Both *The Colonial Present* by Derek Gregory and *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* by Mahmood Mamdani are books written by academics in response to 9/11 and the events that followed, with special attention to the actions of the American government and media. Geared towards the general public, both books attempt to contextualize 9/11 historically and politically—as opposed to culturally—and rectify what each author independently refers to as a state of “historical amnesia” in America. Though neither book focuses solely on Afghanistan, both authors include a substantial discussion of American support for the mujahedeen during the Cold War in order to illustrate how American foreign policy “adventures” came to haunt the U.S. in the post-9/11 world. Through their comparisons of Afghanistan with other countries—Iraq and Palestine in *The Colonial Present* and Indochina and Nicaragua among others in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*—Gregory and Mamdani demonstrate that American involvement in Afghanistan is best understood as one of many American campaigns launched in pursuit of imperial—or as Gregory would argue—colonial goals. Consequently, despite the fact that neither book offers a comprehensive history of Afghanistan, they each provide a distinct lens through which to understand Afghan history. This review, through a separate discussion of each book, will focus on contributions of these two works to the study of Afghanistan.

Despite the fact that both books were written in response to 9/11 and have the same fundamental goal—to challenge the official American narrative used to justify a “war on terror” using terror—their methodologies are very different. Whereas Mamdani is concerned with tracing the roots of political terror by examining the evolution of American foreign policy during the Cold War, Gregory focuses on illustrating the construction of “imagined geographies” in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine to show that far from having disappeared, the colonial divisions of space that distinguish between “civilization” and “barbarism” continue to be employed today. It is important to note that neither book conveys original research and that both rely entirely on secondary sources. These books are better understood as academia lite: they draw on the research and ideas of important intellectuals to provide the historical background necessary to understand 9/11 as something other than a manifestation of a fundamental and inevitable “clash of civilizations”. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* and *The Colonial Present* must therefore be evaluated as books written for the public as opposed to scholarly works.

Mamdani’s central aim in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* is to counter what he calls “culture talk”: “the predilection to define cultures according to their presumed "essential" characteristics, especially as regards politics”¹ that was utilized to explain the link between terrorism and Islam following 9/11, especially by the

¹ Mamdani, Mahmood. “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” *American Anthropologist* 104.3 Sep. 2002: 766-775.
media. According to Mamdani, by explaining Islamic terrorism as a cultural phenomenon rooted in the inherent and unchanging cultural characteristics of a people, “culture talk” obscures history and real issues; “it dehistoricizes the construction of political identities.” Instead, Mamdani argues, Islamic terrorism is a modern political construction that came out of recent history, that of the late Cold War. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, though it consists of four chapters, is really divided into two parts. The first part, chapter 1, “offers a critique of the cultural interpretations of politics [, or] culture talk, [while] the chapters that follow explain how Islamist terror, a phenomenon hitherto marginal, came to occupy center stage in Islamist politics” (11).

In the first part of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, Mamdani argues that both culture talk, which “sees a clash of civilizations as the driving force behind global conflicts...and fundamentalism as a resistance to modernity,” and its critics, who “point to the cultural clash inside civilizations [and argue that fundamentalism] is actually a response to modernity” are flawed precisely because they “seek an explanation of political terrorism in culture, whether modern or premodern” (61). Instead, Mamdani seeks to challenge the “widely held presumption that...extremist religious tendencies can be equated with political terrorism” by illustrating how political terrorism was born of a specific political encounter: the Cold War. Thus part one is best understood as an introduction to the cultural theory of politics that Mamdani subsequently undermines in part two of his book.

Mamdani’s greatest contribution to part one is his comparative analysis of Christian fundamentalism and political Christianity in America with political Islam. His comparison provides his presumably largely American audience with a basis for understanding political manifestations of religion both domestically and abroad. Moreover, he deconstructs the terms used to describe political Islam—namely Islamic fundamentalism—employed by the American media to underscore diversity within political Islam.

The second part of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* is in essence a history of American foreign policy beginning with the late-Cold War period, defined by Mamdani as the period from the end of the American war in Vietnam to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. Through his account of American actions across the world—from Laos and Vietnam to Angola and Nicaragua—Mamdani illustrates how American foreign policy evolved as a result of “lessons learned” and various domestic pressures, the post-Vietnam anti-war movement in particular, leading eventually to the adoption of terrorism or “low-intensity conflict” to wage covert proxy wars against the Soviet Union. Of particular significance to this review is Mamdani’s discussion of Afghanistan in chapter three. According to Mamdani, the CIA, in its attempts to unite a billion Muslims worldwide in a crusade against the
Soviet Union on the soil of Afghanistan ultimately gave right-wing Islamism the “organization, the numbers, the skills, the reach...[,] the confidence [and the] coherent objective” to eventually pose a threat to the U.S. (129). Mamdani’s analysis of the Afghan, or rather American, jihad as one of many American foreign policy “adventures” abroad adds depth to the reader’s understanding of the conflict. Moreover, the implications of his argument that terrorism is a political phenomenon for the current American occupation of Afghanistan are clear: the overwhelming use of force to combat terrorism will not eradicate it; as long as the political goal for which terrorism is a means to an end exists, it will continue.

Like Mamdani, Gregory is concerned with the relationship between culture and power. Indeed, in the first part of his book, he addresses the way in which the “war on terror” was framed in cultural terms and how these were reminiscent of the colonial past: they created a dichotomous relationship between “us” and “them” or “civilization” and “barbarism,” ultimately suggesting that the United States was involved in a moral battle against pure evil. Whereas Mamdani is more concerned with offering an alternative explanation for 9/11 by undermining “culture talk,” Gregory focuses on how such “culture talk” was used to justify America’s “war on terror” and therefore, the pursuit of its own imperial goals. According to Gregory, colonialism continues to manifest itself in the present through the construction of imaginative geographies or “constructions that fold distance into difference through a series of spatializations” (17). Thus Gregory is chiefly concerned with the physical and corporeal manifestations of contemporary colonialism. He illustrates this “colonial present” by narrating “the war on terror as a series of spatial stories that take place in...[three] parts of the world: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq” (13). *The Colonial Present* therefore unifies three central narratives with a common theme: the championing of a “war on terror” to justify colonial occupation.

While each story focuses on a different country, they each follow a similar structure. Gregory provides the reader with a historical background in order to complement his subsequent discussion of how the “war on terror” played itself out within that country. With respect to Afghanistan, Gregory offers a historical account of the formation of the modern Afghan state, with special attention to America’s involvement in its domestic affairs from WWII until the rise of the Taliban. He then tracks forward to America’s invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11 in order to illustrate how the invasion of Afghanistan was but one part of a greater colonial project that sought to ensure American global hegemony. Gregory explains that it was necessary for America to identify al-Qaeda with Afghanistan “so that [Afghanistan] could become the object of a conventional military campaign (49-50).” Despite the fact that Afghanistan was a “failed state,” and therefore had questionable sovereignty to say the least, and al-Qaeda is an international network of loosely affiliated groups operating in over 40 countries, America’s invasion of Afghanistan was not a miscalculation. Rather, according to Gregory, the “territorialization” of Afghanistan provided Washington with a pretext for the subsequent invasion of Iraq and the extension of the American colonial apparatus (51).
For Gregory, the absence of traditional colonies does not imply the absence of colonialism. Rather, as he articulates through case studies of Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq, Washington and Tel Aviv have used “performances of space articulated through imaginative geographies” to distinguish between “us” and “them,” reducing the “other” to the status of homo sacer: he who occupies the space of the exception and therefore has no political voice, he whose death does not matter (249). The ultimate goal of The Colonial Present therefore, is to illustrate the colonial enterprise for which “the war on terror” is a vanguard. In doing so, Gregory exposes the violence that goes hand in hand with colonialism as it pertains to the occupations of Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq, revealing the brutality of occupation that a complacent, if not complicit, American media shielded from its public.

Together, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim and The Colonial Present offer a unique comparative perspective on the history of Afghanistan within the context of American foreign policy. Each book is successful in what it sets out to do: to contextualize the events of 9/11 in historical and political terms, rather than cultural ones, and challenge the official rhetoric of “the war on terror.” The Colonial Present in particular offers a novel and interesting perspective on the global war on terror through its thoughtful analysis of geography and space. Though The Colonial Present is much more abstract and theoretical than Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, both books are accessible to a general audience and do not require previous background knowledge. As a result, they provide the general American public with an antidote for the historical amnesia that plagues their society.