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Finding Ovid in Kandahar: The Radical Pastoral as Resistance to Empire in the Classic and Contemporary Worlds

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Abstract: Prevailing scholarship on pastoral literature often overlooks its political and radical dimensions, relegating the form to particular manifestations of the pastoral in Elizabethan England. World literature, however, exhibits a wider range of the pastoral in which poets contest social injustice and serve as voices of resistance against oppression. This paper explores the existence of and connection between the radical pastoral in both the East and West, as exemplified by the classical poetry of Ovid and Pashto pastoral poetry emanating from contemporary Afghanistan. It argues that, despite differences in time and space, both genres of poetry offer forceful criticisms of empire and consider pastoral values, aesthetics, and landscapes as a means of resistance against it. This paper thus examines pastoral poetics' contribution to social commentary on empire in both imperial Rome and the imperialist present encapsulated by America's post 9/11 political-military interventions in the Middle East.

Keywords: Ovid; pastoral poetry; Pashto poetry; literature; literary geography; Afghanistan; literary ecology; ecocriticism; war poetry; classics; empire

Scholarly work within the pastoral genre in English literature has often focused on its instrumental role in Renaissance court politics and self-(re)presentation. The assumption that depicting the daily lives of peasants, shepherds and the countryside in verse was primarily oriented toward pursuits such as snatching a profitable marriage match in the Early Modern era has been prevalent in literary criticism until very recently. Present day research indicates, however, that pastoral poetry was not solely relegated to the art of seduction and sycophancy necessary to climb the echelons of the Elizabethan Court. In contemporary scholarly work, English medieval pastoral poetry, exemplified by works such as *Piers Plowman*, has been recognized as carrying 'radical' qualities that touch on issues of individual and collective reform, social justice, and agrarian revolt. While current scholarship acknowledges this critical component in the medieval pastoral, I would argue that a radical strain has been extant in pastoral world literature dating back to the pre-Hellenistic Greek pastorals (e.g., Hesiod's *Works and Days*) and biblical passages (e.g., *The Book of Ruth*). Moreover, this form of the pastoral survives through today's late modernity in resistant poetry emerging from the post 9/11 American wars in the Middle East.

Current scholarship suggests that the pastoral genre is multifaceted and has evolved to take on multiple forms. Those analyzing the pastoral mode historically such as [Alpers \(2011\)](#) avow that "there is no principle account of it on which most people agree [and] . . . it is clear to no one, experts or novices, what works count as pastoral or . . . whether pastoral is a historically delimited or permanent literary type" (p. 8). Others have attempted to identify common features of the pastoral. [Gifford \(2020\)](#), for example, writes about four types of ways the term 'pastoral' has been referenced. The first of these is the pastoral as a literary device, inspired by Virgil's *Eclogues*, prevalent until 1610 and encompassing poems and dramas in which "shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work or their loves, with apparently idealised descriptions of their countryside" (p. 1). This literary

device usually involves a retreat and return in which the pastoral offers insights to a court or urban audience. A second type of pastoral is based on the content of literary works and refers to “any literature that describes the country as providing an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” and often entails a celebration of nature (Gifford 2020, p. 2). Gifford’s third understanding of the pastoral sees the genre in a critical and dismissive sense as “pejorative” where critics observe a great discrepancy between the “literary representation of nature” in the pastoral and “material reality.” In this case, “the pastoral vision is [considered] too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country” (Gifford 2020, p. 2). Within analyses of pastoral’s pejorative connotations in British and American contexts, Garrard (2012) states that differences in history and topography lead to differences on the meaning of the pastoral in the United Kingdom and America. He argues that while the British pastoral is identified in Marxist criticism with the validation of the landed aristocracy’s oppressive social order, the American pastoral has faced feminist and multicultural criticism for its “identification with masculine colonial aggression directed against women, indigenes and the land, as well as its deployment in the literature of the slave-owning South” (Garrard 2012, p. 54). Yet despite these reservations, Garrard asserts that the pastoral has been indispensable for contemporary ecocritics, many of whom recognize the implicit social criticism the genre has to offer and view the pastoral’s engagement with nature as a form of political engagement rather than a refuge from the political (Garrard 2012, pp. 42, 62). Continuing with Gifford’s classification, a fourth version of the pastoral simply refers to any literature “concerned with a life of pastoral farming practices in raising grazing animals,” extending the pastoral to works that have as their setting rural landscapes and livelihoods (Gifford 2020, p. 2). Gifford also contends that pastorals can incorporate and blend many characteristics of the above taxonomy. He maintains that “far from being a dead form, there are now so many varieties of pastoral that it has to be regarded as ‘a contested term’ and notes observations that perceive “an ‘almost bewildering variety of works’ to which modern critics attribute the term” (Gifford 2020, p. 4). Developments in the genre include Freudian pastorals, pragmatic pastorals, revolutionary and eco-feminist pastorals, for instance, which have contributed to “evolving conceptions of the pastoral” (Gifford 2020, p. 5). The pastoral has furthermore evolved to incorporate post-colonial critiques of imperialism as manifested by the inclusion of Chinua Achebe’s 1958 *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that examines anti-imperialist resistance and the disruption of traditional rural life in Nigeria at the onset of British colonialism (Gifford 2020, p. 12). Many of the Afghan pastorals discussed in this paper contain thematic affinities with Achebe’s novel.

Against criticism that the English pastoral has long been a retreat and refuge for conservative values which reconstructed and obfuscated the complex social reality of rural life (Sales 1983; Williams 1975; Williams 1980), new research on the pastoral has argued for the existence of social criticism and realism in the pastoral which often undercuts ‘idyllic’ representations. As is evident in Alpers’ (2011) work, the pastoral has gone beyond nostalgia and escapism into idealized landscapes and serves as a mode that fosters the consideration of problems and possibilities which affect contemporary human communities. Gifford (2020) attests to the ability of the genre to contain contradictions and take on a variety of forms: “the pastoral can be a mode of political critique of present society, or it can be a dramatic form of unresolved dialogue about the tensions in that society, or it can be a retreat from politics into an apparently aesthetic landscape that is devoid of conflict and tension.” (Gifford 2020, p. 12). The “versatility of the pastoral” enables it to “both contain and appear to evade tensions and contradictions” (Gifford 2020, p. 12). Variants of the pastoral have also historically included the anti-pastoral which serves as an explicit corrective to pastorals that idealize rural settings, often by highlighting the harsh reality of rural life, and the post-pastoral, prevalent in ecocritic writing, which attempts to transcend the limitations of the pastoral while containing recognizable qualities of the genre (Gifford 2014). The pastoral is thus a broad, flexible mode that often defies the rigid classifications, idealization, escapism, and conservative political perspectives conventionally associated with it.

Critical and reformist forms of the pastoral, however, particularly those pre-dating the Renaissance, have often been disregarded in English literature scholarship. As Little (2013) argues, the existence of

an indigenous pastoral tradition in England that recognized rural labor and social reform (in the form of the plowman), before the advent of Virgil-inspired pastorals in the Renaissance era, has largely been ignored. She argues that texts which view the pastoral as represented mainly by the Virgilian form in English literature “minimize or elide the traditional and potentially reformist significance of the rural laborer—the associations inherited from the medieval and Reformation period that surround both the shepherd/priest in the ecclesiastical pastoral and the plowman” (Little 2013, p. 10). For Little, the pastoral in Middle Ages England incorporated “the symbolic meanings of rural labor inherited from a Christian exegetical tradition and a feudal approach to the social world: labor figures penance, the good deeds necessary for salvation, the proper functioning of society in its three estates, the reform of the social world” (Little 2013, p. 12). She contends that while this symbolism reflects a medieval conception of reform which includes “an idealized return to the status quo”, it “does have a radical potential, as demonstrated in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*.” (Little 2013, p. 12). Little maintains that scholarship tends to overlook the social reality of shepherds, the wool industry, and rural labor historically existent in much of English poetry “in favor of finding some universal and transhistorical “essence” in the Virgilian pastoral (Little 2013, p. 8). In a similar vein, Jones (2011) discusses the existence of a pastoral polemics throughout medieval and Early Modern English literature in the form of the radical pastoral which does not idealize rural life but brings to light the hardship of labor and severe poverty experienced by figures such as plowmen. About this form of pastoral Jones contends: “what might seem to be anti-pastoral is in fact polemical pastoralism” because “the poverty of the Wycliffite ploughman allows him to more directly criticize the quasi-urban buildings and ostentatious wealth of the clergy and mendicant orders” (Jones 2011, p. 67). The radical pastoral in Jones’ sense is a rhetorical device in which the poverty and simplicity of rustic, rural persona authorizes them to offer critique in the form of anti-urban and anti-clerical satire. This satire influenced reformist writers criticizing economic exploitation, social injustice and rampant commercialism into the Reformation era as well as serving as a vehicle for self-fashioning and appropriation for those espousing and opposing radical pastoral ethics (Jones 2011). Additionally, Goodridge (1995) asserts that after the medieval period until the 17th century, the pastoral in its critical form disappears from English literature. The 17th century turn to didacticism, theological reflection, and neo-classicism, especially under the influence of John Milton and John Dryden, then gives rise in the 18th century to a “movement toward a revived native pastoral, a more engaged and realistic kind of rural writing” (Goodridge 1995, pp. 1–2). Goodridge maintains that two forms related to the pastoral tradition, the English mixed georgic and the proletarian pastoral, “in which rural life and labor are strongly present”, come into prominence in 18th century England in relation to the growth of mercantile society (Goodridge 1995, p. 2). These forms, amongst others, then influence the critical pastorals that emerge in the British Romantic period.

One could ostensibly focus on works found in British Romanticism as conventional sources of analysis for rebellious types of the pastoral. The work of Thomas Gray (e.g., “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”), Robert Burns (e.g., “A Man’s a Man for A’ That”) and William Wordsworth (e.g., “Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman”) definitely exhibit qualities of the radical pastoral in this era. This paper, however, considers two seemingly disparate genres of poetry, contemporary resistant poetry emanating from Afghanistan, theater of the longest war in America’s history, and classical Western pastorals which enable us to examine the politics of the pastoral in relation to imperialism. Were we to stay boxed in British Romantic or medieval pastoral poetry, we would miss an engagement with the particular nuances of imperialism that classical poetry provides. In the satires of Juvenal, history of Tacitus, and resistant poetry of Ovid, we encounter criticism of oppression related to militarism and imperialism, mercenary social relationships, materialism and decadence, discrimination based on wealth, and disparity between rural and urban regions that are not only experienced in empire’s metropolis but replicated in its colonial domains. Negotiating these facets of empire is also the direct thematic focus of post-9/11 Afghan poetry discussed in this paper. By comparing these two genres of poetry, we gain insight into the life experience and worldviews of poets (from both classical and

contemporary settings) whose engagement with the pastoral serves as a means of reflecting on the politics of imperialism.

This paper therefore challenges conventional understandings of the pastoral by seeing the genre, in certain manifestations, as a form of political criticism and attempts to shed new light on understandings of the politics of the pastoral. A conspicuously neglected source of the radical pastoral from the classical era is the Latin poet, Ovid. Although Ovid is conventionally identified as a poet that rejoices in the pleasures of Rome, the city (Volk 2010), this paper argues that there is a dissident pastoral strain to his poetry that is largely overlooked in prevailing scholarship. One reason for the neglect of Ovid's pastoral qualities might lie in the different Latin to English translations of the poet, leading to differing political versions of his poetry or conceptions of whether political commentary is extant in his poetry at all.¹ Translators often play a vital role in bringing key aspects, such as an author's perspective on empire, to light. Thus, how and where the translator directs their focus also affects our reading of a particular poet. The pastoral element may also be overlooked because of the current critical propensity to reduce Ovid's poetry to poetic exercises, "poetry as poetry", and poetry that reflects poetic "conventions as conventions." Examples of this outlook include Allen's (1992) contention that Ovid's poetry is a literary metaphor for poetry itself. With their origins in Ferdinand de Saussure, these perspectives, building on the ideas of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, see poetry, and language in general, as referents only to themselves that cannot refer to things existent in the world be it love, politics, or society (Bryson and Movesian 2017). The essentialism extant in this line of thought often disregards the substance and political critique evident in Ovid's poetry, particularly the love elegies in *Amores* and *Art of Love*. Through these elegies, Ovid conveys the interconnectedness of pervasive materialism in Roman culture with imperialism and the concentration of power under the Augustan regime (Green 2006; Habinek 2002). Ovid forcefully criticizes this materialism in love relations, reflected in the commodification of love, as a product of broader political-economic processes adhering in Augustus' rule (Cawley 1925; Sharrock 2002). His poetry betrays nostalgia for a more balanced simple, authentic way of life that rejects the extravagance of materialist Augustan lifestyles and contrasts rural values against those of the city. Moreover, Ovid poignantly details the injustice, disenfranchisement, and dispossession of ordinary people through Augustus' hypocritical social-cultural dictates in his love elegies. Poems in the *Amores* and *Art of Love* elevate and empathize with the poor, maintaining that pure, substantive, non-materialistic love can perhaps mainly be found amongst the lower classes.

This essay further argues for the endurance of the radical pastoral given that, two thousand years later, Ovidian thought still reverberates in places dominant Western discourse largely consigns to barbarity, extremism, and an atavist past, places which a frustrated early 21st century empire, much like Augustus' imperial Rome, seeks to subdue but in which encounters anti-imperialist defiance instead. Contemporary Afghanistan, in which America has waged war for over 19 years, is one such place. Intriguingly, the opposition in Afghanistan not only puts up formidable armed struggle against American projects of empire; it serves up a poetics of resistance as well. The pastorals in this paper emanate from Van Linschoten and Kuehn's (2012a) *Poetry of the Taliban* published by Columbia University Press. The book really represents the poetry of an ethnicity, the Pashto-speaking peoples of Afghanistan,² experiencing the onslaught of military violence by what writers from Johnson (2004a,

¹ Melville's translation of *Amores* and revision of Moore's *Art of Love* (originally translated in 1935), both of which comprise *Ovid: The Love Poems* (Ovid 2008), is well researched and conveys the meaning, style and tone of the prevailing Latin versions of the works, passed down to Western readership through the centuries, fairly meticulously. He argues that the 'sound and sense' of the Ovid can only be presented through rhyme and possesses the skill to bring forth an accurate translation of Ovid (read against the Latin version and other translations) while writing in verse. This paper relies on Melville's translation for its faithfulness to Ovid's original poems in both content and spirit. The translation reflects the poet's wit as well as elegance and contains the political criticism observed in *Art of Love* and *Amores* by scholars who analyze them in the original Latin such as Holleman (1971).

² Indeed, some of the poets identified as "Taliban" in the volume include, Gul Pacha Olfat, a widely recognized deceased Pashto poet, with no known connection to the Taliban insurgency, and Mawlawi Younis Khalis, a Mujahideen political leader during the 1980s.

2004b, 2007) to Bacevich (2002) and Kinzer (2017) have recently referred to as American Empire. However, the moniker of *Taliban* poetry has stuck to the poems, particularly given that they reflect a resistant form of poetics by a largely traditional, pastoral culture engaged in opposition against American occupation.

Devji (2015) asserts that *Poetry of Taliban* is criticized for propagandistically humanizing a movement that is rendered an enemy and dehumanized in Western discourse. He contends that the militants' poetry betrays their humanity, causing confusion and discomfort in Western audiences uncritical of American foreign policy narratives. As Devji contends, "Offering us alternative visions of militant life, this poetry puts into question many of our assumptions regarding it. How might we reconcile the insurgent fanatically committed to an austere religious cause with the poet writing delicately of love and beauty, as well as murder and violence?" (Devji 2015, p. 5). He also conceives of the volume as possessing an ambiguity that enriches the poetry's aesthetic and political force exemplified by certain poems in which the verses can either refer to a desolate lover or a country ruined by war. Interestingly, Devji observes that many of the poems attributed to the Taliban focus on the loss of humanity or attempts to recover it, either in themselves or in their adversaries, as prominent themes.

The Pastoral in *Art of Love* and *Amores*

With reference to Ovid, my argument complements Holleman's (1971) consideration of the poet's work within the context of Roman society, registering its hostility to and critique of the Augustan social order. In response to scholarship arguing that Ovid appeared socially anti-Augustan but nonpolitical, Holleman maintains that Ovid's poetry also expresses political opposition against the Augustan regime. For him, "it does not seem plausible that Ovid could have been [socially] "fundamentally anti-Augustan" without rejecting the Augustan regime and what he thought to be the political aims of the emperor" (Holleman 1971, p. 458). Holleman perceives the *Amores* as typifying political critique of the Augustan regime through its criticism of the emperor's concentration of power in a new military elite as represented by retorts against the new Equestrian order. He observes that Ovid "expresses quite plainly his disgust for the new members of the equestrian order, putting them in contrast to the old equestrian families like his own" which had retained their independence from the emperor while the new Equestrian class were "turning traitors ... to the old equestrian ideals" (Holleman 1971, pp. 458–59). Holleman also identifies Ovid's critique of Augustan imperialism in the *Amores'* sardonic praising of failed Roman military campaigns in Parthia, suggesting Ovid's disapproval of imperial overreach, and states that the *Amores* further express repugnance at a political order that recognizes Augustus as a living god. He asserts that the *Amores* additionally criticize materialism, relating Ovid's recognition of wealth and greed as "the scourge" of Augustan Rome in contrast to more frugal lifestyles of earlier times (Holleman 1971, p. 462). Holleman also contends that Ovid's poetry took notice of "the frugality such as was promulgated by law and preached by propaganda, declaring that "the duplicity in this part of the Augustan program was" a ripe target for his satirization (Holleman 1971, p. 462). In this respect, Holleman sees the *Amores* as elucidating the hypocrisy of Augustan professions to frugality while maintaining extravagant living and associating love with leisurely activity. He furthermore sees Ovid as equating the Augustan order with a corruption of love, arguing that Ovid promoted "romantic love as a basis for life and society" (Holleman 1971, p. 465) instead of the materialistic love prevailing under Augustan rule.

This paper also concurs with Kennedy's (1992) consideration that Ovid's work cannot be reduced to the classification of being either pro or anti-Augustan. Arguing that *Amores* and *Art of Love* are wholly anti-Augustan would deny the complexity of Ovid's poetry (Cunningham 1958; Calabrese 1997; Braden 2014). As Barchiesi (1997) suggests, complex motives, including the lifting of his exile, are evident in Ovid's poetry in which the poet does covertly critique Augustus' New Rome (Syme 1978). Davis also rejects notions that Ovid's exile poetry reflects approval of Roman imperialism, particularly given the context of Ovid's involuntarily exile, arguing that such thinking "ignores the complexities and contradictions" in Ovid's poetry whose purported public support for the Augustan regime is "not

without reservation or qualification" (Davis 2002, pp. 271–72). Indeed, Green (1994) maintains that Ovid offended Augustan aesthetics by displaying irreverence to the epic genre and subverting Augustus' moral reform program. In his *Amores* and *Art of Love*, Ovid paints a portrait of a fashionable world of "freewheeling upper-class adultery" (Green 1994, p. xxi) and extravagance, in stark contradiction to Augustan professions of instituting a moral order. Therefore, while Ovid's poetry is not always overtly anti-Augustan, there is a resistant social criticism of Augustan society which has been largely overlooked in scholarship on Ovid and merits greater scrutiny. As Hollis (1973) contends, Ovid's criticism is interwoven in complex themes, witticism, and satiric reflection on Augustan Roman society (Webber 1958; Mack 1988; Athanassaki 1992).

One facet of Ovid's Augustan critique seems to involve a criticism of Rome's materialist culture. Throughout the *Amores* and *Art of Love*, Ovid suggests that the materialism characteristic of Roman society is intertwined with wealth acquired through Rome's imperialist military conquest of subject territories. As the speaker in *Amores* 2.9a attests, "Had Rome not pushed her power the wide world over/She'd be a huddle of thatched huts today" (Ovid 2008, p. 40, ll. 17–18). Rome's affluence and grandeur, leading to its transformation from a set of rural villages to a world capitol, and concomitantly from republic to an oligarchical empire, is narrated by the persona of *Art of Love* III:

Once life was rude and plain; now golden paved,
Rome holds the treasures of a world enslaved.
The old and the new Capitols compare;
Built for two different Jupiters, you'd swear.
The Senate-house, fit home of high debate,
Was wattle-built when Tatius ruled the state,
And ploughmen's oxen grazed on Palatine
Where glitter now the palace and the shrine. (Ovid 2008, p. 131, ll. 113–20)

The ostentatious affluence of Rome is thus premised on the misery and oppression of the lower classes and subjugated nations both within and outside the empire. In the *Art of Love* I, Ovid satirically conveys how Augustus' avarice for more colonies and greater opulence has resulted in imperial over-reach given that he is pushing into ever more resistant territories to the east such as Parthia where an earlier Roman leader, Crassus, met his death at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C.E.: "Lo! Caesar plans to bring beneath his sway/What's left of earth. Be ours now, far Cathay/Cheer shades of Crassus: Parthia shall pay now" (Ovid 2008, p. 92, ll. 177–79). Here, through hyperbole, Ovid subtly intimates that Augustus' imperialist ambitions will run into frustrations encountered earlier with Parthia, and the speaker prays for better tidings this time around: "May Parthia rue the rout her cause must earn/And rich with Eastern spoils our prince return!" (Ovid 2008, p. 92, ll. 201–2). Through these sentiments, the speaker betrays the lack of consensus and opposition to Rome's hegemony extant amongst people subjected to its imperial might.

Throughout the love elegies, Ovid appears to empathize with the ordinary people suffering under this imperial military might. In *Amores* 3.8 he draws the connection between Augustus' imperial reign and the bloody violence inflicted by his mercenary soldiers to sustain it. The persona in this poem informs his former lover that her soldier boyfriend "did bloody murder" (Ovid 2008, p. 70, l. 17) "... His body's bought him all he does possess/Perhaps he'll tell you how many men he's slaughtered/Can you, for gold, touch those hands that confess?" (Ovid 2008, p. 70, ll. 20–22). The soldier's body, his hand and "scars," in this instance, signify the instrument of violence he has become. The violence underpinning Augustus' rule is also conveyed through cruel and grotesque punishments apportioned to the ordinary masses such as crucifixion, discussed in *Amores* 1.12 where the speaker curses the wooden tablet containing his girlfriend's rejection message as originating from a "tree that made gallows for some wretch to die/It made a ghastly cross to crucify" (Ovid 2008, p. 22, ll. 17–18), comparing himself to the condemned. Ovid further relates that ordinary people suffer for the pomp and pleasure of the Augustan elite through the imagery of an imperial triumph motif, as "a train of captive youths and girls" possibly "wounded" and "fettered," follow Caesar's chariot amidst "cheering

crowds” in glorious pageantry in *Amores* 1.2 (Ovid 2008, p. 5, ll. 28–30, l. 36). These elegies thus epitomize Ovid’s interconnection of materialism as an outgrowth of Rome’s imperialist expansion dependent upon brutal violence and the exploitation of ordinary people throughout Augustus’ empire.

Many poems in the *Amores* also explicitly criticize the materialism that characterizes love relations in Rome. Such materialistic love is presented as the sport of “bawds” and “hags”, as *Amores* 1.8 communicates through the scenario of an old hag or witch instructing a maiden on the art of pilfering her lovers. In the lines, “Keep your price down till the trap’s set, in case they/Escape; once captured, roast them as you please/No harm if love’s a lie; let him think you love him/And take good care your love’s not lacking fees” (Ovid 2008, p. 16, ll. 69–72), the witch’s advice conveys the instrumental pursuit of love through deception practiced in Augustan society at large. Ovid associates this type of predation in which gullible wealthy men are compared to “flocks” of “prey” and attractive young women “wolves” on the prowl, as an industry of prostitution in which the young woman is urged to also “Get sister, mother, nurse to fleece [her] lover” by asking for more gifts, for “The plunder’s swift with many hands to take” (Ovid 2008, p. 16, ll. 91–92). The connection of gift seeking in love relations with subtle forms of prostitution causes the persona in *Amores* 1.10 to turn against his lover, rebuking her with “Why am I changed? Because you ask for presents—/That’s why you cannot please me as before” (Ovid 2008, p. 19, ll. 11–12). He asserts that his lover’s requests for gifts mars her beauty, references gift seeking with the “price” sought by “whores”, and personifies love as embodied in the “unblemished”, naked “innocence” of Cupid which cannot be priced (Ovid 2008, p. 19, ll. 15–16, l. 21). In *Art of Love I* as well, the persona advises male lovers to “dodge” the woman who “begs a trifle for her birthday cake/Gets herself born when’er there’s cash at stake,/Or shams a loss and weeps in blank despair/O’er a dropped earring that was never there” (Ovid 2008, p. 98, ll. 429–32). Ovid thus repudiates love as an outgrowth of materialistic pursuit in a culture where “having nothing’s sheer vulgarity” (Ovid 2008, p. 70, l. 4) and registers this cultural trend with broader, sinister political-historical processes under Augustan sovereignty.

Perhaps more than other poems, Ovid’s critique of the materialism and fixation on opulence that pervades Augustan Rome is encapsulated in *Amores* 3.8. The speaker in this poem observes a cultural transformation in which poetic “genius” is no longer valued, wealth and position in the Augustan ruling class having supplanted it. This is reflected in the speaker’s complaint that he has lost his girlfriend to a new Equestrian mercenary military class that sustains the Augustan state: “My genius in disgrace drifts to and fro./A *nouveau riche* whose wounds have made his money,/A blood-devouring knight usurps my place” (Ovid 2008, p. 70, l. 8–10). He sardonically quips that “wise” poets should now learn “battle-lines,” “try forming fours instead of forming verses” and “enlist Homer” instead of love poets to gain entrance inside women’s “bolted doors” (Ovid 2008, p. 70, ll. 23–27). Ovid furthermore intimates that Augustus retains the loyalty of his Equestrian order in part by enriching them so that they may possess women and lead luxurious lifestyles. In this respect, Augustus takes the shape of Jove in the lines:

The power of gold’s supreme, and well Jove knew it;
To get the girl he made himself the fee.
Before the deal the doors were bronze, the tower
Iron, the father hard, the daughter prim.
But when the cunning lecher came as money,
She gave the gift required—herself—to him. (Ovid 2008, p. 70, ll. 29–34)

The social prominence thus afforded to the Equestrian class renders fathers more pliant in offering their daughters in marriage or otherwise to Augustus’ mercenaries. For these reasons, the speaker pleads for “some god who’s just” to “turn that ill-won wealth of theirs to dust!” (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 64–66), cursing the prevailing order that has turned love into to a commodity for exchange.

Ovid also registers Augustus’ rule with an ecological imbalance and alteration of the social order for the worse as a product of imperial materialism. The speaker remarks how in older times when precious metals were not a source of wealth, “Deep in the dark Earth kept her wealth

secure./She'd stowed the gold and silver, iron and copper/Down with the ghosts: no ingots then, for sure" (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 36–38), but contemporary society plunders the Earth's natural elements. As conveyed in the *Art of Love III*, during Augustus' reign, in contrast, extraction from nature increases considerably "... pliant gold from the earth is wrought/... pearls from distant coasts are brought/... from hills their marble hearts we hew/While piles encroach upon the ocean's blue" (Ovid 2008, p. 131, ll. 123–26) to satiate the ever increasing desire for the consumption of extravagant goods. The speaker in *Amores* 3.8 looks back on a more, perhaps idealistic, bucolic period when oars were not sweeping "across the oceans" for conquest and people were content to live sustainably with nature which provided plenty—better crops, fruits, and honey from "fields unfurrowed", devoid of toiling laborers and property boundaries (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 39–43). Ovid indicates that in earlier times, the territoriality and gluttonous consumption that marks the Augustan period was therefore minimal. In reproachfully apostrophizing self-destructive human nature with "What good for you are cities ringed with ramparts/What good to give men arms in enmity?/What good the sea?—you should have been content with the land" (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 47–50) the speaker criticizes Rome's increasing materialist way of life by suggesting that moving away from living in balance with nature entails moving away from the frugal, simple rustic lifestyle of older Rome and toward the decadence of Augustan imperialist civilization.

The upshot of Augustus' imperial rule, his laying claim to "the sky", according to Ovid, is a social transformation marked by greed, disempowerment of the lower classes, military imperial over-extension, and the corruption of justice. In *Amores* 3.8, the speaker directly confronts the Augustan regime with these instances while attesting that,

Not for food but gold we dig for;
For money soldiers shed their blood and fight.
The Senate's shut to poor men; wealth give honours,
Wealth makes a solemn judge, a haughty knight. (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 53–56)

Wealth and power are thus the purview of the ruling elite and its mercenary hirelings. The speaker makes the point that the only thing of real value "left for the poor" is love and stresses that the Augustan oligarchy can "own the lot" of "Courts and Councils" and "manage peace and war" as long as they leave alone "our true-love" which is "not up for auction" (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 57–60). This genuine love, however, is under increasing threat by an Augustan regime seeking to place it within proprietary bounds.

Ovid suggests that genuine love, based on mutuality and free will, can mostly be found amongst ordinary people in no position to offer material exchange or incentives for it. In contrast to the materialistic love prevalent among the elite in Augustan society, the poor and ordinary do not appear to take love for granted in Ovidian poetry. The speaker of humble means in *Amores* 1.3, for example, wishes "just to be loved—let her but that allow" (4) and he promises to devote his life as one who would "slave" long years for his lover with "frank sincerity" and a "loyalty that yields to none" (Ovid 2008, p. 6, ll. 15–16). These appear to be qualities that Ovid identifies with "common folk" relationships, leading "a blameless life" in "blushing modesty" (Ovid 2008, p. 6, l. 17). Unlike the Augustan ruling class who view love as a leisurely activity, he presents love among the lower classes as something they build their lives upon. The persona in *Amores* 1.3, for instance, offers himself to his love as only a poor poet with "little enough" to commend him "no proud names of ancient ancestry (Ovid 2008, p. 6, l. 8) ... no ploughs unnumbered [to] work rich land" and parents who "keep a good watch on what they spend" (Ovid 2008, p. 6, ll. 10–12), but what he can offer is true devotion and fidelity. This faithfulness is expressed by the persona when he professes: "I am not love's acrobat to leap from bed/To bed. Believe me, you'll be mine always;/With you may heaven let me pass my days (Ovid 2008, p. 6, ll. 19–21) ... And die with you there weeping" (Ovid 2008, p. 6, l. 23). Referencing acrobatic lovers, Ovid thus contrasts the promiscuous relationships of the elite based on materialist exchange with genuine love experienced by ordinary people who conceptualize love as a life-encompassing phenomenon, an end in itself.

The theme that substance in love lies within the realm of ordinary people is also recounted in *Amores* 1.10 in which Ovid presents the dilemma of a poor poet unable to give gifts requested by his lover. The persona highlights the “unnaturalness” of demanding gifts in exchange for the pleasure of love by evoking the imagery of mating amongst animals in nature: “Cows don’t claim gifts from bulls, nor mares from stallions/A ram won’t bring a gift to charm his ewe/Only a woman’s proud her man to plunder (Ovid 2008, p. 19, ll. 27–29) ... and sells what pleases both (Ovid 2008, p. 19, l. 31) ... that [which] man and woman share in unity” (Ovid 2008, p. 19, l. 36). Material exchange in love relations thus represents a corruption of nature, but Ovid also sets this form of exchange metaphorically against the corruption inherent in Augustan justice where “courts make fortunes” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, l. 40) through a judicial system in which people are “bought and bear false witness” and judges give their “palms to grease” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, l. 37–38). Love has therefore become as corrupted as Augustus’ legal institutions. Hence, the persona directs his lover to “ask rewards from rich men” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, l. 53) and pick “the overhanging bunches” of those whose vines are “brimming” and can “give their fruit away” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, ll. 55–56). In lieu of this abundance, Ovid ironizes that “A poor man’s coin is zeal and trust and service—/To give his all to her who holds his heart” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, ll. 57–58), suggesting that what the poor have to offer may be immaterial but intrinsically much more valuable. The persona reinforces the value of the immaterial by emphasizing the ephemerality of goods richer men are able to provide: “dresses get torn and gold and jewels broken” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, l. 61) in comparison to the only gift he can give, the “dower” of fame and immortality through verses “that will always live” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, ll. 59–62). Ovid thus additionally applies the diction of wealth and abundance inversely to critique love as means of commodity acquisition in Augustan society and elevates the poor over the ruling class for offering a more authentic, unconditional love instead. His consideration of intimate love and rejection of materialism are, furthermore, interconnected with an anti-empire perspective.

Embracing poetry as source of immortality and spurning the materialist world of privilege in Augustan society is a position similarly espoused by the speaker in *Amores* 1.15. In response to those in Augustus’ elite circle who condemn poetry as “the work of idle wit” (Ovid 2008, p. 26, l. 3), Ovid responds with criticism of the military officials, lawyers, and politicians that sustain Augustan institutions. The speaker asserts that he would rather spend his youthful vitality leading the life of a poor poet than “pursue a soldier’s dusty life/Or study wordy statutes and the strife/Of courts of law or make my thankless choice/In politics to prostitute my voice ... ” (Ovid 2008, p. 26, ll. 5–8). Ovid presents each of the above occupations as metonymies for the inequitable pillars of the Augustan regime. The “dusty” soldiers represent the military’s engagement in imperialist conquests of subject nations which sustain Rome with tribute, the wordy lawyers represent a legal system premised more on rhetoric than actual justice, and the politicians represent a further “prostituting” of republican “voice” to the benefit of Augustus’ autocratic rule. Indeed, by recounting a long list of classic poets and their eternal works that continue to survive the mortal decrepit world (reflective of Augustan Rome), “while fathers rave, slaves cheat/Pimps have no shame and whores charm in the street” (Ovid 2008, p. 27, ll. 18–19), the speaker privileges poetic immortality over the temporal rule of despots like Augustus. Ovid’s criticism of Augustus’ pretentiousness is further expressed in the lines: “To poetry let pomp of kings yield place/And all the gold that Tagus’ banks embrace” (Ovid 2008, p. 27, ll. 33–34). Here, Ovid maintains that true respect and honor is due to poets, (regardless of their social status), whose works resonate with people, not the affluence and might of self-deified emperors.

Contemporary Afghan Pastorals

Contemporary criticism of imperialist despotism, reflecting Ovid’s critical poetics, is also found in today’s militant Afghan pastorals. These pastorals emerge out of a political historical context of war and occupation following the intervention of hegemonic powers in Afghanistan at the turn of the 21st century. While they include poems pertaining to the Soviet Union’s occupation of the polity in the 1980s, the poems particularly register the protracted and ongoing US/NATO military

intervention in Afghanistan. Entering modern statehood in the early 18th century through the Hotaki and Abdali dynasties, Afghanistan successfully resisted colonization by the British Empire throughout the 19th century as well as recent neo-imperialist endeavors by the Soviet Union and United States (Gregorian 1969; Gulzad 1994; Barfield 2010). The polity has historically possessed a vibrant rural cultural economy integrated with its cities, including a thriving transhumance or nomadic pastoralist sector,³ giving rise to its cultural representation in indigenous poetry, music and folkloric art (Ulfat 1946; Barfield 1981; Sakata 2003; Majruh 2010; Manalay 2010; Khalil 2017). Furthermore, Afghanistan in the 20th century conceivably had resonances with the Rome of Ovid's time (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.). In terms of societies negotiating relationships of empire, classical Rome, like Afghanistan, was a strategic location for conquest and usurpation with cities surrounded by vast agrarian land,⁴ in addition to being a perpetually militarized space. Moreover, post-9/11 Afghanistan, the focus of both Soviet and American occupation at the end of the 20th and early 21st centuries (Misdaq 2006; Braithwaite 2012; Sands and Qazizai 2019), under the aegis of American empire also resembles the outlying rebellious Celtic and Germanic fringes of the Roman Empire, occupied but never subdued. Both settings are thus apposite sources of comparison in analyzing sociopolitical relations elucidated by pastoral poetry with reference to empire.

The American intervention in Afghanistan over the last two decades is a project of empire in that it involves a hegemonic power (the United States) reconfiguring political authority over a peripheral polity (Afghanistan) through means of violence and the establishment of an amenable client state through regime change (Agnew 2005; Biersteker 1996; Greenwald 2012; Weber 1994). Moreover, this imperialist relationship has required the use of continuous military force by the United States for over 19 years to sustain its client state in the face of a resilient insurgency that has burgeoned across rural Afghanistan, despite the American/NATO coalition's overwhelming advantage in financial resources, manpower, advanced weaponry and technological superiority (Mashal 2020; Bacevich 2019). The US has concentrated its bombing campaigns and night raids in the Pashtun-populated areas of Afghanistan during the course of its military campaign in Afghanistan. With approximately 150,000 dead, civilians in these regions have continuously experienced mass aerial bombings, drone attacks, night raids and artillery fire from the American/NATO coalition fighting an insurgency indistinguishable from the native population (Tarzi 2008; Malik 2016; Mashal 2018; Mogelson 2019; Crawford 2018; United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) 2019; McCarthy 2020).⁵ Writing for *The New Yorker*, Mogelson (2019) recounts the brutal and unaccountable "anti-terrorist" raids often meted out to civilians by Afghan intelligence services (NDS) and C.I.A operatives in Nangarhar Province:

Last winter, a seventeen-year-old Afghan named Rabbani was inside his house, in Shirzad District, when he and his father, Khan Wali, heard helicopters in the sky. According to Rabbani, Khan Wali was a mason who raised goats and cows to feed his family. An explosion blew open the front gate of their compound. An Afghan using a megaphone ordered everyone to come outside. As Khan Wali and Rabbani emerged, Khan Wali was shot in the face.

Uniformed men, wearing helmets with night-vision devices, stormed the compound. Rabbani's hands were bound behind his back. He was thrown to the ground and kicked

³ While constituting a sustainable livelihood for a sizeable portion of Afghanistan's population in the 1960s, nomadic pastoralism has declined in recent decades due to war, ethnic conflict and contestation over resources with settled communities.

⁴ In both cases, poor farmers were similarly dependent on small plots of land for livelihoods while wealthy landowners held large estates.

⁵ While all parties in this war including US/NATO forces, Afghan National Army/Police, pro-government militias, Islamic State Khorasan Province, former Northern Alliance factions and the Taliban have been implicated in war crimes and human rights abuses, this paper conceives that local communities often take the brunt of violence against targeted adversaries in the Afghan conflict.

repeatedly. His mother, who was inside at the time, told me, “I had my baby in my arms. I didn’t understand why they were killing us. I didn’t understand who they were.” After the men left, Rabbani discovered that his eleven-year-old brother, Layakat, and his ten-year-old brother, Shaokat, were dead. Next door, three of Rabbani’s cousins, one of whom was thirteen, had also been killed. The family’s car and tractor were ablaze, and all their animals had been shot (Mogelson 2019, pp. 11–12).

Many poems in this paper reference indiscriminate aerial bombings and CIA-led death squads, constituting “night raids” against villagers’ homes, as a commonplace facet of life under occupation.

The Afghan poems also relate the suffering of a rural population caught up in a war that is a product of the global hegemon’s larger economic (military industrial complex) and geopolitical imperatives justified through a purported anti-terrorism narrative. The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan largely emanates from this rural population which has been consistently identified as a bastion of support for religious extremism and “terrorists” and therefore the rightful targets of continuing military violence (Barfield 2010; Jones 2019; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012b; Brown and Rassler 2013). Often evaded in the war on terrorism narrative is the US occupation’s establishment of a ruling structure comprised of American-allied factions and an expatriate Afghan elite⁶ in Kabul which has partaken in massive corruption, appropriating national resources and international aid intended for Afghanistan’s development (Siddique 2014; Malik 2016; Bak 2019). This entrenchment of elites, owing to American military power, has widened social disparity between the majority rural and urban poor, (experiencing food insecurity, displacement, and military violence from war), and enriched local rulers and powerbrokers throughout the urban regions and provincial centers. The American occupation has largely intervened in a civil war between a combination of a client warlords and Western educated, dual-national, emplaced elites in urban areas like Kabul and poor, religiously conservative regions whose people identify in the poems as “Muslims”, defenders of the faith and homeland (Feroz 2019; Osman 2019; Mashal and Rahim 2020; Glinski 2020).

Contemporary Afghan pastorals provide a rich contextualization of life experienced under political economic circumstances prevailing in early 21st century empire. These poems illustrate many themes that reference relations of empire including negotiating war, occupation and the transformation of society under imperialist influence. Sifatullah Sangaryar’s poem, “Food”, for example, exemplifies a poetics that communicates the rural Afghan population’s encounter with forms of imperialist oppression under occupation. In this work, diction involving wildlife connotes the savagery and predation experienced by the local populace. The poem, for instance, depicts foreign invading forces and their local agents as the “big snakes” and carnivorous predators of the current era, preying on poor people, in the lines “Our blood is the food of the wolves” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, l. 2) Blood, connoting the vitality and living flesh of humans, has been transformed into the “food” of empire’s executors and dependents. Through animalistic imagery, Sangaryar’s poem depicts the American occupation as akin to being ravenously mauled by beasts and hence becoming their “food.”

Food

The food of the big snakes of the time,
Our blood is the food of wolves.
Those who came received it for free;
The food of the cruel governors.
They don’t count it when they eat our blood;
They think there is no death; the food of the rich.
This is blood that can brook no alternative;

⁶ These have included Northern Alliance factions such as Jamiat e Islami, Jumbish e Milli, Hezbe Wahdat and Ittehad e Islami; Pashtun regional warlords such as Abdul Rasiq (deceased) and Gul Agha Sherzai, along with expatriate technocrats (e.g., Ashraf Ghani) and former Afghan-Soviet regime (PDPA) affiliates (e.g., Hanif Atmar and Masoum Stanekzai).

They always become the food of the Ghazis.
 In the fight between the fighters of the East and West
 Our blood has become the food of the bombs.
 There is no sympathy for our pains;
 Some became the food of foreigners and some the food of the elders.
 At each moment the food of traitors.
 Around the dragon of this century,
 Is the blood of this poor nation;
 The food of the traders of the bazaar.
 In the name of peace and reconciliation,
 Our bodies and property have become the food of the cheaters.
 When will the killers of Sangaryar's wishes
 Become the food of the Scorpions.

"Food" compares multiple levels of exploitation to forms of consumption in which power, particularly in the guise of emplaced local rulers, eats away at the peasants' being. The refrain, "food of" builds up into a crescendo, expressing the intensity of indignation felt by the persona at each stage of being figuratively "eaten." The lines "Those who came received it for free/The food of cruel governors" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, ll. 3–4) conveys how the rural population's blood, body, being, and substance are now the food of parasitic local magistrates who consume it freely by riding the proverbial coattails of the American coalition. In this relationship, local rulers and elders profit from betrayals, often turning in ordinary people to the Coalition as "terrorists" or "insurgents." As the poem relates, "Some have become the food of the foreigners and some the food of the elders/At each moment, the food of traitors" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, ll. 12–14). The peasants' blood, in this respect, predominantly becomes "the food of the rich" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, l. 6). In a revolutionary turn, the rich are also unaware that there are consequences to the oppression they mete out to the poor—most prominently, death at the hands of martyrs or *Ghazis*, for "They always become the food of the Ghazis" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, l. 8) in the end. In this last metaphoric reference, the poem suggests that martyrdom operations, suicide bombings, and the like, are a response to the brutality and injustice experienced by ordinary people at the hands of those enriched by the occupation.

Sangaryar's poem also potently expresses the predicament many rural Afghans have been thrust into following America's post 9/11 invasion, caught in the violent crosshairs of larger global political-cultural conflicts in which they have had no direct involvement but for which they continue to pay heavily in loss of life and livelihood. This outlook is made poignantly manifest through the speaker's testament: "In the fight between the fighters of East and West/Our blood has become the food of the bombs" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, ll. 9–10). The poem additionally locates tyranny at the heart of the American occupation project through imagery in the line the "blood of this poor nation" streams "Around the dragon of this century", referencing the US. Afghan blood has thus become "the food of the traders of the bazaar" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128–29, ll. 15–17) the global bazaar in which contending powers profit from war. Here the speaker also cogently observes that foreign powers paradoxically fight these wars "in the name of peace and reconciliation" which render peasants' "bodies and property ... the food of cheaters" (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 129, ll. 18–19). By employing food metaphorically throughout the poem in multiple contexts, the poet additionally identifies the disingenuous rhetorical justifications that perpetuate war and suffering amongst the rural poor.

Empire's tactical violence also figures prominently in the Afghan pastorals. A 2008 poem titled "Night Raid" historically collapses the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s into the American occupation of the early 21st century. Through the practice of 'night raids' or death squad 'hunt and kill' missions into villagers' homes by American Special Operations Forces, the speaker in the poem relives

and draws parallels between the two imperialist ventures recently experienced by Afghans through the refrain: “Who made a night raid on my home again?” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 157).

Night Raid

Those who have ruined my life’s harvest
 Made a night raid on my home again.
 The Red armies came and returned defeated;
 They left the destroyed Afghan valleys behind them.
 In any direction that I look, I see deserted gardens;
 The unity of my home has been hit by separation.
 Who made a night raid on my home again?
 What complaint can you make of the Red, this is their rule;
 The forest wolves will always eat meat.
 What else should humans expect from the wolves?
 They have hit my mount and Hamun’s as well.
 Who made a night raid on my home again?
 Somebody extended the hand of the cruel onto my lap,
 That’s why there is no respect for the country’s Ulemma.
 The turbans fell from the heads of our elders today.
 They have set our people on fire.
 Who made a night raid on my home again?
 The house of my history and culture was looted today,
 Each slave is now riding me.
 The teeth of the East and West have become like pliers on my muscles.
 I have stepped into his hall in his presence.
 Who made a night raid on my home again?
 Wise up, O Afghan!
 This scene of grief is made for you.
 Be zealous and grab him by his neck,
 This is seared on your heart from the history of yesterday.
 Who made a night raid on my home again?

In “Night Raid”, the speaker suggests that whether Russian or American, imperialist aggression is the same, carrying destruction and devastation alike for natives like himself, the target of military violence. Replete with pastoral imagery connected to ruined harvests, deserted gardens, mountains, lakes, marshlands, and destroyed valleys, the poem recounts how the “night raids” of occupying armies have transformed his community’s fertile and verdant landscape into barren desolation. The speaker asserts that, even though they face ultimate defeat, occupying forces often leave a trail of destruction in their wake, for “The Red armies came and returned defeated/They left the destroyed Afghan valleys behind them/In any direction that I look, I see the deserted gardens” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 157, ll. 3–5).

Moreover, this scorching of the local landscape is pored with the calamity visited on the speaker’s own home and domestic tranquility. The “unity [*or wholeness*] of my home has been hit by separation [*or division*]” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 157, l. 6) professes the speaker, communicating that the physical destruction of the landscape caused by war has resulted in the disastrous divisiveness of his home. In this respect, he metaphorically references the literal obliteration of his family home in figurative comparison with that of his country.

The poem also employs the imagery of savage animals in the second stanza to underscore the viciousness of predatory practices inherent in sustaining foreign occupation. Comparing US Special Forces’ “night raid” operators to blood-thirsty wolf packs, it rhetorically asks readers, “What else should humans expect from the wolves?”, attesting that “The forest wolves will always eat meat” and their range is geographically vast, for they can “hit my mount and Hamun’s as well”

(Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 157, ll. 9–11). The invaders, in other words, can strike anywhere, from local mountains to Hamun or the lakes and wetlands traversing the Iranian border. The speaker thus implies that it is the nature of American and Russian invaders, “the Red”, to ruthlessly prey on local Afghans. “Night Raid’s” imagery, like that of the poem, “Food”, also suggests that a predator/prey relationship exists between foreign occupation forces and resistant Afghan natives.

In the poem, predation is furthermore connected to the desecration of local cultural symbols connoting respect, as indicated by the lines: “The turbans fell from the heads of our elders today” because the occupiers have “set our people on fire” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 158, ll. 15–16). In losing their turbans, an egregious sign of shame in Afghan culture, community elders lose face in light of continual outrages perpetrated by American forces against their constituents, particularly in the form of aerial bombings on villages. Affronts to culture and dignity precipitated by intrusive and deadly night raids are further evident in the speaker’s profession of degradation and dispossession brought on by the Special Forces’ raids. In declaring, “The house of my history and culture was looted today/Each slave is now riding me/The teeth of the East and West have become like pliers on my muscles” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 158, ll. 18–21) the persona again communicates the act of being defiled and torn apart through the ferocious animalistic behavior of Coalition forces. Like the speaker in “Food”, he locates the appropriation of his personal and cultural dignity by “slaves” or dishonorable servants of occupiers from both Eastern and Western civilizations. Similar to the sentiments expressed in “Food”, the metaphoric mauling by the metonyms of “East” and “West” signify that the violent contest between contending cultural spheres and global powers is once again played out in the homes of hapless Afghan villagers.

The fragility of pastoral values during a period of imperial expansion into local communities is another theme that pervades the Afghan pastorals. War and occupation, in which ordinary Afghans have become entangled, for instance, is also depicted as a time that tests people’s faith and values in the poem, “Selling the Faith” by Abdul Halim.

Selling the Faith
 Decisions are made there, above in the sky,
 No one can be blamed for what happens.
 Everyone’s fate is separate,
 Each man is passing through a time of testing.
 One person is granted wealth and selfishness,
 One is hopeless from poverty.
 Some have sold their faith for money;
 They accompany the non-believers elsewhere.
 Pious God!
 Eliminate their hypocrisy!
 Grant a little modesty and zeal to Muslims.
 Halim sitting and praying asks that
 Muslims be granted dignity in all things.

As the speaker recounts, each person is assigned an individual fate through “decisions” made “above in the sky” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 98, l. 1). In war, humans must struggle with the various fates they are dealt. Through an alternating angry and rhetorical tone, the speaker in Halim’s poem grapples with the idea that fate has thrust people into diverse and inequitable circumstances. He reflects that humans have ultimate agency in making ethical choices in those circumstances, for every fate is a particular “time of testing” by God (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 98, l. 4). With reference to unfolding fates, the speaker depicts the disparity resulting from ongoing war in Afghanistan: “One person is granted wealth and selfishness/One is hopeless from poverty/Some have sold their faith for money;/They accompany the non-believers elsewhere” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 98, ll. 5–8). The war, and the largess granted to local agents complicit in sustaining imperial rule, is furthermore bound up in profit-seeking,

and the renunciation of spiritual beliefs. The speaker suggests that materialism has taken a hold over society. Given this scenario, he implores God to “eliminate” the “hypocrisy” of the perfidious and “Grant a little modesty and zeal to Muslims” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 98, ll. 10–11). Similar to Ovid’s observations of Augustan Rome, the speaker in “Selling the Faith” is discomfited by the increasing avarice and jettisoning of pastoral or traditional values accompanying the expansion of American empire into Afghan rural life.

The scarcity of genuine love in the transformed environment precipitated by occupation is professed in the poem, “The Time of Dollars” by Zahid ul-Rahman Mukhlis. Like “Selling the Faith” and Ovid’s love elegies, this work attests to the increasing materialism affecting social relations under empire, in this instance, American empire. In contrast to Halim’s poem, however, Mukhlis evinces wit in tone as well as a lyrical sound and flow in his lines.

The Time of Dollars
 I am astonished at this time of dollars;
 In poverty, I lost friendship.
 Elsewhere Muslims are drenched in blood;
 The world became a jail for Muslims.
 Alas! What people inherited me?
 What a life, it’s a hollow joke.
 The poor are insulted by riches;
 To be poor is a reason for disrespect.
 Mukhlis says, for the sake of this sweet country,
 My blood takes a vow to love.

The speaker conveys how wealth and relations of exchange presently configure friendship and social relations in rural Afghan regions under American occupation. In a time flush with American dollars for some, but dungeons for others, the persona attests to materialism’s increasing effect on society. The tone is at once biting and intimate as the speaker divulges that he has lost friendships due to his poverty. Through the metonym of “dollars” connoting social esteem, the speaker relates a change in social valuation (given that a person’s worth is now determined by possession of wealth). The persona observes, for example, that “to be poor is a reason for disrespect” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 190, l. 8). The rich insult the poor, subjecting them to indignity and condescension. The speaker also relates how vulnerable people are sold or “turned in” as prisoners in the war much like defenseless people are bought and sold under slavery, in a world equated with the metaphor of “a jail for Muslims” where “Muslims everywhere are drenched in blood” or slaughtered (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 190, ll. 3–4). Moreover, given that friendships are now based on a superficial form of appraisal and the marginalized are either trodden on or the target of imprisonment and brutality, the acerbic speaker metaphorically contends that “life” has indeed become a “hollow joke” for many (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 190, l. 6). In spite of all this, the persona still strives to find the capacity to love humanity, as evidenced by the potent and defiant final lines, “... For the sake of this sweet country/My blood takes a vow to love” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 190, ll. 9–10). Loving life and the personal relations that constitute life has thus becoming increasingly challenging under empire.

Other forms of transformation noted in the poems include a break in tranquility often associated with pastoral landscapes. Hejran’s poem “Scream” communicates this disruption of everyday life in the pastoral. The speaker observes how a bucolic setting of nature is changed into a hideous space of fear, foreboding, anxiety and death under the American occupation.

Scream
 Once again screams are heard from the top of the mountain over there;
 Screams are heard from each valley, from each peak.
 Again, a knife is put to the young body;

Painful screams are heard from the knife.
 Did a shepherd die or was the young shepherd blown up by a bomb?
 Over there, screams are heard from the head of cattle.
 God! Who has been brought, beheaded by the river?
 Girls cry, screams are heard from the bank of the river.
 Someone is taken to Bagram and labeled “Al-Qaeda”;
 Screams are heard from the wings of the helicopter.
 Leave us because you can’t even control yourselves;
 Even if you cry out a hundred times that you are a leader, O God!
 The grief of Hejran will accompany him;
 Screams are heard from the call of the ghazal.

Imagery painting piercing sounds of pain pervades “Scream” as the pastoral space of mountains, valleys, rivers, shepherds and cattle becomes a realm of torment. The persona informs readers that aerial bombings and detentions at American coalition bases like Bagram Air Base, linked to torture, are some of the screams’ causes in the lines “Was the young shepherd blown up by a bomb?” and “Someone is taken to Bagram and labeled “Al-Qaeda” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 206, ll. 6–7, l. 11). Screams also become metonymic throughout the poem for the agony associated with military violence accompanying occupation. This agony is poignantly communicated by the synecdoche of a knife, as in the lines “Again, the knife is put to the young body” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 205, l. 3), signifying that again an instance of pain is inflicted through weaponry upon ordinary young villagers. Toward the poem’s ending, the persona imparts a distraught tone by apostrophizing the American coalition, in the line “Leave us because you can’t even control yourselves” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 206, l. 13), emphasizing the brutality and lack of accountability extant in the occupation. The pastoral thus becomes a “no holds barred” space where the coalition has free reign to multiply the screams, evoking grief and anxiety in Hejran whose poems or *ghazals* transmit the screams to the world.

Rafiq’s poem, Ababeel, also centers on a disturbance in the pastoral wherein a pleasant, vibrant rural setting, characterized by the season of spring, is transformed into a torrential space/time of death, signified by the season of autumn, which lashes the landscape with tempests of violence and cruelty.

Ababeel
 Autumn came to you instead of spring, my homeland,
 A hot wind and torrents of fire came down upon you.
 Your blossoms of wishes have faded in this world,
 Storms of cruelty and power came at you from all sides.
 You were tired and exhausted from poverty,
 The red wide-mouthed predator came at you.
 You have seen the cruelties of the locals and the foreigners,
 Wars, tension, murders and killings came upon you.
 This world has become a hell for you; you are burning in it,
 You haven’t died so far, yet more bullets seek you out.
 You have made many of your sons messengers to paradise,
 Satan, the ambusher, came at you from afar.
 They roasted you on the fire like a kebab once again,
 Satan’s puppet came at you bearing an Afghan name.
 They brought the army again, they are not yet sated,
 The great convoy—the Nimrod of its time—came for you.
 Abraha’s army with the arrogance of the West,
 A row of their tanks and elephants came at you.
 Your true sons will not give you a man-made paradise of this world,
 Leader or mujahed, a sympathetic Afghan came upon you.

In Ababeel, the Afghan homeland is continuously visited metaphorically with autumn, symbolic of death, instead of the natural cycles of rejuvenation and rebirth signified by spring which normally follow in the zodiac year. There is indeed no let-up in the destruction, violence, and oppression meted out to the fragile homeland which wishes and longs for the “blossoms” of spring but faces “storms of cruelty and power . . . from all sides” instead (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 179, ll. 3–4). This depiction is a reference to continuous US/NATO military violence inflicted upon Afghanistan, personified as a soul already war-ravaged, “tired and exhausted from poverty” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 179, l. 5). The American coalition or “wide-mouthed predator’s . . . wars, tension, murders and killings” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, pp. 179–80, ll. 6–8) is further linked to the homeland’s personification as a soul burning in hell with hell being located in the temporal world, not the afterlife. The poem is given greater rhetorical force and intimacy through the second-person perspective and use of the pronoun “you.” In the lines, “Satan, the ambusher, came at you from afar/They roasted you on the fire like a kebab once again/Satan’s puppet came at you bearing an Afghan name” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 180, ll. 12–14), the persona, apostrophizing his homeland, asserts that rural Afghanistan has been palpably thrust into hell, experiencing excruciating suffering through the American regime change project.

Among the resistant poems in the Afghan war collection, Gul Pacha Olfat conveys the pastoral values at risk of loss during a time of war and profit-seeking under empire. In “I Want a Heart”, the speaker elevates empathy and commiseration with the vulnerable over the celebration of outward appearances and material wealth inhering in foreign occupation.

I Want a Heart

I want a heart that can empathise with the discontent;
 I want to be burned together with such a moth.
 For a little pain and pity for sympathy,
 If they exist in a heart, I want to be sacrificed for that.
 Whenever I notice a pain-filled sob or a face behind a candle,
 I want to cry like those who pay a visit to patients.
 Hearts are cold; like a moth, I seek out the fire,
 I never want to stay in such a cold house.
 Everyone eagerly looks at the beautiful faces;
 I wish the pale faces of the poor were also watched.
 I am not one to get friendly with sweet words,
 But in times of sorrow and misery I want to be full of grief.
 Olfat never wishes anything on anyone, but
 I am looking out for my heart, not to have the red or the white.

The “heart” that the speaker craves in this poem is a synecdoche for any compassionate person that can realize these pastoral values. The speaker intimates that the love, care, and empathy, embodied in this heart, are rare qualities in the present cultural realm. This poem also contains elements of ambiguity as it can be read either as the persona’s desire for a lover possessing such qualities or a wish to inculcate these qualities in himself. The speaker’s expressive first-person voice metaphorically equates such hearts to moths drawn to burning candles and longs to feel the burn or emotions that those hearts experience. Through the hyperbole, “For a little pain and pity for sympathy/If they exist in a heart, I want to be sacrificed for that” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 107, ll. 3–4), the speaker communicates the worth and preciousness of this simple pastoral aesthetic centered on consideration for others’ suffering. Additionally, through the use of simile in the lines “I want to cry like those who pay a visit to patients/Hearts are cold; like a moth, I seek out the fire” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 107, ll. 6–7), the persona expresses either his own wish to be imbued with such feelings and values or find them in a potential love interest.

The speaker also comments on the culture of the moment by observing that at the present time, “Everyone eagerly looks at the beautiful faces” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 107, ll. 6–7).

Here, the “beautiful faces” connote the valuation of material splendor, superficial appearances, and decadence that accompany imperial culture. Instead, the persona asks readers to refocus their attention on the forgotten and the suffering encompassed in “the pale faces of the poor” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 107, l. 10) which should require equal, if not greater, consideration. In essence, the speaker recognizes the heart has to feel, “to be full of grief” in “times of sorrow”, in order to commiserate (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 107, l. 12). It cannot be “cold”, which happens when a focus on beautiful appearances and material wealth prevent the heart from feeling and empathizing with the poor and vulnerable. The poem ends with the speaker insisting that the most important thing is to cultivate a good heart, not to possess “the red or white” (a phrase synonymous with gold and silver) (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 107, ll. 14–15). As a whole, Olfat’s poem conveys the desire and struggle to retain pastoral values against a cultural preponderance toward the materialism of empire.

The Ovidian and Afghan Pastorals: A Comparison

In communicating the vulnerability of pastoral values in the face of empire’s looming dominance over cultural aesthetics, Olfat represents the role of the poet as a figure of resistance against societal oppression. Reflecting back on Ovid’s poetry, we can see that, like the Latin poet, Olfat reaffirms the pastoral ethics of human fellowship and concern for community over deference to pomp, status, and glamorous affectation exemplifying the creeping cultural valuations of a society under empire’s aegis. The other Afghan pastoral poets considered in this essay express this resistant strain as well, suggesting the universality of the poet as embodying and expressing rebellious thought across time and space.

The translated works discussed in this paper certainly exhibit differences between critiques of empire from within (in Ovid’s case) versus critiques of empire from the perspective of those most oppressed by it, exemplified by the Afghan pastorals. While Ovid criticizes the increasingly internal tyrannical aspects of Augustan imperial society, largely through its ramifications on social relations, the Afghan pastoral poets concentrate on tyranny experienced by populations under occupation in the rebellious fringes of American empire. Ovid focuses on the cultural decadence of the metropole and the Afghan poets shed light on the experience of subject populations in imperial colonies. The Latin poet laments Roman society’s descent onto fixation on ‘brimming fruit’ and “rewards from rich men” (Ovid 2008, p. 20, l. 53, ll. 55–56) while the Afghan poets ruefully delineate empire’s rendering of ordinary people as “food” of the “cruel governors”, “cheaters”, and “traitors” grown rich from serving the “dragon of this century” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128–29, l. 4, ll. 14–17). While enabling an understanding of their divergences, the translations of both genres also facilitate an awareness of how their respective perspectives meet. Both Ovid and the Afghan poets, for instance, recognize the super-structure of empire as underpinning the oppression and injustice endured by common people throughout the imperial realm. Ovid recognizes that the culture of corruption, gluttonous consumption, exploitation, and inequity prevailing in Rome is linked to the fact that “Rome holds the treasures of a world enslaved” (Ovid 2008, p. 131, ll. 113–20). Afghan pastoral poets are also cognizant of the linkages between the oppression experienced in their local communities and violent political cultural contestation over their homeland under relationships of empire. The ruining of “life’s harvest” and “destroyed Afghan valleys” are directly correlated to the imperialist plying of Afghan “muscles” with “the teeth of the East and West” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 157–58, ll. 1–4, ll. 20–21). Thus, at different scales, both types of poets examined in this essay, classical and local contemporary, illustrate the role of the poet as a public critic of social political inequities under empire.

Ovid and the Afghan pastoral poets also share the propensity of being acutely attuned to the dynamics of power that increasingly shape the tyranny experienced internally by societies in relationships of empire. Both forms of poetry bring to light the violence underpinning imperial power and the attendant corruption and injustice that inhere in imperial institutions and relations. Ovid comments upon a political order sustained through violent force in the form of Augustus’ equestrian class, (mercenaries upon whom the Roman autocracy relies to enforce dominance, compliance,

and extort resources both internally and throughout the empire). He suggests that this violent underpinning of power gives rise to corrupt institutions in Roman society. Mercenary soldiers that “for money . . . shed their blood and fight” are the basis for why the Senate is “shut to poor men . . . wealth give honours . . . [and] wealth makes a solemn judge, a haughty knight.” (Ovid 2008, p. 71, ll. 51–54). A political structure predicated on violent force also underscores the society and institutions found in the Afghan pastorals. The American military occupation brings with it a form of societal corruption in which those “granted wealth and selfishness . . . have sold their faith for money” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 98, ll. 5–7) and people pander to the rich because “to be poor is a reason for disrespect” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 190, l. 8). Thus, despite the Afghan pastorals’ focus on the lack of probity in societal institutions under occupation at a local scale, they share an affinity with Ovid’s elegies on the imperial metropole in that both reflect on political systems dependent on violence and extortion which generate an atmosphere of corruption and injustice against which the poetic personas rebel.

The classical works and contemporary Afghan pastorals also contemplate empire’s impact on social relations, particularly the pervasive materialism imperialistic political structures foster in society. Ovid comments on the adulteration of love relations and social institutions that result from the excessive commodity consumption and the circulation of patron-client largesse that characterizes the Augustan imperial economic system. For Ovid, Roman materialism, as mentioned earlier, is inextricably linked to Augustus’ autocratic appropriation of domestic power, reinforced through imperial conquests. In the Afghan pastorals, materialism is an outgrowth of occupation which enriches an elite clientele while becoming a source of social exclusion and vulnerability for ordinary people. The increasing valuation of affluence as a measure of social status in rural Afghan villages, as in Augustan Rome, affects social relations. The speaker in “The Time of Dollars” confesses: “In poverty, I lost friendship” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 190, l. 2), relating that, like Ovid’s spurned impoverished lovers, Afghan villagers experience the indignity of spurned friendships and social ostracism due to class differences resulting from imperialist occupation. Even worse, materialism is also a source of treachery, injustice, and brutality meted out to villagers in the Afghan pastorals. The “perfidious elders” is a theme evident in several poems where innocent villagers become “the food of elders” (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 128, ll. 12–13) and are betrayed as “terrorists” and militants in return for monetary rewards from Coalition allies, often subjecting the villagers to torture and detention. The elders, in this sense, serve as mercenaries, like Augustus’ Equestrian military class, generating fear while acquiring wealth and social standing under an imperial order reliant on them to maintain political power. Social prominence and empowerment linked to affluence is thus a manifestation of materialism stemming from an imperialistic order found in both poetic genres.

Additionally, in both of the poetic genres discussed in this essay there is a yearning for the recovery of pastoral values seen as an antidote for the intrusion of imperial excess and exploitation overtaking the traditional ethics of local communities. Ovid’s elegies elevate pastoral life and values, identifying genuine affects of love and loyalty within the sphere of ordinary rural Roman society. His lamentation of the emergence of empire, a gluttonous consumption culture, and environmental destruction reflect a mourning of lost pastoral aesthetics and way of life. Ecological destruction accompanying empire in Ovid’s poetry signifies the destruction of pastoral landscapes necessary for the sustenance of pastoral culture. Furthermore, the poetic personas inhabiting Ovid’s elegies continually grope for remnants of the lost pastoral as a means of recovering genuine love and fellowship in personal and social relations. They pine for a past when people reaped fruitful crops from “fields unfurrowed”, hills were not hewn down for their “marble hearts”, and “ploughmen’s oxen grazed on Palatine” in lieu of the “cities ringed with ramparts” comprising imperial Rome (Ovid 2008, pp. 71, 131, ll. 39–47, l. 119). In the Afghan pastorals, the loss of pastoral landscapes and aesthetics is more immediate, and directly experienced by the poems’ speakers rather than the mourning and nostalgia communicated by Ovidian personas. The Afghan poems narrate the unfolding destruction of rural life under phases of occupation with poetic personas serving as witnesses to the devastation of the

pastoral, expressing intense emotions and sentiments of resistance against the palpable violence of empire as a result. They communicate the “screams” heard from “each valley, each peak” as “young shepherds” are “blown up” by bombs (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, pp. 205–6, l. 3, ll. 6–7) and testify to “the destroyed Afghan valleys” and “deserted gardens” left behind by “defeated” invading armies (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012a, p. 157, ll. 3–5). However, both poetic genres reference and look to pastoral landscapes and aesthetics as a means of “fighting back” against the empire’s ruinous incursions and practices of annihilation, suggesting faith in the pastoral as a means of successfully resisting imperialist conquest.

Resistance to imperialism is a main theme in Ovid’s poetry, replete with substance and commentary on the political-cultural concerns of his time. His poetry furthermore displays a daring critique of Rome’s despotic ruler, eventually earning him exile and a sad demise away from his native socio-cultural sphere. While a Roman resident, however, Ovid was able to communicate the intertwinement of Rome’s descent into materialism with Augustus’ imperialistic expansion and monopolization of power. His elegies potently repudiate the materialism seeping into love relationships as well as the unbalanced commodity consumption characteristic of Augustan excess. Ovid’s poetry perhaps belies a longing for an earlier time free from the ecological destruction, corruption, and disempowerment of the ordinary masses prevailing under Augustus’ reign. His elegies reflect sympathy for common people, locating authentic love within the lower classes and rejecting the pretentiousness of autocrats. Similarly, a remarkable aspect of current poetry emanating from America’s Afghan War is that it largely resonates with themes expressed in Ovid’s reflections on Augustan society in classical antiquity. Delving into these Afghan pastorals, we observe that, like Ovid, they reflect rebellion against the aesthetics of empire, express a critique of increasing materialism in society, protest practices of violence, killing, and appropriation undertaken by empire, criticize the corruption inhering in imperial institutions, and display a valuation of the communal, rustic ethics associated with pastoral values. Moreover, if we conceptualize empire as establishing a power structure predicated on sustaining and privileging both urban and rural client rulers/centers of authority, then we can expect to see the ramifications of imperialism in both urban and rural areas (with oppression and social disparity being particular manifestations of this overall imperialist superstructure). Therefore, concerns related to imperialism are not limited to rural areas with reference to the pastoral given that the pastoral is a transcendent mode and purview of a wide range of social concerns. This paper suggests that a countervailing force to empire inheres in pastoral ethics, settings and cultures and focuses on works that offer a radical critique of empire originating from rural as well as urban settings, Ovid’s *Amores* and *Art of Love* being prime urban examples. Examining the Afghan pastorals alongside Ovid’s elegies thus gives us a sense of the pastoral’s significance in speaking to the power of empire across time and space. They further alert us to the fact that the radical pastoral is alive and thriving.

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