones used to beat Farkhunda to death. Once Alam (as Farkhunda) fell to the ground for the last time, the actors simulated the burning of her body. At the finale, Alam emerged from the ashes, her headscarf removed because of the “beating” and her body covered in white ash. Several young women joined her on stage; they clasped hands and raised them in solidarity, which was followed by songs and chants demanding justice for Farkhunda.

The Justice for Farkhunda Committee used the reenactment to reinvigorate attention and public interest in Farkhunda’s murder. Based on our interview data, most of the activists and civil society representatives identified

the drama as a positive action toward continued activism and increased awareness.

My [blood] pressure was very low that day. My feeling was changed. The drama was a good thing. The people . . . saw what happened to that innocent girl. (Female activist)

Theater is really good for making people aware of the situation. I think it was good, those people who had not heard about this case, [but] after that they got awareness about the situation. I think it has a good impact. And to make the government not forget about this incident, to follow the case and punish those responsible. It was good for that, good for awareness raising. (Female CSO leader)

When I saw the drama, I felt like [it was] real. I was shocked. I really couldn't talk. (Female CSO leader)

However, several research participants, while identifying the drama positively, discussed some of the negative reactions from other parts of the population and in some forms of media and public discourse. Most of the negative reactions focused on the actress and ranged from criticizing Leena Alam for not wearing a headscarf (which was torn from her by the male actors as it was from Farkhunda by her murderers) or for seeking fame and personal benefit from Farkhunda's death. The following excerpt from our interview with Alam summarizes her response to these criticisms.

One thing [they said] was "why is she not wearing a scarf?" And the other thing, that my clothes were provocative. "Why did the men take off my coat?" Hmmm, when [my] fellow men were beating her [Farkhunda], touching her all over, breaking her bones, they took her clothes [her outer garment or abaya] off. She was all covered up. She was a Muslim. The only thing you could see was her eyes. At the end when they were burning her body, she had no clothes over here [points to her stomach], her stomach was showing. She was so disrespected. So I don't understand their mentality. You want me to play her dead body, or you're not wanting me to play her dead scene, but I'm doing it. You want me to be covered up? But you did this to her. Do you see what I am saying?

[They] did this to her. [They] disrespected her that much. . . . I couldn't even dream this. . . . So no, [I don't accept them] criticizing me.

Alam, using critiques that are often levied at Afghan men in general, underscores the belief that men (both in Islam and Afghanistan culture) are expected to be the protectors of women. The failure of these men—particu-

larly the bystanders and police officers—to protect Farkhunda reinforces the gendering of social protection for women by men. Thus, the failure of the bystanders to protect Farkhunda was scaled up to represent an all-encompassing miscarriage of Afghan masculinity. In this way women were able to effectively use existing gendered sociospatial norms to criticize the limitations of these protections. The gender switching at Farkhunda’s funeral exemplifies a spatial and mobile reaction that calls attention to Afghan masculinity’s failure to protect. It also underscores Kabul’s exceptionality as a place where this type of violence should not happen. Alam, much like other respondents, reinforced the general shock that this type of murder happened in the capital: “Something like that was not expected in Kabul. I always say this, of course women throughout the years, as long as I can remember, past so many generations, as long as the history of Afghanistan, woman has been tortured, murdered, raped, anything you could think of. But *this* was in the capital of Afghanistan.” Similarly, one of the investigators on the Farkhunda murder case made it clear to us that the men who killed her were not Kabulis but rather outsiders from other provinces. Alam, similarly, emphasized the lack of care or empathy for Farkhunda from the men who killed her and the bystanders who watched, while distinguishing these men from those who expressed empathy through tears during her performance.

Of course doing the play you can’t see, you can’t think of anything, you can’t see, you are just doing your part. . . . When I am done and I am crying and I am watching and I see cameras, I see phones, I see cameras, even the police, everybody [is] of course crying. People crying. So I am thinking, oh my God, now just watching the play, people all crying. [But] out of those . . . hundreds of men, beating her, one tear was not shed. If she had one person shedding tears, maybe she would [be] alive. But me doing the play, why am I getting all these teary eyes in here?

Conclusion

The funeral, protests, and performance in remembrance of and to seek justice for Farkhunda can be identified as a temporally limited convergence space. Paul Routledge (2003) identifies convergence spaces as sites where disparate groups can come together to express solidarity. For women’s rights and civil society organizations, these protests exemplified a convergence space toward a common goal of justice, remembrance, and human/women’s rights. Through the use of social media, civil society was briefly unified in its response to the murder. The ability to mobilize large demonstrations in Kabul and at multiple locations across the country gave the impression of strength and meaning-

ful representation of public opinion. This level of cooperation between members of civil society was short lived, however, as ideological and methodological differences between the organizations resurfaced.

The Ulama and the government had significantly different goals and methods for claiming Farkhunda's death as an exemplar of their own influence, authority, and power within the country. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's repeated calls for justice for Farkhunda were incorporated into his women's rights platform. Ultimately, however, there was little justice for Farkhunda, as the rapid trial ended with few convictions, many of which were later overturned. The Ulama, chastened by their haste to condemn Farkhunda as an infidel, elevated her to the status of an Islamic martyr. As such, they rode a popular wave promoting a new symbol of Afghanistan. Doing so raised their profile and broadened their general appeal and authority. Thus, Farkhunda's death became a discursive space upon which disparate political and social acts were articulated.

Hannah Arendt (1970) identifies the colonial use of racial categories as a method of separating human from not-quite-human others. In the case of Farkhunda, the male killers discredited her as human. In an effort to make sense of this violent action, our research participants identified Farkhunda's murderers as *washiana* (wild, savage) but not less than human. The men who killed Farkhunda dehumanized her through the act of brutally killing and mutilating her body. These men, however, were viewed as fully human by our research participants despite their use of the term *washiana*. Most began by identifying the murderers' actions as animalistic and then quickly retorted that only humans could have committed these actions because animals are not that cruel to each other. By identifying the men's actions as human rather than animalistic, research participants reinforced the undeniable guilt of the men who murdered her. Identifying the men as humans became an effective discursive method against victim blaming, placing both blame and shame onto the bodies of the perpetrators rather than Farkhunda. Additionally, the male murderers were further used to exemplify the failures of Afghan masculinity. While the killers performed masculinity through violence against an assumed non-Muslim infidel and foreign agent sent to defile Islam, in the aftermath their actions were delegitimized. Women's rights activists expressed this failure by focusing on Farkhunda's innocence and by carrying her coffin at the funeral.

Internationally, Farkhunda's death garnered significant media attention and was compared with several other cases of domestic violence, such as facial mutilations, burnings, and torture. Extreme cases of domestic violence in Afghanistan resonate internationally and usually rely on tired tropes of "tradition," "religion," and "culture" to explain gender-based violence rather than

critically examining the role of structural, institutional, and protracted political violence along with endemic poverty and displacement due to flight from conflict and migration for economic opportunity (Kandiyoti 2007a, 2007b). Domestic violence cases, even egregious ones, may be met with public concern in Afghanistan but do not generally garner the same intensity of response from citizens seen in the case of Farkhunda. The aftermath of Farkhunda's death further illustrates the exceptionality rather than everydayness of her murder and both the acceptability of and fear about the legitimacy of women's presence and mobility in public space.

Achille Mbembe's discussion of necropolitics addresses the transcendental aspects of political death, including suicide: "What connects terror, death, and freedom is an *ecstatic* notion of temporality and politics. The future, here, can be authentically anticipated, but not in the present. The present itself is but a moment of vision—vision of the freedom not yet come. Death in the present is the mediator of redemption. Far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, it is experienced as 'a release from terror and bondage'" (Mbembe 2003, 39). In this case, Farkhunda did not choose her own death; her efforts to defend Islam were not linked to expectations of martyrdom. Instead, the necropolitics associated with Farkhunda's posthumous status highlight how the Ulama and government transcendently valued her death through martyrdom after her innocence was established in the wake of public protest.

Farkhunda's martyrdom imbued her death with political meaning and, in the words of Judith Butler (2006, 2009), rendered her former life value grievable within Afghanistan's political Islamic context. Farkhunda's dead body remains beyond reproach, thus reinforcing her as a grievable subject. Her living body exemplified the proper attire and comportment of a pious and virtuous Afghan Muslim woman. Her individual human vulnerability was politicized through the large assembly of citizens at her funeral and the public protests against the men who killed her. The gender switching at her funeral procession called attention to Farkhunda as an exemplar for all women's vulnerability and reinforced the ineffectiveness of male social protection in this case. This served to shame Afghan men generally and to further divert attention away from victim-blaming Farkhunda. The extraordinary spatial, corporeal, and situational aspects of her death provided the conditions for her martyrdom. Thus, the necropolitical value of her personhood resonated by way of her transcendental status as a national Islamic martyr. Yet despite Farkhunda's socially and politically established martyrdom, justice in the living world remains elusive. Judicial inadequacies and corruption resulted in the release of several bystanders and in the early release or limited sentencing of her killers.

Women activists laid claim to Farkhunda's victimhood in order to highlight the need to improve women's rights and access to justice. In the aftermath of her death, various groups claimed Farkhunda, situating her symbolically rather than personally. We will never know if Farkhunda would have identified with women's rights activists, or with the Ulama, or if she would have approved of the makeshift shrine built on the bank of the Kabul River to commemorate her martyrdom. The exceptionality of her murder, and its reverberations, transformed her from a person to a martyr to a symbol personifying multiple and disparate ideologies. Spatially, the symbolic Farkhunda has become part of the built environment. The posthumous proclamation of her innocence positioned her as the perfect victim, ripe for multiple forms of sociopolitical claiming. The spectacles of her death, funeral, and protests, and the reenactment of her murder, imbue her death with social, political, and religious meaning while problematically erasing the ordinariness of her life. Thus, while these public responses to her murder largely occurred because of the exceptionality of her victimhood, they have done little to call attention to gendered violence more broadly. Similarly, as suggested by our research participants, Farkhunda's corporeality did not protect her from harm; however, wearing outer garments and headscarves remains a common sartorial choice for Afghan women in public space. While the standard protections of veiling were called into question after Farkhunda's death, these practices have not been significantly altered. The extraordinariness of her death and the complexities of her intersectional gender identity allowed for multiple social and political actors to claim her and use her death for their respective causes, influences, and authority within the country. The considerable responses by Afghan citizens to claim her legacy, make meaning, and seek justice on her behalf further point to the exceptionality of her death in a place where daily deaths from political and domestic violence abound.

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