FICTIONS OF SOCIAL REPAIR:
CHRONICITY IN SIX SCENES

by

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ABSTRACT

This is a study on flourishing amidst the pahars (mountainscapes) of Northern Pakistan and Kashmir. It is on radical and incremental engagements through heartwork against the undoings of epistemic harms. It is an attempt to see and feel the multiply situated and unbounded labor, desires, and relationalities needed for some approximation of the social to allow life to flourish despite the violence it bestows. The research does not seek to sustain a singular narrative; its arguments are kaleidoscopic and elliptical. It weaves texture, color, pattern. It experiments with form and content to adequately accommodate complexity, non-linearity, ambiguity, and the openness of life. It is organized around the lives of non-normative subjects elaborated in six interconnected scenes. Their stories were gathered and nurtured during conversations around the fire and in the kitchen; while circulating in the landscape; cooking and eating together; being vulnerable, and “percolating” in “data.” True to form, each scene frames a compelling and urgent condition of life as shared by my research interlocutors. Read together or apart; the scenes offer plural readings of repair. The scenes are accompanied by poetic interludes which offer to take the reader’s pulse as modest expressions of accountability (and love). Together, they form the “fictions of social repair.”

The research explores chronicity; the convergence of multiple forms of violence in the body, sociality, and subjectivity. It is about bruising, blisters, and chafed thighs. It is on sweat, tears, and being out of breath. The study embraces analytical indeterminacy and inconsistency to understand the present as durative, the past as malleable, and the future as unstable. It encourages reparative reading and writing to glimpse life’s willfulness and
insistences. This is a work of restraint. It is about feeling, not just looking. It holds the reader and author accountable - to each other, to the text, and to research interlocutors.

These stories are burdensome and demanding. They do not provide instructions for landing or guidance on how they should be read. They are the work of wounds, heartbeats, and heartaches. They will break your heart and ask you to fall in love.
LAY SUMMARY

The study attempts to see and feel the “work” needed to maintain and extend life in the mountainscapes of Northern Pakistan and Kashmir. It presents heartfelt and heartfelt stories of marginal and marginalized subjects and how they render life hospitable despite multiple intersecting forms of violence. This includes the violence of natural disasters, conflict, colonial and military occupation, and other structural forces. The research examines the dual nature of the social, how it elaborates as well as constrains. It experiments with form and content to adequately accommodate life’s complexity, non-linearity, and ambiguity. The study relies on heartwork which combines fieldwork with homework. Heartwork encapsulates processes of data collection as well as their emotional entanglements. Supported by photographs and poetic expression, the dissertation encourages multiple readings of text and works against categorical thinking. It does not seek to provide definitions or easy solutions. These stories will break your heart.
PREFACE

This dissertation is the original intellectual property of the author, Omer Aijazi. But it is also the blood, sweat, and tears of my research assistants. Without their patience and dedication, this research would not have materialized. They are: Nusrat Jamal, Shahzad Aslam, Ambreen Khan, Mubashir Nawaz Khan, Muhammad Shoaib, Fawad Aslam, and Saeed Khan. I am also indebted to Aurangzeb, Shahzad Aslam, and Abdul Shakoor for their driving skills and assistance in navigating the mountainous region. Fieldwork was supported by two community organizations: Haashar Association (Northern Pakistan) and Sukhi Development Foundation (Kashmir). Amongst other things, they offered me guidance, logistical support, and protection.

Except where noted, photographs were taken by the author, research assistants, and research interlocutors. Their names are included alongside each photograph. I have obtained permission from my interlocutors to use their photographs in this dissertation. The author holds the copyrights for these images.

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Misstree and Himtu, and their various incarnations as hummingbirds, geese, and moths.
Jhumpa, the oddity.

And John, you know, for everything.
For Rakshanda and Mutahir
PROLOGUE

"Life should be presented as it is, not how it was, how it will be, or how it should be."
- Saadat Hasan Manto

This is a study on flourishing amidst the pahars of Northern Pakistan and Kashmir (Pakistan “administered”). It is on radical and incremental engagements through heartwork against the undoings, unravellings, and extrications of epistemic harms. It is an attempt to see

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1 Manto was a playwright, author, and literary critic from India/Pakistan known for his interest in “atrocious” truths. He is best known for his stories of betrayal (typically in intimate relationships) during the communal violence of Partition. Manto was harassed and undermined by both the Pakistani and Indian state which scrambled to ban and censor his writings.
and feel the multiply situated and unbounded labor, desires, and relationalities needed for some approximation of the social to allow life to flourish despite the violence it bestows. It weaves texture, color, pattern. The study does not seek to sustain a singular narrative; its arguments are adamantly plural, “kaleidoscopic,” and elliptical. It does not provide a singular place of landing nor guidance towards any one destination. It offers no easy solutions. It experiments with form and content to adequately reflect the complexity, non-linearity, and ambiguity which characterize the openness of life. In this way, it hopes to work against categorical thinking. This research is the work of wounds, heartbeats, and heartaches. It holds the reader and author accountable - to each other, to the text, and to research interlocutors. It does not provide instructions on how to read this text or arrive at conclusions. In these ways, the stories contained in this dissertation are burdensome and demanding. They will break your heart and ask you to fall in love.

The dissertation explores chronicity— the confluence of multiple forms of violence in the body, subjectivity, and sociality. I examine how chronicity unfolds in everyday life, is particularly situated, localized, and contextual, and how people make incremental and/or radical adjustments in relation to each other and their social worlds. In other words, the research explores the social labor needed to maintain and extend life despite continuous diminishment and world-annihilation. I term this work as social repair. I ask: How can we understand social repair in settings of chronicity, if we bring to the forefront the analytical and philological opportunity and risk-taking made possible by a genuine devotion to lived and felt experience? Therefore, the research is equally devoted to feeling as it is to looking and seeing, and approaches theory in a similar way. While this may appear to be an

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3 In the context of this work, multiple forms of violence include natural disasters, cross-border conflict, military and colonial occupation, state-making, and other structural forces.
exploration of coping, I am more devoted to flourishing - a state where survival is not the ultimate desire for life.

The research takes place in two “sparsely populated” and relatively “remote” Himalayan valleys: Neelum (Kashmir) and Siran (Northern Pakistan). The people of Northern Pakistan and Kashmir articulate place-based citizenships—pahari genres of life—that afford us important entry points for re-imagining these expansive pahars. While both locations are distinctly shaped by historical and ongoing processes of state-making, coloniality, erasure, and infringement, I approach them outside their geopolitical boundedness. I understand the pahars of Kashmir and Northern Pakistan as a conglomeration of lived landscapes and situated intimacies, stitched together by heterogeneous movements and flows. This is my attempt to circumvent the normative truths of the sovereign (the “adjudicator of knowledge”) as the only valid complement to life and politics. This in part, is also informed by the daily struggles of the people of Kashmir and Northern Pakistan for political self-designation, self-description, and subjectivity, and how they frustrate the very essence of a Pakistani citizenship.

My entry into these pahars was relatively uneventful. I slipped past the various security check points that dot the region without raising any considerable alarms. Since I “look” and “act” Pakistani, nor the border, provincial, or military police deemed my entry into either valley as suspicious. Most likely, they assumed I was a tourist. With the help of two community organizations who offered to provide me protection (should I ever need it) and logistical support, I eventually managed to hire a team of locally residing research assistants. Next, we secured a vehicle. This was an old beat-up jeep with no seatbelts which over time proved its reliability and worth. On our first day, in anticipation of fieldwork, we

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4 For a discussion on how Pakistan’s north is constructed as “remote” to justify various forms of conscription, see, Shafqat Hussain, Remoteness and Modernity (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015).
drove to the nearest Bata Shoes to purchase new hiking boots. Even the driver wanted new shoes even though he wasn’t going to hike. He felt that the numerous times he will be hitting the brakes at every bend of the pahari road, will surely grind down his slippers. On our second day, we decided to draw a list of “vulnerabilities” that we thought will be helpful in identifying potential participants. Back then, the “language of vulnerability” was the only tool that was present in my conceptual repertoire. I did not know how else to find research participants. We asked some people in the village to help us locate those who corresponded with the “vulnerabilities” on our list. This led to much debate and argument amongst the villagers who felt it was impossible to define people this way without full knowledge of the nature of their embeddedness within their families. They insisted on the relational and contextual nature of vulnerability. We tried to incorporate these considerations into our “list.” After much refinement, we managed to get some names. We decided to visit potential participants in their homes. This is how our journey in the pahars started.

These initial visits were the most awkward. This was mostly because I did not have the right language to communicate my intent, and potential participants had little interest in who I was, where I came from, and what I wanted to study. It took numerous cups of chai, hours of awkward small-talk, countless clumsy questions, and false starts before we reached some agreement on the importance of my research and their participation in it. Slowly, the awkwardness paved the way for more sustained and sincere engagements. As my circulation in the pahars increased, I went from being a stranger to a spectacle. I elaborate this transformation in later chapters.

My initial motivation was to study social repair and recovery with marginalized survivors after natural disasters. Both valleys were disrupted by a massive earthquake in 2005 and unprecedented monsoon floods in 2010. This decision was in part inspired by my experiences as a humanitarian, working in disaster recovery across Pakistan. I was also
dissatisfied with the schematic and definite ways contemporary disaster recovery literature approached disaster survivors. As my research began, I found that my interlocutors spoke very little about the disasters themselves. I also did not insist. Instead, they chose to share heartful stories such as those of betrayal, the *roub* (fear and hold) of the military, or just the sheer boredom of being young in these *pahars*. I attempted to listen quietly. Our conversations helped me consider that while the disasters were substantial events, they did not encapsulate the entirety of their experiences nor represented the full range of the violence at play. Eventually, I came to understand natural disasters as just another blow in a long durée of violations, diminishment, and dehumanization. I decided to focus my research on only those details of life which my interlocutors themselves deemed as urgent and compelling, and which they chose to share. Just like that, I threw out my interview questions and discarded my research proposal which I had spent the last six months perfecting. Surprisingly - or unsurprisingly, just a few weeks with my interlocutors overrode the many months I had spent reviewing literature and conceptualizing the breadth and scope of my project. Even my research questions became inadequate. I am grateful for the education imparted by my interlocutors. Noting the multiple forms of violence that foregrounds their stories, I shifted the focus of my study from disasters to chronicity.

Over repeated trips to the *pahars*, I have developed strange friendships and entanglements with my interlocutors. They hold the power to terrify and frustrate me, reduce me to tears, make me happy, confuse me, influence my thinking, and make me doubt my convictions and commitments. They demand my help, offer me assistance, and tolerate me in their homes and kitchens. At the same time, they consider it okay to ridicule my lack of physical fitness, fear of spiders, or the “uselessness” of my research in ways that are sufficiently pointed but hardly hurtful. In most cases, my research interlocutors have extended gestures of kindness and friendship as long as I am willing to learn their rules of
engagement. In this dissertation, to fully devote to their heartfulness, I turn to *heartbeats* (both theirs and mine) as “data” and site of engagement. I draw on multiple forms of carefully considered heartwork such as conversing around the fire and in the kitchen; circulating in the landscape, getting lost and incurring bodily injury; foraging the forests for food, cooking, and eating together; accepting each other’s vulnerabilities, imperfections, and fragility, and of course, “percolating” in “data.” I seek to show that heartwork is hard work.

My interlocutors are not securely placed within their families or communities. The protective guarantees of the state, community, or family rarely hold for them. For example, some of them have permanent disabilities (such as blindness), are very alone and elderly, or are “beyond” the age of marriage. In this way, my interlocutors are non-normative, queer, and inspire anxiety, simply because they do not circumscribe to the rules by which I/we/you have come to know the world. Their demands and expectations are *out-of-this-world* in terms of the sheer magnitude of the material and philological risks they are compelled to undertake. At the same time, I want to be careful to not cast my interlocutors as “exceptional,” to wrongfully imply that since they are *so far out there*, they are analytically unimportant and irrelevant to more centrally situated life projects. Instead, their hyper-vulnerabilities (exclusions on steroids) offer a unique view of sociality, one that remains unfazed by the readily available (and analytically insufficient) categories of family, community, or sovereignty. Their *karwi-batain* (atrocious truths) allow me to disentangle relations of power, decode social hierarchies, and notice discord and fragmentation in places which otherwise appear beautifully put-together. While their modes of inhabiting the world are practical, humble, materially grounded- they are exceptionally sophisticated in their theoretical offerings and raise urgent concerns which far exceed the tools I have as a researcher. Therefore, this study is about clearing obstacles (material, philological, or conceptual) to allow a grammar of life to emerge that can accommodate the willfulness of my interlocutors.
It is about learning to write with restraint as much it is about falling in love.

Historically, queer (the non-normative) has encompassed sexual practices and orientations that exceed permissible knowledge and sociality. Georgis writes: “Queer acts suspend knowable or teleological time and unhinge proper boundaries and habitual social relationalities.” Berlant reminds us that queer is “not a thing, it’s a relation.” Then, “might a queer aesthetic be understood as the reenactment of impossible desires and the impossible knowledge of relationality itself?” Queer demands “writing against finitude”- intentionally allowing ambiguity and fluidity within our literary, conceptual, and analytical genres to capture life and politics adequately. Georgis writes: “For me, the queerest texts are the ones that provide the conditions for engaging with subjectivity’s aberrant desires when it comes into conflict with the existing better story.” How to then conceptualize the relation between queer and community? Chatterji asks: “Is the price of belonging a complete surrender of individual subjectivity in the guise of a gift? Does the falling away from normality compel individuals to offer up their bodies and their stories to the State?”

The study works towards an analytical assemblage of social repair as opposed to a singular definition. It is organized mainly around six interconnected scenes. A scene is an insistence on finding relation and another way of connecting text: self with text, text with text. The scenes have dual purpose. Firstly, true to form, each scene frames an urgent and

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compelling condition of life as shared by my interlocutors. Secondly, when read in parallel, they offer a conceptual web that acknowledges plural and multiple readings of repair. At various points in the text, these two purposes may be seen as competing or complementing each other or both. This is a tension that runs throughout the text. The scenes are not evenly written, and each performs certain work. They do not need to be read in any particular order and are written as complete manuscripts. Their numbering does not suggest sequence but simply implies quantity. This is a modest effort on my part to challenge the temporality and sequence of evidence building and theory generation. This is an important caveat given chronicity does not have a singular timescape, nor is it composed of a continuously flowing current of successive and irreversible moments. The work of one scene may appear to contradict or challenge the work of another; these incongruences are purposefully maintained to reflect life’s openness and indeterminacy. The scenes are accompanied by poetic interludes which offer to take the reader’s pulse and are modest expressions of accountability to the reader. Together, the scenes and interludes form the “fictions of social repair.”

This dissertation is also written through photographs. These are taken by myself, as well as by my research interlocutors and research assistants. They provide a narrative arc of their own. Some of the images are titled for context and others are purposefully left untitled, so that their generative offerings are not undermined. The photographs contribute to the sensory dimensions of entanglement: “an intimate and proximal practice, a mimetic form of

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12 Many others have wondered about the potentiality of “fiction.” Visweswaran talks about the fictions of ethnography and the ethnography in fiction to unpack the partiality of knowledge and the violations involved in writing about the lives of others. Augé characterizes his book No Fixed Abode as “ethnofiction,” an intermingling of ethnographic research and fictional narrative. He writes about Henri, a retired tax inspector and aspiring writer in Paris who becomes homeless. He tells the readers that Henri is not a “real person” but a composite of “the thousand and one details observed in everyday life.” See, Kamala Visweswaran, Fictions of Feminist Ethnography (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) and Marc Augé, No Fixed Abode, trans. Chris Turner (Seagull Books, 2013), vii.
analysis;”¹³ the convergence of the hepatic and erotic;¹⁴ where analysis becomes “touching, not mastering.”¹⁵

Chronicity constitutes a particular site of learning; how people make life viable despite and within conditions of diminishment by drawing on their bodies, emotions, landscapes, and relationships as sites of knowledge. This implicit focus on learning is also helpful for considering the researcher who stumbles, falls, and makes mistakes during research. This is one reason why this dissertation was written in the Department of Educational Studies. I also chose the department to minimize disciplinary demands and expectations. Of course, over time, I have developed my own intellectual biases and inclinations, but these are ones that I can substantiate and call my own. In other words, the project draws upon multiple bodies, frames, and aesthetics of knowledge, to extend understandings of social repair and chronicity in ways that are defiant and irreverent, for they do not pay homage to any singular discipline or tradition.

There are many bodies in the room which inform this work despite not directly making their way into its pages. This includes my “research assistants” - a label that diminishes the true extent of their involvement. The project would not have taken its current direction without their insistence that we do not always need to create spaces of listening; but they often already exist amongst us, and sometimes all that is required is to learn their rules of engagement. My research assistants have made important contributions to this project and the multiple journeys it necessitated. This includes not just the “collection” of “data” but also reflecting upon it deeply to draw out its richness. In addition to accompanying me to sites of

¹⁴ Marks writes: “Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of a look, more inclined to move than to focus.” See, Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory* (Minnesota, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 8.
insight and wonder, they also sat beside me in stuck places where little made sense, and everything felt daunting. For now, I have only opted for their modest inclusion in these pages. I have attempted to invoke them at critical moments in the text as quiet notes on their presence and contributions. I am mindful of the need to think more carefully about how to better honor our allies within our writings. As a parting token of appreciation, I feel compelled to take their names: Nusrat Jamal, Shahzad Aslam, Ambreen Khan, Mubashir Nawaz Khan, Muhammad Shoaib, Fawad Aslam, and Saeed Khan. At the very least, I am indebted to them for placing their trust in me and extending an invitation into their communities. I am hopeful that the following pages will demonstrate that I did not take this privilege lightly.
Image 2. Gulab Jan (photograph by Saeed Khan)
Image 3. A shrine (photograph by the author)
Image 4. Mubashir and Zakir (photograph by the author)
Image 5. A wedding ceremony (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)
Image 7. A sign board in Muzaffarabad (capital of Pakistan “administered” Kashmir) lists the city of Srinagar (the summer capital of Indian “administered” Kashmir) (photograph by the author)
Image 8. Untitled (photograph by the author)
Remains of a monastery which was once a celebrated site of learning in the Himalayan region. These remains stand near the Line of Control which divides Kashmir between Pakistan and India (photograph by the author)
Image 10. Untitled (photograph by Rihanna Tahir)
Image 11. Untitled (photograph by the author)
Image 12. Naqsh Jan (photograph by Fawad Khan)
Image 13. Untitled (photograph by Rihanna Tahir)
Image 14. Untitled (photograph by the author)
Image 15. Qari Safeer (photograph by the author)
HEARTWORK

To understand how people flourish under chronicity demands a redrawing of the very parameters of research regarding how we approach “data” but also what constitutes our site of engagement, and how we choose to express our devotion and to whom. I turn towards the heart and ask what does an analysis from the heart offer? What if we see the world this way? I draw upon Islamic and feminist epistemologies to learn more about the heart. I focus on heartbeats to understand data as gift and heartwork as being integral to honoring entanglements with research interlocutors. I pause at the heart’s propensity for breakage and appreciate the productive and generative offerings of heartaches. While a lot of attention is directed at the author, should more be also demanded from the reader (the “adjudicator of knowledge”)?

Imam Ghazali (1058-1111), a renown Muslim theologian, jurist, and philosopher was returning home after spending several years seeking knowledge in Nishapur (a city in contemporary Iran) which at the time was an important hub for Islamic scholarship. He has with him in a neat bundle all his notes which he painstakingly maintained while attending various study circles and lectures. He joins a caravan to travel home. At some point in the journey, the convoy is attacked by a band of thieves who one by one strip each traveler of their valuables. When it is Imam Ghazali’s turn, he pleads: “Take all you want, but not my notes!” The robbers inquire what is so special about the bundle of notes? Imam Ghazali responds: “This is my knowledge, collected through years of study. If you take them, all my knowledge will be lost!” One of the bandits scoffs: “What kind of knowledge is this, which
can be stolen? If I burn them, what will be left behind?”16 “What you have told me fills me with great sorrow and regret. Is your knowledge on pieces of paper, when it should be in your heart?”17

The heart is a state of flux; unstable, precarious, transformative, and therefore political. The heart is also the first place of encounter with knowledge, the primary site where knowledge makes it mark.18 The adage “thinking from the heart” alludes that the heart possesses capacities that exceed its materiality. The heart is emotive, reactive, insightful: it can process knowledge but also reject it without giving it a chance. It can sink, rise to your throat, or it can ground. It symbolizes strength and conviction but is also extremely vulnerable; a source of inspiration and desire as well as a site of profound injury and great sensitivity. The heart is full of contradictions: love/hate, anger/calm, vengeance/forgiveness, jealousy/content— all seem to co-exist.

I ask what does an analysis from the heart offer? What if we see the world this way? I take inspiration from Ling’s assertion that “without a substantial overhaul in how we understand the world (epistemology), we can’t change what we think of it (ontology), or do about it (methods and methodology).”19 Similarly, de Sousa Santos reminds us of the systematic erasure of knowledges outside Western rationality and argues that pre-Westphalian histories, religions, spiritual traditions, philosophies, and worldviews should be considered in our scholarship to counter colonial “epistemicide.”20 I seek guidance from the heart for analytical emancipation.

In this chapter, I attempt three things. First, I trace the heart within Islamic and feminist traditions to see how the heart is understood in complementary ways, particularly as a site, source, receiver, repository, and adjudicator of knowledge. Secondly, I read the heart in parallel to the etymological root of “data” which is “an offering” (or “a gift”). Such a reading of “data” as rich and affective enables me to trace the wisdom within Imam Ghazali’s story, i.e. knowledge is that which resides in the heart, that which moves us, what is left behind after an encounter. Finally, I focus on another important quality of the heart: its propensity for injury. I draw attention to heartaches and heartbreaks as productive conditions, not lamentable states which must be wished away but necessary ontological positions needed to understand life in chronicity. I conclude that an investment of the heart warrants the redrawing of the very parameters of research, not only regarding how we approach data but also what constitutes our site of engagement, and how we choose to express our devotion and to whom.

Islamic ↔ Feminist Heart(s)

“Our heart is as big as our entanglements” - unknown

In Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Circular Ruins,” the protagonist tries to dream a man into existence. He dreams an audience of students and selects one to focus on but fails to generate a fully-formed individual. He then tries a new method: starting with the beating heart and working his way outwards. Only then he is successful.21

In this section, I explore some of the ways the heart is taken up in relation to knowledge within Islamic and feminist thought. I understand that there is no singular terrain of Islam or feminism and I do not want to give the impression of a false consensus within

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either body of knowledge. I simply turn to Islam and feminism as modes of engagement with
the world. I want to understand the heart in relation to knowledge in both traditions to then
return to my earlier assertion that very powerful research can be produced when one chooses
to honor the heart.

Why am I turning to Islam to look for language on the heart? For one, my research
interlocutors are Muslim and adhere to multiple forms of spiritual devotions which I
recognize as Islam. Secondly, I am also Muslim and so far, I have not been encouraged by
my academic training to welcome Islam as a body of knowledge into my writings. This then
becomes a doubly-decolonial move.22 Thirdly, much like in feminism, the heart occupies a
compelling place within Islam. This is a perfect political moment to signify the centrality of
the heart in both modes of engagement to suggest multiple proliferations and formations
within Islam(s) and feminism(s) and their overlaps. I appreciate the challenges in attempting
this given the tensions between feminism and Islam23 but I am also mindful of the common
grounds that exist.24

…. of Islamic heart(s)

The word qalb (heart) in Arabic25 can be translated as follows:
i) “turning something inside out, inverting and transforming”26

ii) “changing something from its existing state to another state”27

22 By decolonial, I mean a stance where Euro-American thought is not the only point of reference for
23 See, e.g., Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Muslim Women,” Critical Inquiry 32, no. 4 (2006); Shahrzad Mojab,
24 See, e.g., Margot Badran, “Islam’s Other Half,” The Guardian, November 2008,
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief2008/nov/09/islam-women; Margot Badran, “Between
Secular and Islamic Feminism’s,” Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies 1, no. 1 (2005); Asma Barlas,
“Engaging Islamic Feminism,” in Islamic Feminism, ed. Anitta Kynselehto (Tampere, Finland: Tampere
Peace Research Institute, 2008) and Nilüfer Gole, “Snapshots of Islamic Modernities.” Daedalus 129, no. 1
(2000).
25 Arabic is the language of the Quran but not the only language of Muslims. However, many classical texts on
Islam have been written in this language.
27 Imam Raghib al-Isfahani, Mufraidat Alfadh Al-‘Qur’an (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2002), 411.
iii) “turning and rotating an object [and] changing its direction”

iv) “turning something upside-down, inside out, left-to-right, right-to-left and front-to-back”

Prophet Mohammed is reported to have said: “The heart is like a feather in a desolate field, which the winds keep turning over and over.”

Faced with the overwhelmingly complex task of developing a comprehensive understanding of the heart within a living tradition of knowledge that dates back to the 7th century (Islam), this brief review is not intended to be exhaustive. Some might even consider my reading of this material as a “secular reading.” I find this term unhelpful and an example of colonial segregation which demands that the secular and religious must exist as dichotomies and that one cannot inform the other. Similarly, the term “secular Islam” is also problematic and understood unevenly. My premise is rather simple: Why cannot Muslims as well as those who do not identify spiritually with Islam, learn from Islam, the same way those within and outside the feminist movement are free to draw from it?

Islamic scholarship too has its internal struggles with categories and dichotomies. The heart is often considered to be the preoccupation of “Muslim Sufis” who seem to be at odds with Muslim jurists. A lively internal debate exists on which dimension of Islam should be given primacy: spirituality (which resides in the heart) or ritual, and whether the two can

even be separated.\textsuperscript{33} The heart in Islamic epistemology is understood as the mirror on which the meanings of the unseen are reflected and on which wisdom descends.\textsuperscript{34} The heart is the “sum of all human potential,”\textsuperscript{35} a person’s “inner world,”\textsuperscript{36} a “site of knowing and perception.”\textsuperscript{37} In many interpretations of Islam, there is a hierarchy of knowledge. The ultimate form of knowledge is considered to be that which leads to the recognition of Allah (a singular God), so the heart then becomes the place wherein resides the “potential of profound awareness and understanding of God.”\textsuperscript{38} There are diverging views on what this means, and many have understood all forms of knowledge as leading to Allah, particularly those knowledges which can be mobilized for some vision of social justice.\textsuperscript{39}

Seker traces the multiple ways the heart is understood within Islamic epistemology and scholarship.\textsuperscript{40} In his reading of the landscape, the heart is a shelter, vehicle, and source for knowledge; a site of contemplation and remembrance, insight and perception, understanding and discernment. According to Seker, the inability to use the heart’s innate faculty of insight and perception is synonymous with the inability to reason. He links the heart’s capacity to acquire and produce knowledge with action. Nasr argues against the need to separate cognition from emotion and understands perception, comprehension, and understanding as essential dimensions of the heart.\textsuperscript{41} Imam Ghazali takes this even further

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Kabir Helminski, \textit{The Knowing Heart} (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), 11.
\item Mehmet Tayoz Seker, \textit{A Map of the Divine Subtle Faculty} (New Jersey: Tughra, 2013).
\end{thebibliography}
and understands human-beings as being entirely composed of the heart. For Imam Ghazali, a person is as human as their heart.

.... of feminist heart(s)

I am drawn to feminism because of its acknowledgement of heartwork. In her provocative paper “Gut Feminism,” Wilson points towards a feminism that thinks innovatively and organically. She alerts us to the neurological system that extends well beyond the brain such as in the gut and asserts that the gut is generative (as is “thinking from the gut”). Pollock makes a similar case for the heart (and “thinking from the heart”). She writes: “The domain of the heart is thus much larger than that instantly recognizable organ: the circulatory system makes the heart's work necessarily dispersed.”

Earlier feminist debates contest why conceptual and scientific thinking (thinking with the brain) is considered a masculine project, whereas thinking emotively (thinking from the heart) is labelled as feminine. They argue that such binaries are based on the premise that the brain is able to maintain disconnections from the wider demands on the subject which the heart cannot. Pollock calls such an intuitive attention to one’s self and others – the mundane knowledge gleaned from everyday life -as knowledge of “heartbeats.” She writes: “Because we can feel our own heartbeat, and that of others with whom we are intimate, the heartbeat has been and will remain powerful as a way for lay people to answer the question of who is alive.”

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46 Pollock, “Heart Feminism,” 3.
An investment in heartbeats is a feminist project requiring dedication, it is a careful orientation of work.\(^48\) A devotion to heartbeats means also directing attention to those experiences that typically remain outside analytical purview. This can be both burdensome and exhausting. The “hydraulic heart”\(^49\) may be loaded with all sorts of pressures and injustices which demands a far more thoughtful and radical engagement with the world.\(^50\) The heart is obligated to respond to all these wide-intersecting demands; it is its job to respond to load. Pollock explains that heart failure is not a result of any intrinsic injury of the heart but rather from the excessive burden placed by the body (everything around it).\(^51\) She asks: “What if the heart and its failure can become ways of thinking about objects in the world? What does a model of an object that is intrinsically burdened and thus doomed do…… for feminist theory?”\(^52\)

In her book “Speaking from the Heart,” Manning argues that caring and personal experience provides a far more rewarding ethical life then principle-based ethics.\(^53\) Feminist approaches have long argued that feminist epistemology should be grounded in the heart, situated in activism and caring labor.\(^54\) Emotion is considered as being central and integral to the construction of knowledge\(^55\) and learning.\(^56\) The heart is considered to be an important

\(^{48}\) Also see, Go’s work on “pulse-taking” as a feminist engagement: Chaya Ocampo Go, “Kababayen-an Han Karak-an” (MA diss., University of British Columbia, 2016).

\(^{49}\) Pollock, “Heart Feminism,” 12.


\(^{51}\) Pollock, “Heart Feminism.”

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 11.


receiver of knowledge invested in the creation of a more “accurate, complex, multi-
dimensioned, truthful perception of the world.”

The Quran makes numerous references to the “sealed heart,” a condition of attrition which prevents the recognition of truth and knowledge. It further alludes that the heart must also be adequately cultivated and nurtured for it to be able to honor knowledge. In Islamic traditions, this cultivation is grounded specifically within various forms of piety such as remembering Allah, speaking the truth, acting justly, playing with one’s children, being kind, remembering death, and being hopeful. Some of these discussions are not so different from discussions on cultivating a feminist heart, for example through playfulness, doing the “right” thing, searching for authenticity, hope, and love.

Robots

A pizzeria in the bustling Pakistani city of Multan uses a robot to serve pizza to customers. The restaurant has made headlines in local newspapers and on television and people come from near and far to see the robot in action. To be more specific, the robot is a “waitress,” the restaurant owner commented: “The female body shape is helping the machine to maintain the weight it is carrying. We have put a scarf around her neck to make clear that it is a female robot.”


The robotic waitress can only deliver food to a table. It cannot take orders or interact with customers: greet them, ask about their day, recommend a menu item, smile, pull a baby’s cheek, extend any other gesture of kindness, or develop a relationship. Moreover, the robot does not even have a name. In other words, the robot cannot attune to heartbeats.

Contrast the pizzeria robot -a robot without a heart- with Data from Star Trek who is all heart. According to his Wikipedia page:
Data is an artificial intelligence and synthetic life form. Data is a self-aware, sapient, sentient, and anatomically fully functional android who serves as the second officer and chief operations officer aboard the Federation starships USS Enterprise-D and USS Enterprise-E. His positronic brain allows him impressive computational capabilities. Data experienced ongoing difficulties during the early years of his life with understanding various aspects of human behavior and was unable to feel emotion or understand certain human idiosyncrasies, inspiring him to strive for his own humanity. This goal eventually led to the addition of an "emotion chip"...Although Data's endeavor to increase his humanity and desire for human emotional experience is a significant plot point (and source of humor) throughout the series, he consistently shows a nuanced sense of wisdom, sensitivity, and curiosity, garnering immense respect from his peers and colleagues.63

These robots as metaphors, in their heartlessness and heartfulness, allude to the centrality of the heart in tapping into human idiosyncrasies, reciprocating relationality, and of course attuning to heartbeats.

**Data as Gift**

My work seeks to understand chronicity and social repair as gleaned from the lived and felt experiences of my research interlocutors in Northern Pakistan and Kashmir. During “fieldwork,” I made provisions to compensate my research interlocutors for their time by paying them a stipend. Most participants accepted these payments—some with reservation,

some with a feigned smile, some with a frown. One day, one of my interlocutors could not contain himself. He burst out angrily:

You keep on saying that you are giving me this money in exchange for the time I have spent with you. The truth is, this isn’t an equal exchange [my time is far more valuable than your monetary compensation]. I am making room for you in my life, I am inviting you into my home, I am giving you my time, take it as a gift, not as some object of transaction [and exchange].”

The etymological root of data is to “give,” something that is given—perhaps it can be understood as a gift. 64 What then does it then mean to understand data as a gift? I respond to this question in two ways, first by trying to understand a gift as an invitation towards reciprocity and second by focusing on its affective dimensions.

Testart argues that there are distinctions between an “exchange” and “gift.” 65 According to him, a gift does not demand reciprocity, it is something that is given without the expectations of reciprocity. He offers a definition of a gift: “It is a transfer which implies the renunciation of any right over this good as well as of any right that might arise from this transfer, in particular, that of requiring anything by way of counterpart; and that is not itself required.” 66 Tesrart’s definition implies an asymmetrical form of giving with no strings attached, no honor to uphold, no limits to usage. It is dangerous to equate data with such an understanding of a gift, without worrying about its exploitation and about epistemic violence.

66 Ibid., 260, (emphasis mine).
But a gift is not a self-contained act,\textsuperscript{57} it opens up the possibilities and likelihood of reciprocity, it extends an invitation to one’s world. In Islamic epistemology, a gift requires reciprocity but there are no expectations of equivalence. For example, according to Prophet Mohammed one is obliged to return a gift (or a favor) in ways that exceed it or match it or in ways in which it does not. If one does not have the material resources to repay a gift, then one is encouraged to pray for the gift-giver and extend well-wishes (make added room in the heart).\textsuperscript{68} In fact, there is a distinction between charity and gift. Ibn Taymiyah (a Muslim theologian alive between 1263-1328) stated that \textit{Sadaqah} (charity) is that which is given for the sake of Allah as an act of worship, without intending to give it to a specific person and without seeking anything in return. Rather Sadaqah is given for charitable causes, such as to the needy. A gift is given \textit{with the intention of honoring a specific person, either because the recipient is your friend whom you love, or because you want something in return}.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
Vaughan understands reciprocity in gift-giving outside of a contractual exchange-based interaction. Vaughan proposes word-gifts, as tools of creating convivial experiences that transcend the dichotomy between the social and the material. She writes: "It is useful also to consider the materiality of words as somewhere between goods and services, because the gifts on the nonverbal plane which they re-present, may also be of varying degrees of materiality." She touches upon the idea of "evil gifts" which may result in an adverse or antagonistic relationship. Clark notes that gifting is often considered in a finite economic system in which the objects in circulation are limited and stoic. In such a "parsimonious relation to the world," the gift can only be a calculated exchange in to maximize benefit.

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70 Genevieve Vaughan, For-Giving (Austin: Plain View Press, 1997).
71 Ibid., 18.
73 Clark, “Generosity,” 93.
Lingis argues that a gift can only be a gift if there is “an element of impetuosity, recklessness in it.”\textsuperscript{74} 

Diprose approaches gift-giving as an openness to others that exceeds the bounds of an exchange-based contract.\textsuperscript{75} She reminds us that everyday life is contingent on opening up to others. She believes that the gift can never remain unrecognized/unnoticed on a corporeal level. She presents the idea of “intercorporeal generosity” which creates politically generative relationalities where the self is given to others.\textsuperscript{76} In her reasoning, while a gift may or may not be material, resultant productions of identities, socialities, and relationship are. And therefore, gifts are materially and affectively generative producing unknowable and immeasurable outcomes, a radical opening up of unknowable events, a debt that a body owes to another.\textsuperscript{77} 

Young states that the only proper response to a gift is acceptance.\textsuperscript{78} She argues that the relations of offering and acceptance embedded in a gift are intrinsically asymmetrical. She writes: “I don’t return, I accept. If later I give you a gift, it is a new offering, with its own asymmetry.”\textsuperscript{79} The asymmetry in reciprocity is further compounded by time which separates each relation of giving and receiving. She believes that while an exchange of gift reaffirms a reciprocity, “there is no measure of equivalence,” each gesture is qualitative unique.\textsuperscript{80} She explains:

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 90.  
\textsuperscript{78} Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity,” \textit{Constellations} 3, no. 3 (1997).  
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 356.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
The temporal interval makes each act of giving, moreover, an opening rather than
the closing of a deal. The equality that our relation of giving creates between us is
produced by the substantive and temporal difference which I here call asymmetry.\textsuperscript{81}

A gift can make us joyous, happy, or even sad (if it is a terrible or nostalgic gift). It
surely has affective properties. It is “something” whose properties exceed what it is (its
intrinsic value) because of what it contributes as a result of an asymmetrical exchange
between people. The gift of data is \textit{that which moves us}, the “residue of an encounter.”\textsuperscript{82}

Data is our heartbeats as well as those of others. Data is small-talk.\textsuperscript{83} Data is affective
entanglement that burdens, weighs us down, or conversely re-charges and re-invigorates. If
we return to Imam Ghazali’s story in which a robber ridicules him for thinking his knowledge
is contained in his papers rather than his heart, \textit{than data too is what resides in the heart, not
just what is in our notebooks, computers, and cameras.}

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Lisa Baraitser, “Make Things Public.” \textit{Feminist Review} 93, no. 1 (2009), 16.
\textsuperscript{83} Karan Mahajan, “American Small Talk,” \textit{The New Yorker}, July 2016,
Heartwork

“I am a violent being, full of fiery storms and other catastrophic phenomena. And yet I can’t do more than begin this and begin again because I have to eat myself, as if my body is food, in order to write.” – Kathy Acker

When I returned home from fieldwork, I could not bring myself to open my suitcase full of “data.” What a terrifying gift! It took me another six months to get to it. When I finally did develop the courage to pull out my notebooks, audio recorders, cameras, and transcripts, I decided to spend the next several months meticulously organizing the material. I used colored coded binders, labels, tabs - whatever would help me achieve some order.

Image 20. Some of my "data." There are perhaps not as profound as Imam Ghazali’s bundle of notes (photograph by the author)

Without looking too much as the contents of my suitcase, I kept a journal to record what I remembered and felt from engagements with my research interlocutors. (Interestingly these vivid journals along with the ones that I maintained during fieldwork ended up as constituting much of my “empirical data” in my writing). For me, this was important preparation to work with the data, a journey in its own self. Again, I am not talking about coding and analysis but developing the vocabulary, courage, and the affective tools to thoughtfully engage with the material. This percolation in data, is a kind of work where stories are circulated and re-circulated in one’s heart to work through and achieve a triangulation of the body, mind, and spirit.85 These are necessary gestures of waiting to allow “the knowledge of the other to mark me [us].”86

Soon the university started chasing me for progress reports. What shall I write to them?, I thought. That for the last year I have been “percolating in data”? How can I demonstrate “thinking” as progress? In an interview, Margarethe von Trotta the director of the biopic on Hanna Arendt admits the challenges of depicting “thinking” on camera which is both an intense emotional investment and also an exhausting one.87 In the film thinking takes the visual form of smoking cigarettes, lying down in a day bed, and staring at the ceiling.88 I also considered posing in photographs smoking cigarettes, lying down in a day bed, and staring at the ceiling- and submitting them to the university clerk.

While I am no Hannah Arendt nor am I in a film, I do believe there is a lack of discussion on thinking and percolating, how it is an important yet invisible component of the

research process. Much like working with your hands, such as knitting and weaving, thinking too is a material and affective, a form of praxis where ideas are weaved into the fabric of human existence.\(^9\) I consider thinking/percolating/brooding important genres of heartwork.

Returning to my dilemma: *How to demonstrate progress to the university?* At that point in time, it seemed reasonable to see a counsellor to get some “legitimate paperwork.” I want to share an excerpt of my conversation with the counsellor (which I quickly jotted down from memory in my journal):

Counsellor (C): You need to stop stealing from the pain of others. By feeling their pain, you are diminishing their right/ability to claim their pain and express it.

Omer (O): How can anyone stop feeling the pain of others?

C: Every time you step out into the world, imagine a bubble around you, or imagine yourself wrapped in bubble wrap, separate yourself. To continue doing your work, you need to distance yourself from the pain of your clients/participants. Imagine you are surrounded by a protective shield.

O: But that is the opposite of a feminist engagement and the etiquettes of being a Muslim, how can I write about my interlocutors without understanding the corporeal, spiritual, and affective dimensions of the harms and exclusions they face?

C: But by taking on their pain, you are taking away something from them, it hampers their ability to fully experience that pain.

O: Wait, isn’t that a good thing?

C: No! If you take on the pain of others, you take away from their experience, it taints your ability to see them and listen.

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O: What kind of seeing and listening is this? Which won’t haunt me, interrupt my sleep, discombobulate?

C: You should understand that by allowing people to speak and voice their experiences to you, you are providing incredible therapeutic possibilities for them.

O: Then I am sure I must have changed many lives.

C: My advice to you, is to develop strategies to minimize your emotional investment. You need to clinically remove yourself, so you can see impartially.

O: But listening is an embodied experience. It is meant to be exhausting and depleting. That is why it prompts you to work. Otherwise, it isn’t listening is it? [to heartbeats]

With the help of the above excerpt, I want to make two interventions: 1) Heartwork is not always beautiful, pleasing, and pleasant. You might end up at the shrink’s office. 2) There is opposition to heartwork, and the opposition can be defeating.

**Heartwork is Hard Work**

“You need to do the digging. Learn other languages. Do more research. Read. Keep doing the work that will take you back to see where this will lead you. No one likes to speak like this. Just keep reading and then tell them everything.” - Gina Athena Ulysse

When Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, author, and cultural critic Teju Cole offered a provocation on his public Facebook page:

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There is growing literature on the experiences of researchers who work in uncomfortable settings such as war and disasters. The focus in much of these writings is on self-care and “managing danger,” where the dangers are typically represented as trauma or

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91 Taken from Teju Cole’s public Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/Teju-Cole-200401352198/](https://www.facebook.com/Teju-Cole-200401352198/).
vicarious traumatization,\textsuperscript{94} and occasionally as gender/sexual violence directed at the researcher.\textsuperscript{95} While narratives of trauma and PTSD remain useful in their therapeutic offerings, they also erase the other kinds of departures that arise through difficult encounters in the field; be it ontological, spiritual, or political. Some have even argued that the focus on self-care is part and parcel of the neoliberal turn\textsuperscript{96} which seeks to localize the material and affective inequities and injustices of our times to our bodies and minds.\textsuperscript{97}

I feel uneasy with the singular emphasis on self-care for researchers who work in difficult settings. Why is there an expectation that the study of chronicity should be safe? Why is the researcher expected to walk out of the experience, only slightly unhinged, to be put back together by therapeutic interventions? Instead of just focusing on burnout, healing, trauma, it is also important to focus on heartache as a productive condition. This makes even more sense if we continue with the premise that data is a gift, an offering of corporeal generosity, that which moves us. The researcher in this configuration is someone who listens and receives deeply, someone who is attentive to heartbeats. In my opinion, the focus of the researcher is then not to merely create spaces of listening but bring into purview those spaces that already exist and learn their rules of engagement. Listening and receiving deeply are one such rules of engagement. \textit{Why dampen the researcher’s most significant strength?}

I consider listening deeply an embodied investment (counter to my counsellor), as heartwork which requires the removal of all protective shields, bubbles, or bubble wraps. It is a state of considered vulnerability, a falling apart, the incommensurability of politics, a


\textsuperscript{97} Luigi Esposito and Fernando M. Perez, “Neoliberalism,” \textit{Humanity & Society} 38, no. 4 (2014).
breakdown of conviction, certainty, and theory. Discomfort and unease (as a result of encounters in the “field”) are productive states which if carefully protected can develop a certain thoughtfulness and dedication within one’s engagement with the world.\textsuperscript{98} Allowing oneself to be impacted (both effected and affected) by the gifts of data is a form of devotion towards research interlocutors. This allows for truer conceptual and written forms that better accommodate the willfulness and genres of life research interlocutors suggest, regardless of how this enhances or disrupts existing discourse. In my opinion, such a form of solidarity allows for more opportunity to minimize the epistemic harms perpetuated by research and to intercept lived and felt experience in ways that are generative, indefinite, and plural.

Researching within communities is inherently a disruptive process, the dangers are immense, and the discomfort is expected to be crippling and enabling- why should it be otherwise? Sometimes this will prevent us from working within communities that we are not a part of or have very little stake in, other times it will encourage us to make our interventions even bolder. There is no easy answer, a clear this or that. The important thing is to allow the data to work on the heart: let it take you to places, sit with you, lead your thoughts and writings, condition your engagement with the world - a full-on obsession. This “labor”\textsuperscript{99} is in itself critical methodology.\textsuperscript{100}

In her book \textit{Fictions of Feminist Ethnography}, Visweswaran writes that by openly confronting failure, feminist ethnography discovers both limits and possibilities.\textsuperscript{101} She argues that while full comprehension and representation are impossible, ethnographic failure

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{101} Kamala Visweswaran, \textit{Fictions of Feminist Ethnography} (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
\end{thebibliography}
can be understood as a “means of pointing up the difficulties in our own epistemological assumptions and representational strategies.” Behar argues that only by sharing emotions and developing deep entanglements can the researcher enter the radical space needed for such unlearning and learning. Cvetkovich and Dahl suggest vulnerability opens one up for change since to be vulnerable is also to be potentially transgressive. This way, vulnerability can be understood as an ontological status, a political condition, and a particular kind of bodily and intellectual relation to the world. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable is heartwork.

What is then the “correct” way of doing heartwork? What are the methods? Instead of a slavish devotion to any one method, Das advocates for an ethical stance of receptivity (how we sense, perceive, and acknowledge the Other) which cannot be reduced to any singular methodological framework. Lather has called for “situated methodologies,” to formulate our practice from the specificities of a situation which cannot be prescribed ahead of time but have to be negotiated in real time. The challenge then is to figure out how best we can express our devotion to our research interlocutors. The lack of a guidebook, manual, or pathway does not make this easy.

Discomfort, vulnerability, ontological precarity- these are not strictly intellectual choices. These are embodied forms of unease and awkwardness, such as when one attempts to use un-waxed floss: the thread gets stuck between your teeth, you pull, but it is difficult to

102 Ibid., 98.
107 Das, Life.
dislodge- your gums start to bleed, the floss disintegrates resulting in a strange, bloody mess.

Or similar to “pilling”¹⁰ your sick cat. What forms of vulnerable writing can emerge from such modes of being? Page believes vulnerable writing is not only that which reflects how the researcher is impacted during research but also reveals the fragility of knowledge assembly- as a form of receptivity and wounding.¹¹¹ She writes:

A vulnerable method doesn’t attempt to resolve discomfort immediately through problem-solving, or by forms of sense-making that utilize particular relational elements of cause and effect. Instead, what is at the heart of vulnerable methods and vulnerable writing are ongoing questions about what unsettles, about relations to the unfamiliar and strange, and about the erasure of the complexities of subjectivity when individuals and bodies and their actions don’t fit or adhere to coherent themes of knowledge. This unsettled uncertainty of the research process, rather than foreclosing on further understandings, provides space for new forms of unknowing and continued attempts at understanding the stories of others.¹¹²

_Vulnerable writing is heartwork._

**What If We Let Those Awful Thoughts Persist?**

In her book “Living a Feminist Life,” Ahmed describes the process of becoming a feminist a bumpy one: “You bump into a world as you begin to realize that it doesn’t accommodate you.”¹¹³ Ahmed urges us to believe that feminism is not a sudden escape from

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¹⁰ See this video of how to “pill” your cat: Dechra Academy, “How to Pill a Cat,” October 2010, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWpsTh6ddk&t=7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWpsTh6ddk&t=7s).
¹¹² Ibid., 28.
structures of domination, but a lifelong project of chipping away at those very regimes—a state of constant dissatisfaction and disapproval—“the bringer of discord to family dinners and professional meetings alike.”114 Heartwork is an integral component of this journey, whether one chooses to sum it up as feminism or being Muslim or something else. This is work which extends far beyond the immediacy of the felt encounter.115 Concerning academic writing, this may mean writing slowly and thoughtfully and writing with restraint. Page asks: “What are the consequences of acknowledging forms of vulnerable wounding in research?”116 Behar adds: “To write vulnerably is to open a Pandora’s box. Who can say what will come out?”117

Baba, my host in Kashmir, died last year from a head injury but also from a broken heart (from the death of his favorite son). Once as I was leaving his village, he reminded me: “Don’t just remember us on paper.” Initially, I thought he was referring to only material gains, that if there are any funds generated from my work, I must be sure to channel them back into his village. However, now I wonder whether he also meant to allow the experiences I had with him, sit with me in far richer ways. What if baba was asking me to hold onto his words as much and as far as I can?

I find it comforting to understand baba’s words as gifts to render me more thoughtful as I attempt to chip away at the kind of structures (material or epistemic) that seek to diminish subjects such as baba himself. This involves developing new language and vocabulary to accommodate multiple genres of life, but also the realization of my own limits. I am trying to articulate an investment, devotion, and dedication that far exceeds the sum of

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117 Behar, Vulnerable Observer, 19.
my relationships with my interlocutors. The stakes are very high, and there is urgent need to be “unscrupulously vigilant.”118

The Ethics of Heartwork

An important question arising from the discussion on heartwork is that of ethics. I am not referring to ethics in an institutional regulatory way, but as an engagement with the ethical complexities of heartwork. In heartwork, as I have described it, there really are no separations between “fieldwork” and “homework,” the researcher is continually placed in a configuration of learning. In this way, everyone and everything becomes the “subject of research.” For example, conversations with one’s counsellor, friends, colleagues, “off the book” engagements with interlocutors, are all places of insight for the researcher, sites of paying attention to heartbeats. Since there are no clear boundaries between what constitutes the “field,” what should be the rules that govern “data collection,” and are any rules needed? Similarly, should accountability to the reader be also considered an important component of the ethical framework of heartwork?

This Mess of Heartaches

“I hold in my hand a bird, tell me it is dead or alive?”
"I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." -Toni Morrison's Noble Prize speech119

Narayan has important advice: “Forgive yourself in advance, knowing that whatever you write will never be complete of perfect.” Berlant adds:

When you plan social change, you have to imagine the world that you could promise, the world that could be seductive, the world you could induce people to want to leap into. But leaps are awkward, they’re not actually that beautiful. When you land you’re probably going to fall or hurt your ankle or hit someone.

My research interlocutors have insisted on kinds of telling that are counter-intuitive to what I have been taught to notice - pointing at directions, things, events for which I have no tools. This led to a rather lengthy period of adjustment, where my ethnographic intrusions took a variety of shapes and forms to facilitate the kinds of telling my research interlocutors insisted upon. This “adjustment process,” has resulted in much heartbreak, confusion, loss of direction, self-doubt, and humility.

Stories never leave, they are meant to unsettle. Their very stickiness is homework and heartwork. The process of knowledge generation is as important as the knowledge to be created. While the urgency and stakes of understanding violence and marginality are high, the accountability is low. I am not convinced whether faulty knowledges emanating from spaces of disruption which fragment, undermine, instrumentalize, parse, and diffuse subjects of violence are morally, ethically, or instrumentally any better than the very violence they seek to render visible. Epistemic violence inflicted in the pursuance of justice rapidly translates into a “restriction of possibilities of existence.”

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In a way, the writing endeavor is about accountability to research interlocutors and I am less concerned about the brilliance of my words but more about their integrity—whether they measure up to the substance and contexts in which they were shared. Heartwork is allowing yourself to become decentered by heartbeats. It includes never fully coming to terms with the betrayals implicit in working with people but yet learning to live with that ontological insecurity. This discomfort, learning to work without guarantees, an “un-coercive re-arrangement of desires”123 must be willed and protected.

During the earlier days of my PhD, when I was struggling to put together a reading list for my comprehensive examinations, my supervisor suggested: “Don’t undermine your intuition in deciding what ‘key texts’ you need to read.” Heartwork includes the cultivation of an intuition which allows you to tune-into your interlocutors to appreciate the bigger imaginations and “key texts” they invoke with their stories. This simultaneously opens up many ways to understand feminism and being Muslim, as generative sites of experimentation, a playground of sorts, and not as fragile assemblages of knowledge which need to be protected.124 At the same time given the histories of erasure and co-option, I can also understand those who feel the need to safeguard vigilantly and will accept any necessary blows and criticism with kindness.

A lot of pressure (and rightfully so) is placed on the author, but what about the reader (the “adjudicator of knowledge”)? Should more also be demanded from the reader? Like the author, the reader may or may not pose significant obstacles to the flourishing of the subject of research. The reader may accept the gifts of heartwork or they might reject it. Upon receiving the gifts of heartwork, they may or may not say: But what should I do with this

mess of heartaches? By posing this question, the reader bounces the responsibility of receiving deeply back to the author, who is now cornered to clearly s-p-e-l-l o-u-t the contributions of heartwork, so they can be consumed in a rote like fashion without frustration, injury, and wounding.

How to understand the inertia which prevents a sincere engagement with the “mess of heartaches”? My initial impulse is to label this unwillingness as “laziness,” in the sense that we are hesitant to push our paradigms of being in the world further and farther because it involves pushing against and receiving pushback (both of which are feminist as well as Muslim processes). Heartwork is inconvenient, gritty, and uncomfortable, it is work on top of work. But I am also mindful of the ways modernity, colonialism, and patriarchy have programmed us to privilege certain knowledge formations at the expense of all others. Fear is another impediment; the unsafety of tracing constellations and looking elsewhere, and the unpredictability and danger this brings. Heartwork affords possibilities of doing research in ways that do not seek to conform to the expectations of the reader (or any adjudicator of knowledge). It provides the courage to fully devote to one’s interlocutors even if it is to the detriment of the reader and the author. As Tony Morrison suggests: The bird is in your hands (we have to figure out how to be in this world, what to do with this mess of heartaches - that is on us).

126 By “devotion to my interlocutors,” I mean capturing their stories in their contradiction, circularity, indeterminacy, inconsistency, incoherence, and heartfulness. And not worrying too much about where all this will lead us. And not worrying too much if this dedication will assist or hinder the writer’s projects and the reader’s projects. This is what I mean, when I say: “even if it is to the detriment of the reader and the writer.”
Some Further Reflections on the Reader

I do not mean to chastise the reader or bully them into submission. How can one do that anyways, when the reader holds continual power over the author? The author can only make an offering in the form of text, the reader has the power of choice: they may reject the text, accept it, critique it, or worse- ignore it. Or perhaps a better way to imagine this relationship is that of friction, the reader and author exist in encounter with one other, and the text is their battleground (or chai stall or living room). Their relationship can be antagonistic, troubled, or perhaps that of friendship, caring, and accommodation.

However, my concerns are three-fold: 1) While there is some language on how to hold the author accountable to their text, how can we also hold the reader accountable to the text? 2) How can we hold them (author and reader, both adjudicators of knowledge) accountable to each other? And, 3) Why are both forms of accountability necessary, particularly in relation to heartwork and the minimization of epistemic harms?

Heartwork is ultimately about accountability; the author to the text and to interlocutors, the reader to the text and to interlocutors, and author and reader to each other. My intention behind invoking the reader is to draw attention to each of these accountabilities and develop further language on them. I should also point out that both the author and reader have their offerings, biases, and limitations, and neither is consistently righteous despite having moral evidence. Heartwork provides the resources to also love your reader. 127

A Brief Note on Sequence

The following scenes can be read in any order, and while they are interdependent in the sense that together they should help us move towards our destination(s), they do not rely

127 Throughout the text, I periodically check in with the reader and offer to take their pulse via poetic interludes. This is my modest attempt at being accountable to the reader and loving them.
on each other. They are fairly self-contained but receptive to interlinkages. Earlier, I wrote that the numbering of the *scenes* does not suggest chronology but simply implies quantity, yet I have numbered them sequentially (in English) but out of sequence (in Urdu). These inconsistencies in form are also modest attempts to write against the progression of evidence building and theory generation, and to elaborate interconnection and interdependence in ways that are outside of the expectations of linearity and coherence.

Of course, this is an impossible task, given that this is a text bound together as a book, or an electronic file, where one chapter follows the next. Thus, despite my (imperfect) refusals of linearity and consistency, to function within these constraints, *some decisions* were made in their placement.

How to acknowledge *my hand* in these arrangements which are both purposeful and purposeless? Well, I do not have a whole lot of profound things to say regarding how I have organized these *scenes*, on their sequence. But perhaps in this lack of profundity, lies *some* profundity?

In other words, why was *scene one* numbered as “one” and *scene two* as “two?” I did not take a consistent approach. For example, I placed *scene six* at the "end" because that was the first chapter I wrote. I thought instead of showing a progression of ideas and growing sophistication of writing style which comes with practice, it might be revealing to do the opposite, share what you wrote first - last.

I chose to place *scene one* in the first slot because it is on landscape and the rest of the *scenes* are on my interlocutors, even though landscape is also an important interlocutor. But the opening *scene* only focusses on one of my field sites (Neelum, and not Siran), rendering this logic unsatisfactory. As for the *scenes* in between, I cannot adequately explain why I placed them the way I did, the impetus came from the gut and the heart. *But when I did, they felt right, so they stayed.*
Muntadhar al-Zaidi, an Iraqi journalist, became famous for flinging his shoes at President Bush. In quick succession, he flung both his loafers at the President, shouting: “This is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, dog. This is from the widows, the orphans, and those who were killed in Iraq.” Once at a heated community hearing where I was being taken to task, an elderly man flung his shoe at me. He did not say anything; the shoe did all the talking. While President Bush ducked and dodged his assailant, I welcomed mine straight in the face.

_Sometimes, I don’t think too much about the shoe. Other times I think a lot about the shoe._

What compels people to _fling_ things?

_Fling:_ to move (oneself) violently with impatience, contempt, or the like
_Fling:_ to involve (oneself) vigorously in an undertaking

In the simplest of sense, a _fling_ is the work of complaint. Ahmed writes:

_A complaint: when we let out, spill out, what we are supposed to contain._

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A complaint: when we transform what we do not cope with into a protest at what we are supposed to cope with.¹³⁰

_A fling is a complaint, a complaint is a fling._

In many ways, this text too is the work of complaint. It is complaint that stems from my biography, history, location, experience. You may ask: “What about your biography, history, location, experience that compels you to do this work _and_, in the way, you have done it?”

I have attempted to answer this question by dispersing features of my location, history, biography, experience throughout the text in ways that are prominent and hidden and in-between the lines. Some will see me in these pages, others will not. For the latter, I anticipate frustration. They might ask: “Who are you as a scholar? What is your location?” I feel the weight of this question, it is important. _How can the reader ever fully trust a text, if they do not know who wrote it?_ I have written myself as a character, next to landscape, next to Amal, next to Akbar, next to Chandni, next to Niaz, next to Sattar. I have placed myself in each of their stories in my narcissism, awkwardness, heartbreak, frustration, neuroticism.

_For those who cannot see me_,

_I promise I am here._

_Sometimes like a wallflower._

_Sometimes like the wind._

_Sometimes like an angry wasp._

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scene one MOVEMENT AND MULTITUDE

The Line of Control arbitrarily bifurcates Neelum valley, Kashmir into Pakistan and India. While the border attempts to constrain and categorize, the daily movements and flows of human and more-than-human bodies via “unofficial” routes and routines generate an understanding of Kashmir that is not dependent on geopolitics. Neelum as sculpted and carved by the masculine gaze such as those of the nation-state and humanitarians - indicates closure. But the intrusion of interconnected bodies through the valley’s vast landscapes suggest a continuous re-working and re-opening of its borders. These mobilities are stitched in the material inconveniences and intimacies of daily life in the valley. They are sustained by affective entanglements between human and more-than-human bodies constituting mutual processes of emplacement that are paradoxically unbounded and generative. In these movements and flows are analytical and philological opportunities to articulate fully formed visions of Kashmir. But this necessitates the location of theory and methodology as mutually constitutive within our literary genres (not outside of them) to elaborate narrative writing as praxis.
Since when have maps become so sacrosanct? - Arundhati Roy

Despite attempts to bring to the forefront the very bodies which maps constrain and categorize, the multiply-claimed region of Kashmir remains primarily a geopolitical concern. Internal dispute and diversity characterize Kashmir making it difficult to consider it as a unitary political or socio-cultural zone, mark its absolute borders, or even define a singular way of being Kashmiri. The heavily militarized Line of Control (LoC) dividing Kashmir, transfixes its people into either India or Pakistan, obscuring more flexible notions of belonging. In this chapter, I attempt to capture Kashmir as movement and multitude-unbounded outside of geopolitics.

Zutshi argues that forced attempts at a territorial solution to Kashmir may in fact be counterproductive. For the struggle for Kashmir cannot be defined only in material terms, rather it “exceeds the world” and requires “a rethinking of sovereignty itself, as well as a radical revision of the violence and possibilities of the nation–states of India, Pakistan, and Kashmir, respectively.” What if we attempt to deprioritize the state as the sole adjudicator of all claims? What are then some other possibilities for life and politics in Kashmir if we

133 See, e.g., Sumit Ganguly, Conflict Unending (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). There are some commendable exceptions such as Ananya Jahanara Kabir, Territory of Desire (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
138 Ibid.
locate our desires, aspirations, and ambitions in the very human and more-than-human bodies the sovereign seeks to constrain?

By foregrounding the power of bodies to counter maps\(^\text{139}\) and the intimacies which frustrate geopolitics,\(^\text{140}\) I seek to disentangle what it may mean to be Kashmiri from the epistemic violence of the nation-state. Understanding space as open yet embracing, \(^\text{141}\) I draw upon affective ecologies to trace the circulation of Kashmiri bodies in the region’s vast landscapes via “unofficial” routes and routines. These intrusions contribute to the production of territory and the continuous unfolding and enfolding\(^\text{142}\) of Kashmir’s borders. Affective ecologies draw attention to how human and more-than-human\(^\text{143}\) relations are implicated in the reproduction of ecological, social, economic, cultural, and political formations.\(^\text{144}\) This is a useful lens to understand the inter and intra relationships of bodies in “perpetual adjustments and motion.”\(^\text{145}\)

The chapter is situated in Neelum valley, Pakistan administered Kashmir. Daily life in Neelum is heavily reliant on its landscapes which are materially and existentially necessary for its residents and are sites where human and more-than-human relationships (or ecology) constitute processes of localization which are paradoxically unbounded and generative. Neelum is suitable for this work because of the gendered nature of life and mobility as in the


\(^{142}\) Gilles Deleuze, The Fold (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

\(^{143}\) The “affective body” is not limited to just humans, but includes landscape, waterways, animals, plants, and even insects. See, e.g., Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, “Involutionary Momentum,” Differences 23, no. 3 (2012). Based on ethnographic research in the Gurez Valley, Indian administered Kashmir, Bauer and Bhan urge us to note the very bodies and relations in which well-being gets invested. See, Andrew M. Bauer and Mona Bhan, “Politics and Historicity,” South Atlantic Quarterly 115, no. 1 (2016) and Andrew M. Bauer and Mona Bhan, Climate without Nature (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018).


rest of the Himalayan region, its geopolitical extremeness- the LoC cuts right through Neelum dividing it into India and Pakistan- and its environmental precarity. Between 1990-2003, Neelum was a tense battleground for Kashmiri mujahideen (or “freedom” fighters), and Indian and Pakistani militaries. Two years after the ceasefire, an earthquake devastated the region (2005) followed by massive flash flooding (2010), opening the valley to intense humanitarian action. Every now and then tensions flare at the border putting residents at risk and curtailing their movements.

Are borders and their readjustments, the only possible vocabulary for Kashmir? If we understand Kashmir as fluid and heterogeneously lived, what understandings can emerge that are possible only by intimate and comparative area knowledge which considers Kashmir as a site of data collection and theory generation? To answer these questions, I pay attention to the human and more-than-human bodies that animate Neelum, including my own, which in their movements and flows offer analytical and philological opportunity.

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149 Gloria Anzaldúa, La Frontera/Borderlands (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987); Asef Bayat, “Areas and Ideas,” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 33, no. 3 (2013); Raewyn Connell, Southern Theory (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity, 2007) and Veena Das, “Knowledge Production,” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 33, no. 3 (2013).
Image 22. Underground bunkers provided refuge during periods of cross-border shelling. “Anticipatory structures” such as these are maintained to date in case fighting resumes. These exist side by side newly constructed homes, shops, and guesthouses (photograph by Nusrat Jamal)

Illaqa

When I first got to Neelum, I noticed that the performative gestures of politeness which one gets used to in urban Pakistan were somewhat absent. Research interlocutors would snap at me when offended, and even ask me to come back another day if they got annoyed by my presence. One day, slightly beaten and broken, I mustered the courage to ask Shahzad - my research assistant and resident of Neelum- why are people here so mean? He responds with much amusement:

This is because you are in our illaqa (territory). When we are in Islamabad [capital city], we may appear friendlier. We might smile at you, appear agreeable. We just don’t know the city, perhaps feel out of place, out of our element. But when we come back to Neelum, we become shair (lions)! No one can harm us here, we are the badshah (king) of the land.

Shahzad’s response brings to light the importance of emplacement; that being in one’s
own illaqa provides confidence (“they turn into lions”) and invites an almost abrasive truthfulness. This is intriguing, particularly for understanding belonging and attachment in ways that are not possible by a geopolitical understanding of citizenship and identity. Abrar, one of my research interlocutors, shares a story concerning some Pakistani tourists:

I was leading a hike with these amir zada (rich or privileged) guests from Islamabad. One of them really had to pee. We were passing over a bridge over the Neelum river,\(^{150}\) when the guest exclaimed: ‘I am just going to pee across the bridge, into the water, I can’t wait any longer.’ I grabbed him from his shirt and yelled: Bharvay (your wife is a whore!), this isn’t Pakistan that you can urinate as you please. This is Kashmir, and this is our water.

How can we understand these intense emotional entanglements with landscape and the confidence these connections inspire? More importantly, how can we use these insights to advance understandings of Kashmir which exceed the current offerings of geopolitics?

“Azad” Kashmir

In its narrative traditions, Kashmir has always existed at the intersections of the local and the universal.\(^{151}\) Shahzad narrates the ontological beginnings of his home:

Hazrat Suleman\(^{152}\) was flying over this region with his trusted Jinn on duty. He looked down and noticed a sparkling, crystalline body of water. He asked the Jinn: ‘Can you

\(^{150}\) The raging Neelum river flows through the entire length of the Neelum valley, fearlessly contesting the LoC, Pakistan → India → Pakistan in its ebb and flows.

\(^{151}\) Zutshi, “An Ongoing Partition.”

\(^{152}\) “Hazrat” is an honorific title.
create life here?’ The Jinn replied: ‘Yes, but I have a condition that you must marry me to the fairy Mir.’ Hazarat Suleman agreed, and therefore married the Jinn, Kash with the fairy Mir. The Jinn then inspired life in the region, shaping *pahars* and land. This is how Kashmir was created.

Narratives such as this (there are many others), are refusals against placing Kashmir in its current geopolitical emplotment. They insist that Kashmir has its own historicity, a freedom of sorts. Ironically, Pakistan administered Kashmir is nationally referred to as “Azad Kashmir.” “Azad” translates as “free.” This implies that this Kashmir is free from the Indian military (but occupied by Pakistan’s) and that its residents enjoy political, cultural, and social freedoms. Kashmiris in Pakistan are under constant surveillance and scrutiny by intelligence agencies and for reasons of self-preservation must actively demonstrate allegiance to the Pakistani state. Always under Pakistan’s watchful eyes, Kashmiris have to carefully distance themselves from any public conversations on Kashmir’s sovereignty or risk interrogation, extra judicial imprisonment, or worse- disappearance. The skepticism towards Kashmiris is also shared by ordinary Pakistanis and not just by the military and its secret police. A Kashmiri student studying at a university in Rawalpindi explains: “I have to be careful with what I say and how I voice my political opinions. The slightest of slips can be construed by my classmates as an indication of disloyalty to the Pakistani state.” He continues: “It seems your trustworthiness as a human, and the merit of your character is contingent on your loyalty to Pakistan.”

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Arrival

Entry into Neelum resembles a heavily guarded border crossing. Foreigners are not allowed to enter, Pakistanis are only tolerated as tourists, and only after elaborate security checks. I first arrived in Neelum in 2014, to try to understand how residents negotiate chronicity - the confluence of multiple forms of violence- in their everyday lives. I wanted to understand social repair, how people enable the continuity life in some viable form despite being immersed in ongoing and overwhelming structures of constraint. 154 Why am I drawn to Kashmir? Kashmir is romanticized, fetishized, and offers an allure of raw, untouched beauty, and clear blue waters. Growing up in Pakistan, I was enthralled by the mysticism of Kashmir: a land inhabited by extra-ordinary beautiful people with rosy cheeks and glowing skin, pahars dotted with apple orchards and walnut trees, and the mystical, abundance this

suggests. Kashmiri chai (a pink colored tea), named after the region where it originates from is extremely popular in Pakistan’s urban centers especially in winter, unusual on account of its pink color and pairing with dried fruits and nuts.\textsuperscript{155} During the numerous years of active cross-border conflict, Pakistani TV channels showcased dramas on Kashmir valorizing the role of the Pakistani army in the conflict and the conduct of the mujahideen. Admittedly, my foray into Neelum as a researcher is indeed a problematic extension of decades of objectification and romanticization of the Kashmiri people by the Pakistani state and its citizens. I am no exception.

Luker points out that research methods are not truths in themselves, but normative choices which are historically, socially, and politically located in both time and place.\textsuperscript{156} My ethnographic intrusions in Neelum changed form and shape over the course of the research, at par with the pace of my rapidly evolving relationships. I spent time with my interlocutors in a variety of ways: we conversed around the fire and in the kitchen, took photographs, walked the difficult pahari geography, got lost and incurred bodily injuries, harvested fields and forests for vegetables and mushrooms, cooked and ate together, visited state institutions such as the police station, attended school ceremonies, prayed in the masjids (mosques), gave and received gifts, provided assistance, and asked for help when we needed it. We also shared numerous moments of vulnerability accepting each other’s imperfections and fragility. I maintained journals to record the collisions of our encounters, “creating images” for myself.

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\textsuperscript{155} It is another story, that this pink tea is nowhere to be found in Neelum, a tradition far too expensive to sustain.

\textsuperscript{156} Kristin Luker, Salsa Dancing (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{157} Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, Reflexive Methodology (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 10.
My presence in Neelum was nothing short of a spectacle. I asked baba, my host: “Can I pass as someone from Neelum?” He shook his head: “For one thing, you eat like a little child, just half a plate of rice. When you walk, you can’t walk straight, you are clumsy on these slopes. Sometimes, I worry about you.” (At one point another “worried” interlocutor gave me a walking stick as a gift, to help with my “strange” mobility issues. He adds: “And you are afraid of spiders [for a man your age and size].”

Mobility is an important signifier for Neelum. In most other places that I have worked in (e.g., other parts of Pakistan, northern Uganda), mobility was never an issue and hardly a central concern for my research design. In Neelum, this was not the case. Firstly, the topography was at times so intense, that I was physically unable to access certain spaces, community locations, and neighborhoods. Secondly, mobility within the pahars is gendered and particular, some routes are dedicated for women and children, others for animals, and

Image 24. The kitchen often generated the richest of conversations (photograph by the author)
some for remaining villagers. Outsiders, such as myself are not free to wander in Neelum’s landscapes. For example, tourists are expected to only stick to the main road or popular hiking tracks. It was both an aberration and somewhat disrespectful for me to be circulating freely and unfettered in Neelum’s pahars unless accompanied by someone from Neelum and, even then, in moderation. Perhaps accentuated by its remoteness and the feeling of expansiveness, different rules were in place in Neelum regarding who is acceptable in the landscape and to what proximity to a community.

Therefore, instead of relying solely on my body to explore and experience various lived spaces, and keeping in mind the limitations of my mobility, it made sense to make extensive use of photo-voice or participatory photography, allowing my research interlocutors to share only what they considered acceptable. Therefore, this chapter as the rest of the text includes photographs which open Neelum for us in ways that my words cannot.
Image 25. “Unofficial” pathways crisscross Neelum’s *pahars*, opening up the valley for its residents (photograph by Rihanna Tahir)
Welcome to Neelum

In Neelum, it was clear that I was in Kashmir and not in Pakistan. Residents went out of their way to remind me of where I am, by pointing in the direction of Islamabad and clarifying: “But this is Kashmir and that is Pakistan [far away].” It seemed that the notion of Kashmir as being outside of Pakistan had to be continuously repeated, circulated over and over again in the bazaars, tea shops, at home, and in the masjids.

The LoC cuts right through Neelum, creating its own history and unique political entanglements. Unfortunately, most writings on Kashmir have focused on the LoC as a territorial concern instead of its impact on the lived and felt sentimentalities of Kashmiri subjects, reducing those in close proximities on either side of the LoC as geopolitical abstractions. In 2003, after a tense ceasefire between Pakistan and India, two bridges were inaugurated to link the valley across the LoC. Once a month, residents are permitted to cross on either side to reunite with relatives but only after elaborate paperwork and specialized travel documents. Depending on the political climate of the region, some months the crossings are even closed. The bridges and the difficulties they pose - administrative (specialized documents are required) and temporal (crossings only open certain time a year) - further highlight the absurdity of the LoC. Those who are lucky enough to cross bring back objects, stories, and memories. Shahzad, has been denied access to the crossing several times. Finally, in 2012, after waiting for nearly 16 months for his documents to be

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158 The LoC is heavily monitored and guarded by the military on both sides. Since the early 1990s, in order to prevent “illegal” movement, India has initiated an elaborate fencing project. This comprises of a double row of fencing and electrified wiring connected to a network of motion sensors, thermal imaging devices, lighting systems, alarms, and land mines. See, Praveen Swami, “Sealing the Border,” The Indian Express, October 2016, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/sealing-the-india-pakistan-border-along-loc-after-surgical-strikes-walking-the-line-of-control-3086840/.

“processed,” he was allowed to visit his relatives across the LoC. He shares his experiences of “border crossing:”

On my way back, the Indian soldier stationed at the bridge, smiled at me and inquired: ‘How did you like Indian Kashmir? Is it any different from Pakistani Kashmir?’ I stared blankly at his face and replied as respectfully as I could, surpassing my rage: ‘What are you talking about? This is Kashmir and so is that, I have merely come to the same home.’

While I knew this was Shahzad’s way of refusing the division of Kashmir, I was cheeky enough to insist, but were they any different? Shahzad slightly annoyed, snapped back at me: “Yes, the nature of the violence was indeed different. It is difficult for me to say which is better, an overt assault on our political freedoms and social sensibilities [India] or betrayal and false friendships [Pakistan]?”

As Always, Everyone in Really Concerned about Women’s Bodies

Over the years, Neelum has become a popular destination for Pakistani tourists. For many Pakistanis, the lush pahars of Neelum represent the final frontier of the Pakistani state, literally on its edge, dancing precariously into another kind of collectivity. This adds to the thrill of visiting Neelum. Several restaurants overlook the banks of the Neelum river, where Pakistani tourists can lie back on charpoys optimally placed so they can “see” India,

turning the business of borders into a theatre of sorts.

Perhaps due to its geopolitical edginess or perceived remoteness, Neelum is considered as a space outside of the realm of morality and sexual governance. While most tourists are either men or tidy families organized around heteronormative expectations, for some Pakistanis, Neelum lies outside the moral codes imposed on them by their citizenry. The caretaker of a popular guesthouse remarked that there is an increasing trend for men to bring their girlfriends or even prostitutes to Neelum for “unlawful” sexual activities. To mitigate this, guesthouses are required to check the marriage certificates of men and women travelling together. This practice is also enforced at various military and police checkpoints dotting the valley.

Female tourists are particularly scrutinized and judged on their placement within or outside the heteronormative, state sanctioned familial unit. Those female tourists who are seen as being outside the family, such as perceived to be with their boyfriends, unmarried partners, or even with male colleagues, are particularly vilified for being corrupted and corrupting the women of Neelum. A young male resident angrily pointed at a bus of university students:

Look at the besharam larkyan (young women without modesty). They don’t even wear duppatas (head coverings) and sit and walk next to men. Look at the clothes they wear, tightly fitted shalwars (trousers). They corrupt our girls who now want to follow similar fashions and behave in unacceptable ways around our men.

A large number of humanitarian and development NGOs set up shop in Neelum after the recent disasters. They too were very interested in women. In line with developmental vocabularies of “gender equity,” they sought to maximally hire local women, opening their
bodies to further criticism and public scrutiny. According to a male interlocutor, women working for NGO’s are exceptionally immoral and possibly promiscuous:

NGOs have a bad reputation in Neelum. Take xx [organization’s name] for example, during food distributions after the floods, they hired our young women. Within days their duppatas (head coverings) came off, and they would travel with men in big Pajeros late into the evening.

Women along with other “vulnerable” bodies such as children and the elderly, were also the desired targets of numerous humanitarian interventions. Since humanitarian organizations are first and foremost rational organizations, requiring “scientific” ways to dispense their resources, women and others were rapidly brought into the folds of “vulnerability assessments” and “household consultations.” One interlocutor remarked that after the earthquake “women were in very high demand.”

**Neelum as Sculpted**

Neelum’s *pahars* are sculpted and carved to accommodate certain bodies in particular ways. This is the outcome of specific and situated social practices and gendered norms, consistent with what we know about the gender and the environment: that they are contingent and co-produced. I use the following series of photographs to further highlight this point.
Maize, the staple crop of the region, is grown in abundance in Neelum, typically around a homestead. It is usually hand-picked, the kernels are separated from the husk and stored in large wooden boxes. However, maize plantations provide more than just food and are equally appreciated for their dense networks and camouflaging ability. Qari Safir, the local Imam remarked: “Their dense growth provides a certain sense of purdah (covering) around homes.” After the earthquake and floods, when most homes were destroyed, many chose to live within these maizescapes for reasons of practicality but also purdah, since at least the overgrowth provided some physical coverage and shelter.

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162 Purdah, a hotly contested concept within Muslim communities, generally points towards an understanding of privacy and modesty, mostly but not always directed at women.

The maizescapes also provide cover for defecation as attached latrines are uncommon. Women are expected to defecate only during daylight within the maize fields, very early in the morning, but men can go as they please (outside of the time generally reserved for women). Conversely, maizescapes are also considered to be sites of danger and harm, and are feared to harbor snakes, scorpions, and stray dogs, whose presence is amplified after sunset when visibility is greatly diminished. Women (and young children) are discouraged from navigating these maize plantations and, therefore, much of the landscape, after sunset. In this way, these maizescapes allow selective gendered mobilities and access to the land, safe enough to defecate in and traverse the village with during daytime, but dangerous enough to be harmful after nightfall.

Image 27. A community installed and maintained bridge (photograph by Shafiqa Butt)

The Pakistani state has minimal investments in infrastructure in Neelum. The road
leading into Neelum was only upgraded after the 2005 earthquake and even today its condition is at best “jeepable.” Interconnectivity within and between villages is entirely dependent on the navigational ability and agility of people who live there. In response to this lack, in many places, residents have put in place their own micro-infrastructure such as the bridge pictured above. Bridges like the one pictured above dot the valley and offer some respite in the seemingly inhospitable terrain. While used by everyone, men are expected to make their way around regardless, and therefore micro-infrastructure such as this bridge are primarily for the convenience of those outside the conventions of masculinity, such as women, children, and the elderly.

Image 28. Unique rock formations ideal for soaking and washing clothes (photograph by Shafiqa Butt)

164 There are a few suspension bridges maintained by the Pakistani army at various strategic points in the valley, but these have more to do with providing the army with ready access to LoC as opposed to alleviating the daily inconveniences of topography.
The timely and adequate completion of daily life chores are also contingent on one’s ability to exploit the landscape and convert its apparent inhospitality into convenience. The photographs above show useful rock formations near a stream which are amenable for washing and drying clothes. Rock formations also provide features to the nondescript landscape and enhance people’s navigational capacities by serving as identifiers. For example, the following photograph shows an oddly shaped rock formation, which serves as an identifier and even draws children to play in its vicinity.

Image 29. Freshly washed clothes drying on a rock (photograph by Razia Bano)
Image 30. An unusual rock formation (photograph by Nusrat Jamal)
“Official” Pathways

After the earthquake and flooding, the landscape “shifted.” New cracks and fissures appeared, pahars split, and rocks changed their locations. Even the streams and various smaller water bodies crisscrossing the villages changed their pathways, rendering some bridges useless, and creating the need for new ones. Land that was previously safe to live on became dangerous, and the fertility of the soil changed, opening new opportunities in some areas, and closing hope in others. There were even shifts in the water quality of the Neelum river and the types and quantity of fish it sustained. Research interlocutors described how they had to actively “re-learn” the landscape, discover new spaces, and find other routes to access familiar (and new) destinations as former pathways and routes were erased.165

Humanitarian NGO’s prioritized the re-construction of pathways after the disasters. Hundreds of “cash for work” or “food for work” schemes were initiated across Neelum where local men with the help of civil engineers from Islamabad were compensated in cash or kind to “re-build” pathways in the pahars. After completion, these pathways, were then ‘handed back’ to communities (the men) who from that point onwards were responsible for their upkeep. These reconstructed pathways often took the form of a series of cemented steps crisscrossing the pahars, as shown in the photograph below. Like most humanitarian interventions, and under the pretext of vulnerability, women, children, and the elderly were considered the official beneficiaries for these initiatives. While I was in Neelum, I found most of these reconstructed pathways to be in shambles indicating that they were not maintained by Neelum’s men despite their participation in the construction. The men interviewed during fieldwork shrugged at the practicality of these “reconstructed pathways.”

165 Cook and Butz similarly argue that while disasters curtail mobility by destroying infrastructure, they also motivate communities (though at a different scale) to discover and create new routes for the continuity of daily life. See, Nancy Cook and David Butz, “The Dialectical Constitution of Mobility and Immobility,” Contemporary South Asia 23, no. 4 (2015).
Image 31. An NGO supported cemented pathway, this one is in reasonably better shape (photograph by Rihana Tahir)
Humanitarian intentions might be noble, the yearning to build community infrastructure through wider participation even commendable— but the cemented pathways reflect humanitarian desires of order, control, and technocracy more than anything else. This is apparent just from the way connectivity is imagined and its ideals reproduced as infrastructure. The differences in NGO pathways (above) and those that exist otherwise (see earlier photographs) are not just reflective of a lack of technical and engineering skills but hinge on other considerations, such as what kind of connectivity is desired, by whom, and for what purpose?

It rains and snows much of the year in Neelum. The cemented pathways turn dangerously slippery under these weather conditions and residents find it safer to walk outside of them. I noted narrow pathways created by regular foot traffic crisscrossing the pahars, often adjacent to these cemented stairways. Not surprisingly, livestock and carrier animals (such as donkeys and mules) also find it incredibly difficult to walk on the cemented pathways even outside of the rainy season. The cemented pathways cannot withstand Neelum’s harsh weather. Their upkeep requires monetary expenditure and specialized tools which communities cannot sustain. While connectivity between villages and even within villages from one house to the next is strained, efficiency and time are important considerations which are considered when choosing a particular route. Often this means choosing the shortest route as opposed to the safest or easiest route. Cemented pathways do not necessarily adhere to this consideration of timeliness.

I often chose the cemented pathway since they appeared easier to navigate. One day, a passer-by asked me in awe:

Why are you taking this route to get to Sehri [a village]? This will take you over an hour. Go from here, between these rocks, past the shrubs, across the waterfall—you
will get there *fatafat* (immediately, at the snap of your fingers).

On my way back, I followed the villager’s recommendation and decided to take the “quicker route.” That turned out to be a big *faux pas* and in part provides the inspiration for this chapter. It took me nearly 2.5 hours to navigate the “quick route.” I had to carefully make my way across very narrow pathways, get on my feet and hands on extremely steep slopes (which one passer-by described as *janwar jaisa* [just like an animal]), take numerous breaks, suppress several panic attacks, and at one point requested two elderly villagers to take my hand and walk me across five feet long stretch which was too terrifying to cross on my own.

Humanitarian pathways are not too different, at least in intention, from the micro-infrastructure put in place by Neelum’s able-bodied men. Both are efforts to sculpt and tame Neelum (but to a very different degree) for those who are considered to be “non-experts” of the landscape. The humanitarians were keen to bring in engineers, foreign materials such as cement, and specialized tools to work towards a particular kind of built environment. For Neelum’s men, it was more plausible to do just enough, to make the landscape *slightly* more hospitable for particular bodies - i.e., women, children, elderly, animals - but for nobody else.
A resident makes his way home via an “unofficial pathway” (photograph by Razia Bano)
Bodies Opening Routes and Routines

“Unofficial” pahari pathways encourage the circulation of bodies within the valley’s pahars and allow the fulfilment of daily life tasks. Additionally, the mobility of Neelum’s residents is supported by the notion of multiple homesteads; one being in the village, others being on their route to the malis. Malis are grazing pastures and forests at dizzying altitudes which are collectively accessed by communities. Malis are not bounded geographies with a fixed address but refer to a conglomeration of ancestral spaces which offer increased access to resources, cool temperatures, and even respite from the male gaze. During summer, women and children along with their livestock migrate to the malis. Men are usually not allowed to access the malis, though specific accommodations are sometimes made.166

Migrations to the malis during the summer are examples of very practical (and gendered) engagements with landscape. The animals are fattened in the malis and the forests are combed for vegetables, mushrooms, and medicinal plants. On account of their altitude, the malis also provide respite from the summer heat.

166 Men have their own seasonal migratory patterns to Pakistan’s urban centers where they typically seek poorly compensated employment during the winter months.
Image 33. Transient homes (beheks), en route to the malis (photograph by Mohammed Zaheer)
Sometimes, in their search for food in the malis, women and their livestock will venture dangerously close to the LoC-swaths of landscape littered with landmines to prohibit “illegal” crossings into Indian administered Kashmir. Other times, landmines are swept by rain or mudslides into Neelum’s forests and near the beheks (transient houses). The Pakistan Red Crescent Society (PRCS) works in the valley to educate residents about landmines. The safety advice they impart in their civilian trainings is to discourage residents (specifically women and children) from taking their animals on unfamiliar routes for grazing. Per their records, hundreds of livestock die every year due to landmines and dozens of women and children either die or suffer from lifelong disabilities. The PRCS encourages residents not to venture into unchartered territories, and by doing so they are perpetuating yet another border within Neelum, which runs in parallel to the LoC.

In the following sections, I highlight how the circulation of bodies within Neelum’s pahars is encouraged by affective attachments with more-than-human bodies, namely plants, vegetables, and animals found in landscape.

More-than-Human Bodies

As my research interlocutors became more confident in our relationship, the nature of food I was served also shifted. It went from the usual biryani and chicken karhai to more region-specific dishes such as locally sourced saags (spinaches) and mushrooms. The sugar in the tea changed from regular refined sugar to gur (unprocessed brown sugar) and the milk from Milkpack (a very popular brand of pasteurized milk) to unpasteurized, raw milk. I read this in two ways: one, as people’s comfort increased they did not find it necessary to cater to my urban taste-buds or expectations of food. And second, that local foods communicated a profound sense of pride, belonging, and rootedness which cannot be articulated through the language of geopolitics. In this section I examine more-than-human bodies, such as edible
plants, mushrooms, and animals and how they open up landscape.

**Intimacies of food**

Hameeda, a resident of Neelum, only uses *jangli payyaz* for cooking which she handpicks from the malis. *Jangli payyaz*, a variety of green onions (translates literally as “wild onions”) are bold in flavor and fragrance. Hameeda dries them in the sun and stores them in little plastic containers for use during winter. She explains:

They have a strong taste and smell and food doesn’t taste the same without them. I dislike the onions you can purchase from the bazaar which are trucked in from Pakistan. They have no flavor and they are grown using harmful fertilizers and chemicals. *Jangli payyaz* smells of Neelum and tastes like Neelum.

*Jangli payyaz* are found at dizzying heights and often in difficult to access and dangerous areas such as those prone to landslides - spaces which one would not consider accessing otherwise. Collecting *jangli payyaz* puts the body at tangible risk. They grow in small clusters and therefore large tracts of inaccessible landscape have to be carefully navigated for their sufficient collection.

Andaza, another resident, speaks about shirley, a local variety of mushrooms also found in the malis. She describes:

*Shirley* don’t grow everywhere. They grow on specific trees and there is no guarantee that they will re-appear in the same spot they did last season. They are very delicate. I go to the malis with our animals [goats, cows], as they graze, I scan the forest for *shirley*. They must be collected within 3 days of appearing. Upon appearing, within 2-3 days they ripen, it is at this point they have to collected or they dry out and are no
Shirley are very delicate mushrooms, and women are invested in their protection over repeated trips to the areas where they were initially spotted. Shirley draw the same bodies back to the landscape in relationships of care and anticipation.

Image 34. Shirley: these are boiled and then cooked with a sauce of onions and tomatoes (photograph by the author)

Jangli payyaz and shirley are not only symbolic of the affective ecologies of Neelum (expressions like “they smell of Neelum and taste like Neelum” provide us clues), but they also compel gendered bodies to navigate unchartered and inhospitable landscape, or re-open existing ones, contributing to its renewal and expansion.

The interconnectivities and circulations of bodies in landscapes are also interlinked
with ideas of the social, how it is produced, maintained, preserved, and extended. For example, the malis also have their own culinary traditions. Since animals have better grazing opportunities, they produce more milk. The shelf life of milk is increased by turning milk into lassi (a watered yoghurt drink), bhagoray (cheese curds), and ghee (clarified butter). These are consumed in the beheks but also brought back to the villages where their circulation amongst friends, family, and neighbors creates and maintains kinship and closeness. Since the malis are predominately accessed by women and children, they also serve as amenable spaces of interconnectivity and interactivity exclusively between women. Such spaces of relatability minimally exist in village lived spaces, where sharp distinctions between public and private life are maintained and women’s mobilities are constrained and scrutinized.

Image 35. Bhagoray (cheese curds) prepared in the beheks, these are fried in ghee with spices (photograph by the author)

Women (particularly senior women, such as the mother-in-law or grandmother) take pride in growing vegetables. These practices not only directly emplace women within
landscape but also cement them to other people. One interlocutor explains:

My dadi [paternal grandmother] has a passion for growing vegetables. She regularly tends to them and even takes her shoes off before entering the vegetable garden [out of respect]. She strictly instructs other to do the same. We often have surplus vegetables and regularly send cucumbers, potatoes [and other produce] to neighbors and family members. Our neighbors and relatives do the same.

Animals in landscape

One morning, seated in the veranda of my host’s home in Neelum, I intently watched chickens run around the courtyard. My host interrupted my gaze: “Tumhari nazar na lag jaye
(don’t stare at them so intently, you will give them an evil eye).” As affective bodies - much like the jangli payyaz and shirley- animals form unique relationships with their care-takers and extend their emplacement in landscapes as well as their navigational capacity of it. Livestock in particular are referred to as maal (wealth), reflecting not only their status as assets but the value they bring to everyday life. Children often introduced me to their goats and told me their names. The act of naming implies love and attachment, perhaps formed as a result of large amounts of solitary time spent with animals.

Image 37. Bhala and Tani resting in the shade (photograph by the author)

Birke, Bryld, and Lykke encourage us to think about the complexities of human/animal relationships as a “kind of choreography, a co-creation of behavior.”

Everyday life, migratory patterns even spatial practices are purposefully instituted around animals and their needs. As legitimate bodies in Neelum, animals are very closely intertwined with the opening and maintenance of illaqa. Since ambulatory animals such as cows and goats are also prohibited from crossing over the LoC (they get blown away by landmines), they, too, are geopolitically restricted. Additionally, migrations to the malis are intrinsically tied to the sustenance of livestock, who accompany their caretakers to benefit from unrestricted grazing pastures.
Image 38. A woman tends her livestock. She challenges conventions of flatness and acceptable topography by expertly operating on a slope (photograph by Rihana Tahir)
Image 39. An “unofficial” pathway leading to the malis. Different bodies work in the landscape to create routes and routines that do not depend on geopolitics (photograph by Rhana Tahir)
The two recent disasters that struck Neelum killed large numbers of livestock. Despite the number of years gone by, most households have been unable to regain same levels of livestock as before. This means there is less and less incentive for households to invest their bodily labor and time in trekking to the malis. Several women reported that they no longer go to the malis since they only have a handful of livestock and it does not make much sense to trek all the way up. Instead, they now send their animals with a neighbor or someone else who has a bigger herd and pay them some money for their help. In this way, animals such as cows and goats both allow and deny movement of residents in their landscape, and therefore can expand or foreclose illaqa.

Image 40. An elderly man resting with his cattle on the way back from the malis (photograph by Farhat Shaheen)
Animals help sustain the circulation of bodies within Neelum in ways beyond those afforded by infrastructure such as bridges and pathways. For example, the goats are slaughtered on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, which draws relatives and friends from far and near. Similarly, home grown chickens (referred to as “desi” chickens) are consumed only on significant occasions such as marriage or an important family visit. Therefore, goats and chickens as sources of food maintain familial and diasporic linkages. The examples of various milk products whose production are increased by accessing the malis also speak to this. Animals allow humans to create and maintain modes of relationality which are difficult to sustain otherwise. Surprisingly, this also includes the creation of virtual communities. A research interlocutor explains:

My sisters often steal eggs from our chickens. Usually, they are the ones put in charge of collecting eggs, they often hide some for themselves. They sell the eggs in the bazaar and use the money to purchase credit for their mobile phones. They then send text messages to their sahailees (close friends).
Open Yet Embracing, Closed Yet Expansive, Shrinking Yet Unfolding

The photograph depicts a man wearing a shirt with the slogan “Winner takes Kashmir” at a cricket match between Pakistan and India. The slogan is an excellent reminder that the people of Kashmir remain transfixed within someone else’s imagination. In fact, amongst Kashmiris themselves, there is ample diversity on visions for its future, ranging from a combative approach to accommodation and negotiation with India and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{168} Junaid

\textsuperscript{168} Samina Yasmeen, “Pakistan’s Kashmir Policy,” \textit{Contemporary South Asia} 12, no. 2 (2003).
points out that while many Kashmiris in Pakistan acknowledge how Pakistan has stood by them, behind Pakistani state’s support “lies a form of manipulation, which must be pointed out,” a support which encourages independence from India but only a merger with Pakistan.\textsuperscript{169}

The LoC and its militarization significantly restrict movement in the region. Additionally, the uncertainty and irresolution caused by the LoC creates unique conceptual and material affects, which shape a collective Kashmiri identity.\textsuperscript{170} The Herald (a popular Pakistani magazine) published a story about a woman who waited 45 years and travelled some 3,000 kilometers to be reunited with her mother on the other side of the LoC, while in terms of actual distance is only some 30 kilometers apart.\textsuperscript{171} Another local newspaper features the story of a Kashmiri groom, who while just few kilometers away from his bride’s home across the LoC, is forced to travel some 1,100 kilometers to enter Pakistan from a border crossing near Lahore.\textsuperscript{172} Several people have advocated to make the LoC more permeable to allow for familial and commercial linkages, opening the possibilities of new kinds of solutions (and questions) for Kashmir.\textsuperscript{173}

Life in Neelum remains hostage to the possibility that cross-border hostilities may resume at any point.\textsuperscript{174} During the 14 years of border conflict, research interlocutors described how they were cut off from their illaqa, often reduced to taking refuge in underground shelters for extended periods of time. This impacted their ability to tend the land, raise cattle, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{170} Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Cartographic Irresolution,” \textit{Social Text} 27, no. 4 101 (2009).
\item \textsuperscript{173} PR Chari, Hassan Askari Rizvi, Rashid Ahmed Khan, and Suba Chandran, “The Kashmir Dispute,” \textit{Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies} (2009).
\end{itemize}
engage in the many practices necessary for sustaining everyday life in Neelum. Nusrat, my research assistant, who was in grade 5 when a ceasefire was reached between India and Pakistan recalls: “When the firing stopped, we felt so strange. We could now go out, freely roam the land, and just be.”

How can we understand Neelum (and by extension Kashmir) outside of geopolitics? Neelum, like much of Kashmir is heavily mediated by nation-states, disasters, humanitarians, and other (often masculine) discourses. Bodies in Neelum work in the landscape to create routes and routines that are disentangled from geopolitics and other prescriptive forces. The pahars and more-than-human bodies of Neelum generate unique affective and situated intimacies. These affective ecologies are very much tied to the production of illaqa by drawing residents back to the landscape or opening new spaces for bodily incursions, such as the remote edges of pahars where the jungle payyaz grows or the chicken eggs that allow young women to text their friends opening other kinds of (virtual) spaces. The very circulation of bodies stitched within the materiality of everyday life such as washing clothes, collecting food, and grazing are forms of ambulatory emplacement which disrupt the geopolitical boundedness of territory.175

Understood this way, Neelum is open yet embracing, closed yet expansive, shrinking yet unfolding, determined by the circulation and movement of Kashmiri bodies in its landscapes. The affective entanglements between human and more-than-human bodies play an important role in maintaining and extending relationality in an otherwise “remote” and “un-navigable” region.

Kleinman conceptualizes moral life as “carrying on our existence, negotiating important relations with others, doing work that means something to us, and living in some

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particular local place where others are also passionately engaged in these same existence activities.  

He argues that “moral experience is always about practical engagements in a particular local world, a social space that carries cultural, political, and economic specificity.”

I extend the notion of moral life to moral life in landscape, to encapsulate the social labor and daily life chores performed by residents of Neelum as placed within their landscapes. Remaining emplaced within Neelum despite ongoing conditions of colonial occupation - particularly restrictions to movement - is a powerful example of a life in the meantime, a pragmatic presentism, where life-work is diligently performed to achieve undefined, multiple, and possible futures. Living off the land and waterways in Neelum and understanding relationships with landscape as a conglomeration of public and private intimacies allows us to understand the bodily presence and circulation of residents in Neelum as the maintenance and extension of place, integral to ongoing struggles for Kashmir.

There are many forces that discourage mobility in Neelum. This includes numerous military checkpoints and landmines as well as the LoC itself. Based on self-serving commercial interests and technocratic understandings of nature conservation, there are also other kinds of restrictions on landscapes and waterscapes put in place by the Pakistani state. For example, fishing the Neelum river is prohibited as is collecting certain medicinal plants and mushrooms from its forests.

Everyday life in Neelum challenges the notion of spatial homogeneity demanded by the Pakistani state and its borders. As described previously, even the location of home is multiple, as is land ownership which is rarely consolidated into a singular spatial block. For

177 Arthur Kleinman, Experience and Its Moral Modes, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1999), 365.
example, a household might have land where they grow maize adjacent to their village house, but also in various patches spread throughout the pahars at varying altitudes and locations. These dispersed land-holdings are inherited, based in memory, and undermine spatial homogeneity, but also reconfigure how one understands proximity and distance, space, and landscape, as being unbounded, fragmented, dispersed, and varied.

Neelum has been cut off from Srinagar (the cultural capital of the once unified Kashmir) for decades. During my research in Neelum and its surrounding pahars (including other valleys in the region which do not fall under the ambit of Kashmir), I noted similarities in terms of land-based lifestyles, migratory practices, and other forms of ecological knowledges and consciousness that stem from making life hospitable in the pahars as opposed to simply being Pakistani or Kashmiri. The common language spoken in the pahari region (Hindko) also speaks of another shared similarity. Collectively known as pahari log as opposed to only Kashmiris or Pakistanis, people in this pahari region are united by a mode of life built upon reliance, respect, and attachment to landscape as well as the difficulties and dangers of doing so.

Intellectually and culturally, Neelum was perhaps never an “important” part of unified Kashmir. I also noticed some resentment from Kashmiri-speaking residents (essentially “migrants” from Indian administered Kashmir) towards Hindko speakers, as being “unhygienic and uneducated,” hinting at possible histories of internal colonialism within Kashmir. Having no or limited access to Indian administered Kashmir (being a Pakistani citizen, the practicalities of border-crossing are rather complex), I find it more compelling to understand Neelum as part of a heterogeneous Kashmir, defined by the intimacies of living in landscape rather than a historic configuration within a unified polity, knowledge of which is impossible for me to access. I understand Neelum as a unique space, caught between allegiance to Srinagar and forced inclusion within Pakistan, and an everyday pahari way of
life - a lived territory in its own right.

The bakherwals are a nomadic group of people who raise livestock and move from one mali to another regardless of whether it is situated in Kashmir or Pakistan. Their large caravans can be seen defiantly crossing provincial and territorial borders. They have been raising livestock across the malis in Northern Pakistan and Kashmir long before the firming up of geopolitical borders indicating that connections and routes have always existed. An understanding of Kashmir rooted in movement and flow, interconnectivity, intimacy, and landscape – *pahari* modes of life - can perhaps inspire new language which is generative and does not seek to constrain, constrict, or categorize.

**Sweat, Tears, Blisters, Rashes, and Bruises**

Inayatullah and Blaney suggest that instead of rejecting sovereignty all together, it is perhaps more useful to reimagine sovereignty as “multiple and overlapping” to accommodate the transnational flows and multi-layered processes that disallow boundaries from being absolute.¹⁸⁰ Shneiderman’s ethnographic work shows us that states may even create alternative citizenship categories for border residents in response to demands and practices from below, in non-postcolonial trajectories of state formation.¹⁸¹ However, I remain skeptical of centering the state as the principal adjudicator and only valid complement to life and politics, regardless of how we understand the sovereign. The question then is, should we invest our energy in rescuing old categories or developing new ones which better reflect our understanding of the world? I am inclined towards the latter and find the analytical pathways opened by recent work on refusal more generative for my reading of life and politics in Kashmir than attempts to resuscitate sovereignty as a conceptual opportunity.¹⁸²

Karrar and Mostowlansky argue that perhaps instead of approaching Northern Pakistan [and Kashmir] as a “border area,” what if they are approached as an “assemblage of marginality” that extends beyond location to integrate regional experiences of colonialism, nationalist histories of inclusion/exclusion, political economy, and local identity formation?

I have purposefully chosen not to emphasize marginality as a unifying marker for the region but have instead drawn attention to the situated intimacies and movements which anchor residents to an ambulatory and shape-shifting notion of a territory. This is not because I want to romanticize and mute certain elements of life (for example those of political economy) but because there is “something” about territory (illaqa) that does not adequately make its way into our writings on Kashmir (or on Northern Pakistan).

I often asked my research interlocutors: “Why don’t you leave Neelum, given the difficulties of life here?” The question typically catches people off-guard; perhaps they have never thought about leaving. Some would retaliate with an even stronger provocation: “Why should we leave? Regardless of the hardships we face, this is our illaqa (territory). Even those who have left, eventually make their way back home.” The rich, productive imaginations and social labor that goes into the circulation of the illaqa, is an important analytical space, one that I have attempted to centralize in this writing. Landscapes are not just location -geopoints A and B - but agentive spaces which inform the aspirations, skepticism, and betrayals of life therein. They act upon and are acted upon by human and more-than-human bodies and are central to the stories of chronicity and social repair I seek to write.

It is difficult to initiate any conversation on Kashmir without acknowledging the elephant in the room: colonial occupation. For me, this is a necessary etiquette of engagement without which I become a direct participant in the silences and erasures that sustain the fictions of Pakistan “administered” Kashmir. I stand resolute in this position and am thankful for my research interlocutors for often reminding me that I am not “one of them” and that any solidarity I may offer is really insufficient until I am prepared to engage in a radical repositioning and redistribution of the benefits and protections that I embody as a Pakistani citizen - readjustments I am not yet prepared to undertake. Let me offer an example:

One evening, the small guesthouse in Neelum where I stayed (it only has two rooms) was suddenly filled by a large number of men. These were members of Pakistan
administered Kashmir’s last remaining nationalist political party. Within minutes, the courtyard was full. As they waited for their leader to arrive, the caretaker of the guesthouse strongly suggested that I lock myself in my room and draw the curtains, as things could get rowdy. Plus, I had no business in being a part of this “internal” conversation. He suggested that for my own safety, I should not let anyone in. I did as I was requested. From my room, I could hear people clapping, possibly indicating that their leader had arrived. Shortly after someone started to speak on a loudspeaker, I heard hurried knocks on my door. I did not open as instructed. Eventually, the person gave up. But sooner or later, I heard another knock. After every 10 minutes or so, someone would want to get into my room. Sometimes they would just knock, other times they would yell: “Jaldi, darwaza kholo” (hurry, open the door!). I counted at least 10 different people wanting in. Later, I learnt, that participants of the rally needed to go to the bathroom. The bathroom in the other room was in a state of disrepair and only my room offered some hope. By placing my safety and comfort at the center of the universe (not sure if I would be comfortable letting strangers use my bathroom even if I had known), I was a material impediment to the internal political processes of Kashmir even if in a trivial way such as blocking the dignified gastric releases of political party workers. I learnt they had to go do their “business” in the jungle.

I have always wondered why works of fiction on Kashmir are far more satisfying and enriching than their academic counterparts. For example, writings by Basharat Peer (Curfewed Night), Mirza Waheed (The Collaborator), Salman Rushdie (Shalimar the Clown), Arundhati Roy (The Ministry of Utmost Happiness), Malik Sajjad (Munnu), and Ather Zia (Editor of Kashmir Lit) offer “valuable narrative and rhetorical resources for imagining an
alternative to a militarized postcolonial colonial sovereignty184 and even sovereignty itself. Conversely, most academic writings on Kashmir remain stuck, apologetic, and underwhelming. Hence, this chapter is also about developing the courage to attempt counter-projects of seeing, analyzing, and representation to “agitare the dominant imaginaries, trouble the subtle ruses of state power, and, in the process, train a new disobedient sensorium”185 - whether this is by paying attention to Neelum’s onions, mushrooms, chickens, and goats or my own (clumsy) navigation of the terrain.

While I have attempted to invoke a Deleuze inspired working of movement, space, and its re/de-territorialization, I admit my devotion to Deleuze begins and ends with Wikipedia. Do I really need a dead white guy to help me understand Kashmir? When the resources to do so are right here: the human and more-than-human bodies which situate and are situated by Neelum. Their attachments, movements, and flows constitute genres of life, and the landscape acts as the stage on which these genres of life unfold. My own ambulatory challenges in Neelum, how I struggled just to get from one place to another, provides me further evidence that the body in movement is indeed a site of data and theory, expressed through not just the navigation of the pahars, but also the investments made in the land and in food.

I would like to momentarily focus on my own body, its movement, flow (and stasis), and how my sweat, tears, blisters, rashes, and bruises are also sites of knowledge. For one thing, I would not have written this chapter in this way, if I had not gotten lost, injured, tired, and broken down by Neelum’s landscapes. Known as “motta bhai” (fat brother) by the village children, I was both amused and thrilled to learn how my daily descent and ascent into the pahars inspired an excitement amongst them. In anticipation of my daily incursions, children would excitedly congregate on their rooftops and place friendly bets on how long I would take to get down, how many times I would stop to catch my breath, or drink water. When leaving, one child even professed that he would “miss me,” even though we had never met before. I was certainly an important character in the drama of Neelum.
I also picked up countless theoretical cues by eating in company. Initially, I was hesitant in accepting people’s invitations to break bread. The following excerpt from my journal walks us through my thinking:

There is such little food to eat in general, but I am beginning to think if rejecting an invitation, refusing to eat after someone has gone through the trouble of preparing a meal, making chai, running to the bazaar to buy biscuits, or even cut up a cucumber is actually more damaging… and counterproductive to what I seek to understand in Neelum. It seems I am understanding accepting an invitation to eat as an act of “taking away.” While the engagement far exceeds a mere taking away of food (resources). It signals an acceptance of someone’s generosity, it means taking the time to go to someone’s house (no matter how far away they might live or how difficult it may be to get there). It means allowing yourself to be further enveloped by landscape, sociality, and experience. The home is an extremely private space and an extremely privileged site to which most strangers are not privy too. Can accepting an invitation to eat even within the context of scarcity be understood as a gift, a form of reciprocity, as method and theory generation? Shit, I think I had it wrong all this time.
Image 44. Dasterkhwan ("table cloth" or "great spread") (photograph by the author)
In this chapter, I have attempted to rethink Kashmir’s sovereignty as much as I have attempted to take analytical and literary risks, simply because we cannot break new ground on Kashmir using the same tired tools. If we are really committed to understanding and articulating visions of Kashmir which are fully formed and realized, we must locate theory and methodology as mutually constitutive within our literary genres (not outside of them) to elaborate narrative writing as praxis. Otherwise the rich textures and features of life and world will continue to evade our analytical purview. I take Arundhati’s Roy’s challenge to heart:

[On Kashmir] we have to be able to think clearly, speak freely and listen fearlessly to things we may not want to hear. We have to find a new imagination. This applies to everybody, on all sides of the dispute. Something beautiful could come of it. Why not? Why ever not? 186

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186 Roy, “Azadi.”
Image 45. Odd perspective (photograph by the author)
Let's try this again: “Who are you as a scholar? What is your location?”

It varies: Some days I am a feminist, some days I am queer, some days I am an ethnographer, some days I am an activist, some days I am an ally, some days I am a poser, some days I am an appropriator, some days I am a contrarian, some days I just stay in bed all day long.

Let's try this again: “Who are you as a scholar? What is your location?”

Today, I cannot decide.

Let's try this again: “Who are you as a scholar? What is your location?”

I am a receiver and initiator of complaint.

Let's try this again: “Who are you as a scholar? What is your location?”

I think a lot about the shoe.
scene two  BETRAYAL

Natural disasters impact the very DNA of devotion; what we owe each other and to whom we owe. More simply put, disasters radically reconfigure how people are put together and the expectations they place on one another. In part, because disasters place overwhelming limitations on everyday life, constraining people’s capacities to fulfil shared obligations. But also, because they can shift the very nature of these demands as life is no longer governed by the same boundaries. Understood this way, it is plausible to consider that disasters can catalyze conditions for letting each other down; they create, nurture, and amplify betrayal.

Using the metaphor of betrayal, both as an embodied (lived and felt) experience as well as a shared (affective and material) social condition, I write about my interlocutor: Niaz, whose life in the pahari Northern Pakistan is further confounded by another form of betrayal, that of his body. As a result of an injury (permanent as judged by doctors but temporary as judged by Niaz), Niaz’s bodily limitations placed significant constraints on his life much before the earthquake that devastated his Himalayan village. Niaz’s failed body (a body that refuses to “recover”), presents an important counterpoint to the disaster of the earthquake, both life-altering events. But Niaz does not attribute his most profound dysphoria to either the accident or the earthquake, but to the disloyalty of his best friend. In my attempts to understand intersecting forms of violence (bodily injury, earthquake, social betrayal) as chronicity, I approach disasters as a catalysis for other forms of social let-downs. Furthermore, I attempt to understand social repair as a process governed by its own willful genres of life and disarticulated futurities.
Natural disasters impact the social DNA of devotion; what we owe each other and to whom we owe. More simply put, disasters radically reconfigure how people are put together and the expectations they place on one another. In part, because disasters place overwhelming limitations on everyday life, constraining people’s capacities to fulfil shared obligations. But also, because they can shift the very nature of these demands as life is no longer governed by the same boundaries. Faced with new forms of affective and material scarcity, social expectations may no longer be achievable. More importantly, disasters may reconfigure accountabilities altogether and demand new rules and matching forms of social and affective labor to sustain revised social standards. Understood this way, it is plausible to consider that disasters can catalyze conditions for letting each other down; they create, nurture, and amplify betrayal. This assertion, in turn, raises compelling questions about protective structures such as the family, community, the state, and their in-sufficient roles in social repair and remaking in disaster aftermaths. I argue that repair is less about resolution, reconciliation, and achieving compatible forms of liberal futurities, but about approximating a rather dystopic future which makes current life palpable, irrespective and

189 I am mindful that each of these forms of association (family, community, the state) require further elaboration to adequately tease out their “insufficiencies” which are particular and situated. I attempt to do some of this work in the remainder of the chapter.
despite the contradictory, sabotaging, and jagged edges of sociality. Therefore, natural disasters are not just glitches in “the reproduction of life” \(^{191}\) which warrant the replacement of broken infrastructure necessary for sociality to extend, but also revelatory spaces to understand “how that extension can be non-reproductive, generating a form from within brokenness beyond the exigencies of the current crisis, and alternatively to it too.” \(^{192}\) After all, the “death of nature” \(^{193}\) i.e. the envisioned decay of the natural world, provokes novel genres of humanness and relating which must be executed in the here and now. \(^{194}\)

Using the metaphor of betrayal, both as an embodied (lived and felt) experience as well as a shared (affective and material) social condition, I write about my interlocutor: Niaz, whose life in the pahari Northern Pakistan is further confounded by another form of betrayal, that of his body. \(^{195}\) As a result of an injury (permanent as judged by doctors but temporary as judged by Niaz), Niaz’s bodily limitations already place significant constraints on life in the “unruly” pahars even before the earthquake that devastated his Himalayan village in the Siran valley. Niaz’s failed body (a body that refuses to “recover”), presents an important counterpoint to the disaster of the earthquake, both life-altering events. However, Niaz does not attribute his most profound dysphoria \(^{196}\) to either the accident or the earthquake, but to the disloyalty of a friend. Our conversations were punctuated by repeated references to this other protagonist and how his infidelity shattered Niaz in multiple ways. Another site of

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\(^{191}\) Lauren Berlant, “The Commons,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016), 393.

\(^{192}\) Ibid.


\(^{195}\) I understand the body as being at once “cultural, political, textual and visual, corporeal and abstracted.” See, Michael Richardson, “Writing Trauma,” *New Writing* 10, no. 2 (2013), 155.

\(^{196}\) Durban-Albrecht writes in the context of the Haiti earthquake, where the source of the most profound dysphoria for the paper’s protagonist is not just the earthquake which resulted in broken bones and limbs, but the protagonist’s re-masculinization (destabilization of gender identity) while receiving medical interventions. See, Erin Durban-Albrecht, “Postcolonial Disablement,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2017).
interest is Niaz’s exercise instruments needed for his bodily rehabilitation. These were destroyed in the earthquake and have still not been repaired, causing further deterioration in his bodily abilities. Despite their importance to Niaz’s well-being, why were they not revived as opposed to so many other object-practices that were? Niaz responds with a shrug: “It just hasn’t happened yet.”

In my attempts to understand intersecting forms of violence (bodily injury, earthquake, social betrayal) as contributing to a chronicity of life, I disentangle natural disasters as discrete temporal events but as a catalysis of other forms of social let-downs. I also attempt to understand repair in disaster aftermaths as a process governed by its own willful genres of life and disarticulated futurities. In the ethnographic unfoldings of this chapter, I draw attention to those “thin, transient, analytically awkward” details, which despite being quietly tucked away are important tellings of the multiple genres of politics and possibilities of life.

I approach Niaz as a “phenomenological subject” (as opposed to a psychoanalytical one). At the same time, I am not invested in merely generating a phenomenology of violence, nor in demonstrating breakage and repair in that redemptive order, despite how

201 Oliver writes: “Whereas the phenomenological subject can become conscious of its self-consciousness and its motives, desires and fears, which it owns (as Husserl might say, are its own), the psychoanalytic subject is continually an encounter with the otherness of the unconscious, which can’t completely come to consciousness or be owned up to, let alone owned. These differences bear on the history of subject position and the historicity of subjectivity or the distinction between beings and meaning.” See, Kelly Oliver, “Witnessing and Testimony,” *Parallax* 10, no.1 (2004), 80.
202 This is not to imply that we have done a sufficient job of understanding violence beyond instrumental, cultural, and structural explanations or that it ceases to be a genuine philosophical problem. See, Michael Staudigl, ed. *Phenomenologies of Violence* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
seductive the chiasmus may be. But more so, in dwelling in the interstitial spaces that punctuate the life that Niaz invokes, pointing towards those genres of knowing that defy stable patterns of lived experience to appreciate their incoherence, non-causality, and retro-activeness.

In certain ways, Niaz’s contemporaneity is not conducive to story, and collides with the violent desire for “form, coherency, and credulity.” Therefore, I find it more useful, to situate Niaz in an “in-durable” genre of sociality. One “that takes its objects from those things that constitute normative arrangements of life, or the events that change them, or that contain a ‘transformative potential of becoming,’” drawing attention to the daily experiences of an uncertain life, “that is circumscribed within a present that seems to go nowhere.” This stops me from making the error of categorizing Niaz as an object of potentiality and emergence, reflecting a problematic optimism in some undefined transformative potential whose modes of production we do not know.

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207 Wool, “In-Durable Sociality,” 81.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
211 Another point of departure from the becoming narrative, is how desire is insufficiently articulated as not being smart, agentive, insightful, constitutive of expertise. See, Eve Tuck, “Breaking up with Deleuze,” International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 23, no. 5 (2010).
Can this provide the momentum needed to challenge long-held assumptions by the field of disaster studies, such as those pertaining to the emancipatory and celebratory promises of social capital? I show that not only can sociality fail to deliver but that its very incongruences can inspire new genres of life altogether- anti-heroics enacted in the here and now. Rather than focusing on the legibility of the disaster subject, what if we allow them to do the work: teach us vocabularies that capture life’s newness in the moment despite its (radical) alterity, to demonstrate what repair may look like during and after catastrophe?

Niaz is an outlier of his village, but despite his compounded hyper-vulnerabilities, he

212 E.g., well-known authors like Anthony Oliver-Smith and Rebecca Solnit focus on social networks that arise because of disasters. See, Anthony Oliver-Smith, The Martyred City (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1986) and Rebecca Solnit, Paradise Built in Hell (Penguin, 2010). Within disaster studies, there is a large body of work that explores the role of social-networks and how these networks are strong, integral, and heightened/made more vigilant in disaster aftermaths and therefore must be enriched and protected by disaster recovery interventions. Or how they are differently available during/after disasters and how disaster interventions can undermine them. See, e.g., Roshan Bhakta Bhandari, “Social Capital in Disaster Risk Management,” Disaster Prevention and Management 23, no. 4 (2014); Emily Chamlee-Wright, Cultural and Political Economy (New York and London: Routledge, 2010); Bishnu Prasad Devkota, Brent Doberstein, and Sanjay K. Nepal, “Social Capital and Natural Disaster,” International Journal of Mass Emergencies & Disasters 34, no. 3 (2016) and Albert J. Faas, Eric Jones, Linda Whiteford, Graham Tobin, and Arthur Murphy, “Gendered Access,” Mountain Research and Development 34, no. 3 (2014).

213 Community is not a uniform, justly situated social system, but is mediated by power relations and forms of exclusion. Joy reminds us that the blanket-term of community obfuscates power relations. Palacios considers community a “fetish.” Joseph considers community to be a “romance.” Das believes the community mimics the state in reproducing particular and specific forms of violence into everyday lived spaces. See, James Joy, Seeking the Beloved Community (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2013); Lena Palacios, “Something Else to Be,” Philosophy 6, no. 1 (2016), 98; Miranda Joseph, Against the Romance of Community (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Veena Das, Life and Words (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2007).


218 Graeber argues that to recognize radical alterity, we must accept that we can never entirely understand other lifeworlds, “but nonetheless allow the concepts that underlie it to ‘unsettle’ our own theoretical beliefs.” See, David Graeber, “Radical Alterity,” HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 5, no. 2 (2015), 3. Naelon links alterity with ethics and argues that ethics is constituted as an inexorable affirmative response to different identities, not through an inability to understand or totalize the other. See, Jeffery Naelon, Alterity Politics (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998). Also see, Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, Radical Alterity (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).

219 My intention is not to invite liberal forms of sense-making and application to the disaster space. See, e.g., Megan Bradley, “More than Misfortune,” International Journal of Transitional Justice 11, no. 3 (2017), but to consider other modes of critical analysis which have precluded the field of disaster studies altogether.
offers a unique view of his social world, one that is unfazed by the deceptions and promises of community. His criticality, reflexivity, and bluntness allow me to disentangle relations of power, decode social hierarchies, and notice discord and fragmentation in places which otherwise appear beautifully put-together. My intention is not to pursue “damage-centered research”\textsuperscript{220} but to undo some of the tropes we have come to accept as social realities. Particularly those “truths” that pertain to repair, or any other place holders we have created to circumscribe the work of living despite life’s inhospitality.\textsuperscript{221}


\textsuperscript{221} Majumdar has argued that a focus on the subaltern can lead to a redefinition of social agency as opposed to rendering visible systems of oppression. See, Nivedita Majumdar, “Silencing the Subaltern,” \textit{Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy} 1, no. 1 (2017).
Image 46. Niaz (photograph by the author)
Worldings

By worldings, I refer to lived and felt realities that reflect ontologies and genres of life through which relationships, knowledge, and beliefs are performed on an everyday basis. Niaz consistently directs the focus of our conversations away from the breakage of his bodily functions, to another temporal possibility, where the most significant factors holding his life back are not his bodily ailments but some other. This tension, a battle for legitimacy of whose reading of reality counts, permeates the writing of this chapter.

Life in the Siran valley as in the rest of Northern Pakistan, is heavily contingent on accessing its pahari landscapes. Bodily labor, understood as the adroitness and agility needed to sustain life - collect food and firewood, hike down to the bazaar, work the fields- is the currency of survival. Sociality too, is contingent on overcoming the landscape, as sparse pathways and pahari trails do not significantly alleviate the precariousness of steep topography. I will not detail here the events that led to Niaz’s injuries except that in 2002 as a result of a fall from an electric pole, his body, as Niaz describes “was rendered useless, it was destroyed.” Niaz’s bodily placements in Siran are at odds with the landscape, his refusal to accept the salience of his bodily confinements provides a valuable pause for threshing.

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223 Niaz relies on other people’s bodily labor to make up for his lack, he purchases it. E.g., he has to pay people to collect and transport firewood, carry maize to the mill etc.

224 Tuck et al., describe thresholds as not simply places of crossing from one state to another but “as places that demand pause to mark that passage,” necessary for the ethical integrity of the endeavor. See, Eve Tuck, Mistinguette Smith, Allison M. Guess, Tavia Benjamin and Brian K. Jones, “Geotheorizing Black/Land,” Departures in Critical Qualitative Research 3, no. 1 (2014), 58.
Image 47. An unusual tree formation. Landmarks such as these assist people in navigating the *pahars* and serve as sites of congregation. Niaz is precluded from embodying the landscape in these ways (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)

Image 48. Men transporting dowry to the house of newlyweds (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)
Niaz is only able to traverse space and geography (in their conventional sense) via a wheelchair which he can navigate somewhat independently (as long as someone can help him onto it). However, this form of mobility is only limited to the immediate vicinity of his room and the small adjoining courtyard which offer relative planeness, everywhere else, even the passage leading from his detached room to the rest of his family’s dwelling is un-conducive to the wheelchair. *Niaz is stitched and localized to location.* When asked if Niaz feels confined to his room, he responds: “The world is very vast, it is all a matter of the mind.”

![Image 49. Sunshine is a sought-after commodity in the shaded Siran valley. Residents joke how they have to “chase the sun” and constantly circulate within the *puhars* to catch sunlight (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)](image)

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225 In a way, I was not so dissimilar to Niaz in Siran. My body (though intact in most ways) was also rather ineffective in traversing the moutainscapes. Many sites and locations were inaccessible to me and I had to rely on extensive local support to move from point to the other, often with the help of a hiking stick and sometimes even the guiding hand of a stranger. Most of my research took place in people’s homes and homesteads, in this way, I too was stitched to location.
Image 50. Niaz can only “chase the sun” from his courtyard (photograph by the author)
During a participatory photography workshop, Niaz shared the picture of a wall-clock which decorates his room. He explains how the clock helps him regulate the day and introduce variance in it:

I live my life by this clock. In the morning, I get up, I look at the time and offer Fajr prayers [morning prayers at dawn], then I recite the Quran. Shortly after, my niece brings me breakfast. I keep track of time, and just after lunch, my brother helps me on the wheelchair and I sit in the courtyard. I spend the next several hours reading the newspaper and my books, reading and writing. At 5pm, I return to my room, onto my bed.

Image 51. The wall clock above Niaz’s bed (photograph by Niaz)
With the aid of his wall-clock, Niaz becomes a bit of a superhero with the power of “shifting time” and creates his own timescape in a life situation where routines are impossible to hold. An attention to time, allows Niaz to prevent the finite limits of his physical world creep into the unorderly, routine defying properties of the stillness of time. The clock, and abiding by it, allow Niaz to impose order and structure on his day, and create temporal rhythms to sustain himself. He muses on how time slows down during difficulty: “After my accident and after the earthquake, time considerably slowed down [it became difficult to pass the day, there was too much time]. Nowadays, the day feels very short but back then, I had too many worries.”

Niaz keeps abreast of global and national affairs by listening to his radio, particularly the USAID funded Voice of America (VOA) radio channel and BBC Urdu. The state-run FM radio is a close second favorite. He keeps in touch with his brother who lives in Lahore and his relatives by speaking with them on the telephone, which offers intermitted service throughout the day. Newspapers (whenever he can get his hands on them) and his cassette player also provide additional opportunities to transcend his location and travel elsewhere.

In the evening, propped up with pillows in his charpoi (string bed), he is visited by school children from the village who seek his guidance with their homework. “I love teaching children,” he shares “and I don’t charge them anything, fearing that if I do, they will stop coming.” Niaz is one of the few people in his village who have completed a BA degree. He has also completed a primary teacher certification (PTC). Both credentials were obtained via

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226 These are “transnational” radio projects run by the “international community” to provide locally directed “global” news in Urdu. These radio stations are very popular in Pakistan’s rural landscapes.

227 Phone service (wireless and mobile) only became common in Northern Pakistan after the earthquake in 2005. At that time, I was interviewing at a large phone company for an internship. During the interview, the hiring manager repeatedly asked if I can think of a recent event which changed the landscape of the telephone industry. I could not respond. I did not get the job and only later I learned that she was talking about the earthquake; how it opened an entire geographical region to telephone companies.

228 Niaz also makes it a point to phone me every year during the summer months when I am in Pakistan.
correspondence/distance education from a local university, several years after his injury.

While Niaz is isolated from much of the grittiness of village life by virtue of physical participation, he is able to invite the world into his court yard. In the evening time, after the children leave, men (neighbors, friends, family members) can be seen congregating in his courtyard. They come to him for his companionship but also to seek advice or for tasks such as writing/reading letters, filling forms, or just reading the newspaper. In exchange, they bring gossip and news. Others visit Niaz for no specific reason at all, but as part of their daily routines and affective investments in Niaz as a friend or family member.

Image 52. This is Niaz’s uncle. Ever since Niaz’s accident, he visits him regularly even during the winter months when mobility is constrained due to heavy rain and snow. Niaz speaks very highly of him (photograph by Niaz’s brother)
Niaz’s invitation of the world into his room and courtyard, offers some opportunity to contribute to his community and overcome the “shame” of not raising a family of his own. Niaz re-defines the nature of social expectations placed on him and draws our attention away from his bodily impediments to other features of life. He helps us understand the world as not only a physically situated place. He also fills in an important social gap (that of literacy) in his immediate village. Niaz wants to be known as a “literate” person, as someone elevated by

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229 On several occasions, Niaz expressed feeling shameful at not being able to raise a family of his own, reflecting the many demands placed on the male body. The heteronormative family unit is considered to provide the functional basis of community, a good “Muslim society,” and in turn a prosperous Pakistani nation-state. By not having a family of his own, Niaz feels he is unable to participate in any of these spheres of life.
education. He has a huge book selection which he keeps in a clear plastic bags in the store adjacent to his room. He explains: “I am planning on making a bookshelf, so I can neatly arrange them in my room and protect my books.”

There are material limits to Niaz’s expectations for life and his isolation is particularly accentuated during the winter months when life freezes, both literally and figuratively. Niaz explains:

During the winter season, it is so cold in my room, that I stay fixed onto my charpoi. It is even difficult to take my hands out of the blanket to read the Quran. It is almost impossible to do wudu [ablution performed with water before a prayer can be offered], and when I pray by taking my hands out from under the blanket [he prays lying down or sitting up], it takes me another half an hour to get warm again. When it gets really cold, I don’t even have the courage to offer my prayers.

During winter, Niaz essentially becomes a cocoon and finds it extremely difficult to fulfil his spiritual commitments. He explains: “Namaz (prayer) and reading the Quran, they take care of my heart. In the winter, I am unable to devote myself to either.” At another occasion, when asked what he misses the most about life before his injury, he responds: “That I could stand up and offer namaz.” It also becomes difficult for people to visit him in the winter months and he admits “no one can be here with me 24 hours in any case.” Niaz has to work extra hard during this time, to establish temporality, sequence, and variance in the wintery days and transcend collapsed space and time. It is the winter season, where Niaz’s bodily impediments make a strong comeback, and his loneliness and isolation are at their peak.
Image 54. The roots of the sumbal plant are valued for their medicinal properties. Its skin is peeled, and the roots are dried before being grinded down to a powder form. Sumbal is known for healing broken bones and bodily pains. After his accident, Niaz's mother made him regularly eat sumbal for over a year. It is combined with desi ghee (homemade clarified butter) and milk (photograph by the author)

**Dysphoric Disablement**

The source of Niaz’s most disabling and unhinging dysphoria was neither the earthquake (which devastated the entire region and activated millions of dollars of humanitarian aid), or a life-altering injury (which dramatically reduced his bodily abilities), but a seemingly trivial event which occurred within the nondescript folds of an interpersonal relationship. Niaz explains:

Getting injured was a life changing event, but the injury will pass [I will recover]. The earthquake was also very difficult. But there is one person in my life, who has served as the
role of villain. I can never forget what he did.

He refers to this person as the “worst man” in his life, the “villain.” Let’s call him Ahmed. Ahmed, currently a school teacher, was a close friend of Niaz: “He was also my student. He would often come to me for help when he was doing his own PTC (primary teacher certification) course, several years before I started my own. I would help him out where I can.”

Niaz states that to this day, he cannot forget how Ahmed betrayed him:

During my own PTC course, I had an assignment to submit. Usually, I ask my brother to post my letters but that day it was heavily raining. Ahmed was sitting with me and he offered to post the assignment as he was headed towards the bazaar. He took my assignment and promised to put it in the mail box in the bazaar. For the next few days, he stopped coming to my house. I sensed that he was avoiding me. Some more time went by, and I hadn’t heard back from the tutor [at the university]. I got worried. After several tries, my brother succeeded in persuading Ahmed to come see me. I asked him about the letter. He tried to avoid answering the question. Finally, he admitted, that he didn’t post it.

As a result, Niaz failed the PTC course. He tried to reason with his university tutors, but they would not grant him an extension. Niaz recalls:

This was the biggest setback in my life. I failed the PTC course. Ahmed purposely hid my assignment, so I wouldn’t pass the PTC and become a teacher like him. It took me another two years to recover from this. I finally re-enrolled and passed the course. Ahmed was jealous that I will also get a teacher job like him, or worse replace him, since he is
insecure in his abilities.

It took Niaz another two years to gather the financial and affective resources to pull himself together. While much of the course work for the PTC is completed via self-study at home, candidates are required to sit for final exams at the university’s campus in Mansehra (nearest city). Niaz’s trips to Mansehra are somewhat of a public ceremony and the entire village is alerted of his journeys. He relies on several people to make the travel possible, and in this way, the “public” participates in his educational quest and also place their own investments in it, raising the significance of the endeavor (and its outcomes). He explains the process:

With the help of neighbors, my brother places me on a charpoi which is then carried down [from his house] on their shoulders to the road below. The slope is steep, and it takes at least 4-5 men as I am a large man. From there, they help me onto a jeep [the road accessing Niaz’s village is modest at best and can only be navigated on a 4x4 vehicle]. The jeep then takes us to the bazaar. At the bazaar, my brother helps me onto a wheel chair and wheels me to the bus stand [the road in the main bazaar is relatively better]. At the bus stand, my brother [with other people’s help] seats me on the bus. My wheel chair is folded and placed on the bus roof top. Then the bus transports us to Mansehra. Upon reaching the bus stop in Mansehra, my brother helps me onto the wheelchair again. Then he wheels me to the university. The return journey is the same process. (The entire trip typically takes about 2 days to complete and usually involves an overnight stay in Mansehra. It is equally cumbersome to wheel Niaz into a hotel room as hotel buildings are not usually accessible).

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Niaz’s mother joked: “My son has lately gained weight, he has become fat.”
Image 55. The jeep needed to transport Niaz to the bazaar (photographs by Niaz’s brother)

Image 56. The public bus that takes Niaz to the city (photograph by Niaz’s brother)
It is only after this very public, labor intensive, and arduous journey which spans multiple hours and involves multiple bodies, that Niaz is able to reach the university in Mansehra. Niaz explains: “No one cares. I pass through Mansehra and Shinkiari [another city] and people don’t even look at me or move an inch. But they say, ‘get out of my way, what are you even doing here?’” Niaz shares details of an incident that happened during the examination:

The candidate next to me was cheating, he had some cheat notes hidden in his clothes. So, I thought that is a great idea, I should do the same! To be honest, I usually don’t cheat. This is mostly because I have far less options for cheating. I don’t have the same level of control over my body as everyone else, and I don’t have a lot of places to hide cheat notes, or the [bodily] ability to peak into a fellow student’s paper. Anyways, I was cheating from my cheat notes, but the exam invigilator caught me and forcefully yanked my notes away from me. He started scolding me: ‘Why didn’t you study for the exam? It isn’t like you have anything else to do. All these other normal people, have a lot to do in their lives [a lot of responsibilities], they don’t have the time to study. If they cheat, it is ok, but what is your excuse?’

It is mandatory to complete the PTC before one can teach at a public school. Being a school teacher is a highly esteemed and sought-after profession in Siran, as it comes with a modest but regular monthly salary, health benefits, and a pension. It is one of the few ways for residents to secure a job while staying close to home instead of having to migrate to urban

Incidents like these point towards the affective labor also demanded from Niaz to pursue education, in addition to the financial burden.
Pakistan for unskilled and precarious work. It is also a viable way for people to contribute locally to their communities, which is particularly important for Niaz. While Niaz has completed the PTC, he has still not applied for jobs. He explains:

I often don’t know of open vacancies till the deadline has passed. These are advertised in the newspaper and I can’t get a newspaper here, it is only when someone is coming from Mansehra, that they bring a newspaper with them. People here don’t share this information with me. They keep it to themselves, worried that if they tell me, I will create even more competition for that one job. The competition is intense and the number of positions every few.

He elaborates:

People pretend to be my friends. They sit in my house, talk with me, but withhold valuable information [of a job vacancy]. They are jealous of me. They believe if the most able bodied of men can’t even get hired, why should I?

Social DNA

"Disaster is like everyday life, but more so." - Rebecca Solnit

Niaz has witnessed at least three large natural disasters in his life. In 1992, a flood inundated Northern Pakistan (including Niaz’s village), resulting in widespread destruction and displacement. In 2005, Siran and the surrounding region was devastated by an earthquake and in
2010, unprecedented monsoon floods submerged the valley again.\textsuperscript{232} The latter two disasters which together affected over 25 million people throughout Pakistan and Kashmir, also opened the region to short-lived but intense humanitarian attention. I locate the act of betrayal by his former friend which unhinged Niaz within the wider social milieu in which it was situated. I draw particular attention to the 2005 earthquake and its long-lasting residual effects which possibly set the conditions for failure and compromise in social accountabilities.

Allison shows that the Tohoku earthquake in Japan forced people to reimagine the very meaning of what constitutes a “relationship,” altering how they related to one another.\textsuperscript{233} Petryna’s work on the Chernobyl disaster, shows how disasters can impact the very DNA of survivors, reconfiguring their biological citizenships.\textsuperscript{234} I focus on social DNA, how people are put together, and how disasters interfere with various forms of coming and being together. I start from the very locale of the village, understood as a set of inward and outbound relationships, a multivalent organizational site which negotiates nostalgia, emotion, and pragmatism.\textsuperscript{235}

Several of my research interlocutors viewed their social worlds with skepticism,\textsuperscript{236} highlighting the fragmentation that seemed to be initiated by the earthquake. Niaz’s mother remarks: “Life was hospitable, people were good. But after the earthquake, people have grown apart, love has decreased.” Niaz adds:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{232} Luckily, due to its elevation and considerable distance from water bodies, the 2010 floods did not cause much damage in Niaz’s village.
\item \textsuperscript{233} See, Anne Allison, Precarious Japan (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013).
\item \textsuperscript{235} Sara B. Shneiderman, “Regionalism, Mobility, and the Village,” Critique of Anthropology 35, no. 3 (2015).
\item \textsuperscript{236} Dodd describes skepticism as an “exercise of philosophical imagination that projects from any belief, any articulated position, the possibility, even necessity of reaching for an understanding of its very opposite—and then back again—in order to avoid becoming the dupe of settled and transparent beliefs.” See, James Dodd, Phenomenological Reflections on Violence (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), vii.
\end{itemize}
People’s willingness to care and feel for one another has also decreased. They no longer care to feel your pain. It is as if people’s insaniyat (humanity) has finished. There no longer any unity, people are only concerned about their own well-being.

These narratives highlight that natural disasters possibly place significant pressures on affective resources, which are material for keeping community intact in disaster aftermaths. These accounts also hint at a particular kind of moral breakdown, a re-orientation of previously held values and rules which governed social accountabilities. Niaz remarks: “Even the younger generations have become ill-mannered and disconnected from our morals and values since the earthquake. Love within families has decreased, even children don’t get along with their parents.”

Niaz was unable to explain why the earthquake reconfigured the social architecture of his village. But he (along with other research interlocutors) provide important clues that help us understand these micro-social breakdowns, the un-doneness of life in interstitial spaces, which when combined with a reading of modernity and climate change offer insights on the social breakages catalyzed by disasters. I elaborate this in the following sub-sections.

**Affective genres of life**

The earthquake created new forms of separation between landscape and people. Spaces and destinations became inaccessible as the landscape shifted and pathways and routes were destroyed. Niaz’s family (like many others) lost almost all of their livestock in the earthquake

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and have not yet replaced them. Since these animals served as critical conduits to the landscape, their absence provides lesser incentives to circulate in landscape. For example, houses with insufficient numbers of livestock no longer find it viable to migrate to the malis, further reducing social spaces available exclusively to women.

Loss of livestock, also indicates a reduction in the production of milk and dairy products. Niaz’s mother shares:

Desi ghee [homemade clarified butter] and milk have substantially decreased because we don’t have enough cows anymore. Since we don’t use as much milk and ghee in our foods, the flavor, richness, and aroma of our food has also decreased.

She adds: “Now there is a trend to use dalda [commercially prepared ghee sold in the bazaar].” Dalda is considered nutritionally inferior to desi ghee, Niaz’s mother explains: “Dalda has taken the breath out of our young people [they tire easily], people don’t have the courage or bodily capacity to work anymore [in the pahars]!” The reduction of livestock also means that residents have less access to manure and must instead purchase commercially prepared fertilizer, whose use was also heavily encouraged by the humanitarians. This has also changed the taste of vegetables and fruits. Niaz explains: “The sweetness of saag [mustard leaves] has decreased [from use of fertilizers].”

These narratives indicate that the earthquake led to a real diminishment in how food and by extension life is enjoyed and how bodies are embedded in landscape. The senses- smells and

238 Malis are abundant grazing pastures at high altitudes which are typically accessed only by the caretakers of livestock: women and children.
taste of food—shifted, as did bodily aches and pains (with newer routes and routines that opened).

The earthquake altered affective genres of life. For example, the common practice of sharing dairy products (milk, desi ghee, homemade cheese), amongst relatives, neighbors, and friends was interrupted by the earthquake and according to residents has still not been revived to the same level as before. The earthquake also rearticulated ideas of public and private shame. Selling desi ghee or milk was considered a taboo, as these are affective objects, only to be shared out of love and communal reciprocity. However, since the earthquake there has been an increase in the sale of these items as families struggle to get by. This way the earthquake contributed to shifts in understandings of pride, shame, respectability, and led to the commodification of gifts.

**Humanitarian vomit**

Humanitarian aid distributed after the earthquake and floods created intense competition in the region. Niaz explains:

Relief was unevenly distributed, without much consideration of who deserves it, so some of us got more and others got far less, despite being more deserving. We don’t know the basis on which relief was distributed. This created enmity, distrust, and, hostility amongst people. Those who received less accused those who got more of corruption, deception, and treachery.²³⁹

I met a man from an adjacent village who stated with much pride how after the 2010 floods, village elders blocked the entry of humanitarian assistance into his village. This decision

²³⁹ This is consistent with literature which shows that access to humanitarian assistance has to be actively sought after and managed, creating intense internal competition within communities. See, e.g., Jock Stirrat, “Competitive Humanitarianism,” Anthropology Today 22, no. 5 (2006).
was based on the experiences of social discord created by earthquake relief several years prior.

He elaborates:

Let’s say, I am the Nazim [locally elected public official] or the village elder. Any aid that goes into village will have to pass through me. Social expectations dictate that I must first channel aid to my own family members before channeling it elsewhere, regardless of who deserves it. If I don’t do that, my own blood relatives will hold a grudge against me for the rest of my life and will take every opportunity available to take revenge. Therefore, the village elders decided, that they would rather push through these difficult times then allow relief to destroy our community.

Local residents working with aid organizations, either as volunteers or paid staff, were also not immune to these pressures. Aid organizations relied heavily on local volunteers to facilitate their distributions and were often oblivious of local level politics that determined whom local volunteers directed aid supplies towards despite the presence of “beneficiary lists,” “operational protocols,” and “procedures.” During my research, I sifted through countless claims and accusations of how so and so only funneled relief into their own family. Humanitarian distributions also became sites where old scores were settled by community members (by denying assistance to specific families) or friendships and loyalties were renewed or developed (e.g., by sending the choicest of humanitarian goods to pre-selected households). Niaz shares an example:
I was shortlisted to receive a cow from a relief agency. But some jealous neighbors convinced the staff of the organization to cancel my name by saying ‘he is just a young boy, what will he do with a cow?’

The social and political capital gained by locally employed humanitarian staff or volunteers extends well-beyond the duration of their engagement. In fact, many of those who facilitated humanitarian assistance after the earthquake were again approached after the floods to take on similar roles, further bolstering their social positions. During my time in Siran (2014, 2015), I could easily identify such individuals and noted how much social power and capital they commanded, e.g., very impoverished households would periodically send gifts (such as corn from their own limited supplies or the choicest cucumber form their fields) to such individuals, perhaps with the hope that during the next humanitarian incursion, they would be remembered and prioritized for relief.

Aid also instituted new power structures, which sprang up to respond to the various demands of the humanitarian apparatus. This includes the “community-based organization” or CBOs, which facilitated aid organizations (much to the chagrin of landlords, elders, and political representatives). However, in parallel, the CBOs also worked to police and regulate aid into their own kinship networks and into specific constellations of locally held power. In attempts to bypass existing corrupt power structures, aid agencies inadvertently created parallel and equally corrupt power structures in the form of the CBOs themselves. The CBOs are true social innovations, run by big men (and sometimes big women) who have fully adopted the language of international development such as that of participation and gender equality. But CBOs are also
unique conduits of power, subjectivity, and politics which circumvent the humanitarian and development agenda by seeking local gains that are not always democratically shared.  

It is not uncommon today for every village to have multiple CBOs created along lines of caste, political affiliation, or any other difference. Competition for resources within CBOs and their constituencies is severe and has led to further fragmentation of communities. My research interlocutors expressed deep suspicion towards CBOs. Niaz remarks: “They are all thieves.” At later stages of the humanitarian operation, some aid organizations frustrated by CBO politics chose to bypass them, opting to attempt their own mobilization, creating even more organizational structures such as village councils and local committees. This led to even further fragmentation.

**Home as a site of social disarticulation**

The earthquake destroyed a large percentage of homes (along with other infrastructure) in the region. To facilitate their reconstruction, the humanitarian community channeled conditional cash payments to households only to be used to reconstruct houses based on pre-approved earthquake resilient designs. The new approved designs dismantled the joint family structure and proposed houses as single-family units, separating parents and siblings. The new designs were significantly different from previous forms of housing, which comprised of a shared complex (inhabited by the extended family), organized around a common kitchen. The new designs led to the fragmentation of the household and challenged sacred expectations and accountabilities of being and belonging to a family. Niaz remarks:

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240 As word of my research slowly spread, one night a bunch of angry men showed up at my guesthouse. They had notebooks and accused me of bypassing them for relief distribution. We spent several hours discussing that I am not an aid worker but a researcher. The conversation then shifted to why I did not approach them for my research. They threatened to black list me from the valley and print false accusations in local newspapers so that no one will cooperate with me in the future. They were the “big men” (executive team) of a local CBO.
Since members of the family no longer live together, their demeanor towards one other has significantly changed. Previously, I would see my parents, siblings, and their families daily. Now we are separated and sometimes I don’t see them for several days.

An emphasis on the separation of the kitchen also created novel distinctions between public and private spheres of domestic life, offering far less opportunities for mutual help and sharing. Niaz explains: “Previously it was easier to get by. We would sit together and eat. If someone lacked something, we could easily share, taking and giving was easier and acceptable. Now it is not possible the same way.” At another occasion, Niaz adds: “Previously when I was living with my parents and brother, I would always know what everyone was cooking and could ask for my favorite dishes. Now I can’t do this anymore.” The distribution of housing payments within families also led to much dispute and discord as there was no clarity on how the money should be distributed or operationalized in the context of a joint family.  

Infrastructure collapse was the leading cause of death in the earthquake. However, the older homes provided certain social contributions which were embedded in their very design. For example, their flat mud roofs (to be replaced by sturdy, sloped iron sheets after the earthquake) provided some relief to the steepness of the region and offered a semblance of flatness. The roofs served as social sites for people to come together (including women), to sit, have tea, exchange news and gossip without interfering with the privacy of the home and the gender segregation it demands. Men and boys would sometimes play kabaddi (a form of wrestling) on these flat(ish)

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241 The new housing designs actually worked in Niaz’s favor as his separate/detached room allows him to host people which would not have been possible if he was still living with his parents, as per strict expectations of gender segregation.
roofs and people could gather for various events such as to offer funeral prayers. The mud houses (pre-earthquake) also allowed residents to collect honey. Residents maintained special cavities in their mud walls for honeybees. The bees stopped coming once the materials changed to cement. Several residents expressed nostalgia at the lack of honey which was shared amongst family and friends. The new housing design interrupted sociality and took away the few social sites available in the pahars and contributed to their shrinking as opposed to their expansion.242

242 Unfortunately, sites like play grounds were also not a reconstruction priority. Young people reported a loss of cricket grounds after the earthquake and lamented the days when the entire valley would compete in a region wide cricket competition bringing villagers together in a festive mood.
Image 57. Men congregating on the flat roof of an older style house to offer funeral prayers. Newer constructions with sloping tin roofs can be seen in the background (photograph by Saeed Khan)
Commodification of mutual assistance

Humanitarian projects focused on the rebuilding of micro-public infrastructure through community participation. Hundreds of able bodied men were drafted into cash for work schemes which paid them to rebuild small scale community infrastructure such as water channels, roads, and sanitation lines. This led to the monetization of bodily labor outside of the regimes of formal work reducing the social incentives for people to help one another (and themselves). For example, before the earthquake residents would pool their labor to work on common projects or assist one another in a ritual process of coming together known as haashar. These were large gathering of men (young and old), who would willingly donate their bodily labor for tasks such as rebuilding a damaged road, or helping a neighbor repair his home, or tend to his fields. Food and tea was offered in exchange of people’s kindness, but no money changed hands. My research interlocutors reported a reduction in the size and frequency of haashars. One person remarked: “It isn’t the same as before, people don’t help one another without money.” Niaz adds: “People now only run after NGOs and beg for their help. If you tell someone that NGO personnel are in the village, they will leave everything and rush to them, even if they were praying in the masjid (mosque).”

The Betraying Body

According to Niaz, his body changed further after the earthquake: “Previously, I could prop myself up and even stand with someone’s support. But since the earthquake it seems as if my body has lost all its muscle, I can’t even sit up on my own anymore.”243 In the panic, chaos

243 Several other research interlocutors reported how their bodies changed after the earthquake. Chandni bibi, for example, insists she lost her eyesight as a result of the earthquake. See, scene six.
and dislocation that followed the earthquake, there was no opportunity for Niaz to focus on his bodily repair. He explains:

After my accident, the doctors had recommended exercises which they said I should regularly do. My brother [who lives in Lahore] helped build an exercise frame for me. It was a very basic foundational structure. It provided support for me to stand up and remain standing up for a short while. This structure was destroyed in the earthquake. In the 7-8 months after the earthquake, I didn’t do any of the exercises, nor was there any time/opportunity to repair the exercise frame. I was stuck/fixed to the bed and eventually the wheelchair. Till today, I am unable to stand up, my body isn’t the same as before.

Niaz continues:

There has been no opportunity to repair the exercise instruments. After the earthquake, we lived for two years in tents pitched on our land. After that, I moved to small tin shelter given to us during the relief for housing our livestock in the winter season. It was a tiny shelter (hardly 8 feet x feet), one could barely stand in it. I was there for 7 years before my room (in which I am currently in) was completed. *(When I first met him in 2014, he had just moved into his new room)*

The earthquake interfered with Niaz’s rehabilitation. His body as a site of repair was no longer a priority. Niaz did not once blame his family for this shift in priority, perhaps to protect them from my analytical intrusions. Instead, he identified his own body as letting him down: “I
also gained a lot of weight in that time period because of which I can no longer stand up.” Niaz’s body can also be understood as an important site of betrayal (and potentially repair) on account of its very refusal to maintain itself, taking attention away from family members who may have compromised his care.

**What to Revive/ What Not to**

*Why have Niaz’s exercise instruments not been revived till today, despite being crucial for his rehabilitation? What makes it through a disaster, what does not? And why?*

![Image 58. Remains of Niaz’s exercise instruments (photograph by Niaz)](image-url)
The tandoor (homemade underground oven) provides an interesting counterpoint to
Niaz’s exercise instruments, of something that did make it through the earthquake. The tandoor
is a rather technical and historical instrument in its own right. Its construction and use are
managed solely by women, knowledge of which is passed down inter-generationally. Niaz’s
mother remarks: “I learned to make the tandoor from my mother, who learned to make it from
hers.” The tandoor can be understood as a locally constructed, inter-generationally protected
instrument which points towards a moral and ethical community and demonstrates an attachment
to place in Siran’s “desolate” pahars. The tandoor points at cultural continuity, a historicity of
sorts. It is also a pragmatic tool, a production belt which reduces the labor of cooking by
allowing 7-8 rotis [bread] to be cooked at the same time. It even comes with its own set of
rituals. Niaz’s mother explains: “After it is built, we add sugar to the flour to make sweet roti [to
inaugurate the tandoor].” Its construction is rather technical, and a variety of grasses, soils, and
rocks are used, each providing different features to the tandoor such as reducing the amount of
smoke, regulating heat, providing insulation, and providing the correct texture for dough to stick
to. Niaz’s mother explains: “Everywhere we go [referring to the various transitory houses/places
of rest in the pahars on the way to the malis], we make a tandoor.”
Gordon argues the past (haunting social forces) control contemporary life in far more complex ways than presumed by social analysis.\textsuperscript{244} Zinn states that strategies to deal with uncertainty do not follow standards of instrumental rationality nor they are irrational but follow their own logic which works well under particular circumstances.\textsuperscript{245} Not every object-practice merits revival and not every revival reflects importance. Some object-practices are impossible to revive e.g., certain \textit{pahari} pathways can never be made viable again post-earthquake. Other object-practices were intentionally revived (such as the tandoor) and while some others were not

\textsuperscript{244} Avery F. Gordon, \textit{Ghostly Matters} (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{245} Jens O. Zinn, “In-Between and Other Reasonable Ways,” \textit{Health, Risk & Society} 18, no. 7–8 (2016).
(such as households who now only have a small number of animals no longer go to the malis). These choices do not merely reflect the importance of the object-practice of revival, but an assessment that despite their importance, they may no longer have a social place. Perhaps, they reflect a bygone era, a past life whose social value cannot be calibrated any longer, at least not in the same way.

The earthquake catalyzed the emergence of a new life-space, where food tasted and smelled different, and the body’s investments in the landscape changed, as did people’s disposition towards one another. Not all object-practices require revival in this new life-space. The decisions of what not to revive are also possible ways of grieving and commemoration, to render the experiences of the earthquake immortal and atemporal, as not just events of the past, but also of the present and the future. Instead of presenting a definitive answer to why Niaz’s exercise instruments are yet to be revived, I attempt to draw out the analytical space this opens for us. I develop this further in the next section.

**Muslim Futurities**

Niaz’s father passed away in 2014. His death revealed weaknesses in the continuity of his own care (after all it is the elders who reinforce social accountabilities), raising anxieties about the future. Niaz is worried who will take care of him, after his mother also dies. But the future is a touchy subject. Once I got scolded by a villager for asking how he is planning for his future, to which he curtly responded: “The future isn’t something that can be planned for, it can take so many different routes. All you can do is ask Allah for the strength needed to face whatever may come your way. Don’t ask us about the future.”

As a next life project, Niaz wants to complete his MA. He believes this will make
him more competitive for a teaching job. The open-air village school (whose building was
destroyed in the earthquake and never revived) is just a few feet away from Niaz’s home, yet
outside of his reach. Another irony of the situation is, that there is a current shortage of local
qualified teachers and the school board recently started to hire candidates from other parts of
Pakistan, bringing people to Siran who are not equipped to navigate its *pahars.*

Niaz is partly bewitched by the futurity offered by education, that of employment,
stability, and enlightenment. Niaz believes that the obstacles for a teaching job are not his current
bodily impediments (which he believes are temporary), or unfair hiring practices, but his lack of
qualifications. He shares: “There is a special quota for people with disabilities in government
jobs.” This also demonstrates a confidence in the state’s capacity to enforce rules and keep its
promises. While Niaz is hopeful to secure a teaching job, he admits:

There is no guarantee, I will even get a job. It is a matter of fate. But I am also studying to
learn about the world, to expose myself to newer ways of thinking and knowing. Education
and knowledge provide exposure, experience, and wisdom.

Niaz believes, that the purpose of life “is to be useful to others.” And an education helps
one move towards this goal. Niaz explains: “Whoever has understood the human [the qualities

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246 One teacher joked: “Many of us start the day with a prayer, we look up the *pahar* from the road and ask
ourselves; ‘do we really want to make this hike today?’” Another teacher remarked: “I am from the other side of the
country. One night I was sleeping in the village here, in the quarter they have given me, and I heard loud drumming
noises. I went out to see, it turned out the villagers were playing their drums to scare away monkeys from their
fields. Life is here indeed strange and different.”

247 Oppenheim and Stambach’s work shows that the mantra of education is being uncritically adopted by parents in
parts of Northern Pakistan who feel compelled to send their children to school without really understanding why.
However, in the case of Niaz, he is certain about the offerings of education. See, Willy Oppenheim and Amy
that make us human], has understood everything in the world [that is the knowledge needed to unlock all other forms of knowing].” He wants to do a MA in Islamic Studies, International Relations, and Pakistan Studies. He believes, mastery in these subject matters will equip him to be a better Muslim and Pakistani citizen.

*Why does Niaz insist devotion to a collectivity that does not adequately accommodate him, but rather carelessly expels him?* Some ways the state “expels” him includes the lack of social and physical infrastructure needed for his “unwieldy” body, therefore in many ways excluding him economically, socially, and politically.248 Yet, Niaz reflects the official narrative of the Pakistani state, where the Muslim subject is in congruence with the national (Pakistani) citizen and possible separations between the two are purposefully minimized.249 The labels of Pakistani, Muslim, and disability facilitate his conscription into the state as opposed to highlighting the experimentation and hybridity that better articulate his life. The social forces of education, Islam, state-making, further raise anxiety within Niaz. They constitute a multi-valent form of sabotage- a cruel optimism of sorts250 -a dissonant collision between the safety and stability they offer and the raw deals of life, which being a good Muslim, a good son, a good community member, or a good Pakistani citizen cannot ameliorate. Niaz is captivated by the goodness of education and high morality and purposefulness of Islam, which instead of safety

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248 However, in liberal political imagination, the potential for coercion, cruelty, outrage, disorder, and brokenness are abiding aspects of social life. See, Candace A. Vogler and Patchen Markell, “Violence, Redemption, and the Liberal Imagination,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 2-3.

249 With reference to the India-Pakistan Partition, Das asks: “Are there different ways of relating to territory than those that are catalogued in modernist discourses of nationhood that might have been brought into play in considering what it is to cultivate oneself as a moral person in this “new” land?” See, Veena Das, “Moral and Spiritual Striving,” in *Ethical Life in South Asia*, eds. Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 232.

250 Lauren Berlant theorizes cruel optimism as a way of understanding the injurious attachments we have formed to fantasies of the good life that are no longer sustainable in the present. See, Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011).
produce further anxiety. The future is a contradictory destination for Niaz, which demands good citizenship, but does not provide adequate recourse when desirable genres of life are interrupted (such as by bodily injury). 251

Conversely, Islam as Niaz embodies it, also offers the spiritual and affective resources— an ontological framework—useful for overcoming disenchantment with life and its failed plans. Niaz is convinced that his injuries are temporary, and he will regain full control of his body despite the doctors stating that he will never walk again: “This impairment is only temporary, a difficult phase of my life, it too shall pass.” Niaz elaborates:

Allah has given me the determination to persevere and see this difficulty through [referring to his injuries]. Some people say to me that I am foolish to hold onto the hope that one day I will walk again. But I don’t let their words sadden my heart. In any case, it is Allah who will decide, not them.

Niaz possess hope in his bodily abilities, that is exceeding and seemingly irrational. He does not understand his current disability as a detriment to his future since it will dissipate. Niaz’s hope is radical in its own way; it is relentless, incessant, seemingly illogical, un-learnable, exceeds the limitations of the world (the limitations of medical knowledge, the nation-state), yet enabling. 252 Niaz states: “I never give up. I never think that since my spinal cord is broken, I am

251 By future, I am referring to a liberal futurity promised by modernity (by virtue of both the technologies it validates such as education, but also rejects such as religion and spirituality).
252 Freire understands hope is an ontological need. He writes: “I don’t understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream.” He further elaborates: “Dreaming isn’t only a necessary political act, it is an integral part of the historico-social manner of being a person. It is part of human nature, which within history, is a permanent process of becoming.” See, Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope (London: Continuum, 1994), 2 and 77. On hope (and hopelessness) and climate change, see, Michael Safi, “Suicides of 60,000 Indian Farmers,” The Guardian, July 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/31/suicides-of-nearly-60000-indian-
useless.” On another occasion, he adds: “I can withstand Allah’s work [can hold steadfast through whatever Allah decides for me].” At the same time, Niaz’s hopefulness is based within reality, lodged in his body, a product of suffering, survival, and genius, an ability to live with each other despite inhospitable conditions. His hopefulness is the very “temporal structure and orientation of living sanely and ethically acting in the social world.”

It seems as if Islam as it is variously embodied by Niaz, provides him with the “capacity to aspire” and to anticipate his bodily revival. Hage calls this work of anticipation as waiting which indicates that we are engaged in and have expectations from life. Berlant captures this work as the “impasse,” which are “exemplary cases of adjustment to the loss of this fantasy [of the good life].” Povinelli understands this as forms of suffering that do not rise to the level of an event. And Wool uses the term endurance, as not the work of overcoming adversity, but “the practices of making do in a protracted moment of dire and even life-threatening uncertainty” which emphasize “affective modes of sheltering in place while waiting for a new genre of social life to emerge.”

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257 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 11.


259 Wool, “In-Durable Sociality,” 80.

260 Ibid.
Niaz’s work towards his future demands its own analytical space, a *Muslim futurity* which forms a robust point of departure from the unachievable safety and predictability offered by modernity.  261 Modernity constrains choices and responses (including to natural disasters) fixing the subject within unitary ways of being. By allowing the circulation of Niaz’s desires -*the life he invokes*—inspires some analytical courage, even if it does not provide answers to outstanding questions such as why his exercise instruments are yet to be revived.

*Doe the rationality of bodily repair unhinge the temporal pathways to Niaz’s desired future(s) in ways we cannot understand through our analytical intrusions?* 262 Is the choice of not reviving his exercise instruments, a reflection of the risky genres of life, necessary to express devotion to place; a process of experimentation, striving for an ideal never to be attained?  263

**Betrayal(s)**

A betrayal is a breach of trust. “Its threat lies precisely in its rupturing the invisible cohesion of community,” contesting how people are put together socially, morally, and ethically.  264 Betrayal dismantles the promises of modernity, reveals gaps, inconsistencies, and incoherence in its conceptual framework, unhinging the assumptions that allow for it very circulation.  265

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Natural disasters catalyze betrayals in interpersonal relationships and interrupt the social glue that keeps people together (or apart) as families, neighbors, friends, community members, and citizens. This is to say, disasters are atemporal, non-linear, and their consequences far exceed the parameters within which we tend to localize them. Loureiro’s work on post-earthquake Kashmir insists that many of the social changes that survivors ascribe to the disaster (particularly changed housing structures and social breakages) cannot be empirically attributed to the disaster.²⁶⁶ He argues that these changes were already taking place due to Pakistan’s changing national character and modernization.²⁶⁷ He believes, these narratives instead point towards the creation of a shared public myth, needed for people to move on and make sense of the past, present, and future.

Niaz is a queer body: he invokes anxiety in those around him and discombobulates along multiple scales and temporalities.²⁶⁸ His unwieldy and hyper-educated self, challenges and frustrates his peers. His pursuit of education is at once performative and public, the community “participates” in it. They rely on Niaz’s literacies and their futures (their children) also depend on him. In certain ways, they are invested both in his protection and sabotage, offering prayers for his safety and prayers for his demise (e.g., their jealousy and fear of the possibility that he may get a paid teaching job. Also, recall Niaz’s earlier complaint about how people around him do not share job vacancies with him).

²⁶⁷ Ibid.
²⁶⁸ Niaz is also an unmarried male of age. In this social landscape, unmarried men and women of age have a threatening presence though his current bodily impediments considerably reduce this “threat.”
Niaz points towards the plurality and multiplicity of experiences of natural disasters which cannot be conveniently distilled into the “social” and the “physical.”\(^{269}\) Niaz also teaches us something about marginality. While Niaz is excluded from his sociality by virtue of physical access, he has co-created an alter-sociality, that in his courtyard and room. While I have focused on the unpredictability and dissatisfaction of relationships, it goes without saying that many forms of relationships withstand breakages.

The earthquake produced several (sometimes divergent and contradictory) genres of life. Niaz operates with a hope, that is incessant, almost illogical, but radical in its enabling properties. He works towards a futurity which requires its own vocabulary and grammar. Niaz invites us to be courageous and develop a new language and gain the muscle to use it with confidence. He demands satisfaction with a lack of resolution and prompts us to appreciate contradiction as valid and purposeful.

Niaz stated a number of times that he is unable to enroll in the MA, his next life project, because of a lack of funds. He was given a generous stipend for his involvement with this research. In 2014, when I was leaving Siran, I suggested to Niaz that perhaps he should use the money to finally enroll in the MA. Next year when I was back in Siran, I asked Niaz whether he had enrolled, and he responded with a negative. Instead, he used the money to insulate his room by repairing the various holes and gaps in the roofing and walls. In 2015, Niaz was remunerated in a similar way and I again gently suggested that perhaps the money can be used for his MA this

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time around. In 2016, when I was in Islamabad, Niaz phoned me on Eid to wish me Eid Mubarak. I learned that he had still not started the MA.

*Why did Niaz not use the money to pursue his MA, a life project he was yearning for?*

Remember, Niaz told us that the winter season compounds his sense of loneliness? In fact, it becomes so cold in his room that at times he cannot even take out his hands from under the blanket to offer his prayers or recite the Quran. For Niaz, these are extremely important for nurturing his heart and are made more possible in a warmer room. Increasing the insulation of his room also means that his guests can stay longer with him and have more incentive to see him during the isolating winter season. Niaz also had an influx of visitors in the winter following his father’s death who came to offer their prayers and condolences. The act of insulating his room is a significant strategy of repair; one meant to protect and nurture his heart (by allowing him to engage in his spiritual endeavors) and enabling his alter-sociality to flourish in the winter months. It also meant more people can visit him and pray for his father, and in this way, he contributes to the safety and well-being of his departed father. This is a rare opportunity for Niaz to prove himself as a good son and responsible family member. Some of the money also went to his father’s funeral rites and burial ceremony. Niaz is now the head of his household, which means his future(s) cannot be disentangled from of those around him.

I am invested in understanding social repair as a heuristic device, a theoretical terrain to capture those life genres—mundane yet of important existential value—which are crucial for attaining livable presents and viable futures. Social repair captures how those immersed in ongoing structures of violence seek to carve out a hospitable life for themselves, despite constraint. In this way social repair stands distinct from “repairing the social,” the reconciliatory act of drawing relationships closer. Rather, it encompasses coming to terms with the fragility of
the normal\textsuperscript{270} and dismantling the “feelings of skepticism” embedded within a “frayed everyday life.”\textsuperscript{271} It is a modest process of advancing one’s claims and responding to those that are placed upon you-a negotiation, a vigorous shuffling of feet, a dance- a graceful way of inhabiting the world.


\textsuperscript{271} Das, \textit{Life and Words}, 9.
My mother gestures with her heart,
I let her guide the way.

The city has shrunk,
I turn her away.

The city is a stranger,
I miss her guiding heart.
Is social repair the affordance of the political? I examine the biography of Amal: mother, midwife, and resident of Neelum valley, Pakistan administered Kashmir. Amal successfully raised a family with her husband during the height of the Kashmiri liberation movement until his untimely death in 2014. Amal leaves for work every morning, hoping that the spiritual rewards of her medical services will bless her deceased husband. In a volunteer capacity, Amal also advises pregnant women in their communities against a backdrop of lacking health services, difficult topography, and other gendered features of life in the disputed region. By examining Amal’s life as a series of heterogeneous empirical truths, I offer reparative readings of social repair and political life. Social repair can be understood as the smallest of gestures that convey regard for one another, delicate acts that not only unfold in the adjustment and crafting of moral spaces within existing socialities, but also in the creation of new socialities altogether, which may even transcend the limits of this world. These shifting relations are also sites of making assertions and advancing political claims instrumental for improving one’s conditions of life or further anchoring one’s positions in an otherwise inconsistent, contradictory, fraught, and fragile sociality. Amal is a Kashmiri, Muslim woman who demands her own vocabulary and grammar. She helps us consider that the political is not amenable to tautological or teleological thinking nor does it have a singular texture or erotics or timescape.
“I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring…an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. All the better.” - Michel Foucault

Walby asks: What can we know of violence and how? Violence is multiply located and cannot be reduced to a single medium of interpretation. Perhaps it is a pre-condition of engaging with the world. It is slippery, tenuous, and can slide between the particularities of pain and the generalities of an intellectual category. It is at once “material and symbolic; structural and aberrant; collective and individual; visible and invisible; legal, extralegal and illegal; brutal and subtle; sporadic and everyday; and spectacular and banal.” It can be simultaneously destructive, reproductive, and productive. Violence can end life or diminish, unhinge, and constrain those living in its midst. It can catalyze a breakdown of meaning, but can also be “ennobling, redeeming, and necessary to the continuance of life itself.” In fact, violence can

276 Jane Kilby, “Introduction to Special Issue,” European Journal of Social Theory 16, no. 3 (2013), 263.
become a life form mediated by its own actors, cultural codes, and legitimacies, producing
genres of life that are not outside of violence but exist despite of it.279

Feminist and other allied writings have sought to reveal how violence is actualized via
gendered processes and discourses,280 that violence not only impacts gendered bodies
differently,281 but it explicitly seeks and targets them.282  Some writings focus specifically on the
negotiations of gendered bodies with violence, and seek to provide language that recognizes
their agency in settings of constraint.283 Others have argued that gendered bodies are not
necessarily only targets of violence but can also partake in its infliction.284 Perhaps the most
ground-breaking contribution has been the insight that violence manifests itself prominently at
the intersections of race, class, ability, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and gender.285 While we have
sharpened our abilities to grapple with the multiplicity of social identities in relation to violence,
how injury can be situated at their intersections, what about the multiplicity of violence itself?

I write about Amal who lives in Neelum, Pakistan administered Kashmir. Amal works as
a midwife in her community but is also a mother, a wife, and a Kashmiri, Muslim woman. As
described in the opening scene, due to its proximity to the Line of Control (LOC, the arbitrary border that divides Kashmir into Pakistan and India), Neelum was at the forefront of the Kashmir liberation movement of the 1990s. During this time period, Neelum was at the center of some 14 years of unpredictable cross border firing between Pakistan and Indian armies stationed across the LoC. A shaky ceasefire was eventually reached in 2003. In 2005, the region was hit by a large earthquake and in 2010 by severe monsoon floods. Together, the two disasters disrupted the lives of some 25 million people throughout Pakistan. Despite this, Amal successfully raised a family with her husband until his untimely death a few years ago. For Amal, there is no before, during or after violence, it is omnipresent, always life-shaping, chipping away constantly, inescapable.

Every morning, as Amal leaves for the health center where she works, she hopes that the spiritual rewards of her medical services will bless her deceased husband. In a volunteer capacity, Amal also visits pregnant women in their homes and advises them against a backdrop of lacking health services, isolation, difficult topography, and other gendered features of life in the disputed region. Amal demonstrates that social repair or the creation, maintenance, and extension of ethical life amidst and despite violence, not only unfolds in the crafting of moral spaces within existing socialities, but also in the creation of new socialities altogether, which may even exceed this world. These adjustments not only sustain Amal but also strengthen her embeddedness within Neelum’s pahars. Neelum with its irregular topographical and spatial (dis)orderliness is an extension of Kashmir and its disputes. Life in Neelum demonstrates that we cannot disentangle an understanding of social repair and political life from landscape, which acts both as a container and stage for all social relations.

In this chapter, I offer reparative readings of social repair and political life. I draw attention to chronicity and the inadequacies of categorical thinking for examining spaces of diminishment or responses to it. I explore what bearing this may have on how we understand social repair and political life as mutually constitutive. The chapter focuses on how people acknowledge one another with acts of kindness via an “ordinary ethics” which holds in highest esteem the “delicacies of maintaining regard for others through the minutest of gestures.”\textsuperscript{287} An attention to how people lead ethical lives offers important entry points into understanding the injuries of violence and responses to it. This then also becomes an investigation into epistemic harms: \textit{Which dimensions of violence are revealed and which responses to it are legitimized? Why? What is left unsaid and at whose expense? Or put more succinctly: What is at stake at acknowledging or denying one form of pain over another?}\textsuperscript{288} Mani suggests an analytical sophistication beyond the “dialectic of subjugation and resistance.”\textsuperscript{289} She writes: “There is more, much more to be said; and prior to that, even more to be noticed and restored to the center of our consciousness.”\textsuperscript{290}

\textbf{Kashmiri as Political Subjectivity}

Why is it important to recognize the political in conjunction with social repair? This question is important in the context of Kashmir, where the maintenance and extension of daily life and relationships cannot be disentangled from the fragmentation and dispersion brought on

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.
by occupation. Visweswaran asserts that while the central goal of occupation is control of land or territory, occupation also seeks to “violently remake the culture of subjugated people by changing its internal fabric of patterning.”

Residents of Neelum, as in much of Pakistan administered Kashmir, identify as Kashmiri (not Pakistani), which calibrates the body in particular ways. This claim is supported by formal tools of governance, such as the internal borders separating Pakistan from Kashmir, which have the semblance of an international border. Similarly, Kashmiris carry differently marked national identity cards reflecting their unique status within Pakistan. Visitors from Pakistan are only tolerated as tourists and ancient customary laws prevent non-Kashmiris from purchasing land anywhere within the territory. Kashmiri is at once a distinct cultural, ethnic, and place-based identity but also a political subjectivity tied to the “reclamation” of Kashmir. There is no real consensus on what this reclamation may or should look like, reflective of the inherent contradictions in attempting to “define” political life.

An important avenue for exercising Kashmiri political subjectivity has been recruitment into the mujahideen forces (locally known as freedom fighters, but internationally as cross-border militants and terrorists), an armed, non-state transnational group, fighting for the liberation of Indian administered Kashmir, secretly and opportunistically supported by the Pakistani state. Neelum due to its close proximity to the LoC and dense forestscapes served as a strategic site for the accumulation of mujahideen soldiers. This resulted in some 14 years of cross-border conflict in the region until a shaky ceasefire was eventually reached. The ceasefire is not a permanent resolution to Kashmir, and the region remains animated by anxiety. While the ceasefire inspired

relative peace between India and Pakistan across the LoC, it did little to minimize the violations committed towards Kashmiris on either side of the LoC.

The mujahideen remain a controversial topic in most moral and political registers, but they did constitute an important avenue for exercising one particular form of Kashmiri political subjectivity. Numerous residents, typically men, readily took up roles of foot-soldiers, porters, and guides with the mujahideen. My interviews with former mujahideen as well as their family members, reveal that these choices were motivated by a strong political consciousness but also occasionally bolstered by an economic prerogative. Even if residents did not directly engage in battle, they readily provided shelter, food, medical assistance, and clothing. A resident remarked: “Everybody was implicated with the mujahideen. We all gave whatever we could and contributed according to our circumstances. There isn’t a single household who didn’t support them, at the least we welcomed them into our communities.”

The mujahideen took shelter within communities, using Neelum as a base to launch attacks into Indian administered Kashmir. Local residents assisted them in crossing the LoC through the heavily forested pahars which they intimately knew. From 1990-2003, when the movement was at its peak, Indian soldiers stationed across the LoC would retaliate by opening fire and launching mortar shells into communities suspected of harboring the mujahideen. The Pakistani military would respond in a similar fashion, endangering the lives of Kashmiris on the other side of the LoC. During this time, Neelum was cut off from the rest of Pakistan and everyday life was brought to a standstill. In addition to loss of life, injury, destruction of infrastructure, and discontinuities in people’s life plans, the conflict also created its own affective regime. One resident shared:
When I was in grade 5, a bunch of girls [including me] decided to commit suicide. We thought that the odds of getting shot or killed by a mortar shell are so high, so why not take our own life to escape this unpredictability of death? So, we all gathered around a bottle of black ink, and we drank it, closing our eyes hoping to never wake up. We were so disappointed to learn that we were still alive.

Image 60. This is Arif’s father who disappeared from Neelum while working as a porter for the mujahideen. The mujahideen only enjoyed the tacit support of the Pakistani military (in the form of training and weaponry), this meant the fighting was unregulated and guerrilla in nature, and that there were no diplomatic channels available to negotiate the release of prisoners of war. Many Neelum residents remain missing to date, either captured or killed by the Indian military (photograph by Arif)
After the ceasefire, the Pakistani state curtailed support for the mujahideen in line with new pressures brought on by the events of 9/11, dramatically diminishing the scope of mujahedeen operations. Opinions on the peace deal are divided indicating the multiplicity of Kashmiri political subjectivities and desired ways forward. Some residents welcomed the ceasefire and the return to relative normalcy:

When the firing stopped, it felt so strange. There were no longer loud noises, or cancellation of classes [school], we could even go out freely and roam around on the streets. It felt as if a new life was breathed into the valley.

Others consider the ceasefire as yet another betrayal of the Pakistani state. A resident remarked: “What was all this suffering and blood shed for? These 14 years of compromise, all are lost, there is still no resolution for Kashmir.” Despite the ceasefire, Neelum remains heavily militarized and the valley is dotted with numerous military cantonments and checkpoints. Cross-border firing also flares up occasionally. In addition to the military, the Pakistani state also maintains its presence - a silent, watchful encroachment - via the branches of local government, such as the departments of forest and fisheries. In Neelum, the forests and waterways are a perpetual battleground between the state and residents, who rely on the forest for firewood and food, and the waterways for fishing. Forests are a site of daily negotiation where certain legal limitations exist regarding what is acceptable as firewood and what is not. Foraging for saleable mushrooms and medicinal plants is strictly forbidden. Forest guards, many of them local residents, patrol the landscape in an ambivalent allegiance to Pakistan. Enforcement staff from the fisheries department monitors popular fishing spots and issue fines to those who break the
law. To circumvent these restrictions, villagers typically cast their fishing nets late in the evening after the department’s employees have gone home, and collect them early in the morning before the law enforcers arrive for duty.

![Image 61. Trout fish “illegally” caught from the Neelum river. Residents professed a certain affective attachment and pride in the local fish of Neelum. One boy remarked: “Once we caught a trout, it was huge, its bones were like stars, solid and sparkling, like diamonds or pearls” (photograph by the author)](image)

It can be argued that the Pakistani state is interested in the gradual assimilation of Kashmir; its homogenization and subsequent erasure as being nothing but Pakistan. Therefore, for some Kashmiris, a quest for Kashmir includes efforts at maintaining, preserving, and extending unique Kashmiri cultural forms while remaining anchored in place. This includes speaking traditional languages, remembering the historical boundaries of unified Kashmir
including its former provinces and governance structures, as well as ensuring the circulation of cultural practices particularly amongst the youth.

Image 62. Students dressed in “traditional” Kashmiri attire perform a skit in a school function in Neelum. Due to the expansive nature of the former princely state, there is no real consensus on what constitutes as a “traditional” Kashmiri dress (photograph by Saeed Khan)

The unassuming and silent encroachment of the Pakistani state can also be observed in the most quotidian of spheres, such as at the dinner table (or dasterkhwan, a cloth spread on the ground where the family gathers to eat), where local foods are rapidly being replaced with those from Pakistan. Pakistani cuisine is perceived by residents as fashionable and culturally superior. Practices such as living off the land, growing and harvesting vegetables, are increasingly seen by
residents as anachronistic to modern life, and as contradicting the teachings of modern-day education. Young women often complained how difficult it is for them to complete their schooling while continuing to tend the land and livestock which has traditionally been their responsibility. An interlocutor explained how after the death of his grandmother, his family is unable to keep up with growing vegetables:

My mother hasn’t taken the same interest, she does maintain our vegetable garden but not at the same scale. Now we produce enough just for our consumption. My mother waters the garden every other day. But it is difficult for her too, as she doesn’t have much spare time, because now she works in the education department. We also don’t keep any maal movehsi [livestock] nor do we rely on firewood, we use gas cylinders.

Image 63. Sonchal, a leafy spinach found in abundance in Neelum (photograph by the author)
Scaffolding

Before I turn to Amal to elaborate on what I mean by reparative readings of social repair and political life, and the interlinkages between the two, I briefly examine the conceptual terrain that will assist me in doing so. I approach this in relation to the subject position of Muslim and the challenges a gendered Muslim subjectivity poses for the “reading” of political life. I do this in preparation for engaging substantively and carefully with Amal.

Reparative readings

The subject of violence is resistant, ambivalent, and if I dare, phenomenologically contradictory and ethnographically untenable, making any discursive project deficient. To move forward from this impasse, I find Sedgwick’s work on reparative readings useful. Sedgwick dispels the myth of exposure. She writes: “As though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction.” Sedgwick forms her point of departure from contemporary critical thinking which in its over-investment in a close reading of the world does not consider the myriad of ways the reader may also reshape the deep truths that are offered. She asserts that critical analysis lets itself down in its meticulousness and definitiveness, by seeking to defend itself against every position of criticism. Instead, Sedgwick offers the notion of reparative readings, which are “additive and accretive,” and emphasize “generating concepts that add to the complexity and inclusiveness of our representations, rather than trying to prescribe the right

292 I approach phenomenology as related to life worlds and lived and felt experience. I am drawing attention to the limitations of both phenomenological and ethnographic investigations and their attempts to “capture” the subject.
293 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Touching Feeling (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 139.
295 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 149.
revolutionary path.” Reparative readings allow us to consider the importance of imperfect and incoherent stories and the “open unexpected conceptual possibilities, ways of thinking, gestures, and tones” which they offer. Sedgwick writes:

Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently than it actually did.

A reparative position picks up “fragments to construct a sustainable life,” and instead of a selective, tautological, and teleological readings of the world, offers uncontained responses to “political injuries and perhaps even new political futures.” Sedgwick further clarifies:

…the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of culture— even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.

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298 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 146.
301 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 150-151.
**Social repair**

Social repair delineates how the sense of self is reclaimed, the social is transformed in a web of relations, and the everyday is recreated in ways that not only overcome the hurdles of the present but also estimates an undefined but hospitable future. It is an exercise of “reconnecting of parts of self that have been disconnected - parts of self, and self to others.” It may include actions, articulations, and embodiments that “reconstruct social relations, negotiate strategies for coping with disruption, and to get on with daily life” though not always with that schematic definitiveness. It is the social labor that must be performed to work through conditions of violence, to regain a sense of wholeness. Repair is also pragmatic and concerned with everyday tasks of having enough to eat or a roof on one’s head without any pretenses of some “grand project of recovery.” It is thoughtful, thought-out, and processual, but also “messy, elaborate, layered.” Repair involves material and philological risk-taking, its animacy is marked by “viral proliferation” then grammatical predictability.

**Political life**

“When you define something, you say whatever falls within the definition, I will observe, whatever doesn’t, I will leave. This is a very conservative approach to research, and if you let

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308 By philological risk-taking, I mean that for its adequate articulation, social repair requires language that is new/novel, and which takes risks in what it chooses to communicate, how it communicates, what is left unsaid, and what is implied between the lines.
me, a very conservative approach to politics.”

-Didier Fassin

Political life captures the negotiations over the value of human life and the sort of life people may or may not live. It captures the contestations of “living together in and through the spaces that this sharing constitutes.” Arguably, these contestations are relational and expressed within the realm of social action, constituting “individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting.” It draws attention to genres of co-existence and struggles for compatible forms of life. The political is also about inter-subjective encounters and how we engage with the world as we are rendered vulnerable by each other.

These are helpful starting points, but there is something unsettling about the way political life is defined as a struggle over humanness where the human is understood as a stance or a gradient that can be lost, regained, reconfigured, recalibrated without challenging the very assumption that humans can be reduced to “non-humanity” in the first place. The political is also imagined as requiring an audience, a strictly relational project- a story that must be told or

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313 Erin Baines, Buried in the Heart (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
315 Mani, “Writing the Present.”
317 Terms such as “bare life,” “camp,” “social death,” and “sites of exception” have gained currency through the works of Giorgio Agamben and Primo Levy - inspiring an entire genre of very problematic literature which considers it acceptable to conjecture what constitutes a loss of humanity and what does not and when a person stops being a human. Others have made similar arguments, usually with reference to the discourse on human rights or law which constitute particular bodies as human and others as subhuman, inhuman, or bestial through articulations of vulnerability, empowerment, or the choices they have made. See, e.g., Faisal Devji, “Militant Poetics,” The Wire, June 2015, https://thewire.in/3458/militant-poetics-what-taliban-verse-says-about-us-and-them/ and Shenila Khoja-Moolji, “The Making of Humans,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 42, no. 2 (2017).
performed in relation to someone. Or to put it differently, it is assumed that the political must gain contextual importance and resonance within one’s polis,\textsuperscript{318} forcing an uncomfortable return to separations between the public and the private. Sociality too is left unproblematised as being something desirous, as if the continuity of life involves a re-enchantment with sociality as opposed to drawing more attention to its very treacherous and jagged edges which cut, bleed, drain, and suffocate requiring not just a re-entry but different ontologies altogether.

The political also demands attention to its phenomenologies,\textsuperscript{319} the multiplicities of its sites of emergence,\textsuperscript{320} its processual nature, and its non-causal linkages with violence.\textsuperscript{321} Political life is the “unexpected newness, precise possibilities” that emerge through ordinary everyday engagements, as people carve their dwellings in the world.\textsuperscript{322} “What are the ways that the world claims you? And how do you respond to this kind of claim, from the position that you are in?”\textsuperscript{323}

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  \item[322] Veena Das as quoted in Kim Turcot DiFruscia, “Listening to Voices,” \textit{Altérités} 7, no. 1 (2010), 141.
  \item[323] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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The “untenable” political lives of Muslim women

“If you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves.” - Junot Diaz

Simpson asks:

What is it in the way that we imagine the political that might demand or suggest an easy answer? By “easy answer” one might think of a diagnostic, a characteristic of action, a statement of effect, rather than analysis that may course to the unthinkable?

In the context of the controversial Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) incident in Pakistan where both male and female madrassa students (students of a religious seminary) took up arms against the state, Shaikh argues that there were palpable differences in how women in this movement were received compared to their male counterparts. While the men were automatically branded as “terrorists,” the women elicited differential sympathy, drawing attention to the other kinds of trauma they must have endured due to their vulnerable positions, indicating a lesser form of political investment. Shaikh highlights that gendered processes are always at place (as are racial processes), when reading for political life.

*How is the political life of Muslim women articulated, if at all? I am not interested in converting the politics of Muslim women into essentialized private interests or social claims.*

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Rather taking inspiration from Junot Díaz’s quote above, I am interested in drawing attention to the wider ambit of political life that may not be captured via existing political theory which at its worst form of categorical thinking, denies a people their politics.

Al-Jazeera ran a story on how Palestinian women smuggle sperm out of Israeli prisons while visiting their long-term incarcerated husbands.\(^{328}\) The article quotes a doctor stating that his medical center receives one or two sperm samples every week. The article concludes that having babies despite their husband’s long sentences in prison, provides the women with hope and anticipation for their husband’s release, and allows them to partake in the normalcy of raising a family. The article offers various textures of political life without necessarily naming or claiming them as such. For one, hope in a space of chronicity (such as protracted military occupation) is political as is the investment of raising a family. There is also something to be said about the reproductive labor of Palestinian women. Increasing the number of Palestinian bodies (through the process of giving birth) in a life-space where their removal, erasure, and exodus is a prominent strategy of colonial occupation only highlights the malleability and adaptiveness of political action, how the distinctions between private and public are unhelpful, and that political life knows how to fly under the radar. Another example is El-Haddad and Schmitt’s masterpiece *The Gaza Kitchen*.\(^{329}\) The cookbook, a compilation of place-based Palestinian culinary traditions, offers beautiful photographs and delicious recipes. However, the cookbook also performs important political work without necessarily claiming its burden. It documents how Palestinian women maintain their culinary traditions and historicity in a space of


erasure, reflecting their own claims to territory as intertwined with “the intimacy of the Palestinian struggle.”

Zunera Ishaq, a Pakistani woman (and now Canadian) refused to take off her niqab (veil) during the Canadian citizenship ceremony and was denied citizenship according to the rules in place at the time. Zunera took the case to court and was eventually allowed to take her citizenship oath while wearing the niqab. In a radio interview, Zunera explains that it is her religious (Islamic) duty to cover her face in public spaces. She goes on to say that it was a personal choice (to not unveil herself) and has nothing to do with politics (referring to how the issue was made a political debate during subsequent campaigns of the Canadian Conservative and Liberal parties). For most part of the interview, Zunera invests in the language of discrimination, free choice, and identity, and classifies herself as a “Muslim niqabi woman” (a unique subset of Muslim women). Masuma Khan another Muslim woman, is a student at Dalhousie University. As an executive member of the Dalhousie Student Union, she publicly denounced Canada Day celebrations planned to mark the country’s 150 years of existence. She called the celebrations an ongoing “act of colonialism” referring to the erasure of First Nation communities. She tweeted: 

*White fragility can kiss my ass. Your white tears aren’t sacred, this land is.*

Her tweet was met with a huge backlash, including calls for disciplinary action by the university, as well as racist and inflammatory twitter blasts. One opponent tweeted: *You Fucking Muslim Cunt. I hope you get your Fucking Ass Kick in. Allah Sucks Mohammds Jew Cock. I*

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would choke you in That Habib you Ugly bitch. Masuma tweeted back: At this point, fuck you all. I stand by the motion I put forward. I stand by Indigenous students. ... Be proud of this country? For what, over 400 years of genocide? #unlearn150 #whitefragilitycankissmyass #yourwhitetearsarentsacredthislandis

Zunera and Masuma reveal different textures of what it may mean to be political. Both operate in modes that are perhaps contradictory to one another. Zunera extends her claims by arguing for her free choice to wear a niqab and emphasizes her identity as a “niqabi, Muslim woman.” Whereas, Masuma extends solidarity to indigenous students with her act of refusal to support celebration events on her university campus as a form of alliance building and feminist solidarity without drawing any attention to her own identity politics.

These examples show that the political does not have a singular texture or erotics or timescape. It is not amenable to tautological or teleological thinking. A definitional approach to the political is almost an oxymoron. Since by its very vocation, the political seeks to outmatch and outmode the very contours of its injury with perpetually increasing sophistication. How can we then instead nurture an enabling language, a sensibility, a considered gaze, a far more generous way of reading social reality, which allows us to appreciate and honour the political without destroying it by our attempts of legibility? Political life is work that is already taking place with or without us being on board. As Toni Morrison puts it, invisible things “are not necessarily not-there.” I now turn to Amal to further dwell on these ideas.

Life and Times of Amal

Amal lives in a village named “Sehri” which translates as “the flat top of a pahar” or a “place of descent.” To the un-acclimatized eye, the village appears anything but flat, yet generations of families have invested their lives here. The village is far from the nearest jeepable road (there is only one road really) and it takes me a good 2 hours to access her home via a series of steep and twisting pahari trails. I am incapable of navigating these trails on my own and am always accompanied by my research assistants (Shehzad, Fawad, Saaed, and Madam Nusrat) in various permutations, all whom call Neelum their home. We often joke how their responsibilities also include helping me traverse these pahars in addition to more “intellectual” work. In fact, the knowledge they carry in their bodies - the muscle memory needed to safely and rapidly navigate these trails- should not be considered any less valuable.

Sehri is the only home Amal has ever known. Much like her, her parents were also born and raised in Sehri, as was her late husband. This is where she got married, raised a family, and wants to be buried. “It is a privilege to die in one’s own home,” she shares. Amal’s modest home is surrounded by immediate and extended members of her family. By certain calculations, her entire neighborhood is constituted by family members of varying degrees of separation. Amal and her husband are paternal cousins and during their marriage of some 41 years, they successfully raised 9 children.

Amal works as a mid-wife at the only health center in this particular section of the valley. The center is classified as a “basic health unit” on account of the limited services it offers. At the time it was being supported by the United Nations system but ultimately falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health.
Image 64. The “basic health unit” in Neelum. It comprises of a series of small buildings which were gradually re-built after the 2010 monsoon floods with assistance from the United Nations system (photograph by Rafi Butt)

Getting employment in Neelum on a government salary, especially for a woman, is next to impossible. Amal explains how she managed to secure the job:

Our family [herself and some relatives] donated some 4 canals [measure of land] for the construction of the health unit. We sold it to the government at a modest price with the understanding that each one of us will get permanent employment at the health facility. After the facility was built, none of us got jobs. I fought them in court and worked unpaid as a midwife for 14 long years before I was finally put on a government salary of Rs. 2,500 per
month. My relatives still don’t have a job. They are bitter towards the government but also towards me. They take up every opportunity to harm me and my family. They go out of their way to do so. [Amal did not feel comfortable elaborating on the nature of these violations but expressed that they are significant]

Amal’s employment is a source of contention and jealousy in the village including amongst her relatives. She chuckles: “People in my village are extremely jealous, especially my relatives, that an illiterate woman such as myself managed to get hired on a government salary.” Amal never attended school and has no formal training as a midwife. She explains:

You know, I can’t read or write. We were altogether 5 children. Back then, educational facilities were very uncommon, particularly for girls. Instead we would spend time with the animals, take them for grazing, tend to them. There were only two girls in my entire village who went to school, one was named Abida Javed, and the other Zahida Akbar.

She laughs:

When my supervisor asks for a file, I retrieve it based on my own cleverness, as I can’t actually read. I have learned the different shapes of certain alphabets enough to differentiate one file from the next. Just by looking at the name of the file, without actually reading them, I know which one which is.

Most of Amal’s midwifery training has been hands on, she explains:
I am very observant and only attempt easy/straightforward cases. I look at the mother, the placement/angle of the baby, and decide if I can facilitate child birth. If I feel the baby is tilted or something else is wrong, I don’t even touch her, I refer the mother to the nearest hospital [which is a few hours away by car, there are no doctors or trained nurses in this health unit, just her, a dispenser, and a clerk.] Other than this, I can do first aid, I can bandage, I clean people’s vomit, I clean their wounds, and drain puss.

Amal believes humor when used kindly can make life pleasant and by extension more livable. In some cases, it can even make people feel better. She quips:

Life is a gift and it is my duty to spread joy. When a serious patient comes to me, I console her and make her laugh. I reassure her, that she will be okay and in the grand scheme of things, her suffering is insignificant. With laughter, encouragement, and kindness, I am able to significantly alleviate her pain.

**Chronicity**

Amal recalls life during the 14 years of cross border firing in Neelum:

Life was extremely difficult during this time. Our children would usually take cover under the rocks [in a cave, for protection]. The mujahideen would be hiding in the forests and the Indian army would fire at them from across the border. The Pakistani army would retaliate. We would hardly have enough food. The men would attempt to make their way in the night to Athmuqam [the nearest urban center], often on foot, sometimes in a jeep with the
headlights turned off to avoid detection from the Indian army. Other times, a man would walk ahead of the jeep with a white cloth to direct the vehicle across the treacherous geography in pitch darkness. My husband and my son would barely make it back to the village with a sack of wheat, that the firing would restart. Many people died during this time.

Amal continued to work uninterrupted in the health unit. She remembers: “Sometimes it was very difficult to even get home from the health unit. It takes over an hour each way. Often times, I would be stuck at night at work, waiting for the firing to stop.” Barely two years after the ceasefire, an earthquake struck the region. Amal recalls:

After the earthquake, the prices of food went significantly up. We would get a small packet of salt for Rs. 20. Sometimes we would get to eat, sometimes we wouldn’t. This unpredictability is part and parcel of daily life. The earthquake destroyed our house, but we received some money for its reconstruction. I was on duty that day. The building of the health unit collapsed, there was dust and rubble everywhere. We were all in a state of panic and didn’t even recognize each other. My children were young at that time. I was worried that everything including them had ceased to exist. Many of us were shifted to camps, but life there was beyond humiliation.

She continues:

Then the floods came. If something would ordinarily cost Rs.5, it would cost four times
more during the floods [again the region was cut off]. We would boil vegetables and feed them to our children [this is an aberration, as under normal circumstances, vegetables are typically curried or cooked with oil and spices]. I saw 3 people being swept away by the water with my own eyes. They only found 1 body. We were surrounded by water on one side and mudslides [rocks and mud loosened by the heavy rainfall and flood waters] on the other. The water destroyed our crops and fields, which we still haven’t been able to revive [as flood waters deposit multiple layers of silt, which can only be removed with heavy machinery].

Amal draws our attention to the nature of violence in Neelum: its magnitude, persistence, and repetitive attributes. She helps us understand violence as chronicity; a constant and continuous presence that lodges itself within the rhythms of daily life. To the point, that it serves no real purpose to differentiate the conflict, from the earthquake or floods. Nor do the temporal vestiges of pre- and post- (conflict/disaster) offer any substantive analytical value.

*Mir sahib*

In 2014, Mir sahib, Amal’s husband died of a heart attack. Amal describes the day of his death as the “worst day of her life” and remembers it as the “biggest disaster she has ever faced.” She recalls the days leading up to his departure:

He told me 15 days prior to his death, that he dreamt of a man calling out his name and saying; ‘prepare yourself for the journey [the journey of death].’ As he was recalling this dream to me, he said: ‘We live in a world of false promises and deceit’ and he laughed,

336 Sahib [masculine] is a marker of respect and is added in front of a name.
with so much gusto and energy, as when he used to laugh when he was a young man. The deception was that he died and left me alone.

Amal remembers her husband with much warmth and love. Her voice quivering, she draws attention to his numerous gestures of love and devotion:

My husband, Mir sahib was very devout and kind, he wouldn’t even let me collect firewood [which is commonly the responsibility of women] and I would rarely cook [he would instead]. He looked after me, the way a mother looks after her favorite child. When I would be on duty [at the health unit], in the evenings he would wait for me halfway on the path and we would walk back up together to our home. He was also a devout father. When he was in the army, he was once posted in Kail [Kail is further up the valley] and would trek through several feet of snow to come see his children. This is why I feel so lost without him, he has abandoned me, leaving me completely alone and desolate.

Amal’s intimacy with Mir sahib did not discontinue after his death. She shares:

After hours [after her duty at the health unit is over], I often go into villages to check on pregnant women. I give them advice, medicines, and administer necessary injections. This isn’t part of my job [it is volunteer work]. Sometimes, I am at home, women come and fetch me if there is an emergency. I don’t accept money from anyone, but in my heart, I hope that the spiritual rewards of my services and hard work will reach my husband. He was a very generous and charitable man, and I do all this [volunteer work] for him.
Amal continues:

I keep his memory alive in my heart. I remember him every time I pray namaz (prayers), every time I eat something that is delicious, he is always in my heart. When someone wrongs me, I forgive them, and hope that the reward of granting forgiveness will enrich and bless my husband’s soul.

**Death is the Best Remembrance**

“And now? We bury the dead and take care of the living.” - The Marquis of Pombal (on being asked what should be done after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755) 337

An episode of the podcast *This American Life* narrates the story of man named Itaru in a small coastal town in Japan. 338 To deal with the death of his cousin, Itaru installs a phone booth in his backyard which he uses to “call” his dead cousin. In 2011, this town was devastated by a tsunami and earthquake which killed thousands along the coast. Soon after, word of Itaru’s phonebooth got out and hundreds of people from the region (near and far) begin visiting the phonebooth to “talk” to their loved ones who either died or were still missing from the tsunami. A *New York Times* article details the story of another Japanese man who continues to search the sea for his wife who disappeared in the tsunami some five years ago, joined by a father hoping to find his daughter.339 The article states:

337 Quoted in Miguel Loureiro, “Of the Earthquake and Other Stories” (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2012), 73.
The search for love, the search — his, hers, everyone’s — is not for a needle in a haystack, nor a fish in the sea. It’s for a specific person on earth. The world never looks as big as when someone is lost.

An episode of the reality TV show *Come Dine with Me* (Canada), features a home-cook who places his mother’s ashes in a pair of maracas, which he shakes at every party he hosts, since his mother “was the life of the party.”

Amal’s continued devotion to her husband even after his death demonstrates (much like the examples provided above) that intimacy between loved ones does not cease after death, that the relationship between the dead and the living requires continuous maintenance, and that both hold the capacity to influence each other.

Amal helps us understand social repair as the minutest of gestures that convey regard for the other, unconducive to visual spectacularism, or to our narrative expectations.\(^{340}\) She provides us with grammar, an approximate vocabulary to capture those unnamed, minute gestures that convey care and consideration. Her use of laughter and humor to comfort her patients is one form of such reciprocity, as is her volunteer work, and continued devotion to Mir sahib. She shows us that these delicate acts not only unfold in the crafting of moral spaces within existing socialities, but also in the creation of new socialities altogether. Her commitment to Mir sahib even after his departure can be understood as extending relationality beyond the living, a *sociality that exceeds this world*.

\(^{340}\) Adelman and Kozol, “Ornamenting the Unthinkable.”
Is Social Repair the Affordance of The Political?

Simpson argues that the heuristics of recognition, repair, resilience, resistance, revolution, are all chronological diagnostics, “containers for describing the political.” 341 She contends that the political describes “distributions of power, of effective and affective possibility, the imagination of how action will unfold to reach back to that distribution for a re-sort, but also for a push on what should be.” 342 The political is engagement to claim particular forms of dwelling in the world. It is about “redistributing insecurity” 343 and not just merely smoothing over the “ambivalence that saturates social life about the irregular conditions of fairness.” 344 An important component of political life is tolerating ambivalence, as opposed to only its resolution: the “vanquishing of the very contingency of non-sovereign standing that is at the heart of true equality, where status is not worked out in advance or outside of relation.” 345 Cole draws attention to the politics of ambivalence, where ambivalence is not “an attitudinal void obstructing political engagement” but a “critical, liminal affect generative of politics.” 346 Using the figure of the Nepantlera from Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, Cole further states that “the instability of precarity opens the possibility for connecting with others and, more generally, an awareness of how often political options are falsely circumscribed and dichotomized, pushing us into either/or thinking in the search for certainty, stability, and security.” 347

Neelum, its mountainscapes and waterways are the conduits through which Amal expresses devotion to her sociality and creates pathways that allow her to do so. Life in Neelum

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342 Ibid.
344 Ibid.
345 Ibid.
347 Ibid., 90.
as in other parts of the Himalayan region is gendered, permitting only particular forms of mobility and social engagement. Amal’s volunteer midwifery practice allows her increased circulation within her community (and neighboring communities), enabling her to renegotiate gendered restrictions, and craft further moral spaces within the frames of allowability. Her continued enactment of devotion to her husband allows her to redefine the parameters of Neelum (as permissible to her), provides a legitimate vocabulary to continue working in the health unit, and increases her presence within communities. These are extensions of her claims on the world, despite its ambiguities and irregularities.

Her medical services, as limited and insufficient they may be, allow Kashmiri bodies to remain anchored in place even during the 14 years of cross border firing and the two large natural disasters. Remaining in place, purposefully inhabiting territory, as understood within the current climate of the assimilationist Pakistani state, are important and necessary components of the struggle for Kashmir (however that maybe defined), which Amal not only participates in directly but also makes possible for others.

Amal’s contributions to her family are also important to keep in mind. Together with her husband, she raised 9 children. 7 of her children are married with families of their own, and 2 of her youngest daughters continue to live with her. Both of them are in school, one in grade 5 and the second just completed her bachelor’s degree, the first in the entire family and one of the few women in her village to do so. Amal’s husband who like her also never attended school, instructed Amal before his death to invest in the education of their children as much as possible.

Amal renders the abstract as concrete, biographical as social, and personal as political. She allows us to understand social repair as simultaneously “strategy, counter narrative,
performance, failure, and temporal suspension,” “impossibly suspended between direct political aspiration and trajectories of becoming directed beyond rational, foreseeable ends.”

Amal allows us to recognize that the subjects of repair and politics are subjects of desire and literature, to move away from “truths” and “forms,” “towards intermediate, processual stages,”

drawing attention to the “alternative enunciative frames that individuals can mobilize.”

She reflects imperfect processes of striving that do not necessarily lend to societal transformation but may operate within the same institutional structures, relationships, and social parameters that constrain—be it religion, culture, community, familial expectations, patriarchy, or the state. The jealousies of relatives and villagers towards Amal, hint at society’s double edge; how it can be constraining in addition to being enabling and resourceful. This way, we learn to appreciate the everyday both as a site of engagement and enchantment as well as trance, illusion, and danger.

A reparative reading of social repair and political life, does not preclude itself to any one scale of transformation. With Amal, we are drawn to life’s grittiness, its capillaries both intimate and precarious. If repair reflects the untested inter- and intra-personal experimentations and improvisations that quietly insist on amending, revising, or re-creating; the political reflects the inner ferocity which responds to disappointments and grievances of existing arrangements demanding new social configurations altogether. These demands can be understood as incremental shifts in social entanglements to enable the continuity of life in some viable form. If we understand these incremental yet radical shifts in social relations as repair, then it becomes

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349 Ibid., 16.
351 Ibid., 327.
intuitive to consider that these incremental shifts are also sites of making assertions and advancing claims instrumental for improving one’s conditions of life, or further anchoring one’s positions in an otherwise inconsistent, contradictory, fraught, and fragile sociality. In this way, the subject of repair is also the subject of politics.

The Slightest of Gestures

Very little is written about women in Pakistan administered Kashmir, a site which is generally considered to be outside of politics, or where politics is only defined in terms of insurgents and militants.354 There are now multiple generations of Kashmiris who only know of themselves as being Kashmiris within Pakistan and have little cultural or affective connections with Indian administered Kashmir. For some residents, a historical collectivity (a return to a unified Kashmir) does not have much resonance while for many others it does. This is particularly true for Neelum, which due to its geographical remoteness was always on the margins of the once unified Kashmir, its genres of life resembling a devotion to landscape - pahari modes of life - as opposed to being part of the high culture, aesthetics, and abundance of Srinagar (the historical capital of unified Kashmir). But for Kashmiris in Pakistan, their politics are already preconfigured: as being nationalists (someone who supports independence from Pakistan and India), those who believe in assimilation into Pakistan, those who believe in the

independence of Indian administered Kashmir but Kashmir’s absorption into Pakistan, or those who believe in greater rights and freedoms within Kashmir(s) irrespective of how it is claimed by either country.

Amal embodies all of these or none of these. She is a Kashmiri, Muslim woman, living in Neelum, Pakistan administered Kashmir, which makes her a member of multiple national communities, open to contestation and reconfiguration. She lives the anxious and uncertain life that defines border regions such as that of Neelum. It is not clear what citizenship means for Amal, which in its broadest of sense is ultimately a “relation among strangers.” Amal’s devotion to the landscape and the relations within it cannot be decoupled from the occupation of Kashmiri lands, she is not a de-territorialized Muslim woman. As a midwife, Amal commands much respect and reverence (as well as jealousy); people often gift her clothes, money, and toffees upon the successful delivery of a baby. One resident remarked: “After the mother, it is the dai [the midwife] who birthed you, who deserves your respect. Respect and reverence for the dai remains for the rest of one’s life.” As Amal shows us through her work with pregnant women in Mir sahib’s memory, death nurtures particular moral economies amongst the living, opening up further avenues of social action and relationality. Therefore, death can also be read as possibility, not necessarily only as foreclosure.

355 E.g., residents still maintain anticipatory underground shelters and protective spaces such as bunkers in case fighting resumes. As mentioned before, sporadic exchange of fire across the border between Pakistan and Indian troops occurs frequently to this day. For a related discussion on anxious belonging, see, Townsend Middleton, “Anxious Belongings,” American Anthropologist 115, no. 4 (2013).
Amal’s biography is a series of stitched truths, a patchwork, a “configuration of heterogeneous empirical facts”\cite{fassin2008life} which allow us to dissolve distinctions between the personal and the political, the intimate and the public, the singular and the social. As Brown has argued, the political need not to be protected from “the economic, the social, the cultural, the natural, and the private/domestic/familial.”\cite{brown2002edge}

One morning, I noticed baba, my host in Neelum, haphazardly dispersing seeds in the air.\cite{baba2016death} I inquired what he was doing. He explains: “I disperse seeds of various flowers around Neelum, wherever I can walk to. They bring flowers, they beautify the earth with all their colors. Beautifying the earth is sawab (an act of virtue).”

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\cite{brown2002edge} Wendy Brown, “At the Edge,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002), 557.

\cite{baba2016death} Baba died in 2016 from brain and spinal cord injuries after falling from a pahar while collecting grass, a task he routinely performs, reflecting that even daily life tasks in Neelum carry considerable precarity and uncertainty.
Flowers in their varying shades, fragrances, and sizes symbolize the subjectivity of human beings, and how according to their individual social locations and specific viewpoints interact with public life. In this way, the public is absorbed into the private and the private into the public. Farhat, Amal’s daughter also loves flowers, she shares:

Whenever I get free time, I immerse myself in flowers. They beautify the world and reinvigorate the mind. I think about my father a lot. I miss him. When I step into these flowers, I think about their petals and their thorns. I ask: Why do these beautiful flowers have such sharp thorns?

“this is the recipe of life
said my mother
as she held me in her arms as I wept
think of those flowers you plant
in the garden each year
they will teach you
that people too
must wilt
fall
root
rise
in order to bloom”\textsuperscript{361}

\textsuperscript{361} Rupi Kaur, \textit{The Sun and Her Flowers} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 114.
I engage with Sattar Shah, an elderly resident of a remote Himalayan valley in Northern Pakistan. Sattar calibrates his investments and reliance on others as being subservient to his relationship with Allah. He possesses a spirituality, a certain kind of asceticism, developed over a lifetime of negotiating relationships with varying degrees of reciprocity, betrayal, and fulfilment. He has arrived at the conclusion, that only Allah has stood by him through the various tribulations of life, including a large earthquake, material poverty, hunger, death of family, social isolation, and other forms of precarity. I am unable to articulate Sattar Shah only through available tools on Islam, text-critical or anthropological, and posit that another kind of attention is required to capture the work he performs: a lifelong accumulation of strength and fierceness, which cannot be sufficiently explained through forms of self-cultivation. By understanding his devotions to Allah as a site of engagement (the “local”), I seek to understand what compels Sattar Shah to only rely on Allah for fulfilling even the most basic of needs such as obtaining milk or the occasional cigarette or donate all his assets to the local madrassa or not seek humanitarian assistance after a large earthquake. By drawing attention to the particularities and situatedness of Sattar Shah’s relationship with Allah, I attempt to show that this relationship is accumulative and accretive of the very social it seeks to reject. The rejection of the social or engaging with it on one’s own terms, constitutes a site of the social in itself, one that is needed for Sattar Shah’s sustenance. This allows us to appreciate how Sattar Shah makes Islam his own, rather than only being subjected to its ethical norms.
The local as site of engagement does not offer a singular definition. Its everydayness is not a given or defined and cannot be assumed. It is merely the “site in which the life of the other is engaged,” inclusive but not limited to routine, quotidian detail, and contestation.

Postcolonial, feminist, queer, and other aligned movements have worked to populate the container of “the local” by highlighting those features and genres of life which may appear excessively normative to rationalist and realist social sciences but are important truths that permit very different sets of conclusions. The local is then the anti-thesis to generality and causality and frustrates knowledge hierarchies by positing its own vocabularies, grammar, and affirmations. It provides a levelling force, checks, and balances, a demand to demonstrate rather than assume any one reading of the world. The local, in its multiplicity and irreducible textures, is frightening, infuriating, anxiety provoking, and in that sense political because it points at the problem (and maybe not enough at the “solution”).

Ali argues that we cannot apprehend the “local” of Muslim South Asia without attending to poetic knowledges which approximate the “moral universe and cognitive hearts” of its people. She describes poetic knowledges as a “felt mode of seeing, being, and doing in the world that is expressed beautifully and truthfully through word, art, and action.” Ali goes on to qualify: “This is still an intellectual, abstract definition because in an embodied, alive sense, the meaning of poetic knowledge can only be communicated in its own form, not as an explanation about its form.” I find poetic knowledges to be a useful frame to encompass wider intuitive and

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365 Ibid., 5.
366 Ibid.
sensory-emotional ways of knowing and engaging with the world. More specifically, in this paper, I am interested in exploring a Muslim poetics of sorts, as a genre of the “local” which can potentially provide an additional lens for understanding how chronicity is negotiated and life within it is shaped. I am drawn to this based on my continued work with disaster survivors in Northern Pakistan and Kashmir.

I am particularly interested in one of my research interlocutors: Sattar Shah, an elderly resident of a remote Himalayan village in the Siran valley of Northern Pakistan. Sattar calibrates his investments and reliance on others as being subservient to his relationship with Allah. He possesses a spirituality, a certain kind of asceticism, developed over a lifetime of negotiating relationships with varying degrees of reciprocity, betrayal, and fulfilment. He has arrived at the conclusion, that only Allah has stood by him through various tribulations of life, such as a large earthquake, material poverty, hunger, death of family, social isolation, and other forms of precarity. I am unable to articulate Sattar Shah only through available tools on Islam, text-critical or anthropological, and posit that another kind of attention is required to capture the inner-work he performs: a lifelong accumulation of strength, fierceness, and certainty which cannot be sufficiently attuned only through forms of self-cultivation. I am referring to forms of devotions which cannot be validated only by frames of piety or discredited simply because one exceeds them. But a kind of striving which compels Sattar Shah to only rely on Allah for fulfilling even the most basic of needs such as a roti (bread), doodh (milk), or the occasional cigarette. I am referring to those forms of devotion which afford him the conviction (and audacity) to give away his deceased sister’s buffalos (his only “assets”) as charity to the local madrassa or not seek humanitarian assistance after a large earthquake. I conclude by putting these observations in conversation with wider discussions on Islam and the fashioning of life in
settings of chronicity including after natural disasters. Sattar Shah shows us that social repair is not necessarily synonymous with achieving some form of social coherence, but perhaps better captured via modes of striving which inspire subjectivities and modalities necessary for the continuity of life on one’s own terms. Sattar Shah compels us to a stance of humility, where the researcher’s point of departure is not just existing deficiencies in knowledge, but the inability to fathom what is already there.

As a Muslim subject, Sattar Shah is both “usual” and “unusual.” Usual, in the sense that he is reflective of ascetic life modes found in many parts of the Indian subcontinent which can be understood as Indic forms of world-renunciation or Islamic forms of Sufi-inflected behavior. He is “unusual” in the sense that his rejection of sociality (or “re-working” of it) is understood as non-normative by those around him and raises awe, anxiety, as well as admiration in his community. This behavior takes particular salience in settings of chronicity, where a reliance on sociality (as opposed to its rejection), is assumed as a precondition for survival. Additionally, the figure of the ascetic Muslim (if we characterize Sattar Shah as such), occupies a suspect position within conventional understandings of Islam.

In this chapter, I seek to bring to the forefront those ethical and subjective modes of being and inhabiting the world which situate and contextualize the subject despite and perhaps in response to multiple conditions of violence. This way, I am not just interested in a wider moral imagination (a genre of the “local”) only for its existential, spiritual, and metaphysical characteristics, but because it also structures and anticipates life presently. Put differently; I am looking to reconcile the worldly with the transcendent, the spiritual with the social. Drawing from the works of Wittgenstein and Cavell, Das argues that even the “interior” of the most
private of persons is shaped by the social. Sattar Shah is a devout Muslim, but instead of simply containing him as a Sufi or ascetic, I seek to center his “fierceness” and social ambivalence to understand the finer textures of repair in settings of chronicity. His reworking of the social and re-positioning in the world is poorly understood if simply depicted as an outcome of normative Islam and the forms of “self-fashioning” with which it is associated. Instead, by paying more attention to the specificities of his relationship with Allah, I attempt to show how it is accumulative and accretive of the very social it seeks to reject. The rejection of the social or engaging with it on one’s own terms, constitutes a site of the social in itself, one that is needed for Sattar Shah’s sustenance. This allows us to appreciate how Sattar Shah makes Islam his own, rather than only being subjected to its ethical norms.

A Muslim Poetics of Sorts

According to Ahmed, existing scholarship on Islam grounded in the categories of “religion” and “culture” or those that privilege law or scripture diminish our understanding of the contradictions, ambiguity, and polyvalence that characterize Muslim political and social life. Schielke asserts that a focus on self-cultivation and religious virtuosity alone obscures “some key questions regarding everyday religious and moral practice, notably the ambivalence, the inconsistencies and the openness of people’s lives that never fit into the framework of a single tradition.” How to then articulate those unadjudicated modes of striving and being Muslim which are accumulative and accretive of the social and in that sense imbricated in achieving a

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In order to also bring into purview these diverse modes of being Muslim, I extend Ali’s notion of poetic knowledges to a working understanding of “Muslim poetics” - *the wide complex of experiences and permutations, “affective modes of seeing, being, doing,”* relating, situating, and becoming in the world which occur alongside the cultivation of piety. Or put more succinctly, Muslim poetics encompasses those poetic knowledges which are multiply reflective of devotions to Allah and the sustenance of a relationship with Him, outside or alongside Islam’s ethical norms. Such an understanding of Muslim poetics draws attention to additional sites of inquiry such as sensory-emotional embodiments, relationships, thought, intuition, dreams, words, action, non-action, and being acted upon which can be collectively or individually read as devotions to Allah and as relational processes with Him. Muslim poetics allows us to further elaborate the “local” of Muslim lifeworlds by emphasizing the spiritual, metaphysical, and relational components of the world as well as its transcendence.

That being said, I am interested not only in those modes of being Muslim which are tied to progressive change but also those that aim towards “continuity, stasis, and stability.” It is important to keep these caveats in mind given the history of the region (South Asia), where Islam

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has not always existed as a totalizing category. As Devji argues it was only during the 19th century that Islam came to be seen as an “independent historical actor designating a new kind of moral community,” till then “Islam itself had not yet come to exist as a singular culture or civilization, the sum total of Muslim beliefs and practices.” In this sense, I am not so much interested in how Islam encapsulates Sattar Shah or how it does not. Instead, I am drawn towards understanding how “Muslim” modes of inhabiting the world (Muslim poetics) are shaped by chronicity which in turn shapes varied modes of being Muslim and how this mutually constitutive process is accumulative and accretive of the social.

Sattar loves poetry. When he was younger, he would go to the jungle and recite poetry to keep himself company as the animals grazed. He often supplements his words with verses of poetry which according to him, “he picked up from here and there.” This indicates that perhaps conventional speech alone cannot adequately communicate the depth and integrity of what he seeks to convey. This also provides some food for thought to further consider how poetic expression is so deeply intertwined with what I have termed as Muslim poetics. And that within the permutations that I call Muslim poetics, there is an aesthetics at play that needs to be centered without which our understanding of the “local” and the nature of Sattar Shah’s relationship with Allah will remain lacking.

I have kept some of our conversations in Urdu, fearing that the tension and palpability that punctuates his words may become lost during translation. This is not meant to be exclusionary. As novelist Junot Diaz responded (or rather tweeted) to those who criticize the

frequent use of Spanish in his writings: “Motherfuckers will read a book that’s one third Elvish, but put two sentences in Spanish and they [white people] think we’re taking over.”

Woh Cigarette Bhi Siraf Allah Sai Mangta Hai

Sattar Shah’s reputation precedes him. I met him through Dur-e-man (another interlocutor). While having tea in Dur-e-man’s home, he suggested:

Let me introduce you to this old man. He lives further up [the pahars]. Despite his delicate condition, he never asks anyone for help. His Iman (belief and certainty in Allah) is so strong, woh cigarette bhi siraf Allah sai mangta hai (he only relies on Allah, even if he needs a cigarette).

My time with Sattar was a strange period of acclimatization. My words seemed to miss his world, and his mine. I would ask one question and he would respond with another, or offer a resolution which appeared to exceed the considerations of what was being asked. Mubashir, my research assistant suggested that perhaps due to old age, Sattar is a little senile. Or was he a genius, generous enough to invite us into his world? And that too rather unapologetically:

378Taken from the public Twitter account of Junot Diaz:
https://twitter.com/junotdiazdaily/status/268774844273934336?lang=en
Omer (O): Who else lives here [at home]?

Sattar (S): No one! *Maira Rabb hai, bus aik Rabb ki zaat hai* (only my Rabb,379 Him alone).

O: Do you then sometimes feel lonely?

S: But I am not alone! There is someone who keeps me company and that is my Rabb. He is the only one who truly looks out for me. That is my agreement with Him. When the earth shook [earthquake], so many houses toppled over. But Allah didn’t allow mine to fall. He protected my family. Only Allah can protect us [our lives], am I correct? But that is the truth [regardless of what you think].”

O: Are people kind to you?

S: Only Khuda380 is. Not many people go out of their way in this village.

O: What about the NGOs after the earthquake?

S: You know Khuda brought them here, so they came. They gave me some things such as flour, CGI sheets [corrugated iron sheets for roofing]. But I didn’t go to them or seek anything from them myself. If they came, they came.

O: How about any one from the village?

S: Do these villagers have the power to invoke earthquakes? [almost scolding me]. Only Khuda can take away life, can anyone else? Without Allah’s command you can’t even move from this charpoi. *Jo kaam hai, meray Rabb ka hai* (only my Rabb can make things/tasks/events unfold).

O: How do you get by?

S: *Allah Allah karta hoon* (by invoking Allah). Allah is responsible for my expenditure [it

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379 Rabb is one of Allah’s 99 names, where each name describes a specific attribute. Rabb roughly translates as the sustainer, the one who nurtures and maintains.

380 Khuda is another word for Allah, reflecting the region’s Persian roots as opposed to Arabic.
isn’t me].

O: For example, if you need some tea?

S: Doesn’t Khuda exist? [again, scolding me]. Allah provides for me. Allah can send me provisions through you, or anybody else. The point is that Allah is the one who provides. Then why should I ask anyone else for assistance? Dainay wali zaat tu woh hi hai (Allah is the only true provider).

O: What do you consider as being valuable in life?

S: It isn’t something you can touch or see. My Iman (belief and certainty in Allah) is the most important. Please Allah keep my Iman intact. Dunya hai makhi ke par ki tarah (this world is as insignificant as the wing of a fly).

O: How do you protect yourself from wild animals which are often sighted around the village during the winter season?381

S: (Laughing) Allah kai hokum kai sawa woh kis tara khaye gai humay? (Without Allah’s permission, how can they [wild animals] harm/eat me?)

Sattar Shah was firm that if he is to be engaged, it can only be on his terms. His responses indicate to me that my questions seemed to miss their mark and that their insufficiencies were intertwined with my lack of understanding of the nature and power of Allah. Or that my knowledge of how the world is nurtured, protected, and sustained, was at best deficient. The rawness of his responses was disheveling and humbling. This was his hospitality; this was his graciousness.

381 At the time of this research, there was a rumor circulating in the village that a man’s severed head and mangled body was found in the surrounding forests, possibly killed by a bear or leopard.
Image 66. Sattar Shah: “Dunya hai makhi ke par ki tarah (this world is as insignificant as the wing of a fly)” (photograph by Sattar’s nephew: Ali Akbar Shah)
Allah Ko Aajzi Bohut Pasand Hai

Sattar’s father moved to this village some 60-70 years ago when the local landlord awarded him some land to cultivate. Most people here are tenant farmers living on land leased from the Swati family. The Swatis are a kinship network who were elevated economically and politically during British colonial rule as part of their divide and conquer strategy. As per agreement with the Swati family, Sattar Shah and his brother, must pay Rs. 10,000 annually as rent. Sattar explains: “If we don’t pay them the rent, they threaten us with eviction. It is their land, so we must live under their rules.” Sattar is responsible for half the rent:

Sometimes, I save some maize over the year or collect some grass and sell it. Other times, I take a loan from my elder brother who lives in Mansehra [a nearby city]. I am thankful to Allah, He provides for me [one way or the other].

Currently Sattar Shah lives in the same modest katcha house\footnote{A katcha house is one that is made from mud and clay as opposed to cement, katcha translates as “raw” or “unbaked.”} that his father built: “I have been living here for more than 50 years. My father has long died. My sister also used to live in this house, but she is also dead. Their graves are nearby.”

In 2005, the valley was struck by a powerful earthquake which affected some 5.1 million people throughout the Himalayan region, killing at least 73,000 and injuring countless more.\footnote{Disasters are frequent in Northern Pakistan. In 2010, monsoon floods ravaged the region again affecting over 20 million people across the country. A large flood also devastated Siran in 1992, details of which are poorly documented. Due to its elevation, Sattar’s village was spared from the flooding. One should also not forget frequently recurring seasonal landslides and flash floods brought on by melting glaciers and snow.} I asked Sattar Shah about the earthquake:
It was very severe, the trees were swaying, and the earth was trembling. The earth was shaking like this [he moves his hands rapidly]. The pots and pans fell, but Allah saved the humans. The animals too, Allah saved them. But many also died.

Sattar continues: “I was scared that day. It was every person for himself, bus Allah Allah karta raha (all I could do was invoke Allah).” Sattar points at a corner of the room in which we were seated: “Look there is a door there [which led into a small room], this is where I tie my goat. My father made this with his own hands, he is long gone, but see this survived the earthquake.”
The earthquake cut the village off from the rest of the valley due to heavy landsliding. So much so, that the Pakistani army along with various humanitarian organizations resorted to air drops: “They threw down lots of stuff, such as tents and plastic sheets [from helicopters and planes].” As the Pakistani army eventually cleared their way into this village, more emergency relief slowly started to trickle in:

I received some relief goods in the days following the earthquake. But nothing after that. But you know the ones who were powerful took the most. The people of our village are such, that they get jealous when someone else receives anything. When they see people other than themselves benefitting, they make a fuss, they cry, ‘but what about me?’

Sattar received some CGI (corrugated iron sheets). These were given on the condition that recipients would reconstruct their homes following pre-approved earthquake “resilient” designs. These came to be known as the *pakka* houses. Sattar also began constructing a new home, approximating the mandatory housing design but never truly completed construction. At present, Sattar has two houses: the one his father built (the katcha house) and the partially finished “earthquake resilient” cemented house constructed after the earthquake.

Both houses are only a few feet apart. The katcha house is in far worse shape and requires urgent maintenance work, yet Sattar chooses to live there. He explains: “I prefer this house [the

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384 *Pakka* is the opposite for *katcha*, “full-baked,” “sturdy,” cemented.
385 There was much controversy at the time. The Swatis demanded that any relief provision for housing reconstruction should be awarded to them, since they are the rightful owners of the land (and technically the homes on it). The matter went to court and it was decided that while humanitarian housing support will be given directly to tenants, land ownership will remain with the landlords. One could see this as a victory or as a failure. Failure because the court decision stopped short of instituting real political change and changing the ownership of land in favor of the tenants.
katcha house]. When it snows, you can hear the snow falling on the tin roof [of the other house] and it is also very noisy there when it rains.” He continues:

When my sister died, I stopped looking after the other house [the pakka house]. I have decided that I will spend my remaining years here. That house is furnished and has my things, but I feel more content here. You know my father built it with his own hands. I feel more at home here [I feel more grounded here]. My temperament is also such [I like simple/down to earth things]. Allah ko aajzi bohut pasand hai ([You know] Allah loves those who are humble).

Image 68. Katcha (left) and pakka (right) houses next to one another (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)
**Jawani Ki Ayashi**

It is unusual for someone of Sattar Shah’s age to be living by himself. Sattar never married or raised a family, and therefore for much of his life remained outside of the scope of morality (represented best by marriage and family), designated for men and women in Siran (as in much of Pakistan). The scramble and anxiety created by his sexually viable, yet reproductively un-attuned body seems to have calmed down due to his “senior age” and godly reputation. Sattar explains:

When my father was alive, life was good. *Jawani ki ayashi mai tha* (I was mesmerized by my youth, the possibilities and vibrancy it offered). Allah bless my father, he really tried [to get me married]. I told my parents, ‘I will only marry someone beautiful, I can’t marry just any unattractive woman.’ But I couldn’t argue with my father; how can anyone argue with their parents? So, I would just run away from home every time they would bring up the issue of marriage. When my father died, I fell into a deep state of grief. Then time just flew by and here I am today.

I wondered if Sattar regrets his decision to not marry: “Na ji! I have to present myself to Allah [be accountable to Him]. Allah has the power over all matters, even if I am alone, He helps me. Na ji! I don’t have any regrets.” To elaborate his understanding of a life lived, he offers the following verses:
Guzra hows zamana ata naheen dobara.

Hafiz Khuda tumhara,

Lai aye phir kahan kismet humay dobarah?

Ye woh jaga thi, guzray thay hum jahan sai.

Time only passes, but never returns.

Khuda is your protector/guardian,

Where has fate brought us once again?

To the same place, where we passed through before.

Allah Ka Shukar Hai

Sattar reminisces his youth:

My youth is long gone, now I don’t even remember where I place my things! When it was my time [I was young], I could do anything. If someone asked for my assistance, I would respond kindly, help them to lift large loads, patch a leaky roof, or remove pathar [rocks, debri] from their fields. Now it is difficult for me to even get by and complete my own tasks. But I am thankful to Allah. Jaan hai tu jahan hai (the universe only matters if you have strength/health).

Sattar explains:

Have you seen our buzzarg log (people of my parent’s generation)? They freely roam these pahars even in their advanced years. But now, a 50-year-old or even a 20-year-old can’t
move with such purpose. The older generations followed a pure diet. They would only eat
desi ghee (home-made ghee) butter and milk. They wouldn’t eat dalda [commercially
prepared ghee], we now eat things of all color. That is why we aren’t as strong as them.

He elaborates:

When I was young, we would make lassi [yoghurt drink], and add ground maize and lots
of ghee into it, cook it down, and then eat it. We had so much milk, butter, and ghee, that
we would even sell them! But now I only have 1 goat, so I am forced to purchase these
items from the bazaar. But that too only when I have any money. Ghee is presently
Rs.1000 per kilo! [can you believe it?]. Even moat [kidney beans] are Rs.150 per kilo!

Sattar adds:

Woh buhut payara zamana tha [those were such good times]. There was more love
between people and the food tasted so much better! [He hesitates] But life is good even
now, Allah ka shukar hai (I am grateful to Allah). It doesn’t matter [I don’t take matters to
heart]. Whatever Allah provides, I eat. If He doesn’t, then so what, I persevere in hunger.
Makkai Ki Roti

Image 69. Sattar Shah: “Hunger teaches one to do everything [even how to make roti]” (photograph by the author)

Makkai ki roti, or roti made from ground maize, is a staple food item in much of Siran’s pahars. Maize seems to be a fairly generous crop, well suited to the rain and soils of Siran. I find makai ki roti a useful medium through which to better appreciate Sattar’s many devotions to Allah and the labor of life required in Siran. Or in Homi Bhabha’s words: “What kind of agency is constituted in the circulation of the chapati?” To this I add: What does the roti reveal in

386 The chappati played a role in the 1857 revolt against colonial Britain in India. At the time, there were rumors that rifle ammunition supplied to loyal Muslim and Hindu sepoys of the East India Company army were lined with cow and pig fat- religious affronts to Hindu and Muslim sensibilities. The British though that this news was being spread
terms of relationships with others and with Allah, and how is the precarity of pahari life reflected in the humble roti?

I wanted to know who cooks for Sattar Shah. He responded rather curtly: “Do you see anyone else [in this house]? I cook for myself!” He continues:

I can’t make salan [gravy, sauce], or cook any vegetables, nor can I make pulao [rice in soup]. Sometimes, I find saag [spinach] in the forest, and I request a neighbor to prepare it for me. *Yeh haath kalay karna, idler idhur jana naheen hota* (blackening my hands [from the ashes of cooking on an open fire], and searching for food in the landscape, I can’t do these). I live on two things: makkai ki roti and boiled rice.

He adds: “Sometimes I stay hungry for as long as 3 days. No problem! Allah is present [He takes care of me, even if no one else does].”

We decided to make makai ki roti together. It is a bit unusual for men to be making roti, but as Sattar says: “Hunger teaches one to do everything [even how to make roti].” Makkai ki roti only requires two ingredients: ground maize and water. Sattar grows his own maize. He explains:

We are a people of the land [we are farmers], this is our job. I learned to farm by watching my father who learned it from his. But it is Allah who creates and cultivates the maize, we

just do the weeding.

To grow maize, first the land has to be ploughed. Sattar Shah is no longer able to do this himself, sometimes his neighbors assist him, otherwise he does what he can. Once the land is ready, the seeds are sown, and fertilizer is added. Most people use cow dung in their fields, but Sattar does not have access to any, and therefore must attempt to purchase fertilizer from the bazaar. Since maize is a rain fed crop, no irrigation is required. Almost a year later, when the crop is ready, Sattar Shah collects the maize. It is then cleaned, dried, and stored in a large wooden container (karand), ready to be used.

Image 70. Maize being dried on a rooftop (photograph by the author)

Commercially prepared fertilizers were popularized by aid organizations after the earthquake. There is now a growing trend to use them due to changing social norms around handling dung but also because people no longer have large numbers of cows and buffalos.
Once the maize is dry, Sattar loads manageable quantities onto a rented donkey and takes the maize downhill to a *chakki* (mill), where for a small fee it is ground into flour.

Image 72. Sattar Shah: “Even the donkey doesn’t come for free!” A donkey loaded with maize makes its way down the slope of a *pahar* (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)
Occasionally, someone from the village may help Sattar Shah carry the maize from his home to the chakki and back. When he cannot afford to rent a donkey, or no one offers to help, he makes repeated trips, carrying on his back whatever he can manage. Once brought back up home, the ground maize is finally stored in a canister and used throughout the year (or as long as it lasts).
Maize yields are low and unpredictable, Sattar supplement the ground maize with rice or wheat bought from the bazaar. Most people also cut the grass around the maize to dry and use as fodder during winter when life freezes in the valley. But Sattar does not have the strength to do so anymore: “But things fall into place, Allah provides for me [fodder for his goat] nonetheless.”
As we put our hands into the maize flour, he adds: “I like to make my roti a bit thick [for it to be soft], so I can easily chew.” Making the roti is rather simple. The flour is kneaded with a bit of water to form a dough. Small balls are then made from the dough which are then rolled out using a rolling pin into a round roti, ready to be cooked onto a tawwa [flat pan]. To cook the roti, Sattar requires firewood: “I just collect fallen branches, twigs, whatever I can find in the forest.” During winter, additional wood is required for heating: “Even then I collect my own wood. But people also sell firewood in the village. It costs about Rs.800 per batch, who can afford that?”
When he is at home, Sattar cooks the roti on a pan over an open flame. But when he is out with his goat in the grazing pastures [malis], the roti is cooked on a hot stone: “A flat stone is heated on the fire, when it is really hot, you cook the roti on it. Usually, the stone does not explode [from the heat], but sometimes it does.”

Dunya Yehi Hai

Sattar Shah often talks about his sister: “She was my companion and a friend.”

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388 According to Sohaib, my other research assistant, exploding stones are known to cause severe injuries, making the process of preparing the humble makkai ki roti rather dangerous, adding to the precarity of life in the pahars.
lived together till her death. He shares: “She died some 8-10 years ago, shortly after the earthquake, just around the time when disaster aid had tapered down. You can say as the relief provisions died, so did she.” He continues: “She was sick. Humans are mortals, you can never truly predict the time of death.” I inquired whether a cause of death was known. Sattar Shah did not appreciate the question: “Mout ka koi naam hai jo bataye? (Does death have a name?) [Does death need to be named to be valid?].” He continues: “No one knows when they will die. Right now, you are young, but when your time in this world is finished then there is nothing you can do to stay standing. Dunya yehi hai (such is life in this world [unpredictable]).”

Sattar was very fond of his sister:

Her name was Bibi Zainab, she was married but then returned home [divorced or separated from her husband or perhaps he died, I did not ask]. She insisted that instead of asking people for help, one should only ask Allah. She believed that it is self-deception to give into dunya ki lalalch (greed/allure of the material world). People tried to persuade her to go and ask for more relief [humanitarian relief] that since she is alone [divorced], NGOs will be more inclined to help her. But my sister refused, she would say ‘If I can just get food to eat, then I won’t go out [to ask anyone for help], I also have to give my account to Allah.’

Sattar Shah adds: “But then she went to the grave… She had a daughter, but she too died.”

I wanted to know if they ever argued:

Not as such. Once after the earthquake, I also told her to go and get the relief/aid, she became angry with me and said ‘but Allah will provide for me, I don’t need to go out and
ask anyone for help. Meira muhaida Allah kai saath hai. (My agreement is with Allah).’

He continues:

She took care of the cooking and cleaning, and tending to the animals. I focused on “outside” matters, whatever had to be dealt with outside the home. She was Allah’s possession. He took her back, the world will also end like this.

When I first met Sattar, he had two buffalos. The following year when we met again, the buffalos were gone. I asked what happened to them. Sattar Shah explains: “They weren’t mine to begin with. They belonged to my sister. I donated them as charity in Allah’s name.” Sattar Shah sold the two buffalos and donated the money to the local madrassa.389

That is Allah’s house [the madrassa]. She [Bibi Zainab] entrusted me with her property. I was afraid of not doing justice to my sister [by being unable to properly and honestly look after her property]. What if I harmed them [the buffalos]? What if they got sick? How would I then make up for the loss? My heart feels content with this decision. This way, the reward of the buffalos will reach my sister [since they were her buffalos, the (spiritual) rewards of donating them to charity will also go to her].

389 Madrassas are usually viewed favorably by most rural Pakistanis (and increasingly urban too). They are appreciated for their religious as well as multiplier contributions such as providing a social safety net. See, e.g., Ömer Ajazi and Leonora C. Angeles, “Extra-Religious Functions of Islamic Schools,” Community Development 45, no. 5 (2014).
For Sattar, this was one way of acknowledging and reciprocating her loyalty to him, and his to her. He suggests an intense dedication to Bibi Zainab.

**Isi Tarah Kaam Laga Rehta Hai**

Unlike with Bibi Zainab, Sattar’s relationship with his brother (also his neighbor) appears strained. He explains:

There is love and affection between us but also resentment and bitterness. *Isi tarah kaam laga reheat hai* (we keep at it, this is how it goes). But this is what being a brother means [this is how all relationship are].

Since donating his sister’s buffalos, Sattar’s only source of milk is his singular goat. I asked if his brother ever sends him any milk, he responds: “Even he doesn’t have much milk. Occasionally, when he has extra [which is rarely the case], he might send me some.”

Sattar’s second and eldest brother lives in Mansehra. He moved out of Siran shortly after the earthquake. Sattar expressed some closeness to him:

During the time of President Ayub [1958-1969], my brother used to work in Karachi, I went to live with him for several months. He then moved to Mansehra. *Us waqt main nya nya jawan tha* (at that time, I had just discovered what it means to be young). You know Karachi is Karachi, it is the heart of Pakistan. When winter starts here and it begins to snow, I feel like running away to Karachi.

Every year before Eid, Sattar’s brother in Mansehra sends him clothes and shoes. He shares:
I occasionally visit my brother in Mansehra, particularly during the winter months. I give my goat to a neighbor to look after. But I don’t stay for more than 4 days in his house. While he goes out of his way to accommodate me/look after me, sakoon hum ko tu siraf is mulk main hi hai [I only feel content/at home here].

Sattar’s material poverty is an open secret. He does not rely on his family, support from whom is sporadic in any case. During one of my visits, his nephew was also present. He encouraged Sattar Shah to tell us more about his “destitution.” “Why don’t you tell them more,” he urged, “ever since we were kids we have seen him [Sattar Shah] suffer. Why don’t you tell them about your condition?” Sattar Shah angrily responded: “Don’t you [nephew] already know? [ my condition]. Sometimes, I eat, other times I stay hungry. Don’t you [directed at the nephew] already know this?”

Sattar possibly suggests that while his family very well understands his “condition,” they do not do much about it. His quiet anger or irritation at his nephew indicates the very unpredictable nature of support available to him from his family. I asked if he is happy with them. He hesitates: “What can I say, they all live in their homes, my house is this, and my charpoi [bed] is also here. I don’t ask anyone for anything, except Allah.”

Musafir Ko Kon Poochta Hai?

“Here within this universe that we call ourselves, is the zoo of man, and there is no admission charge. Each day we can observe how the angry wolf comes forward, how the scorpion stings,
To better appreciate Sattar Shah’s detachment and relative isolation, I wanted to understand how his community interacts with him. Sattar shares: “People only gravitate towards the powerful [someone who can benefit them]. I am weak, who in their right mind will come to me? *Musafir ko kon poochta hai?* (No one seeks the traveler).”

Sattar invokes the metaphor of the “traveler” to explain his situatedness within the “community.” A traveler is someone who is in a compromised state of power, having left his belongings, importance, power, capital, influence, back at home. A traveler is someone who is in a constant state of need (directions, food, shelter, advice) and is seldom in a position to reciprocate kindness. He continues: “I once had a *mamoo* (uncle), who would say ‘when people need something from you, then even a stranger will claim to be your relative.’”

Sattar explains further by way of poetry:

*Sab rishtadar bun jatay hai, jab kuch pass hota hai,*

*Tut jata hai gharibi main jo rishtay khaas hotay hain.*

Everyone becomes a relative when you have something they need,

But in poverty, even the most special of relations break.

I asked Sattar if he has any friends. Slightly annoyed, he responds:

*Pay attention to what I am saying! Khuda is my only friend. Who makes friends with the*
musafir (traveler)? Gharib ka koi dost naheen hota (the poor have no friends). People come to me only when they need something, only Allah looks out for me [like a sincere friend].

Sattar does not make much effort to connect with other people in his village:

I often don’t sit with them [his relatives, acquaintances in the village]. What will I achieve by talking to other people? Allah hi hai. Allah said mangu, woh dai ga [Allah is the only one, ask Him, and He will provide].

For Sattar Shah, dependence on others is perhaps linked to a dilution of his devotions to Allah. It seems maintaining a certain disengagement with others is integral to how he understands his relationship with Allah. He does not see maintaining relations with others as being compatible or conducive to this purpose. As indicated before, this form of detachment can be interpreted as extensions of Indic forms of world-renunciation or Islamic forms of Sufi-inflected behavior. But, I cannot help to wonder whether this disengagement is also a response to the community’s (including his family’s) indifference or lack of response to his material poverty. It is no secret, that he lives alone, is elderly, often goes hungry, and yet the community only selectively and inconsistently engages with him. Perhaps, Sattar sees this as a betrayal, further strengthening his sole reliance (Imaan) in Allah. This to me, opens up some possibilities to consider Sattar’s relationship with Allah as also reflecting the limitations of the social.
I asked, if Sattar feels resentment towards others. He responds with a few more verses:

Tooth gya ghareebi main ju rishta pass hota hai,
Ghareeb aur aajiz ka koi naheen hota hai.
In poverty, all close relationships break,
The poor and the humble don’t have anyone to call their own.

[the word which I am translating as poverty is “ghareeb,” which refers to poverty in all its forms: material, social, cultural, political; an all-encompassing typology of poverty, linked to the inability to reciprocate or contribute or give back].

He continues: “Now do you understand what I am saying? Suppose a king is walking alongside the pauper, will people seek the king or the pauper?” I asked Sattar, if he has ever tried to make amends with his relatives. He disliked the suggestion: “Why shall I try? They are rich/comfortable [or more than he is]. They should approach me/ ask how I am. I am the one who is poor.” He continues: “I don’t go out and seek people. You called me, so I came. I didn’t come to you asking for anything. If you hadn’t called me, we wouldn’t have even met.”
Image 77. Sattar Shah: “Mussafir ko kon poochta hai? (No one seeks the traveler).” Sattar seated with his nephews (photograph by Ali Akbar Shah)
Maira Muhaida, Allah Kai Saath Hai Siraf

Once, Sattar Shah was boiling some rice for us over an open fire. He grabbed the daichki (pot) with his hands, exposing them to the fire below. I got alarmed: “Baba ji, why don’t you use a cloth to grab the pot? You will get burned!” Sattar Shah laughed at my concern: “Aag kabhi hoti hai, kabhi naheen (sometimes there is fire, sometimes there isn’t). Allah pak forun aag ko rokta hai (Allah immediately stops the fire).” He continues smiling:

The wind also blows with Allah’s permission, we met because of Allah’s command, every action in this universe occurs with Allah’s permission. He can do absolutely anything. He can block furious winds, remember that earthquake? Some faced death and devastation, while others were left unharmed [surely, Allah can also protect my hands from getting burned].

Sattar has an unwavering relationship with Allah, or as he puts it: “Maira muhaida, Allah kai saath hai siraf [my pact is with Allah only].” I asked Sattar, how he cultivates this relationship:

What do I do? I pray, I recite the Quran, I go to the mosque, I fast. But making Allah happy means to remember Him in everything [in every matter/ to acknowledge His presence and architect behind every decision/process/outcome]. Acha musliman woh hai, jo Allah ko yad karta hai, sab Allah ko poochta hai (a good Muslim is one who remembers Allah, and seeks Him in every matter).
He continues:

A good Muslim is also someone who spends in the name of Allah [gives charity in His name], who is mindful of all living creations [Allah’s creations], this is what Allah likes. His creations are like ants, be mindful of them [just as you are careful when you walk on a path full of ants, so you don’t crush them].

Sattar elaborates:

Allah appreciates those who are truthful. And let me be clear here, Allah is the King who gives as He pleases, and it is Allah who sent you here, I didn’t call you [i.e. I am only thankful to Allah for sending you, not to you].

I asked Sattar what he considers a good life:

I think my brother [in Mansehra] has a good life, he has his own house, he has sons. But I say, Allah inman wala rakhay (that Allah keeps my Iman/belief/commitment to Him intact) [that is a good life]. There is no compulsion for Allah to provide for me. I will eat whatever He provides. But I don’t need anything much. I just hope Allah strengthens and protects my Iman, according to me that is a good life.
Khudi Khud

“Why is it that every time we hear hoofbeats, we think of a horse?” - Shems Friedlander

Once, while seated in Sattar Shah’s home, a little girl shyly knocked on the door and left behind a silver container. No words were exchanged. The container had milk and the girl was from a neighboring house. Sattar points at the container: “See, Allah provides for me.” He continues:

I just gently mentioned to them [the neighbors] yesterday, that I will be having some guests over today. I didn’t explicitly ask for milk. But see it came khudi khud [on its own]. Mujhay rakhnay wala Allah hai [Allah is the one who sustains me].

Sattar identifies as a Sayyid. Sayyids are claimed descendants of Prophet Mohammed. These claims of ancestry are considered worthy and important within the Indian Subcontinent but dispelled by most “mainstream” legitimizing discourses on Islam. According to many, there is only weak if any support from the Quran or Hadith on the salience of a Sayyid (but I am not an expert in this matter).

Local traditions call for a certain veneration of Sayyids and separate codes of conduct govern their life. For example, in some communities it is not considered permissible for Sayyid women to marry non-Sayyid men (Sayyid men are free to marry anyone). Similarly, in some communities it is considered disrespectful for Sayyids to be shepherds (keeping goats and sheep is not allowed, buffalos and cows are okay). It is also not generally

391 Friedlander, When You Hear Hoofbeats, 10.
392 Traditions from Prophet Mohammed.
permissible to give Zakat\textsuperscript{394} to Sayyids.

Sattar Shah explains:

My qoum (nation) is Sayyid. We are buzzarg (saints/wise men/sages). In olden times, there was this wise man [a saint and a sage], Allah always listened to him. He prayed to Allah for fire. Immediately, there was an explosion and his house caught fire! In those times, people lived in jhopris [huts made from twigs and dried grasses which are easily combustible]. The baba ji requested Allah for fire, and his house caught fire! [I am his descendant, a lineage of people who are close to Allah, whom Allah listens to].

The claim of a Sayyid seems to have material currency in Siran. Some people [those who believe in the specialness of being Sayyid] come to see Sattar Shah, and request him to make dua (prayer) to Allah for certain special things which they are wanting but are difficult to obtain. They sometimes bring small tokens of appreciation: “You know the girl who brought milk, she lives in the neighborhood, they often send milk [either in reverence or gratitude].” Sattar clarifies: “I never ask for anything from anyone. I can even stay hungry for 10 days. Bahir main haath naheen philatha (I don’t spread my hands outside [for help]).”

Sattar’s understanding of the fire story, also demonstrates that the buzzarg was unaware of the “true scope” of Allah’s powers, and ended up wishing for something that destroyed his home. Perhaps, the story suggests that the nature of Allah and a relationship with Him cannot be ascertained only via the realm of the logical. But intimacy with Allah is also contingent on the realm of the imagination.\textsuperscript{395} The previous story of the daichki and fire

\textsuperscript{394} Mandatory annual payments made by affording Muslims to poor/deserving individuals.

\textsuperscript{395} Relevant here is Amira Mittermaier’s work on the place of dreams and imagination in Muslim lifeworlds. See, \textit{Dreams That Matter} (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011).
also alludes to this.

**Muslim Poetics, Chronicity, and Repair**

“...there [is] no sharp boundary between experience and concepts- that experience clings to concepts rather than being eliminated...” - Veena Das

In this chapter, I have attempted to draw attention to another genre of the “local”: that is Sattar Shah’s intense and multiple devotions to Allah and his relationship with Him. Without an attention to these dimensions of his lifeworld, any reading of Sattar Shah will remain analytically deficient. As Das says, the local is simply where the life of the other can be engaged. In this sense, the local, much like the social, can also transcend the world.

Sattar Shah shows us that “community” or “family” are unstable categories. They may be sites of stability, sustenance, and support but are also powerful spaces of exclusion, hurt, and grievance. They offer no protective guarantees, and are better described as being in a state of flux, where inclusivity and support is to be negotiated at all times. Or as Sattar Shah puts it: “Isi tarah kaam laga rehta hai (we keep at it, this is how it goes).”

Some scholars have written on how natural disasters (such as earthquakes) reinvigorate or diminish people’s religious devotions. I have also previously written on how Islam and its various embodiments provide a language for negotiating with the disaster recovery apparatus. For Sattar Shah, the earthquake was not so much an awakening call or divine instruction but rather a mere extension of Allah’s powers. I asked if he ever wonders why some people were killed in his village and others were not? He responds: “Look, Allah

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397 Das, “Engaging the Life of the Other,” 376.
can do whatever He wishes. There is no task difficult for Him, He kills/takes away life from whomever He wants. When the earthquake happened, we were all invoking Allah (for protection).”

The earthquake was not a site of transformation per se for Sattar Shah. Rather, it allowed him to accumulate further insights on Allah, only confirming the limitations of community and family:

The earthquake came with Allah’s permission. But it didn’t soften people’s hearts. Their love for wealth [instead for each other] increased. They engage in leg pulling, they lie to each other, they are munafiq (disingenuous/hypocrites). They feel if somebody is doing well it must mean they themselves are being cheated.

He continues:

Last year when you came, everyone in the village found out about the money you gave me. When they heard you are coming to see me again, they started to incite me. They said: ‘That man gave xx rupees to you, but he gave more money to other people.’ I told them: ‘Oh yeah, but how much money are you giving me?’

I understand Sattar Shah as being at the intersections of spirituality, ritual, and theology. By foregrounding him within Islam, I do not seek to reduce him or conceal other aspects of his life such as his profound ruralness or his relationships with the landscape which also constitute an important genre of the local. I also appreciate that Islam/his spirituality only presents one part of the puzzle and I do not claim to understand Sattar Shah in his totality, and essentially approach him as an unknowable subject. Rather, in this chapter, I am
interested in understanding how one’s relationship with Allah is particular and situated, and shapes and is shaped by the social. Sattar Shah’s relationship with Allah is very much fashioned by his circulation in a lifeworld that offers little or no guarantees. Everything is uncertain, from having enough food to eat to receiving support for getting his land ready to what his own body can achieve. Even the roti stone can explode.

I cannot know for certain the role of Islamic teachings (whether from his elders or learnt from being in society) in assisting Sattar Shah develop his points of departure from the world. For sure, I can identify at least certain Islamic expectations from his stories. For example, Quranic and Prophetic teachings on Tawakkul (reliance on Allah), and Imaan (belief in Allah), or Hadith that understand this world as a site of travel (a stop before the next world/eternity), or Sufi teachings (both esoteric and mainstream) which lend to the rich faqeri (sainthood) traditions of South Asia. But I am not fully convinced whether we even need to use Islam as a heuristic device to contain Sattar Shah.

Instead, I am more inclined towards understanding his points of departure from the world as a lifelong accumulation of strength and fierceness over the course of his time in the world, very much rooted in its tangibility and materiality. In other words, I am drawn to his relationship with Allah and how that manifests in the multiple ways he orders his life and social relations. My main point of emphasis is that Sattar’s relationship with Allah is accumulative and accretive of the social and the chronicity which subsumes it.

The various ways Sattar Shah makes this world his own, are perhaps better captured by looking beyond and in-between anthropological and text-critical approaches to Islam. I find it more useful to understand his engagement with the world as informed but unbounded by Islam. Or if we must stick with the category of Islam, then Sattar Shah also shows us how

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the very project of Islam can be made one’s own. In this way as opposed to understanding Islam as a set of pre-sanctioned guidelines which are meant to constrain behavior; the varied work Sattar Shah performs to nurture his relationship with Allah also enables us to understand Islam as generative- as personal, collective, and social sites of striving. I am not saying that Tawakkul or Imaan cannot be taught via Islamic teachings, but that it is also learnt and approximated. While we might consider such a commitment as incremental work within the normative folds of Islam, I think its radical potential lies outside of what is only understood as a conscious, reactive, and highly personal project of ethical improvement. Therefore, by drawing attention to Sattar Shah’s Tawwakkul and Imaan as expressed deeply and richly in his speech and actions is a powerful indicator of what constitutes Islam in addition to self-cultivation. In this sense, both the terms “religious agency” and “ethical improvement” commonly used to contain religious subjects are lacking.⁴⁰¹

Sattar Shah’s relationship with Allah is liberatory in its disentanglement from sociality, its constraints, and generative in the multiple ways devotions to Allah can be expressed. For example, handling a hot pot of rice, not collecting fodder, not asking others for food despite hunger, donating his sister’s buffalos to the madrassa, choosing to live in a deteriorating house (while he has better options) are some examples of Sattar Shah’s many devotions to Allah. These forms of devotions cannot be fully corroborated by existing theological discourses of Islam. In fact, a focus on the generalities of Islam as a collective category, obscures the particularities of Sattar’s experiences.⁴⁰²

Sattar Shah’s many devotions to Allah can be best appreciated outside the expectations of religion, secularity, rationality, and the seductions of either. Many have written about the unsuitability of the terms of “religion” or “culture” to capture the totality of

Islam. Why then bother to invest in an analytically untenable category (of Islam) which can simultaneously suggest that Islam is everything and Islam is nothing? As Asad says: “The aspiration to coherence with regard to connections between ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ is a process, not a fixed structure.”

Why should Sattar Shah place his trust in sociality when there are no assured sources of assistance, comfort, or support? He has firmly concluded that it is only Allah who provides for him, sustains him, and comforts him. His many devotions to Allah are not just outcomes of self-cultivation based on Islam’s formal teachings, but also accumulations of a life time of experience, aging, loss, contemplation, and betrayal. Sattar Shah says: “I have spent more than 50 years in this poverty, but I only ask Allah.” For him Allah offers the only certainty, which not even his own body can provide: “I am growing weak. I rarely go to the doctor. But you know, I can only go to the doctor if I can afford his fee. Allah nurtures and sustains, He will surely do the same for me.”

What I am not saying though, is that Sattar Shah’s many devotions to Allah are only a response to the chronicity of life in Siran, or that Sattar’s reliance on Allah is a way of coping, negotiating, and making-sense of precarity. Such a reduction diminishes Sattar Shah and his relationship with Allah. I do not wish to imply a causality with spirituality and precarity. There are plenty of people in Siran, whose lives are similar to Sattar, yet their modes of engagement are far different from his. Simply put, I am drawn to Sattar Shah’s many devotions to Allah and his relationship with Him, as a site of engagement to access his “local” and his truths that allow for a sincerer rendition of life on the margins, a life in constant adjustment - or just life.

There is also an abruptness to Sattar Shah’s truthfulness, in how he calibrates his

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relationships to others. While he needs others for his survival, he does not seek them. He does make one exception on Eid\textsuperscript{405} where he actively seeks people: “I do go to my relative’s homes on Eid. After all, we are Muslim brothers.” He also speaks very fondly of his sister. His donation of her buffalos can be understood as devotions to her as well as Allah, and without contradiction.

I approached Sattar Shah to understand social repair.\textsuperscript{406} But how do you do that with someone who exceeds the social? Sattar seems to exist somewhat outside of the social or his “social” is his relationship with Allah. He is engaged with others but on his terms. Sattar acknowledges others (their imperfections and limitations), accepts their assistance, but does not venerate them. In many ways, Sattar takes charge of his life through his determination to not need others and by selectively refusing their assistance. In this reworking of sociality, lies a paradox. The rejection of the social or engaging with it on one’s own terms, constitutes a site of the social in itself, one that is needed for Sattar Shah’s sustenance.

Sattar Shah’s many devotions to Allah are forms of philological and material risk taking; genius ways of engaging with the chronicity of life in the pahari Siran valley. Reconciling his aloneness with the limits of his own agency and the unsafely of sociality are embodiments of Islam. He inhabits the world in particular ways that allow him to cultivate a relationship with Allah which at times includes an indifference towards others. Yet, on account of his closeness to Allah, he draws people to him, as much as he raises anxieties within them. Sattar Shah’s rejection of the social, which is marked by the profound contingency of everyday existence and the absoluteness of the presence of Allah in everything, helps us understand that a turn away from the social is also a turn towards the

\textsuperscript{405} A day of religious importance for Muslims, where they are expected to celebrate as a community.
Or in other words, Sattar’s reliance on Allah and rejection of others, is also sustained by the social and constitutes its own moral communities. His modes of Islam are far more sophisticated than those around him, in that sense Islam is his point of departure as much as it is his point of arrival.

Sattar helps us understand that social repair is not simply synonymous with “repairing the social,” i.e. putting things back together to enable co-existence. Rather, social repair can also be understood as efforts to find one’s own particular situatedness and grounding, and therefore serves a very pragmatic purpose: to enable the continuity of life on one’s own terms. This way, Sattar’s non-normativity is integral to understanding social repair; how someone so far removed from community can still be a part of it, create their “own social” in its very rejection, and blaze a pathway for a kind of life they are compelled to live.

Sattar Shah sincerely believes that Allah will provide for his remaining life on earth: “Allah guzarta hai (Allah will arrange for my life). I don’t need to plan.” Mubashir, my research assistant, who had a pretty rough last few years with no stable employment, asks Sattar Shah, almost pleading: “Baba ji, can you also please tell me of a method [a scheme], so Allah also provides for me?”
(interlude)

It is time we connected.

In my singular focus, I have neglected you.

I have been pre-occupied dwelling with my interlocutors.
I have been pre-occupied searching for the “perfect” form.
The search is ongoing, I am dissatisfied.
I have brought this burden home, I am depleted.

I have assumed that writing is at odds with welcoming you.
I have imagined you as uncaring, calculating, selfish, instrumental, only looking to gain.
This is such a parsimonious view of the world and of others, and despite this, I am still broke.

I have imagined that you will only get in the way, by demanding clarity and resolution.
I have forgotten that you too can shatter, weep, wound.
I have forgotten that you too may become invested.

I have considered breaking up with you, to write only for myself.
This is such a lonely proposition, I am scared.

What if we meet each other half-way?
What if we share burden?
Why don’t we be humble together?

This has been great, we should talk more often.
I seek to understand anger as a legitimate mode of engagement in settings of chronicity. I turn towards Abrar- a young Kashmiri man- who is desirous of a world that he is not permitted to have. In the myriad of ways Abrar insists against the conditions of sovereignty that seek to diminish him, he helps us understand anger as generative and ontologically informed. I tease out social formations that are nurtured by anger, and how being in a state of disintegration may provide the impetus for novel ways of relating to one another. Anger in its transgressions, not only generates sophisticated moral communities but lends a certain “practicality” to the ambitions of social repair. I also reflect on my relationship with Abrar as being symbolic of the wider colonial dynamics between Pakistan and Kashmir and wonder about the possibilities of friendship in settings of incommensurable inequality.

“It comes as a great shock to discover that the country, which is your birthplace, to which you owe your life and your identity, has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you.”

- James Baldwin

Abrar infuriates me, at least as much as I infuriate him. I sense he even holds a grudge against me, for not assisting him to find employment or doing more to save his father from dying. In this way, I am also terrified of him, the expectations he places on me are ones I cannot satisfy. His demands appear to be unfulfillable, exceptional, and exceed the

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407 Taken from the 2016 documentary film: “I am Not Your Negro,” directed by Raoul Peck.
constituents of our relationship. At least, that is how I thought relationships are supposed to be: safe, bounded interactions, you know intimacies within reason. I use this chapter to host Abrar’s anger- the rage of a young Kashmiri man- to appreciate the urgency, palpability, and material groundings of his frustrations. I also punctuate the writing with my irritations towards him. Abrar’s rage is not unwarranted, and I can vouch for its intensity. In other words: I seek to explore anger as a mode of engagement with the world in settings of chronicity: colonial occupation, military omnipresence, natural disasters, and structural violence. I ask: What does it mean to be angry and Kashmiri? How can we better understand anger as productive, generative, ontologically informed, and not just as affective residue (that bitter aftertaste)? What are the linkages between anger and social repair? I understand social repair as the multiply situated and unbounded labor, desires and relationalities needed for some approximation of the social to allow life to flourish despite the violence it bestows. I attempt to approach these questions within the microcosm of my relationship with Abrar and how that is emblematic of the wider dynamics between Pakistan and Kashmir.

The demands Abrar places on those around him may appear outrageous but can also be read as intertwined with the experiences of colonialism in contemporary Kashmir. His anger cannot be disentangled from the diminishment of Kashmiri bodies and subjectivities. I consider Abrar’s sense of entitlement as a mode of advocating for himself in a lifeworld where nothing is guaranteed, or a given. I seek to bring to the forefront those everyday inconveniences which can impede flourishing (a state where survival is not the ultimate triumph)- such as in matters of love, employment, life, and death. Abrar seems to read the world as an accumulation of uncertainty, where things seldom go as planned, and where one must doubly rely on the asymmetries of power to achieve the simplest of tasks. By this I mean minuscule undertakings such as delivering an important letter on time or getting one’s name spelled correctly on school documents. Things which despite their tiny magnitude can
be mourned as significant obstacles when they do not align or celebrated as glorious achievements when they do. I am reminded of the various times, Abrar has asked (demanded) that I speak to the doctor on his behalf or with Abuka (the Nigerian conman who sells dreams of prosperous employment in Africa): “Ap baray hai, ap ki baat woh sunay gain (you are ‘older’ they will listen to you).”

I should clarify, I am not interested in “providing” Abrar “narrative opportunity” for his anger. Rather, I want to highlight the very grittiness and inconveniences of being young and Kashmiri and the multiple forms of attrition/wear-and-tear occupation demands. In this way, I seek to write Kashmir outside the broad strokes of geopolitics, which are padded, tiresome, repetitive, and stuck between the dualisms of India and Pakistan.

Abrar lives in Neelum valley, Pakistan “administered” Kashmir. The Line of Control (LoC) cuts through Neelum arbitrarily dividing the valley amongst India and Pakistan. At times the demarcations are so outlandish, that one part of the same pahar may “belong” to India and another to Pakistan. There is even a point along the Neelum river, where you can sit on a charpoi (string bed) with hot doodh patti (chai with milk), and “look” at India in a theatre of borders. Residents have mostly learned to configure themselves in relation to the LoC and the heavy contingents of the military which “safeguard” the region. Neelum is also a site of repeated disasters and humanitarian operations. The nomenclature of Pakistan “administered” Kashmir is problematic not just because it conceals the materiality of occupation behind the civility of bureaucracy, but it also creates the semblance of two different struggles (one in India and the other in Pakistan). At the same time, it is important to note the plurality of the Kashmiri struggle -as forms of politics that have not yet been fully worked through- to encompass the diversity of opinions that characterize the discourse on Kashmir by Kashmiris on either side of the LoC.
Anger and Non-sovereignty

“My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of anger will teach you nothing, also.”

-Audrey Lorde

Anger is a legitimate response to colonialism, state violence, and racism despite liberal democratic demands to eject anger from political, public, and popular deliberations.

In fact, anger plays a significant role in the very processes through which ethnic identity and differences are articulated and transacted under colonialism.

How is anger talked about in contemporary discussions on Kashmir? Well, not so brilliantly. For example, Devadas’s unfortunately titled book *The Generation of Rage in Kashmir* essentializes anger to violence and terrorism.

The book makes a tenuous link between anger and new forms of militancy amongst Kashmiri youth. Though far more sophisticated, Parashar’s work on the participation of Kashmiri women in armed uprising also inadvertently suggests links between anger and militancy.

For Parashar, the more important task is to understand the anger of militant women as “politically valid” and processual. But, she does very little to elaborate the textures and offerings of anger outside of armed struggle. Such works risk the erasure of

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other modes of engagement by “angry” Kashmiris and put forth a rather conservative approach to anger which minimizes its varied social, cultural, and political productivities.

At the same time, I am not talking about a “call to anger” as developed by earlier feminist and critical race writings, which seek to develop a sensorium of rage around collective wrongs to elicit a call to action. Nor am I invested in developing a typology of anger. For example, Nussbaum seeks to distinguish between unproductive and productive anger. Chakaravarti’s book Sing the Rage also attempts a rather apologetic reduction of anger to “three dimensions” (cognitive-evaluative, confrontational, and kinetic). For me, it is the very conceptual confusion and normative perniciousness of anger (which frustrates Nussbaum) that makes anger so intriguing (not conceptually faulty). I do not share the urgency for its theoretical resolution or singular reading. Instead, I am energized by the very ambivalence of anger which provides a space for “interrogation and reflexivity about its efficacy for political/pedagogical work.”

I am interested in the frictions between anger and the sovereign. I understand the sovereign as the “adjudicator of knowledge.” This can be the nation-state, the liberal self, the researcher, the reader, the writer, the community, the family, and so on. In this chapter, I

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mostly focus on the sovereign in two interrelated forms: the nation-state and the researcher/writer and how each seeks to claim and constrain the unknowable subject to a realm of knowability. This may be for the purposes of biopolitics and state conscription, or any other. Berlant and Hardt agree that the notion of the sovereign is over-stated within contemporary political theory. Berlant believes that sovereignty is best an aspirational and normative concept (not a “true” given condition) which is mistakenly circulated as realism. Therefore, I approach the work of exceeding and countering the frames of sovereignty as both a “political as well as an epistemic project.”

Building on contemporary understandings of anger as reactive and demand-seeking and as investments in the reshaping of geopolitics and citizenship, the productivities of anger also lie in its interruptions of the sovereign’s ability to singularly make decisions. Therefore, I seek to understand anger as ontologically constitutive and transgressive, as disorganization which compels us to move beyond ourselves, as instability not simply in an emotive sense but the mad scramble for relationality which allow possibilities of the social that may not be permitted under sovereignty. In other words, I want to percolate in the

proposition that anger propels the subject towards non-sovereignty which can in itself engender novel relationalities.\textsuperscript{425}

Berlant understands non-sovereignty as a state of plural and multiple (even contrasting) forms of self-adjudication.\textsuperscript{426} Non-sovereignty allows us to consider a “different relation to incoherence” where one’s “complicity and contradiction can never be resolved.”\textsuperscript{427} Lau believes non-sovereignty is not a permanent state of being, but a fleeting transformative experience.\textsuperscript{428} I consider Lau’s understanding of non-sovereignty lacking in the sense that it signals a very unrealistic form of life which can be simply guided and nudged from suspension to coherence. Further, informed by Hardt, I approach non-sovereignty both at the level of the social and the self/subject and how they relate to one another.\textsuperscript{429}

With the help of the protagonist of this chapter: Abrar, I attempt a working through of non-sovereign subjectivities and social formations. I take to heart Berlant’s advice to consider the “different ways in which we engender different kinds of claims on the world, in our attachments or ways of moving or desires for habituation or aspirations.”\textsuperscript{430} For Abrar, anger is a constant relation to the self and the social, not a mere passing/working through.\textsuperscript{431} Rather than transformative “moments” as Lau suggests,\textsuperscript{432} I understand Abrar’s anger as a political formation of being continually unhinged which due to its relentless and

\textsuperscript{426} Berlant as quoted in Davis and Sarlin, “On the Risk,” 16.
\textsuperscript{427} Berlant as quoted in Davis and Sarlin, “On the Risk,” 16.
\textsuperscript{429} Hardt as quoted in Davis and Sarlin, “On the Risk,” 14.
\textsuperscript{430} Berlant as quoted in Davis and Sarlin, “On the Risk,” 16.
\textsuperscript{431} For the same reason, I do not seek to enter the territory of love (by way of anger), despite the tracks being so convenient. E.g., hooks understands anger as the possibility for love which can provide healing, coalition building, and strength for catalyzing social change. See, bell hooks, \textit{Killing Rage} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995). But in my reading of Abrar and life in colonial Kashmir, I am unable to confidently make this leap. Also note Flowers’ discussion on why understanding indigenous women’s resistance to colonization in terms of love denies the transformative potential of resentment, anger, and rage. See, Rachel Flowers, “Refusal to Forgive,” \textit{Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society} 4, no. 2 (2015).
\textsuperscript{432} Lau, “Half-cup Rage.”
unpredictable nature is frustrating to the biopolitics of all those who seek to constrain him, inclusive of the Pakistani state.

I understand Abrar’s anger as a want or desire for more from the world, despite being repeatedly reminded of the audacity of such a proposition. This is perhaps somewhat consistent with understandings of decolonization as “the opening of modes of living beyond the imperialism sustained by the truth of colonization.”433 Despite not having a singular or specific end in view, anger can disrupt or supplement logics of social strategy. I approach anger as an everyday mode of engagement which in its animal immediacy can imbibe the promise/joy/potential that sovereignty seeks to enslave or enhance.434

What is then the relationship between anger and social repair? In order to answer this question, I first seek to understand non-sovereign relationalities and to think about “being-with-disintegration” as a way to develop the muscle to reject integration/the smoothing over of edges as at the desired state of subjectivity.435 And to think about the possibilities (or impossibilities) of social repair within the very conditions of non-sovereignty. Berlant and Edelman write: “[to] encounter ourselves as non-sovereign... is to encounter relationality itself, in the psychic, social, and political senses of the term.”436 How can then non-sovereignty foster “both intimate and social bonds?”437 I return to these questions but only after we become better acquainted with Abrar.

Friendship as Method

Abrar’s father (or “baba”) was the caretaker of the guesthouse where I stayed in Neelum. Baba tasked Abrar to look after me: make me breakfast and dinner, heat water, and run any small errands that I may have. In this sense, I never really planned on writing about Abrar, though I took copious notes of our interactions in my journals when and where I could. Over repeated trips to Neelum, we struck a friendship. Due to a self-imposed curfew, I spent most of my evenings at the guesthouse, seriously bored and lonely. Abrar would often join me. We talked, exchanged stories, and swapped life anecdotes.

It was only after some four years into our friendship that I decided to write about Abrar. When I asked for his permission, he responded: “Main samjha, shahid ap kabhee naheen poochain gain (I thought you will never ask).” The sites of my research with Abrar are therefore multiple: the guesthouse where we first met, the cell phone and Facebook through which we keep contact, but also the tea shops and hospitals of Islamabad. I return to these sites throughout the chapter. Tillman-Healy considers friendship as a method of qualitative inquiry and as a kind of fieldwork in itself.438 She suggests that the very processes of building sustained engagements, compassion, and vulnerability constitute “data collection” and the “path of the relationship becomes the path of the project [research].”439

439 Ibid., 735.
The Cactus

I sometimes imagine Abrar as a cactus: very prickly. One morning at breakfast, Abrar was in a particularly grumpy mood. He stared me down for waking him up so early in the day:

We have this one darned hen who never lays any eggs. Today early in the morning, she was making so much shour (annoying noise). Turns out, she finally laid an egg! I had to chase her away to make her shut up [so I could go back to sleep].
He then points at his phone:

I went to bed very late. First, I watched a film on my phone.\footnote{Abrar is not referring to streaming a film online, since there is no or very limited internet available in Neelum. Instead, there is a video store in the bazaar which transfers pirated Bollywood films onto the phones of customers via an old-fashioned USB. Abrar watches films on the very tiny screen of his dated Nokia phone.} Then I was up most of the night trying to reach my girlfriend. Look, I had to try 446 times before the call went through [showing me the call log on his phone].

It was exceptionally cold that morning, Abrar adds:

Winter in Neelum sucks. It is so cold, there is nothing much to do but sleep and stay warm in bed. When I was younger, I would spend all day in front of the fire, reading digests, and novels. We never had a TV, but the radio was on at all times. Schools were closed during the core winter months but remained open otherwise. Most kids skipped school when it snowed but since I lived so close I was forced to go every day. If I didn’t go, the teacher would hit me and say: ‘Why didn’t you come yesterday, you just live next door?’

He then sighs: “Kidher jaye, har jaga pahar hi pahar hain, idhir daikho pahar, udher daikho pahar (Where can one go? There are pahars everywhere, you look here you see a pahar, you look there, you see some more).”

**Panchis (Flight Birds)**

During summer, Abrar works as a tourist guide in Neelum. The rest of the year, he works as a salesman at a clothing store in Lahore. He explains: “I earn more as a tourist guide
here in 4 months than working all year round in Lahore.” Tourists are typically overcharged during “tourist season”—the price of everything goes up from food to accommodation to the cost of hiring a jeep. Abrar quips: “That’s the price you pay for being Pakistani.”

While Abrar appreciates the vibrancy and energy urban Lahore offers, he is also mindful of its perils. He explains:

The first year when I was in Lahore, I made friends with a rowdy group of boys. We would go around the bazaars late at night and mug people; steal their money, mobile phones, even food. We once attacked a man who was drinking vodka and ran away with all his merchandise from this stall. But then it struck me: these guys have families here, if we get caught by the police, their families will get them out of jail. *What will happen to me?* I will be fucked! So, I decided to leave their company, they taunted and bullied me for some weeks but then just left me alone.

Abrar continues:

Lahore is a dangerous city. When I was new there, the police would often harass me in hopes of making extra cash. As soon as they found out that I am from Kashmir, they got on my case. I am lucky, I have a reference in the police force [know someone in the police], I would just take his name and tell them to fuck off.

He further adds: “In Lahore, Kashmiris are called *panchis* (flight birds) because there is an assumption amongst Pakistanis that we are not loyal and can take off whenever we want.” He shakes his head: “As if Pakistanis are committed in their relationships. They are nice when they need something but once that is over, they simply forget about you.”
The last observation was directed towards me, it was Abrar’s way of prodding whether I too will forget him (and Neelum) once my research is over. He laughs:

There is also this stereotype that us Kashmiris run away from work during summer, when the garmi (heat) is unbearable for us pahari log. This is true, it is really hot in Lahore in the summer, who in their right mind wants to stay in an inferno?

We Are Not from India

One night, a strong earthquake shook Neelum. The next morning, I inquired if Abrar too felt the tremor. He shrugged: “I do remember the bed shaking, but I wasn’t convinced if I needed to get up. Instead, I sent a text message to a friend and went back to sleep.” He continues: “The earthquake which I can never forget is the one in 2005. The tremors were so intense, I thought maybe India was attacking us with missiles!” Abrar elaborates:

Everything was destroyed after the earthquake. For several months, we had no connection with the outside world. Finally, the army set up a phone near a hospital. Some called Saudi Arabia, some Pakistan, to let their family members know of their condition. My school was also destroyed. We spent the next 3 years studying in the open. When I was in grade 10, work on the new building finally started. I was so excited, that I would study in the new premises. But by the time the building was finally complete, I had already graduated.

Abrar’s eyes lit up: “Shall I tell you something else?” I nodded:
Do you see this *nallah* (stream) running down this *pahar* and under that bridge? This swells up during monsoon season, every year. Remember the big flood [of 2010]? That year, the nallah destroyed the bridge separating this part of the valley from the rest. We were stuck here, the nallah became another LoC! One of my brothers was on the other side, he remained there for nearly two weeks. People would write letters, tie them to rocks, and hurl them across the water. One man from our village wrote a note saying: ‘We are out of *atta* (flour), send us some!’ A person on the other side wrote back: ‘We don’t have a flour mill here, you know. Don’t even bother coming here, there is nothing here for you.’ People on this side got very angry at his provocation. They burst out: ‘We are not from India that we are not allowed to cross!’

Image 79. As the flood waters receded, the Pakistani army eventually rehabilitated the bridge reconnecting the valley (photograph by the author)
Best Days of My Life

Abrar likes to dress smartly: “You know in Lahore, customers are surprised when they find out I am a shopkeeper. I am so well-dressed that they mistake me as one of them.” I asked what inspires him to dress so well. He shrugs: “I don’t know, I picked up these cues when I lived in the [displacement] camp in Islamabad [after the earthquake]. In fact, those were the best days of my life.”

After the earthquake in 2010, a series of “model” displacement camps were set up in Islamabad to accommodate people from Kashmir and other parts of Northern Pakistan. These camps were unusual in the sense that they were right in the city under the watchful eyes of Islamabad’s elites, news reporters, as well as humanitarian organizations. Unlike most camps which are squalid, dirty, and underserviced, these were quite extraordinary in their attention to cleanliness, quality of living facilities, and available services.

At the time of the earthquake, Abrar’s sister lived in Rawalpindi with her husband. Hearing how comfortable the camps were, they managed to gain entry in one of the camps designated for people from Kashmir. They invited Abrar to stay with them, and he did so, for a year. He explains:

Life was strange there. But if I look at my entire life, I have never lived as comfortably (aram aur ayashi sai) as I did in the camp. Everything was free, whatever your heart desired! I would live like the people of Islamabad, neat and tidy in my appearance. Initially, other people in the camp were suspicious if I was from Islamabad [as opposed to Kashmir]. They would tell me to leave the camp as it was only for Kashmiris. Only after they overheard me talking to my sister in Kashmiri, they got satisfied. After that, sometimes they would refer to me as their ‘Kashmiri bhai’ (Kashmiri brother).
I inquired if he made any friends in the camp. Abrar responds:

When I first got there, the other kids were brutal. They would pick on me and beat me. I was new and didn’t know the ropes. The first two months there were pretty rough. Then one day I decided enough is enough, life cannot go on like this. I took things into my own hands.

“How did you do that?” I wondered. Abrar laughs:

Simple, I grew some balls. I would not give in to their demands, if they would hit me, I would strike back. I became bold and fierce. In fact, a time came when I surpassed them. They began to look up to me. Soon, whenever they wanted to beat someone or go play somewhere, they would seek my advice and company. I became their leader!

Abrar recalls an unusual incident in the camp:

One day, the camp ran out of water. A fellow resident already known for his activism encouraged us to get out on the streets to protest. He stepped in the middle of traffic, yelling, and screaming, and tore his clothes off. We also grabbed our empty containers and joined him. We blocked traffic and created a ruckus. This went on for a few hours. Eventually, some government official started to negotiate with our strike leader [the activist]. After some time, the activist instructed us to go back to the camp saying that the government has promised to restore the water supply. We all went back but there was no water for another three days! It was rumored that the activist was bribed to call
off the strike. I even saw a car drop off Nestle water bottles in front of his tent. That fucker.

After nearly a year, the government started pressurizing camp residents to return home and eventually the camps were shut down. Abrar remembers:

When I returned home, I was reminded of the harsh conditions of life in Neelum. For example, there is little or no electricity here, it is always dark. The camp was always lit up. There were no restrictions on movement there. Here, if you enter someone’s property to steal their fruit, they yell at you. What do you do if you feel like having fruit and are surrounded by other people’s fruit trees? I still miss my friends. My closest friend was a boy named Zeeshan. He was from Muzaffarabad. We have lost contact. I don’t know where he lives but I remember his father has a shop in the bazaar. To this day, whenever I go to a bazaar in Muzaffarabad, I ask about him. So far, I have not been lucky. My life will become so much better if we are to be united.

Everyone Keeps Score

“You know, an interesting thing about Neelum is that people here always keep score,” Abrar shared. There is tension within Abrar’s paternal family. Some of this has to do with competing claims on property left behind by Abrar’s deceased grandfather. This complicates matters because Abrar’s home is surrounded mostly by these relatives. I was interested in finding out more about how this conflict renders daily life inconvenient. Abrar provides an example:
The village mailman is my father’s relative [and hence an ‘enemy’]. A few years ago, we sent a time sensitive letter, but the mailman delayed the letter for some 15 days. Any letter that leaves this area goes through him. That bastard is very calculating and delivers letters according to his wishes. This is how he maintains power over us. He gets particularly jealous when we develop relationships with people in Pakistan fearing that we may develop strong allies.

He continues:

Then there is the master sahib (school headmaster). He has been bugging me and all of my siblings ever since we started school. He always picked on me in class. Or during exam time, he would send an invigilator to single me out for a body search or make me sit in the noisiest of spots in the room. He is the same son-of-a-bitch, who would scold me if I missed even a day of school during bad weather.

Abrar adds: “People here are out to get each other, if you don’t keep score, log kha jaye gain (you will be consumed/destroyed).”

**Document Everything**

Abrar confided in me that his eldest brother was in jail. He was in prison for the last 14 years and a year remained in his sentence. While I did not ask the details of his conviction, it was clear that Abrar blamed his extended family for his imprisonment. He explains:
My cousins put my eldest brother in jail. Our entire family life was destroyed, imagine having your loved one being locked away for 15 years? The money and time we spent, the loss of peace of mind, not knowing if he will be okay.

Abrar adds: “We didn’t even know what to do when my brother was arrested. We had no experience with the police or the legal system, and were not aware of terms like ‘evidence,’ ‘witness,’ and ‘appeal.’” He continues: “Over time we have learned how to deal with the police, the army, the agencies, we have learned the hard way, how to be vigilant. The trick is to document everything.”

Abrar’s family maintains a ledger of any “strange” interactions they have with the police, intelligence, or the military, as well any violations or harms inflicted on them by their extended family. He explains:

My brother who is in the army, maintains a ledger. He writes down every incident including any instance of violation from our own family. He has been maintaining this ledger since he was in grade 7. He thought we are seven brothers, when we get older, we will take revenge on each and every transgression that is recorded.

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441 It is a public secret that Neelum is run by the Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies (locally referred to as ‘agencies’). The agencies maintain a close watch on residents. Neelum has a long history of unexplainable disappearances and abductions of civilians. Getting on the radar of the agencies is considered “as the worst possible outcome of life in Neelum,” and as one interlocutor described: “certain death.” The agencies work with a discernible juridical-political logic of exception and impunity, rendering Kashmiri (political) subjects as threats and opportunities for extending Pakistan’s own claims of sovereignty against unfavorable regional geopolitics.
Abrar offers an example of a transgression:

The rainwater from my uncle’s house drains directly onto our property. We have repeatedly asked them to dig a drain. One day, I got pissed and took a shovel and dug a drain on their property. The men came out yelling, telling me to get off their land. There was a fight and they beat me up. When I got home, I entered the incidence in our ledger. We called a jirga [a village level conflict resolution tribunal]. We presented all their transgressions, there were pages and pages of chronological documentation dating all the way back to 1970! The matter was decided in our favor, and my uncles were obligated to sign a document of apology and also publicly apologize to us in the mosque.

I made several trips to Islamabad during my fieldwork. On one such occasion, Abrar handed me a thin manila envelope:

Can you please post this? This is too important to be mailed from here. This is a request from my mother to my brother’s warden for his early release. It is a compassionate appeal from a mother for her son.

As soon as I reached Islamabad, I dropped the letter at the post office. A few weeks later, Abrar’s brother was released from prison.
Matters of Love

Abrar spends a lot of his time texting with his girlfriend. “How did you meet?” I asked:

My sister is married to my girlfriend’s brother, she lives with them. Once I called my sister from Lahore and instead Naima [girlfriend] answered. We got talking and one thing led to the other. We exchanged numbers and began regularly texting and calling. I did not even know what she looked like, but I fell in love! I decided to visit my sister, so I can see Naima. I was shocked, she wasn’t that attractive! I had a panic attack: fuck, what have I gotten myself into? But I thought if I leave her now, she will think I have left her just because she is not pretty.

He continues:

One day, I was on the bus from Neelum to Lahore and Naima called. She professed her love for me and expressed a desire for marriage. Our relationship has entered a new phase of intimacy and depth, but her parents are not agreeing to our marriage. They are worried our marriage will lower the position of their son. They think if their son treats my sister badly, I will retaliate by harming their daughter.

Abrar adds:

Her parents have instructed me to forget about her. But, how can I? Last week, I went hiking with my friends. Suddenly, it started to rain and hail. There was so much wind,
the trees were swaying, and we had minimal visibility. Everyone ran for cover, we were all concerned about ourselves (nafs nafsī). I ran into a cave and etched Naima’s name into the wall. I told her parents: ‘Even at 1400 feet under conditions in which people forget Allah, she was on my mind. How can I forget her?’

I inquired how will he move forward: “Well I have decided, if I want to pursue this relationship, I need to figure out a way to move back to Kashmir. What better way to do that then joining the army?”

**Master Sahib Strikes Again**

The army forms the backdrop against which all life unfolds in Neelum. It regulates most institutions and services: from hospitals to the only mobile phone service in the valley. Abrar jokes: “When they spy on my calls, they probably hear me having phone-sex.” The army’s numerous security posts, cantonments, and military grade vehicles, as one interlocutor puts it: “makes life feel very heavy.” The army is an important yet highly selective source of employment in Neelum. It provides a rare opportunity for regular income, a pension, and medical care via an elaborate network of nationwide military hospitals. By joining the army (if one is lucky enough to get accepted), Kashmiri subjects must concede to a version of Kashmir that is under the benevolent supervision of Pakistan. Drawing on Raymond William’s work on “structures of feeling,” Ali argues that through constant surveillance

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442 Williams explains structures of feeling as “social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available.” See, Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1977), 133-134.
via its intelligence arm and highly selective employment, the army “dominates discourse, emotions, and ways of being.”

She writes:

Regional employment in the Pakistani military creates loyal subjects who revere the military and the military state, producing the conditions of possibility for continued military authoritarianism in the region. At the same time the activities of the intelligence agencies produce a paranoid state and suspicious subjects...Loyalty and suspicion thus constitute forms of emotional regulation that are paradoxical but not contradictory: the former integrates people into the nation and accomplishes rule by creating consent, while the latter services state power by emotionally disintegrating the region through suspicion and hindering the possibilities of local collective action.

Through such forms of emotional regulation, the army restricts ways of being Kashmiri and relating with one another. In Abrar’s case, the military also directly impinges on romantic relationships and regulates whom one can love and how:

This is my third attempt at applying for the army. Last time I got pretty close, I passed the written test and the interview. Things got derailed when I was brought in for the medical examination. I had etched Naima’s name on my arm using a sharp scissor. The army major [doctor] saw the cuts on my arm and inquired what they were. At first, I said I got cut during work and hoped he would move on. But the motherfucker kept pressing on. Eventually I told him what they meant. He immediately referred me for a psych evaluation. I was handed a whole bunch of questions. It was all fine till I read the


444 Ibid., 86.
following question: ‘Have you ever loved a boy or a girl?’ I panicked, I don’t know what happened to me, but something consumed me at that point. I just froze. I drew thick lines across the question with my pen. After reviewing my responses, the psychiatrist levelled with me: ‘Baita (son), you can’t do this job.’ I asked: ‘Why not?’ He responded: ‘Baita don’t argue, just go home, you can’t do this job.’ Here I am again, trying to get into the bloody army. But, do you know that my brother got in after 7 tries?

Baba is extremely proud of his other son who made it into the army. He is also hopeful that Abrar will make it this year. Baba shared excitedly: “This year we even have some safarish (a source). The person who makes the entry tests is a relative and so is the person who checks the height of potential recruits.” The morning of the test, Abrar was very nervous. I wished him luck. That same night, he stormed into my room, visibly pissed. Things did not go as planned. Abrar arrived at the test center only to learn that the surname listed on his school documents as forwarded from his school was misspelled. The headmaster strikes again. Abrar was not allowed to sit in on the exam because of this clerical error. He was trembling with rage, I tried to calm him down. We both swore at the headmaster till we ran out of insults.
Abuka, the Conman

The following year when I returned to Pakistan, I called Abrar. Till then, the army had not accepted him. He told me that he spent the past few months texting with a Nigerian man whom he met on a bus in Lahore. The man’s name was Abuka and he claimed to work for the Nigerian High Commission in Islamabad. He asked Abrar for Rs. 2 lakhs in exchange for a guaranteed visa and job in Nigeria for a salary of $5000 a month. “That’s an obscene amount of money,” I tried to reason with him. Abrar thought I was being unsupportive and presumptuous. He raised his voice: “I mustered up whatever courage I had to speak with him in English, but can you please talk with him and help me understand the process of obtaining a visa?” I reluctantly agreed to accompany Abrar in his meeting with Abuka. We decided that I will question Abuka to gauge the authenticity of his offer as well as to get more
details of the job he was promising. Over the phone, we also made a list of tasks that Abrar will need to do if he does get the job (such as apply for a passport) as well as a list of alternatives if he does not.

The next morning, I picked Abrar from a bus stop in Islamabad. We googled the Nigerian High Commission to obtain a list of staff members, Abuka was not listed. I cautioned Abrar to not get his hopes up. Abrar did not appreciate this and accused me of sabotage: “First at least meet him, this is how these things work. When embassy people work through back channels, they act sneaky and take bribes.”

We met Abuka at a tea shop. I tried to get some basic details from him such as the documentation required for the visa and the nature and location of the job. He was unable to sufficiently answer any of my questions and instead put me on the phone with his associate, a mysterious Dr. Gerry who “works at the UK consulate.” Dr. Gerry was also not very helpful. Before leaving, Abuka demanded Rs. 2 lakh and Abrar’s passport within the next 2 weeks, otherwise the offer would expire. I strongly advised Abrar not to hand over any money or documents to Abuka.

See, Isn’t it Useful to Be in the Army?

While I was in Neelum, baba had a serious accident. I was not present when it happened but heard details from Abrar few days later when he returned from the hospital:

We were cutting grass, as we always do. We heard a noise and looked up to see abbu (dad) stumble off the ledge. He had slipped. We ran down, his head had hit some rocks and was split open, he was heavily bleeding. I sent my brother to the dispenser in the bazaar for help [there are no readily available doctors in this section of the valley]. But the dispenser refused to come to see my father and retorted: ‘The hospital is here, bring the patient here, have you ever heard the doctor visiting the patient?’ We then carried
him to the dispensary where he was injected with a powerful sedative. I ran to the jeep wala (jeep driver) who usually drives tourists. He refused to help us. He is an outsider, a man from Lahore. I told him to fuck off and then out of desperation ran to one of my uncles who also owns a jeep. Despite our history of enmity, he came right away. I muttered under my breath: ‘Apnay apnay hi hotay hain, aur paraye paraye hi (after all, only blood relatives can be ‘real’ family, and everyone else strangers).’

Baba was rushed to the nearest military hospital, some two hours away. There were no doctors on call. A technician attempted to take an x-ray of baba’s head. But he could not figure out how to x-ray someone who is lying down. Abrar recalls:

He [the x-ray technician] told us to support abbu’s body upright, we moved him and propped him up, at that very moment his entire body went limp and he lost consciousness. We then jeeped him to the better equipped military hospital in Muzaffarabad. It was a Sunday, only one doctor was present who was already overwhelmed with various medical emergencies. The next morning, we drove him to the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) in Rawalpindi. He was immediately shifted to the neuro ward. The doctor ordered a Head CT which showed a skull fracture and blood clots in the brain. Right now, he is numb from his waist below.

He continues:

I couldn’t even ask the fauji doctors (army doctors) too many questions, they have no respect for civilians and can do absolutely anything. As soon we got to the CMH, my brother [who is currently in the army] phoned someone from his brigade who now
drives an ambulance at this hospital. He helped us navigate the administration. We then called another cousin who is also in the army at a relatively good post. He also sent a note to the hospital to take care of us. See, isn’t it useful to be in the army?

Over the next few days as test results came in, the doctors concluded that baba will most likely never regain full functionality of his body, but he will continue to live. Abrar started to cry: “Allah khairyat sai unhay wapis lai aye (I hope Allah brings him [baba] safely back home).”

Changes

Soon after baba’s accident, I moved onto another valley for my research. I occasionally checked in with Abrar to inquire about his father. Last I heard from him, baba was back home and relatively stable. Months later, when I returned to Canada, we lost touch. In the summer of 2017, while I was visiting my parents in Islamabad, I received a Facebook invitation from Abrar. I accepted it and decided to call him to see how he was doing. A lot had changed. Abrar’s brother who was in the army died last year. Not being able to bear the loss of his son, baba also died shortly after. Abrar sighs: “It seemed, he gave up on life.”

There was also some good news, the army had finally accepted Abrar. It had almost been a year since his deployment. He shares:

I hated it at first but now things are okay. Ever since my brother died, I promised myself to perform well in the army. He (my brother) was the pride of our family, he was a superstar in the army.
Abrar asked if I had any photographs of his father. I only had a few and they were not very good. He replied angrily, as if I had let him down: “You lived in Neelum for so long, why didn’t you take more photographs of abbu?” I did not know how to respond.

The next morning at 7 am, Abrar woke me up with another phone call. His eldest brother (the one who was released from prison a few years ago), along with his wife and children, were in a major bus accident near Murree (a hill-station, a couple of hours away from Islamabad), and were admitted in the ICU of a government hospital in Islamabad. He hurriedly inquired if I can meet him at the hospital later in the day and talk to the doctors on his behalf. I agreed to do so.

Non-sovereign Relationalities

Abrar helps us bring to the forefront the very grounding and specificity of chronicity; the confluence of multiple forms of violence on structural conditions, as well as in personal, subjective, lived experience, and embodied reality. These range from matters of love to matters of life and death. He helps us appreciate the contours of relationality in the very spaces that blur distinctions between the sovereign and other sites of adjudication. I want to redraw attention to those genres of sociality that exist within and despite the reaches of the sovereign and perhaps as a result of its impositions.

Are Abrar and I really friends? Kirsch warns us to not confuse the friendliness of the people we encounter in our fieldwork with genuine friendship. She builds on earlier contributions of feminist writers who have argued for the recognition of power differentials between the researcher and the researched, and the deceptiveness of egalitarian

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relationships.446 My relationship with Abrar, its somewhat sharp contours, is perhaps emblematic of the wider relationship between Pakistan and Kashmir i.e., a relationship of incommensurable inequality. How can such a skewed relationship ever be fully reciprocated, when past and continuing violations and grievances are so intense?447

I brought a printer and scanner to Neelum, so I could make copies of research transcripts as needed. Abrar was keen to learn how to use the machine. He figured, perhaps one day he can work as a photocopier (photocopy shops are very common in urban Pakistan). I promised to teach him, I needed several transcripts copied anyways. After dinner, Abrar came to my room to work on the printer. After only 15 minutes of activity, the electricity went out. We waited for half an hour for the power to come back on, but it only did so for another 15 minutes. This went on for the rest of the night. After attempting to do this for 4 nights, Abrar, understandably frustrated, gave up. I shrugged: “Well, tough luck.” I guess that was the limit of my generosity.

447 Butterwick prompts us to also consider how social class profoundly shapes social relations and the rather unexpected ways reciprocity can occur despite such difference. See, Shauna Butterwick, “Travels with Feminist Community-Based Research,” in Feminist Community Research, eds. Gillian Creese and Wendy Frisby (Vancouver, British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press, 2011).
One other way I can unpack the nature of our relationship is through the metaphor of the *desi chicken*. The desi chicken, is chicken that is lovingly raised at home in much of rural Kashmir and Pakistan. The desi chicken is prized possession and a labor of love. They are only eaten on very special occasions: such as after being united with a long-separated family member or when a marriage is settled between two households. I noticed several occasions when the desi chicken was prepared in Abrar’s home. In my over 2 years of repeated trips to Neelum, I was never offered a desi chicken. Does this mean, that I failed to make real, meaningful inroads? Or the opposite, that I made such great progress, that Abrar felt no pressure to offer me a desi chicken? I knew if I asked him why I was never offered the chicken, he would simply shrug (much like I did when my photocopier idea did not pan out): “Well, tough luck.” *I guess that was the limit of his generosity.*
Can Abrar’s friendships with urban Pakistanis such as myself be considered a form of non-sovereign relationality - *incommensurable bonds steeped in colonial grievances which in their opportunism frustrate the civility of relationships?* And which provide some protections disallowed or rendered extremely difficult by conditions of sovereignty? One night, while consumed by his phone, Abrar proudly revealed:

I am texting my friends, one lives in Rawalpindi, one in Lahore, and another in Multan. Many people stay at this guesthouse and we form friendships, the genuine ones stay in touch. You never know when they can come in handy.
Abrar indicates that these relationships can be activated when the limits of kinship are stretched or when family or community cannot or intentionally chooses not to accommodate. These bonds may even form at multiple scales. For example, Schild demonstrates how after the earthquake, activists in Kashmir exerted pressure on the reconstruction bureaucracy in Muzaffarabad by creating alliances with national actors in Pakistan. In the same way, a functional engagement with the military, such by having at least one family member join the army, can also be considered as a unique relational configuration where the military is exploited in return to secure particular protections and services that cannot be obtained otherwise (e.g., access to hospitals).

The residents of Neelum maintain a particular disposition towards Pakistanis. Non-Kashmiris are not allowed to purchase land and are typically only tolerated as tourists, that too rather brusquely. Tourists are charged exponentially for room and boarding, and separate rates exist for renting vehicles for tourists versus locals. The guesthouse Abrar’s father managed is another example. While the guesthouse is owned by the tourism board which sets and collects rent, baba often charged extra and pocketed most of the rent, even from me. The frictions between tourists and local residents configures each in relation to the other in very particular ways, generating a shared understanding of outsiders amongst Kashmiri residents, setting up minimally intersecting and parallel ways of relating. Indeed, these borders are enforced both ways, reflecting the strange colonial dynamics that exists between Kashmir and Pakistan (and between Abrar and myself). The displacement camp which Abrar talks about is a good reminder of this. While the Pakistani state created these camps to maintain segregation between displaced Kashmiris and the rest, camp residents also reciprocated by ensuring that only Kashmiris were allowed to be residents (recall the suspicion levelled at

Abrar if he really was Kashmiri). The camp is an important metaphor: its residents were able to create another Kashmir within Pakistan, this time in the heart of its capital city, a kind of alter-community.

During fieldwork, the United Nations (UN) was implementing a nutrition project. The manager of the project occasionally stopped at the guesthouse. He joked how the residents of Neelum have a “peculiar flavor”:

I was shocked by how rude people are here. When we are on the road in our vehicle [most UN vehicles are large 4 by 4 cars], we have to constantly honk at pedestrians to get out of the way. They walk in the middle of the road as if they are walking on their forefather’s property (jaisy un kay baap ka road hai) After some time, I realized, it is not their fault, they have certain micronutrient deficiencies because of which they have very slow reactions, they are not rude, just malnourished.

This very “peculiar flavour” is what I am referring to when I invoke the term non-sovereign relationalities. Residents are hardly “slow in their reactions” but operate with considerable agreement to defy road etiquette as displays of solidarity, anger, and refusal of those who seek to encroach their lands. These unspoken yet shared codes of conduct (such as being rude to tourists and over-charging them) are particular social formations and ways of relating.
Kashmiris in Pakistan possess a significant and chronological ledger of betrayals by the state (and its people), just like the ledger maintained by Abrar’s brother. This includes the undermining of any collective action and politics within Kashmir (the “bribing” of the Kashmiri activist in the displacement camp is just a small example). Every year, Kashmiris celebrate youm-e-sia (“black day”), a day of anger. It falls on October 27th which marks the date when Pakistan and Indian forces occupied Kashmir, just three days after Kashmir finally gained independence from the long and cruel Dogra rule.449 There are strikes and speeches

449 It should be noted that while the Kashmir struggle is shaped by Partition, it exceeds it in important ways. Kashmir was sold in 1846 for an obscure (minimal) amount of Rs. 75 lakhs by the British to the Hindu Dogra
across Kashmir, public offices and schools remain closed. Unsurprisingly, this day is not commemorated in Pakistan.

Abrar recalls how public expressions of anger such as strikes and demonstrations are common in Neelum:

One year while I was in school, there were a lot of power cuts at night. It was exam time; how could we study? We were pissed. We marched in front of the electricity exchange, those bastards were sending all the power generated from our waterways in Neelum to Islamabad. We yelled at them to give us back our electricity and not send it to fucking Pakistan.

Abrar helps us consider that anger may generate unique social formations which can open alternative avenues for claims-making and for achieving very practical ends. One can also make a similar case at the communal level. For example, residents of Neelum outraged by the apathy of the Pakistani state have collectivized across different lines of power, affiliation, and kinship to take matters in their own hands: such as by maintaining privately run schools, operating village level micro-hydro plants that generate broken streams of electric power, and even maintaining alternate approaches to health care and healing. For example, after baba’s accident, Abrar came back to Neelum to collect medicinal plants and herbs known for their anti-inflammatory properties. Abrar’s mother also performs “dum” [curative spiritual invocations] for some 300 illnesses including hepatitis C which is

Dynasty reducing the status of Kashmiris to subordinates and slaves. Protesting the indignities represented by this transaction, Urdu poet Hafeez Jalandhari writes: “The fate of human beings was sold for Rs. 75 lakhs, Kashmir the paradise was sold for 75 lakhs.” See, Mona Bhan, “Voices of Kashmir: Defending Civilians in a Heavily Militarized Zone,” talk given at the 2017 Rafto Conference, Bergen, Norway, https://vimeo.com/241376622. One activist whom I interviewed remarked: “We Kashmiris are used to struggle; first the Dogra, now India and Pakistan.”
widespread in Neelum. Every Sunday she has an open house, and people visit from near and far to benefit from her healing powers, a unique social formation in its own right.

Image 84. A basic health unit near Abrar’s village which has been under construction for the last 7 years (photograph by Saeed Khan)

Under the surveillance of the watchful army and its intelligence wing, residents of Neelum have also innovated alternative social formations such as poetry societies, literary magazines, and debating competitions. In addition to the very significant purpose of bringing people together, they also serve as important venues for nurturing unique Kashmiri political subjectivities, solidarity, and historicity. I cannot divulge further details of these spaces at the risk of their over-exposure but consider that perhaps these are also examples of non-sovereign relationalities steeped in a tradition of anger and resentment towards the Pakistani

state and inspired as a result of them. Also, useful here is the literature on refusal which prompts us to consider its generative aspects: i.e., those who “turn away” are not merely disengaging but instead are imagining and enacting new subjectivities, ways of being and interpretations of histories, that lie outside the scope of the sovereign.451

The antagonisms anger generates may be considered as unique forms of relationality and intimacy which further configure ambivalent and hostile bodies in relation to one another. To continue to elaborate the urgent work of anger and the moral communities anger can nurture, I recreate some vignettes from my journals:

**Vignette 1:** The Senior Super Intendant (SSP) of the District Police was staying at the guesthouse. Abrar had a heated argument with him which he later recalls:

That bastard was drinking (alcohol) in his room. I entered his room to drop tea. He said to me in a drunken state: ‘Why are you wearing such a thick jacket?’ I replied: ‘Because it is so cold? Don’t you know?’ He didn’t like my response and shouted: ‘There are other cures for the cold [referring to his bottle of alcohol].’ I retorted back: ‘Only you and your kind will know that, since you have a racket of the cure’ [the police are notorious for confiscating illegal alcohol and consuming it themselves]. With that I stormed out of the room.

The next morning as the SSP was checking out, he yells at Abrar: “I am not going to pay the bill, after all I am the police, I am the government.” Abrar smirks: “Put that in writing, and I will let you go.”

**Vignette 2:** A UN official asks Abrar to serve him dinner in his room. Abrar refuses, heated words are exchanged:

I don’t know who he thinks he is. He comes to our village in his Pajero and demands special treatment. You know, we aren’t allowed to serve food in the rooms. These are the rules. Previously, we used to do so. But the guests are so uncouth, they often get salan (gravy/curry) stains on the white bed sheets. Do you know how hard it is to get salan stains out? It is not like we have washing machines here!

**Vignette 3:** At around 11 pm, two tourists (a man and a woman) walk into the guest house and request a room. Abrar asks for their national identity cards and inquires about the nature of their relationship. He can only rent rooms to legally married couples. The man shows him his identity card, the woman does not. Abrar presses for her card. She eventually hands it over. Their last names do not match. Abrar asks: “How do I know you both are married; your surnames don’t match?” The woman feels insulted, she snaps: “Don’t you know who you are talking to? I will call my papa in Muzaffarabad, all he needs to do is make a few phone calls and you will be taken to task.” Abrar grins: “Madam, the phones don’t work very well in Neelum, good luck to you and your papa.”

Abrar helps us think about anger as productive, generative, ontologically informed (not just a mere emotion) which can generate its own particular relationalities, social bonds,
and intimacies. Using my relationship with Abrar as a microcosm of wider colonial relations between Pakistan and Kashmir, I have attempted to understand Abrar’s anger (much like the anger of Kashmiris in Pakistan), as desirable and productive. Anger and its assumed fragmentation may appear counter-intuitive to social repair. But Abrar shows us that in its very transgression, anger nurtures sophisticated moral communities, and lends a certain “practicality” to the ambitions of repair. By this I mean, that anger creates and/or adjusts the social in ways that are not necessarily counterproductive to the flourishing of life, but rather anger can compel a moral and ethical urgency for the resolution of the very ambiguities which impede life. And that anger can work towards very practical and tangible ends, such as getting basic life tasks accomplished or refusing the influence of aid workers and the state on an already shrinking life-space. Such a relationship of anger and the social may appear counter-intuitive. But Abrar helps us see that anger in its very social disarticulation, can perform important work towards unforeseeable ends as well as towards very practical and grounded destinations.

Abrar may or may not have extended sincere gestures of friendship towards me, but nor did I, and neither one of us can do so without seriously engaging with the wider colonial relations that govern us. Instead, we were able to foster a mutually shared tolerance, a guarded proclivity, a protected fondness- as a place holder, until wider colonial ambiguities are fully worked through. Our friendship is one that is closely shaped by power relations and biopolitics. Some friendships are strong and survive over years, while others are “muscular” and fade. I am not sure how to characterize ours. Regardless of this irresolution, we maintain an intimacy which in the meantime performs important work.
Chandni bibi’s non-normativity is striking. She insists that the earthquake caused her to become blind which she describes as the “taking away of light, brightness, and illumination.” This is contrary to the claims of her family and those around her who believe her vision was impaired ever since she was a child. Reading the earthquake against the features of her sociality and the multiple forms of violence contained therein, it is possible to consider that in her blindness, bodily memory, biography, and social history have merged. By insisting that her vision deteriorated because of the earthquake, Chandni bibi ensures that the earthquake is not reduced to an “event” that can be temporalized and resolved in ways that demand “moving on” as the only next logical step. If we truly consider her blindness as social commentary and critique, we can begin to appreciate the multiple ways disasters are lived and surpassed, and how chronology is at best a normative truth. Chandni bibi demands a certain unknowability and opacity, her analytical indeterminacy is in itself an analytical lens. Her blindness and prognostic uncertainty allow ambiguity and open normativities for working towards a present-future. This is an orientation of proliferation and widespread flourishing, irreducible to a singular direction, but perhaps better imagined as a moving map of wayward steps and sideway glances.
“The event is not what happens. The event is that which can be narrated” - Allen Feldman

In our academic contemplations, we mistakenly take for granted the qualities that make us human. These include the very ability to form meaningful relationships, negotiate care, and experience a moral life despite adversity. We are, however, inclined to describe the human experience far more precisely, clinically, and intellectually, allowing our scientific impulses to separate, categorize, and label. This includes the modalities of testimony, evidence, and reparation, which establish trauma as a valid moral category pushing for the political and cultural recognition of its victims and survivors. While it is somewhat useful to set apart our protagonists in calculated ways - to highlight the extraordinariness of their lived and felt experiences - we may be unknowingly contributing to their dehumanization as somebody entirely else. These faulty new personas we create are at risk of being noncomplex, quite ready for co-option by problematic machineries of humanitarianism, development, and social policy.

Admittedly we have come full circle, first by investing thought in establishing the very vocabularies of victim and survivor and then allowing their absorption back into everyday sensibilities, fearing that we may have overlooked the ordinariness of the spaces

455 The messy actualities of practice and process are often lost this way. See, Tim Ingold, Being Alive (New York: Routledge, 2011).
where much work of life is enacted. Curiously, as academics we are engaged in an inherently fraught intellectual project that disembowels and defragments humans and then painstakingly pieces them back together. What if we allow unknowability and its lack of resolution to persist in our writing and thinking, even to take over and consume? What if we understand this not as a lack or a compromise, but as a lens that opens additional theoretical avenues and forms of relatability that may otherwise remain outside our analytical purview? What if unknowability and the openness of language that it demands, become our tools of analytical precision?

To elaborate these concerns, I write about Chandni bibi, a resident of the Siran Valley in Northern Pakistan, and her navigation of the 2005 Kashmir and Northern Areas Earthquake. The earthquake killed 73,000, severely injured over 128,304, and affected some 5.1 million people throughout the Himalayan region. Contrary to the claims of her family and those around her that she had struggled with her vision since childhood, Chandni bibi insists that the earthquake made her completely blind. She describes this experience as a “taking away of light, brightness, and illumination.” I juxtapose the seemingly mundane details of Chandni bibi’s life with the calm, incremental, accretive violence of natural disasters as well as the conditions of chronicity which shape and constrain her. By reading the earthquake against the features of her life and sociality, it becomes possible to consider that Chandni bibi embodies the earthquake in her blindness, where bodily memory, biography, and social history have merged. In this way, I seek to reveal the “ordinariness” of

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461 “Bibi” is used to address women in Pakistan and is typically paired with a given name. In addition to implying respect, “bibi” also structures social interactions between opposite genders by predefining these exchanges as strictly nonsexual and distant, denying any forms of possible intimacy.
462 Natural disasters are frequent in Northern Pakistan. In 2010, monsoon floods ravaged the region again, affecting some 20 million people across the country. A large flood also devastated Siran in 1992, details of which are poorly documented. These are in addition to frequently recurring, smaller events including seasonal landslides, snowstorms, flash foods, and glacier melts.
social repair— which is rarely achieved through some grand transcendent gesture. Rather, I work towards an idea of repair that is embracement and hold of the ordinary. Chandni bibi’s story is an achingly human one, mired in quotidian details. By focusing on how she understands her encounter with the earthquake, I offer alternatives to interpreting her experiences in purely clinical and reductive terms which are routinely presented in interventionist discourses on “disaster survivors.” In her insistence that the earthquake led to the loss of her vision, Chandni bibi ensures that the earthquake is not reduced to an “event” that can be temporalized and resolved in ways that demand “moving on” as the only next logical step. This allows us to purposefully reconsider our assumptions of temporality, chronology as well as the singularity of life and event, and their unfoldings.

Siran is one of Northern Pakistan’s several forgotten valleys, hidden among the cracks and crevices of the lesser known Himalayan region. It rarely appears on any map and is rather unceremoniously absorbed into the boundaries of the larger Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Siran is dispersed into numerous sparsely populated, smaller villages. Modest houses with mud and corrugated iron sheet roofs dot its pahars. To an outsider these houses appear out of place, but they are rather strategically placed based on local understandings of acceptable topography, flat enough to construct a homestead. The terrain is rugged, and homes are connected via narrow, makeshift pahari pathways. Residents overcome this apparent lack of connectivity with considerable ease, and do not let the trivialities of topography interfere with everyday life.

465 These iron sheets are remnants of the intense humanitarian action that took place in the wake of the 2005 earthquake. While this temporarily brought Siran into the national and international spotlight, the valley quickly faded into the background as a result of an equally rapid humanitarian withdrawal.
466 It is important to understand that the geography of the region intimately shapes everyday life and structures notions of community and belonging, setting residents apart from mainland Pakistan. In the absence of any central spaces, which could serve as a focal point for locals, familial units organized into immediate and extended households form the standard parameters of one’s social world and relationships. Complex caste and kinship relations further exacerbate this sense of fragmentation.
I arrive in the valley with at least some disciplinary baggage, troubled by an unresolved past as a humanitarian worker in similar spaces. I am here to understand social repair in settings of chronicity including natural disasters. I have identified Chandni bibi using conventional markers of vulnerability such as “disability,” “extreme poverty,” and “old age,” arbitrary categories commonly used to demarcate and sift through target populations after humanitarian emergencies. Coincidentally, Chandni bibi is also considered “highly vulnerable” by her community because she is blind, single, and “beyond marriageable age.” She also lived through the earthquake. After obtaining permission from her and from her family, I enter their home. She is not entirely comfortable with my presence. I ask her name. She hesitates: “My name is Chandni, the earthquake extinguished the light of my eyes.”

469 I did not note any standard gendered rules or protocols of engagement. Each household seemed to have its own understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, and the proximity to which a male “stranger” such as myself can be around women. I noted that many factors were at play: e.g., the presence of family members at home made it more acceptable for me to visit. For these reasons, many of my interactions took place within the heart of the domestic space, often surrounded by crying children, mothers-in-law, and dirty dishes. The fact that Ambreen (female research assistant) always accompanied me, also made much of this bridging work easier. I should note, when conversing with female interlocutors, I relied heavily on Ambreen to take the lead, at least for the several initial meetings till I felt welcomed to initiate conversations on my own. It is also possible that I did not observe a systematic pattern of gendered engagement because I am rather comfortable carrying myself in gendered environments and have accumulated the tact, carefulness, and etiquette of doing so over the years, to the point that I can intuitively configure myself in gendered spaces. This can also mean that perhaps I have become too comfortable and smug and may have inadvertently committed many violations. This can be a reason why Chandni bibi never really became comfortable with my presence and at one point, requested to speak only with Ambreen. I trust my interlocutors for calling out my ‘bullshit,’ which they often did with little or no hesitation.
Who Is Chandni bibi?

Quiet laughter and an introspective silence - which should not be mistaken for a failure in communication - steadily punctuate our conversations. Chandni bibi’s quietness can be understood as a deliberate reaction on the astonishment and incredulity of being interviewed and the peculiar insistence of my questions.

Centrality of Home

Home is a necessary constant for Chandni bibi. It reflects the materiality of a familiar space and actively structures her social relations and everyday life. Home and its implied constancy allow Chandni bibi to remain anchored in the very same house and village where she was born.
Once managed by her parents, Chandni bibi’s younger brother now heads the household, which includes his wife and their children. Chandni bibi explains: “We have been living here since the beginning with our parents; we have no other place to call home.” Their home is at a distance from other members of their extended family:

We are the only ones here. Our relatives used to live close to us before the earthquake but moved away after it. Now they rarely come to visit us. When they do visit us, we enjoy their company. They tell us about their lives and we share with them some of our stories. I haven’t been to their house in over two years.

The limited degree to which Chandni bibi and her household are embedded in their extended family signals the fragile and fragmented nature of their social. It also highlights the extent of the disruption that followed the 2005 earthquake, which in addition to causing material destruction and loss of life, also reorganized social relationships. This is a particularly important consequence for Chandni bibi, who due to her visual impairment is unable to visit her now dispersed social relations. Chandni bibi’s home, however, continues to serve as a nucleus for her relatives and also for other women in the village: “There are no places as such in the village which are easily accessible by women [without intense public scrutiny] or where I can go. The women come here to our house and sit with us.”

**Relationships of Care**

Chandni bibi’s attachment to her home is partially cemented by memories of her parents. Her mother died when she was very young and Chandni bibi only offers a limited conscious recollection of her *ammi* (mother):
I was very young, I wasn’t very old [when my mother died]. I couldn’t even walk; I couldn’t get from one point to the other [pointing at two opposite corners of the room]. Maybe I could have walked just a little bit. When ammi died, I was perhaps three years old [gesturing with her hand how tall she must have been].

Chandni bibi describes the transitions in the household with the loss of her parents:

My mother used to look after me, then she died. After her death, abbu [my father], took care of me. When he also died, bhai [my brother] took over the responsibility of looking after me. Abbu died of old age.

Chandni bibi describes her relationships via the functionality of care, defining both her parents and brother in terms of their responsibilities in looking after her. She does not explicitly elaborate on any emotional attachments with her parents, but her love for them is apparent throughout our interviews: “After the death of my parents, my life became very constricted.” Chandni bibi also speaks about her brother and his wife in a similar fashion:

After abbu’s death, bhai took care of me. I live with him, I have no place else to go, he is my only brother. Who else will take care of me, if not him? He feeds me and buys me clothes. During the day, he works on daily wages [as an unskilled laborer], and in the night he comes home with tea and sugar; this is how he does it. When I need something such as clothes, shoes etc., I ask him. He then gets them for me. I was very happy when he got married. I was glad that now a bhabi [sister-in-law] would enter the family who will also look after me. Abbu arranged for his marriage and found him a bride; ammi was already dead. Bhai takes care of me; otherwise, I will just die.
Chandni bibi is very concerned about her self-preservation. This is accentuated by fears of her visual impairment, being unmarried, the death of her parents, and the isolation of living far from any other relatives. She has concluded that she must always be taken care of. She has calibrated her relationships, including with her sister-in-law, in similar approximations.

Chandni bibi uses the collective of the family to speak about herself. Her notion of family is inextricably tied to home both as a place of uninterrupted residence and also as a space of familial continuity. When initially asked who lives in the house, she replied: “Myself, bhai, ammi, and abbu.” Throughout our conversations, Chandni bibi often speaks in plural pronouns, referring to the collective of the family (ammi, abbu, and bhai), which forms an important component of her identity.

Unfortunately, after the earthquake familial ties beyond the immediate household did not translate into any form of assistance or comfort, further reinforcing Chandni bibi’s reliance on her brother. She shared her disappointment: “The Rabb [Allah, the Sustainer of life] is a witness! My brother is the only one who looks after me, no chacha [father’s brother], or mamoo [mother’s brother], not even the neighbors, nobody.”

**Comforting the Heart**

Chandni bibi’s daily life closely revolves around her home. She spends her time reading namaz (prayers), warming herself by the fireplace (which doubles as a stove), and resting on the charpoi (string bed). She explains: “This is my routine; it isn’t much. This is how my life passes. I also pick up the children. I can’t really do any real work, just remain sitting all day long.” She expands on her relationship with her brother’s children: “Their
mother leaves them at home, so I look after them. I like them. They don’t bother me as such, they are sometimes naughty, but my time passes. I guess there is little pleasure in my life.”

Chandni bibi looks after her brother’s children and is therefore a care-giver as well as a care-receiver. This awards her a place of responsibility within the household, allowing her to partake tangibly in homemaking. Chandni bibi, therefore, occupies a relational position of accountability, necessary for remaining embedded within the household.

Being quite aware of her limited mobility, Chandni bibi shares some spaces accessible to her outside the house: “I sit here [pointing toward a tree], I come outside and sit under this tree to enjoy the sunshine and think, to comfort my heart.”
Occasionally, Chandni bibi also visits her sister-in-law’s mother. These visits placate her heart, she explains:

There is no other place that I can get to. Sometimes my heart feels constricted [I feel unsettled]. To feel better and more grounded I go to her house. She is my chachi [my father’s sister in addition to being my sister-in-law’s mother]. She is a good person. I
don’t give or take anything from her. We just sit together and talk, then I come back home. Visiting her makes my heart feels better.

Chandni bibi inhabits the surrounding geography as best as she can. She frequents spaces outside of her home, even though they may be in the immediate vicinity. She also invests in relationships - such as with her aunt and her brother’s children - as a means of keeping herself grounded and anchored within the familiarity and continuity of the family unit. Since she is unable to visit other relatives, Chandni bibi places great importance on being able to visit her chachi. These visits provide her with the possibility of forming meaningful connections with others at her own volition. More importantly, Chandni bibi is deeply invested in the project of taking care of her heart. This involves praying, forming meaningful and codependent relationships, and finding spaces near or around her home where she can be outdoors and engage in reflective contemplation.

**Sabr**

Winters are a complex phenomenon for the residents of Siran Valley, including Chandni bibi. According to Chandni bibi, it is the most difficult time of the year. Winters restrict her mobility, already constrained by her visual impairment and the difficult topography, cementing Chandni bibi to her home in a rather ambivalent relationship:

When there is heavy rain and snow, life becomes very difficult. Other people can get out of their homes and move around while I remain stuck in this room. I feel very unsettled, but I keep my heart strong and do *sabr*. The sunshine feels good, in the winters. It’s not like I can go places in any case, but when it rains my heart sinks. I feel worried.
Sabr is a comprehensive complex of Islamic virtues and dispositions, which roughly translates as forbearance, endurance, diligence, perseverance, and restraint. It is the working of the heart and spirit (as opposed to only the body and mind). In the simplest of sense, sabr is elaborated within Islamic teachings as remaining devoted to Allah and maintaining hopefulness despite adversity. Islamic traditions elevate sabr as a necessary rite of passage, as the capacity to receive deeply and renew and refresh one’s beliefs, commitments, and orientations towards life and Allah. Sabr is the wisdom to accept the unexpected, not necessarily a giving-in, but as the cultivation of the inner resources needed to surpass and exceed the uncertain and difficult.470 Chandni bibi describes her life during winters as a concrete embodiment of sabr.471 She also contends that the cold interferes with both her vision and mobility:

My eyes don’t open in the winters, even right now I have difficulties keeping my eyes open. In the summers when it is warm, one can at least step outside; go here and there. But in winters my eyes remain sealed shut, even right now my head hurts.

Chandni bibi quickly grounds herself back into the concreteness of her experiences indicating that the winter months pose a combination of material and existential troubles: “If during winters one wears warm clothes and warm socks, then one can get by and it isn’t so bad. But if these all aren’t available; then how can one survive the winters?”

470 Numerous traditions (Hadith) from Prophet Mohammed elaborate sabr in these ways. E.g., Prophet Mohammed described sabr as “illumination” (Sahih Muslim), an “outstanding and comprehensive gift” (Sahih Bukhari). The Quran also speaks of the aesthetics and beauty of sabr (see, e.g., Surah Al-Ma’arij, verse 5): “so endure patiently, with a beautiful patience.”

471 It should be noted that the 2005 earthquake also occurred at the onset of the winter season.
Even though Chandni bibi is grateful to her brother for providing her with the basic necessities of life, including allowing her to stay in his home and remain established within the family unit, the tensions that punctuate their relationship are also evident. When asked why she never sought treatment for her blindness, from either a medical doctor or traditional/spiritual healer, Chandni bibi responds:

Ever since my eyes lost their light, I haven’t sought any treatment. Well, ammi and abbu have died, so who is there to ask otherwise? My brother is good to me, but he also has his own children, which he must take care of. He brings his wage home, feeds himself, and also feeds me as well as his children. Perhaps, there is a cure for my blindness? Perhaps, there isn’t?

Allah’s Mysteries

The earthquake was an event of unprecedented magnitude, rupturing common beliefs about the physical and social worlds. Survivors were forced to confront displacement and large numbers of deaths; loss of property, livestock, and food reserves; and the destruction of livelihoods and agricultural lands. In addition, the earthquake ruptured confidence in the permanence and stability of the physical and social worlds and the protections they previously guaranteed. Chandni bibi recalls her memory of the earthquake:

We were sitting outside in the courtyard, sifting through the corn, when the pahars started to quiver. We ran down to the banks of the Siran River. We spent the next few days there by the river under the stars. We didn’t go back home because we were scared the roof might collapse on us in our sleep. The possibility of the pahars collapsing terrified me. What if there is a rockslide? What if the house fell? Several
village houses had completely crumbled, there was dust everywhere and it turned very dark, I was very scared. Our animals died, the fodder we had collected for winters, the boxes where we store corn, our fields, our home, they were all crushed by the pahars. I don’t know why the earthquake occurred, only Allah knows. It is part of His workings. I don’t know of His mysteries.

A Changed Life

Chandni bibi insists that when she was a little girl she could see rather clearly and would play in the village just like other children: “I could make out everything, every little detail.” She describes her routine before she lost her vision:

I used to enjoy sweeping the floors and making roti (bread). I could easily get around, no problem! I would get meals ready for the family, remove any rocks in the field brought down by the landslide, even plough the ground getting it ready in time for planting season. I would wake up in the morning, make chai, sweep the floors, make roti, get the meals ready.

The earthquake had profound consequences for Chandni bibi, as she holds it responsible for the loss of her vision. She contends: “Yes! My eyesight escaped during the earthquake. Now I can barely keep my eyes open. The earthquake forced the light out of my eyes. What can be more jarring than that?” Chandni bibi elaborates:

When a person closes their eyes, what is left? Absolutely nothing, just darkness, this is how my life has changed. My eyes are my biggest affliction. I am unable to feel happiness anymore. When the day of Eid comes [Islamic day of celebration] I feel upset, I can’t freely go out into the world and even attend a wedding.
Wayward Steps and Sideway Glances

For Chandni bibi, the most significant consequence of the earthquake was the complete loss of her vision. Other community members were fairly certain that Chandni bibi had difficulties with her vision since childhood. Her family also suggested this was the case, though they acknowledged that her vision became significantly worse after the earthquake. Throughout our conversations, however, Chandni bibi insists that the earthquake is responsible for her blindness. She delineates in detail how the earthquake and its resulting damage to her eyesight impacted her ability to contribute to the household - essential for maintaining her place in the home.

How can we read Chandni bibi’s insistence that her blindness was a direct consequence of the earthquake? Paul Connerton has long argued that societies and individuals remember in multiple ways, including through the incorporation of social memory into the body.\(^\text{472}\) In their study of political violence and trauma during China’s Cultural Revolution, Kleinman and Kleinman explore how social disorientation becomes bodily experience. They write:

Thus in the early 1980s when we were conducting our research, we were impressed by the way that retelling narratives of sickness, especially of neurasthenia—a common syndrome of chronic pain, sleeplessness, fatigue, dizziness, and related physical symptoms, as well as sadness, anxiety, and anger-authorized social memory and thereby enabled oblique criticism of the Cultural Revolution and the political process generally, which our informants regarded to be the origin of the complaints.\(^\text{473}\)

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They continue:

In their narratives of illness, patients’ remembrance of bodily complaints broadened into more general stories of suffering that integrated memories of menace and loss with their traumatic effects (demoralization, fear, desperation) and with their sources (criticism sessions, beatings, prison, exile). Bodily memory, biography, and social history merged. The bodily axis of moral processes of social experience aggregated historical event, symbolic meaning, and social situations. The memory of bodily complaints evoked social complaints which were not so much represented as lived and relived (remembered) in the body.474

Drawing on Kleinman and Kleinman, it is also possible to read Chandni bibi’s blindness as an embodiment of the social and personal experiences of the earthquake as well as a commentary of her limited embeddedness in her family and sociality. In her blindness too “bodily memory, biography, and social history merged.”475 The earthquake and the social incoherence it amplified, extended from “personal anatomy to the social body from the anatomical network of muscles, bones, nerves, and blood to the social network of interpersonal experience.”476 But, in addition to social critique, Chandni bibi’s insistence that the earthquake made her blind, allows her to keep the “burden of the earthquake” in constant circulation so as to not reduce the earthquake to a temporal event whose only resolution is to “recover” and “move on.” Why does Chandni bibi choose to carry the burden of the earthquake?

474 Ibid., 714-715. (emphasis mine)
475 Ibid., 714.
476 Ibid., 715.
earthquake with her at all times when the usual impulse is to imagine a purposeful forgetting that enables a return to a life of relative normalcy?

Chandni bibi compels us to think more carefully about our relationship with time and how our notions of “beginning, middle, and end” are inadequate. She compels us to see that the past lingers in the present offering no clean breaks. And that the future is both known and unknown i.e. one could guess how the future might unfold from a reading of the present, but its precarity means uncertainty is the only “stable” sensibility. In this way, she allows us to more carefully appreciate social repair as atemporal or lodged within some other logic of time and direction; nor a return, nor a forward orientation but wayward steps and sideway glances, processual, a moving map; “something” that cannot be simply encapsulated by a desire for resolution and equilibrium.

An important way Chandni bibi navigates the uncertainties of the future is through her spirituality and investment in taking care of her heart:

I like to offer my namaz. I perform them with the full attention of my heart; I feel peace. I don’t enjoy any act more than praying. I pray that Allah keeps us all in safety and under His protection. I pray that my eyes regain their vision and light. I don’t ask for anything else. I am hopeful about my eyes, that my vision comes back, the light returns to my eyes. Then my life will pass smoothly. I just hope Allah gives me this much, because He is actually the only one who can give me such a gift.

Chandni bibi hopes to regain her eyesight, so she can live life on her own terms and participate in the important task of homemaking. Through her spirituality, practices of prayer, and sabr, she is able to maintain and extend hope and desire for the future, and invest in the
act of living in ways that matter deeply. Her efforts toward taking care of her heart are in line with her aspirations for the future. She elaborates:

[If I regain my vision] I will continue to live with my brother. I am longing to immerse myself in my surroundings, to go visit my relatives, but without any light in my eyes I can’t do any of these. I just wish Allah can return my vision. This is my heart’s desire. If I can get my eyes back, that will be gold for me.

Opacity, Prognostic Uncertainty, and Open Normativities

Chandni bibi’s bodily narratives of blindness are “her truths,” facts that govern her life and her emplacement within it. Her insistence that the earthquake diminished her vision are demands for opacity and writing/thinking with restraint, an invitation to come to terms with her unknowability. Speculating on the loss of her vision, a staff member of the World Food Program remarked that perhaps she is deficient in some essential micronutrient, insisting on a purely physiological reason for her blindness, which may be rectified by a targeted micronutrient intervention. Following a similar logic of “prognostic certainty,” those in the medical establishment insist that her blindness is most likely a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and suggest that she requires an immediate psychological assessment. Both stipulations may be correct. However, I am interested in presenting Chandni bibi’s engagement with the earthquake as enmeshed within her wider sociality without imposing any predefined parameters, which could limit our interpretations of her

478 Day writes: “Prognostic certainty refers to the idea that once we diagnose a body (fetus, child, adult) with a condition, we can predict the outcome of that condition on the living subject, regardless of sociocultural circumstances.” See, Ally Day, “Grappling with Prognostic Uncertainty,” Feminist Formations 30, no. 1 (2018), 164.
experiences. Instead of focusing on the event (the disaster) as a state of exceptionality external to her desires and lifeworld, I have focused on how the earthquake continues to linger, and more importantly, how Chandni bibi navigates these enduring consequences as rooted within the chronicity of life. In reading Chandni bibi’s experiences of the earthquake against the nuanced features of her daily life (home, family, spirituality, navigation of the harsh winters), it becomes possible to consider that she embodies the social and personal experience of the earthquake in her blindness. Carrying the burden of the earthquake ensures that it will never be forgotten nor rendered insignificant. For Chandni bibi, perhaps the continuation of life is not dependent on the erasure and re-appropriation of past experiences, but rather their embracement. Chandni bibi’s loss of vision is an important, necessary, and valid encounter with the spectacular experience of the earthquake and the stabilities of the physical and social worlds it challenged. Her narratives of blindness can be understood as forms of attunement: “the potentiality to become engaged with and become entangled in diverse and particular relationships that makes possible the vast diversity of ways of living we find in the social world.”

In her blindness are opportunities for re-articulation and refashioning of life and its containments, to allow more genuine self-reflection that is consistent with the moving map she seeks to create.

Speaking from her work after the tsunami in Ache, Indonesia, Samuels argues that bodily experiences reveal not only the significance of the body as a site of narrative, but how “the body becomes the subjective site of the entangled relations between disorder and order.” Chandni bibi’s insistence that the earthquake was responsible for the loss of her vision indicates that disasters are lived, experienced, and embodied in multiple ways. She

tells her story “through the body.” She challenges the very category of the static “disaster survivor,” a socially constructed identity dependent on limiting “human experiences of disruption to sterile, laboratory states” and disallowing “disrupted bodies from articulating their experiences in other expressions, styles, and embodiments.” Interestingly, Chandni bibi’s somatic response to the earthquake is reflective of similar claims made by other disaster survivors in the valley. Several residents reported that since the earthquake, they have had difficulty recalling immediate tasks and recent conversations, indicating a rupture in short-term memory. Others complained of a marked increase in body pains, aches, and stomach ulcers. Another interlocutor, a long-term resident of the valley, similarly reported a rapid decline in his vision. Like Chandni bibi, he too attributes his visual impairment to the 2005 earthquake.

What does such an enrichment of Chandni bibi offer us? For one, it deters from clinical and analytical precision that risk the denial of the less obvious and/or idiosyncratic ways life is lived and imagined. It allows us to consider the possibilities of life maps, desires, and futures that exceed or interrupt the logics that ground us in the world, where repair only has a singular, forward looking orientation. A superficial reading of Chandni bibi mistakenly compels us to believe that repair is synonymous with the resolution of her blindness. On many occasions, I have attempted to inquire about Chandni bibi’s medical history from her brother in relation to her vision. Sometimes, the matter appears as ordinary as obtaining a pair of high powered prescription glasses to getting a simple cataract surgery. It quickly became apparent, that her family (brother) was not necessarily interested in pursuing this medicalized route to a curative resolution. Or they had already exhausted that route and my suggestions were presumptuous at best. Ambreen, my research assistant, who closely worked with

Chandni bibi, felt that it was more a matter of neglect, that Chandni bibi was an ignored, “extra” person in the household who no one really paid attention towards. Ambreen felt that there was no real commitment to the resolution of her diminished vision. Perhaps all these interpretations are true, and they most likely are. However, I cannot offer anything more than my own frustrations at the gnawing question: *Is Chandni bibi living with a curable condition which can be ameliorated by simple medical intervention?*

But, I have to constantly remind myself, that it is also necessary to approach Chandni bibi outside of her blindness. From a critical disability perspective, Clare argues that cure is at best indeterminate and contradictory and can lead to diminishment as well as enhancement, and therefore is only one of the many tools available for a sustainable future. Day builds on this work and offers a powerful discussion on “prognostic un/certainty” to help us think beyond a curative resolution as a precondition for flourishing (i.e., a state where survival is not sufficient, nor the ultimate desire).

Day argues that all bodies are fragile, enmeshed in complex social phenomenon, and therefore prognostically uncertain; their bodily experiences cannot be predicted. This brings into purview those open, multiple futures which are “not always and already hoping for and leaning toward a cure.” Shotwell writes: “It is not possible to ask what the future is…There is never a determinate future, but instead only a present that moves in relation to what we want to move toward.” In addition to social critique, biography, event, and experience, Chandni bibi’s blindness allows ambiguity and openness, catalyzing movement

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485 Ibid.
486 Ibid., 179.
towards a “present-future” - a way to sustain proliferations and open normativities: “crafted ways of being that shape subjectivities oriented toward widespread flourishing.”

This chapter communicates “something” beautiful and urgent about the process of writing and thinking as praxis, that can only be nurtured by doing. The contributions of this chapter are not to simply highlight memory as a site of social remaking (which has been well discussed within anthropology and memory studies), or to only understand Chandni bibi’s blindness as social critique and commentary, but to elaborate the very desires, open normativities, futurities, and navigational maps enacted in her assertions of blindness.

I only met Chandni bibi a couple of times. Chandni bibi is my only interlocutor whom I did not directly work with but only did so through my research assistant (Ambreen). I never got a chance to get to “know” her other than from transcripts. “Chandni” roughly translates as “moonlight,” something that is reflected and reflective, which illuminates but also needs to be illuminated. A mirror of sorts, which not only reflects social reality but also guides attention towards those textures of life which remain outside analytical purview, either because we choose not to acknowledge them or because we do not know how to. Chandni bibi is excessive and exceeding in this regard, her non-normativity is striking. Her wholeness and partiality and analytical indeterminacy are urgent and compelling. The humanitarian machinery closed their file on Siran just two years after the earthquake - wrongfully signaling “recovery.” But there has been no recovery for Chandni bibi: “My eyes didn’t have light after the earthquake, they still don’t [nothing has changed].”

488 Shotwell, Against Purity, 139, as quoted in Day, “Prognostic Un/certainty,” 179.
Are you warm?
Here take my blanket.

Have you eaten?
Here have some bread.

Have you landed?
Here take my wings.
Tell us how to read these stories.
For I am thirsty.

My interlocutors have never met. They have not had the pleasure of sharing a conversation, sit around the fire, sip chai, grow in each other’s company. Yet in my mind, they are the closest of friends. They are confidants; they share secrets, laugh, get annoyed, walk away, and then come back together the next day.
Image 87. Untitled (photograph by the author)
I have been telling students for years that the writing we do... what we call ‘ethnography,’ is a form of literature, a unique variety of ‘creative non-fiction’ that has yet to be taught in Master of Fine Arts programs.”

Urdu (and its variants) was one language of relation between myself and my interlocutors. I use Urdu numerals to mark places of pause. They are not in sequence; another modest poke at the “fictions” of tautological and teleological thinking, and the “chrononormativity” of theory building. This chapter is one last attempt at proliferation and permeation. It is an effort to let the generative offerings of what has been written thus far to uncomfortably and awkwardly persist, frustrate, gnaw. It points towards a “monstrous”

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491 This opacity of numbers is intriguing. E.g., the number 9 is different from the number 8 in terms of sequence and quantity. A number itself does not reveal form or content. We do not know what is contained in the number 9. Is it 9 x the same “thing”? Is it 9 x different “things”? In a certain way $8+1=9$ but in other ways it does not.
type of knowledge. A knowledge that “thrives in interstices” between disciplines; loose, fluid, critical, transdisciplinary, suited for understanding “the multitude of new objects and new connections.” I do not wish for this chapter to be read as a conclusion or as an attempt at summation but as a complement to the writing. It weaves texture, color, pattern. It attempts to enrich and populate. It attempts to disrupt "the means of semantic production… not in the interest of obfuscation but in the interest of precision." It attempts to re-circulate doubt and uncertainty to compete with firm conclusions.

Who are you writing for?

I am writing for myself.

But we can walk together.

These stories exist on their own merit.

They have no expectations.

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494 Ibid.
What is the big picture?

“At times I think we risk losing the big picture, which to me does not involve a fantasy of making a big picture of a repaired world of happy lovers, adequate storytellers, and properly recognized beings. It involves, as theorists, taking on the overdetermination of encounter in the staging of reparative fantasy—which points to something in addition to allegory. This returns us to the question of narrative.” 496

My interlocutors can make me laugh or want to cry. They depress me, they confuse me, they infuriate me. I cannot figure them out, they leave me perplexed. How is it possible that they have such power over me?

496 Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, Sex, or the Unbearable (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014), 100.
Their struggles, aspirations, disappointments, heartbreaks, betrayals, friendships, frustrations—*this is the stuff of life.*

“Now go away. Leave, you have eaten our entire day, I also have to look after the cows.”

One evening, Abrar knocked on my door. He wanted to borrow my nail clippers. What an odd request.
These pages demand a lot from the reader.
I hope they are not burdensome.
(I hope that they are)

“The longest journey someone must take is the eighteen inches from their head to their heart.”

What is the work of beauty?

498 People often say that my work is beautiful. But what is the work of beauty?
“Don’t use your data as a pillow.”

“Let the data speak for themselves, these scientists say. The trouble with that argument is, of course, that data never do speak for themselves.”

“I suspect two large monsters might lumber out of the mist, both creatures of imagination made terrifyingly real through aspiration. The first is the liberal subject, that siren of personal sovereignty, autonomy, individual genius, and artistic authorship. The second is the Westphalian state, the muscular expression of political integrity and self-determination long

499 S. Eben Kirksey, “Don’t Use Your Data as a Pillow,” in Anthropology off the Shelf, ed. Alisse Waterston and Maria D. Vesperi (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Blackwell-Wiley, 2009), 149.

wedded to nationally defined populations. Neither may be as certain as once assumed, following transformations in lifeworlds and waves of intellectual critique. But they nonetheless display ferocious tenacity, holding tight onto the dreams of even many critical academics in their personal lives…**501**

The adjudicators of knowledge (you and I) are capable of inflicting a grave form of violence, one that is perpetrated at the level of the episteme.**502** Is this violence at par with that of disasters and conflict? Is epistemic violence an essential dimension of chronicity? Let’s face it; there is no actual accountability when it comes to writing the lives of others.**503** No one goes to jail for inflicting epistemic violence nor are any reparative payments considered necessary for doing so. Sure, we have pressures from existing literatures for consistency (departures are fine as long as they are incremental), the test of

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502 Epistemic violence very quickly transforms into material harm. E.g., Ayotte and Husain demonstrate how American understandings of the burqa (veil) rhetorically constructed the women of Afghanistan as gendered slaves in need of “saving” by the West which ultimately provided support for the invasion of Afghanistan and increased women’s insecurity in tangible ways. Similarly, Aijazi and Panjwani demonstrate how lack of consideration of gender segregation and purdah in housing design after the floods in Pakistan, as well as in the arrangement of tents in displacement camps, further shrank the social spaces afforded to woman, and even led to their death in some cases. Namaste argues that the epistemic violence of Anglo-American feminist theory renders invisible the experiences, struggles, and actions of transsexual and transgendered bodies nor does it fulfill the feminist promise of improving everyday lives of transsexual women despite making trans bodies a central object of inquiry since the early 1990s. See, Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 3 (2005); Omer Aijazi and Dilnoor Panjwani, “Religion in Spaces of Social Disruption,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies & Disasters* 33, no. 1 (2015) and Vivian Namaste, “Undoing Theory,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009).
citations (if your work is not “credible” you will not get cited), and modest protections of ethnographic evidence and its thick descriptions.⁵⁰⁴ There is also the stuff of moral outrage.⁵⁰⁵

These measures are unsatisfactory at best since we very well know that the construction, diffusion, and legitimization of knowledge is ultimately contingent on relations of power (of which gender, class, race, and sexuality are a part of).⁵⁰⁶ The instability of meaning and its reliance on intertextuality has long been pointed out⁵⁰⁷ and therefore, even the most well-intentioned, self-reflexive, and rigorously collected “ethnographic evidence” cannot be uncritically accepted as being “reflective of the real.”⁵⁰⁸

Epistemic violence can be understood as the “epistemic exclusions, afforded positions, and communities that produce deficiencies in social knowledge,” and infringements “on the epistemic agency of knowers that reduces her or his ability to participate in a given epistemic community.”⁵⁰⁹ Epistemic violence silences people by presumptuously discrediting their knowledges ⁵¹⁰ or denies them the necessary concepts and contexts for making sense of their own experiences and becoming intelligible to others.⁵¹¹

In simpler terms, epistemic violence are the frames we impose on others to make them legible, knowable, familiar, pertinent. These are erasures of certain experiences (intention does not matter, the harm is the same) or the privileging of one form over the other,

⁵¹⁰ Fricker terms this testimonial injustice. See, Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.
⁵¹¹ Fricker terms this “hermeneutical injustice.” Ibid.
creating false hierarchies. These are “processes of subjugation through dominant forms of knowledge production that justify unequal divisions of labor, resources, and worth of people … and alternative forms of knowledge.”

“Roti khayee hai?”
(Have you eaten?)

What is theory?
They are stars.
You are free to trace your own constellations.

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“You are working mostly with ‘ajoubas’ (the ‘peculiars,’ ‘the outliers,’ ‘the one of a kind,’ those who according to their uniqueness may inspire wonder and astonishment). Why not engage with the ‘typical household,’ *who don’t have it so bad?’”

“When I first saw you, I thought who is this *ajouba* (strange, odd spectacle)? Does he speak Urdu? What will he eat? What will we talk about?”

For the ajoubas, *I am* the ajouba.

My interlocutors are “marginal” to their communities and rarely rely on any protective guarantees. Through their diverse abilities, spiritualities, and violations of everyday norms (their queerness), they inspire anxiety in those around them. Their unknowability offers a glimpse of the sheer magnitude of “work” needed to maintain and
extend life. I find it useful to replace the language of marginality with that of non-normativity. I consider my interlocutors “non-normative” (ajoubas) in their desires and aspirations for discursively impossible futures, and simply because they do not circumscribe to the same rules by which we have come to know the world.

What if theory is generated from the standpoint of “radically unfixing normative subject positions”? What if non-normativity is taken as the only “normative truth”? What if theory is rooted within the assumption that the subject is contingent and indefinite “to avoid re-inscribing the terms by which the subject is recognized?” This is not to get caught up in binary thinking, or to consider that non-normativity only exists in opposition to the “normative,” or that it is a “thing” of its own. But to consider that non-normativity connotes the only stable sensibility.

Non-normativity extends beyond sexuality and gender. In fact, marginality, vulnerability, sub-alternity are very much non-normative subject positions. Furthermore, if we truly devote ourselves to the textures and density of life, and to heartbeats, then all life is exceptional, unbounded, outside of the “norm.” The task for theoretical projects is then not to minimize difference and reach some false consensus but to dwell in the very vibrations that make life distinct, one’s own. It is perplexing: if so many can be considered as “marginal,” then how come they do not constitute the normative?

516 E.g., Kafer notes the circularity of queer. She writes: “Queerness is something always to be queered.” See, Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 16.
“Politics is not solely a contest over access to power, decision-making, and legitimate social authority. It is equally a practice and a space for imagining, reimagining, how we might live with each other and with the rest of the phenomenal world. When conceived as a struggle for a form of life, for an alternative mode of coexistence, social, economic, and political institutions represent vectors of interest but not the entire field of engagement. We need a fresh language—visual, linguistic, analytic—for thinking about the present. We need a language that enables us to pause and reflect on the things we witness, not merely possess facts and figures about them.” 517

The future is a site of contestation between different epistemic and political visions.518 Which futures are allowed to be imagined and aspired towards? Which pathways are rendered visible?519 The future is not a neutral site. In its imagining, history, sociality, and biography converge. Articulating the future is a deeply political as well as decolonial

517 Lata Mani, “Writing the Present,” Economic & Political Weekly 1, no. 49 (2015), 24. (emphasis mine)
Paur agrees: “Opening up to the fantastical wonders of futurity is the most powerful of political and critical strategies, whether it be through assemblage or to something as yet unknown, perhaps even forever unknowable.”

How to then find language about the future which is not just a rote regurgitation of a “better life”? Wool and Livingston sum this more eloquently:

How and why people act toward themselves and others in contexts where such redemption is not recognized as immanent or expected as forthcoming…. How do people take up or sidestep the problem of being, in contexts where they enjoy neither a progressive telos nor a radical political vision to orient their efforts and offer hope of meaningful futures?

They continue:

Activists, activist-scholars, and revolutionaries may seek to transform the disasters of the present into a rock-bottom or dialectical turning point from which a better world will rise. But our effort here is to convey something of the lives and worlds that endure out of the way of such redemptive possibilities—not beyond their reach but that roll along off to the side of efforts to stabilize, repair, and improve any collective lot in the name of the future.

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520 E.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that decoloniality “envisions people to be active and free makers of their own futures.” See, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” History Compass 13, no. 10 (2015), 493.
521 Jasbir K. Puar, “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,” Social Text 23, no. 3-4 (2005), 137.
523 Ibid.
I have attempted to direct attention to those “modes of sociality, forms of life, and ethical investments that have nothing to offer liberalism’s continually failing vision of a better tomorrow.” My interlocutors work towards futurities animated by forms of hope which are distinct from a liberal vision of redemption or a better life. This is a kind of freedom, and refusal of liberal performances or any “isms” that promise betterment and deliverance. In this sense, social repair is work towards futurity which is not solely dependent on (liberal) hope. It suggests an “elliptical life,” that shrugs at futural communal promises, a new sort of sociality altogether which represent forms of life in the durative present, “not a world that retreats from the social but that exists elliptically, in proximity but not in community.”

Mani cautions against thinking about the future as being disjointed from the present:

One of the ruses of power is to pretend as if that which it desires already exists and, if it does not already exist, will do so given time. A particular idea of the future dominates; and the present is deemed no more than a staging ground for its emergence. From this perspective, the past is rubble, the present inconsequential, and the future the only thing that matters. But, however much it may be wished away, it is the present in which we live. It is in the present that the past is lived and relived, imagined, and reimagined, pilloried, and embraced. And it is on the present that the future is sought to be imposed. Attention to the present thus becomes critical.

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524 Ibid., 8.
West takes Mani’s assertion even further and asks:

So, how do we narrate the now in a way that might help us all move beyond what is killing our world? And how do we do so with love and fear and sadness and wonder at its becoming without incarcerating it into a particular history or future? And how do we do it in a way that holds tight a place that was? 528

Entanglements convey “a meaning of bodies coming together.” 529 It is a “knotting and twisting of different modes of knowledge generation,” and of intersections and enmeshments. 530 Entanglements are “an adventure, a desire line through a data set perhaps. It calls to mind excitement, risk, confusion, and matters of the heart.” 531 It is where the haptic, erotic, and analytical converge. It is the site where “phrastic knowledge [practical wisdom] emerges in the banalities and hurdles of everyday practice.” 532

530 Ibid.
531 Ibid., 2.
532 Ibid.
Tell me something that is puzzling you?

That what are the insistences of life?
“There is no logic to survival, my father would say. It is always a journey from Bukhara to Samarkand, with death waiting for us where we least expect it but always at the appointed time.”

Fraught and contradictory, people do not render the violence that permeates their lives in any consistent way. These contradictions not only make projects of theory building from lived and felt experience difficult, but also provide reasons to reject them entirely. Dave terms this the “tyranny of consistency.” She argues that the tyranny of consistency collapses everything together so “that what we are left with is nothing.” Dave points out two uncomfortable truths about consistency: 1) it is merely convenient and rote, reflecting not moral truth but circular thinking, a form of reasoning aimed at “maintaining us without

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535 Ibid., 38.
extending us." and 2) the normative man (unlike everyone else) is rarely called upon to account for his contradictions because his contradictions are considered uneventful. Why do the contradictions of my interlocutors matter? Is it because they de-stabilize, challenge, or oppose what we may hold valuable and sacred? Why does their refusals of standards imposed from elsewhere make them “faulty,” “deficient,” “whimsical,” “un-trustworthy” for projects of theory building?

Violence when intercepted in everyday life, and as refracted in the particularities of the personal and the social, does not take even form or permanence. This makes it pertinent to gain a better approximation of chronicity and how it impinges differently and specifically in people’s lives to approximate a “violence of their own,” despite being enmeshed within the same disaster, conflict, or other structural forces. An attention to chronicity helps us to more carefully approach the temporal and spatial dimensions of repair, by moving away from the notion of a singular “event.” It is not possible to understand social repair without adequately understanding chronicity; they are inseparable. Otherwise, repair risks becoming convenient and rote like putting something back together, akin to return and recovery. This not only lends to a false reduction of the labor needed to maintain and extend life but also reflects a certain arrogance that life can always be put back together. And then how to articulate repair when there was never an equitable, egalitarian, and even social to begin with?

I have taken an exploratory and emergent approach in my research, away from a type of knowledge which is instrumental or transactional. I have attempted to shift focus away from what is lost and destroyed to what is left behind and sustained- hopes, desires,

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538 A term used by French director Jacques Audiard for his film *Dheepan* in which he attempts to depict the uniquely situated experiences of Tamil refugees in France.
aspirations.\textsuperscript{539} I approach social repair as a theoretical terrain, an assemblage of sorts to capture genres of life which are crucial for attaining livable presents and viable futures. In my current thinking, social repair captures the plurality of processes, embodiments, and decisions made to carve a hospitable life despite overwhelming structural constraints. This may mean crafting new and novel forms of relationality altogether or re-calibrating what already exists in an almost precarious kind of entanglement, where the same sociality responsible for constraint may also be necessary for the maintenance and/or extension of life.\textsuperscript{540} These gritty attempts may open different spaces for advancing political claims or they may instead be devoted to “continuity, stasis and stability.”\textsuperscript{541}

Social repair is tense, urgent, palpable. It is shape-shifting, liquid, and matches the density and complexity of social life. It has no singular or agreed upon form. Social repair is heterogeneously situated. It is opportunity for the flow of life. It is the working and re-working of the betrayals and disappointments of the world, and are sites and situations of advancing one’s position. These are small-gestures, incremental, microscopic as much as they are grand transcensions and bold forms of self-advocacy. They are imperfect strivings, flawed, contradictory, circular, and do not necessarily lend to the figure of the socially transformed, woke, or liberated.

There is a sheer lack of adjectives to “describe” social repair. Therefore, much of my work is a quest for language and imagination which can accommodate subjects that are fully formed, loved, reciprocated. When language and concepts are insufficient or do not reflect how one sees/interprets the world, then either they must be assigned new meanings, or one

\textsuperscript{540} Constraint can then be understood as compelling and generative, but we also must remain cautious to not romanticize its “redeeming” qualities.
must fashion novel forms of articulation. Spivak reminds us: “What I cannot imagine stands guard over everything that I must/can do, think, live.”

Berlant asks: Why are there only so few words for flourishing? She writes:

For example, in a crisis culture we’re so excited about gaming the difference between zero and one that flourishing somehow gets bracketed. Survival looks like a triumph, and that’s a terrible thing. I want flourishing. But what do I mean by flourishing anyway? What are all of the synonyms I know for flourishing? There aren’t that many. Isn’t that interesting? The phrase you use is an increase in joy. But an increase of joy might not feel like increase. It might feel like relief, it might feel like I can be a mass of incoherent things and not be defeated by that.

What if we consider social repair as a form of flourishing, with the caveat that flourishing has no singular definition or form?

(See this video of a woman who maintains a visual log of her hair following cancer treatment. Hair- its density, entanglement, proliferation is a good metaphor for flourishing)

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543 Lauren Berlant as quoted in Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin, “Interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt,” *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 2, no. 3 (2008), 18.
Social repair comes with a certain sense of seduction and judgment. It implies that after the scramble there is an “acceptable state” which one must aspire to - a mandatory equilibrium necessary to claim some re-found joy in life. And if the subject does not seek this equilibrium, they are then considered faulty, disinvested in the very project of life.

*Imagine you have cancer:*

**Scenario A:** The cancer is never detected, and you die as the disease spreads.

**Scenario B:** The cancer metastasizes but is caught in time. You survive chemotherapy, only to learn that your body has now completely changed: the materiality of your existence, your relationship with food, how you walk, your ability to lift and manipulate objects with your hands, how you tolerate sunlight, is not the same. You are now a different version of who you are, not a lesser version, just a different version.

**Scenario C:** You refuse chemotherapy and opt to die. (Think of the moral panic and the backlash for not “wanting to live.”)

My interest has been to broaden/open/expand the work of repair, which is not just concerned with expected futurity; that is a life of perceived stability, coherence, closure. But how can we also begin to imagine the decision not to choose chemotherapy and die, also as a form of repair, and death as desired and acceptable, a form of flourishing?
Perhaps, what I am referring to as social repair can be better captured via the language of “minor theory” which “tears at the confines of major theory; pushing its limits to provoke a ‘a line of escape,’ a rupture - a tension out of which something else might happen.”

Minor theory (theory with a “t”) can scratch at major theory (theory with a “T”), “from a range of different positions but its claims are interstitial.” It is not a “theory of margins but a different way of working with material.” It is “a shaping and ‘becoming’ of theory through its frictive relationships.”

The Theory of Theory

This text is largely organized around six interconnected scenes. Each scene is devoted to an interlocutor to maintain the integrity and wholeness of their lives. When read together or apart, in any order, I hope that they paint a vivid picture of chronicity; the convergence of multiple forms of violence in the body, subjectivity, and sociality. They attempt to elaborate chronicity as the persistence of historical and contemporary processes of violence, such as colonialism, racism, natural disaster, and conflict, within personal, subjective, lived and felt

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546 Ibid.
547 Ibid.
experience, as well as on structural conditions. Each scene tries to demonstrate how violence is particularly and specifically situated, impinges on everyday life and relations, and weaves the past, present, and future to disrupt the chronology of time. The scenes suggest that violence is not discrete, and one form cannot be purposefully detangled from another. And that perhaps there is no real value and advantage in attempting to do so. They posit that there is “something” to be gained by insisting on the world and social phenomenon as complexly relational and integral. Even though these interrelations are easily obscured by the “ruling paradigm,” the facts of relationally and indivisibility continually assert themselves in the richness and density of life. I have attempted to differentially ground and elaborate each scene (albeit imperfectly), to complement or contradict our understandings of social repair amidst chronicity. I hope that the dual ethnographic and phenomenological orientation of each scene adequately elaborates the “heartfulness” of my interlocutors.

Douglas and Wilkerson write: “We need to imagine metaphysical violence rather than a metaphysics that violence destroys.” My intention is not to only “describe” violence, its permeability, and omnipresence, but to also direct attention to “even at is most seamlessness, life’s seams.” I have attempted to ground each scene within those textures, details, and heartbeats, which I understood as being urgent to each interlocutor’s story as it was shared with me. For example, Niaz spoke about betrayal, Amal on devotion to her deceased.

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549 Berlant writes on “crisis ordinarness”: the everyday traumas and forms of precarity generated by modernity and political economy. This is somewhat close to my understanding of chronicity, though I am differently invested in the further specificity of political economy and modernity, and in writing from location. See, Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.


husband, Sattar on his relationship with Allah, Chandni on her blindness, and Abrar on his exasperation at the world. As mentioned before, a scene is a unit of time, event, illustration which attempts to ground us in particularity. In this case, these will be the particularities of betrayal, political life, spirituality, anger, and opacity which my interlocutors urgently speak off. In other words, each scene does dual work. One, it grounds us within a certain, urgent, and compelling condition of life, and preserves and nurtures the interlocutor’s story. Second, it provides us textures of chronicity which may help us deepen our understandings of the work of repair. These two goals may be seen as competing with another, or they may work together in generative ways. This is the tension that runs throughout the text. However, I do not wish to imply a linear or schematic relationship between the motif of each scene and social repair, but rather the scenes are merely different ways of slicing into the “stuff of life.”

I have attempted to maintain the integrity of each story, regardless of the “work” each story may or may not do. This makes the writing uneven. For some, this may distract from the broader goals of the text. For me, this is devotion to my interlocutors even if it is to the detriment of our theoretical/discursive projects. This is also an orientation of exploratory and emergent theory building. How can we preselect what features of life will be useful to our projects and which would not, without first adequately investing in them? And if we are genuinely committed to understanding social repair as processual and exponential, then all of life becomes necessary. 554

My interlocutors do not share a singular or uniform understanding of “the social.” For them, the social is not synonymous with “community” which itself lacks definition, is uneven, mediated by power relations, and can mimic the state and/or status quo in reproducing violence and exclusion. Instead, my interlocutors have shown me that the social

is better understood as a “relation,” rather than a form in itself. Understood this way, the social is a wide range of relations, such as with the self, other people, more-than-human bodies, landscapes, the dead, Allah. Like “community,” the social too can replicate violence or transcend it, or neither, or both.

I have sought out the social within the thin, transient, analytically awkward details of life, tucked away in corners and crevices that usually remain outside of our purview. These rich textures and heartbeats, provide a nuanced approximation of the often unstable, incremental as well as radical adjustments, gestures, variations, movements, and recombinations people undertake in relation to the social (whatever that may be) to nourish life despite diminishment and annihilation. The crude details of existence demonstrate that there is no singular “life strategy” or way forward, and question if “forward” is even the desired direction. They offer the future as indeterminate and incommensurable, implicated in the precarity of the present, and in friction with the “disjuncture between the singularity of figures and their enacted multiplicities.”

They speak of the ways subjects of desire, “empirically engage biopolitical instances.” They draw attention to a “kind of perpetual preparation for violence … our dealing among ourselves ‘the little deaths of everyday life,’ the slights, the grudges, the clumsiness, the impatience, the bitterness, the narcissism, the boredom, and so on.” “A microanalysis of such engagements can help us to understand people and their present not so much as territorialized by history but as makers of new systems of perception and action that come with specific sets of possibilities and limits. How

555 Lucy Suchman, “The End of Innovation (As We Know It),” Limn, n.d., https://limn.it/articles/the-end-of-innovation-as-we-knew-it, as quoted in Redfield, “Intervention.”
are we then to repopulate the political stage with the insights, ambiguities, and desires” 558 that my interlocutors embody?

The urgent task at hand is therefore theoretical. Mani eloquently sums this:

It is in part to make palpable as experience those abstractions that shape the ruling paradigm and, in enabling us to feel their implications and effects, lead us towards understanding what the abstraction serves to occlude, mask, or distort. Put another way, it is to represent the density, particularity, and rich complexity of lived experience and in that process unsettle the ability of an abstraction to continue to make sense. I would argue that it is at this epistemological level that we need to intervene; calling into question not only the so-called facts claimed as true by current thinking but countering its assumptions with an altogether different imagination. The word theory comes from theoria, meaning the act of observation. What is it that is right here and which we fail to see? And what textual, aural, or visual forms might enable a different quality of attentiveness?559

(here the actions of “seeing” or “observing” dominate, I should add that theory also enables “feeling”)

What is then the “work” of theory? Theory can expand thinking, it can also constrain and intimidate. Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner believe that theory is “real” only by virtue of the work it can do “on situated individuals and their practical orientations.”560 And that theory exists only “in the plurality of its articulations, in a loose yet specific enough nexus of

558 Joa’o Biehl’s comments on Didier Fassin, Frédéric Le Marcis, and Todd Lethata, “Life & Times,” 235, (emphasis mine)
559 Mani, “Writing the Present,” 25. (emphasis mine)
interrelated practices of explication, elaboration, reception, uptake, transformation, contestation, and critique." Drawing on Spivak’s work, Lather writes: “Theory as what we call philosophy today; something we can hide behind; something to help us read the world; something to help us change the world; something we use in bullying.” Theory is “promiscuous,” unfixed in substance and can travel without context; its meaning, work, and politics is open to re-signification and re-articulation. Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wüschner assert:

[Theory cannot be understood] independently of the conceptual capacities and powers of judgment on part of scholars or researchers that develop, employ, refine, and elaborate them – capacities that are not only a product of each individual’s personal history of affective involvement in the world, but also stemming from particular histories of learning, of being embedded within traditions of scholarship and thought collectives.

According to Connell, the goal of theory is “not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness.” Berlant and Edelman write: “As with sex and politics, theory is that to which we look both to disturb things and to repair them.” Sefa Dei believes that the “worth of a ‘social theory’ must not be measured simply in terms of its philosophical and ontological claims, but rather, in terms

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561 Ibid.
567 Raewyn Connell, Southern Theory (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity, 2007), 207.
568 Berlant and Edelman, Sex, 71.
of the ability of theory to offer a social and political corrective.” 569 Seconding Mani, Biehl and Locke also believe that theory work is epistemological, needed to illuminate “human matters that dominant epistemologies and interventions do not routinely conceptualize or account for.” 570 Asad believes that instead of advancing “grand theories” or “locating particular problems within new frames of reference (replacing one interpretative category with another),” it is more urgent to “understand the grammar of concepts, forms of life, memories, and desires released and disabled in situations striated by asymmetries.” 571

For now, I have assigned the conceptual offerings of this text to the container of “social repair.” I have not pursued a line of inquiry that assumes a stable or coherent philosophical vantage point from which social repair can be imagined, because no such vantage point exists. Rather I have pursued social repair as an ensemble of questions “dedicated to the status of the subject as a relational being.” 572 I do not wish to imply that social repair is a fixed category or concept, nor am I interested in imposing definitional parameters, or policing it. Instead, I approach social repair as a theoretical terrain which is at once heuristic, descriptive, diagnostic, analytical, normative, and generative. It is shapeshifting, amorphous, emergent - only matching the sophistication, exactness, depth, and multiplicity of our analytical and philological repertoire. Instead of a theory or definition, this work advocates for an “analytical assemblage” of social repair based on a different set of considerations altogether, ones that point towards openness, multiplicity, and plurality.

Put differently: if we indeed devote ourselves to the heartbeats of our interlocutors, then we cannot honestly put forth a theory that seeks to contain, constrain, and exclude. I realize this may be a barrier for those invested in “applying” theory or analyzing lived and felt experience through some available lens. Rather, this writing is an opportunity to “open” theory and give away the hierarchies that govern description: the lived, the felt, the political.\textsuperscript{573} It is a modest step towards a “theory in the flesh.”\textsuperscript{574}

“A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience:

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.

We are the feminists among the people of our culture.

We are often the lesbians among the straight.

We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words.”\textsuperscript{575}

\textsuperscript{573} Nader writes: “Ethnography has commonly been summarized as description, albeit description in context, but not exactly theory. Yet, theory is defined as the analysis of a set of facts in their relation to one another, or the general or abstract principles of any body of facts, which to my mind makes ethnography most definitely a theoretical endeavor, one that has had and still has worldly significance, as description and explanation. Thus, the ethnography itself as well as its explanatory use is a theoretical endeavor.” See, Laura Nader, “Ethnography as Theory,” \textit{HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory} 1, no. 1 (2011), 211.
\textsuperscript{575} Ibid.
“Imagine the open admission of love and affection to be something highly prized in the academy as a key ingredient in leading new work or as a necessity in nonfiction writing that is canonized from now on. Imagine having the power and the authority to show love openly and to take love into account in our assessment of each other’s work.”

“[Our disciplines are] built on the deaths and losses of others, and these are deaths and losses that we never personally experience. It is a discipline built on the lives of people that most of us never even meet and, if we do meet them, we certainly never get to know them. We don’t invite them to our homes. We don’t meet them for coffee. We don’t attend their weddings. We

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don't attend their funerals. We don't love them. If we do, we do it secretly and we never, ever admit it.”

(See this video of a woman who falls in love with a bee)

This text, amongst other things, is concerned with aesthetics, language, and literature. It is an exercise of writing with restraint, of letting ambiguity, unevenness, analytical indeterminacy, and inconsistency exist and persist, not as a lack but as intellectual choice and strength. The text is a search for language and discursive forms, an attempt at clearing the obstacles (material, philological, conceptual) for a grammar of life that can accommodate the willfulness and heartfulness of my interlocutors. It is a search for articulation which does not categorize or constrain or pay homage to the sovereign as the only valid complement to life and politics. Most importantly, this work is about falling in love, unconditional and unguarded. Like love, this writing is obsession; which in its volatility and pyrosociality strives in ways that will always remain incomplete, insufficient, inadequate. In love as in this writing, there is no comfort in having “the facts and the data,” and there are no clear lines separating facts from fiction.

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579 As implied before, I understand the sovereign as the “adjudicator of knowledge,” whether this is the nation-state, the liberal self, the reader, the researcher, the community, the family, or anyone else.
581 Dauphinee writes: “Responsibility, ethics, and love are not the same. But they often enable one another. Of equal significance is the fact that love is not always something that emanates from the expectations we grow to have of one another (of our spouses, siblings, children, parents, and so on). Sometimes, love is a surprise that
I continue to dwell on the fictions of social repair, the fictions of theory, and the fictions that ensure their circulation. This text points towards the seductions of research and the research in seduction, as well as the partiality and violence of knowledge. I leave it up to you to consider whether these stories are the work of love.

What are the facts of love?

(Further Research / Next Steps) Muslim Normativities

Islam (as it is variously and vigorously understood, practiced, embodied) provides some language for the “departures” my interlocutors seem to take. Their “Islams” represent other normativities which cannot be captured solely on the basis of Islam as a “religion” and any of its restricting definitions. In the chapter on Sattar Shah, I have called these non-normativities “Muslim poetics.” My interlocutors’ Islams provide sustenance, language, and opportunity for world-making in ways that are situated, ethical, personal, social, pertinent, compelling. I am drawn towards those non-normative attempts at sculpting life which may be read as departures from existing social codes and expectations, but are strongly situated

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animates our research. Sometimes, to love is to be answerable for our actions - for our words about others, who cannot respond from within the confines of our disciplines.” See, Dauphinee, “The Ethics of Autoethnography,” 818. Also see, John L. Jackson Jr., “On Ethnographic Sincerity,” Current Anthropology 51, no. 2 (2010).
within one’s normative understandings of Islam and desires to cultivate a relationship with Allah. This will allow me to further elaborate social repair from a decolonial epistemic perspective. This is where my interlocutors seem to be taking me next. Another attempt at “theory in the flesh.”

(For an example of “Muslim normativities,” see this video of a man displaced by conflict in North West Pakistan who has 36 children. He believes having this many children helps maintain his clan and historicity in settings of chronicity and is importantly an extension of his faith in Allah)


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