

The Ground Was Always in Play

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Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.

—Michel de Certeau, *Practices of Everyday Life*

The thing is, I've never been to Laarh. Till some months ago, I didn't even know it existed. Then, one warm morning, a man turned up in Islamabad carrying his tale and his place, and I spent the next several weeks springing the name on people I met, friends, reporters, refugees, and acquaintances, in the hopes of scaring some information from them.

Every outsider to this war-bitten region knows this experience. For the past decade, the conflict has been churning and ploughing the ground in the border zone till it convulsed and threw places into view, some valleys so hopelessly beautiful you couldn't believe the stories, the titan clashes, how bodies, guts, and bone had rotted there till the land consumed them, places where the war had lacerated the land into stillness, dusty towns undergoing "security operations," empty villages standing strange and serious, *pakka* (built) road, *kaccha* (unfinished) trail, brushland, heath, pasture, scabbled earth where the ground was always in a state of play.¹ Once, standing on a riverbank where we had come to drink in the scenery, a friend casually pointed a stone's throw away into the tall, green grass "over

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1. The terms *pakka* and *kaccha* are used widely in Pakistan; in the Tribal Areas, they can also take on the implication of "legitimate" paths with checkpoints versus "illegitimate" paths without checkpoints, or going off-road. Writes Michael Herr (1991 [1968]: 14): "The ground was always in play, always being swept."

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there,” where a few years back, a local boy had stepped on a mine that the Soviets left buried or maybe the fighters of this war buried, but in either case it was the same, he had been blasted into oblivion. God knows, I became some kind of born-again Muslim right there and said whatever silent prayer I knew. I didn’t have the courage to ask if the area had since been cleared. I just followed him back, taking care to stay a few feet behind and keep to his trail. Step, step, step.

And then there were places like Laarh that, when they flickered into the line of sight, made you feel like a schmuck: you could spend years trying to get the lay of the land and then trip up on a border hamlet whose pronunciation was even in doubt.

His name was Mir Azad Khan, and on the tape, around the fifteen-minute mark, you can hear me repeating the place-name after him: “Lār.” But some weeks later when I met a man who knew the village because he had roots in the land nearby, he said that it was called Luaṛā. (Me: “You said the place was called Lārā?” Man: “Yes, Luaṛā.” Me: “Luaṛā?” Man: “Luaṛā.”) It means “at the height” or “at the top.” I knew that Mir Azad’s Laarh was a village in district Barmal in Afghanistan, so I wondered if this man was confusing *that* Barmal with *this* Barmal, a district in South Waziristan, part of Pakistan’s Tribal Areas, but he rattled off other details that corroborated what Mir Azad had told me. I have my theories about the difference, but I still haven’t been able to get to the bottom of it, so I’ll stick with Laarh. This is Mir Azad’s story after all.

To tell it, Mir Azad crossed about five hundred kilometers by car, by foot, and by bus. How stories travel has a lot to do with their truth-value; some travel a long mile to the center but remain unheard, some embody centrality wherever they are. One reporter’s newspaper gave him bylines on Pakistan stories for years while he lived in Europe. Another one claimed in print, bless his soul, that because he had gained a passing acquaintance with Urdu, he understood Pashto, which is about as sensible as saying that because you’ve read the manual for a sailboat, you know how to fly an airplane. But as long as certain formulas held, space could be elastic like that for some people.

This is why if you looked at the stories in the morning newspaper and you knew something about this place, you could see that the stories weren’t about the country. They were just a trace map of the ten-mile circuit of Islamabad that the diplos, the journos, the officials, and the television analysts traveled, up and down, round and round, talking each other in and out of paranoia, one stupid, dangerous loop. There is a joke about Islamabad’s planned alphabet sectors that captures the power-geometry of it all: E for the elites, F for the foreigners, G for the general public, H for the horticulturalists, and I for the idiots who think they

live in Islamabad.² It's funny because it's true, and disgusting for the same reason; keep it in mind and you have a rough sketch of where the US embassy's security detail will allow its people. We are fifteen years into it and the Americans are now confined mainly to pockets of three sectors, which is maybe all you need to know about this war.

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Laarh is a village in Barmal, a district in Afghanistan's Paktika Province bordering Pakistan's Tribal Areas, and the people living in this hamlet, and others around it, are Pakistani. I don't mean that they were raised in-country. Mir Azad and his kinsfolk have been living in Barmal since his forefathers' time, but his bureaucratic documents including his citizenship papers, his kinship and tribal affiliations, as well as the orientation of his political demands connect to Pakistan. In 1893 the agreement with the emir of Afghanistan to establish a boundary between the Afghan and British spheres of influence separated Barmal from Waziristan and brought it into the Afghan sphere of influence (Davies 2013). The Durand Line, today the internationally recognized border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, split the Darwesh Khel Wazirs, a grand tribe that suddenly found itself on both sides of the border; Mir Azad belongs to the Utmanzai Wazir branch and within it the Saifali *khel* (a tribal subdivision that is sometimes also referred to as a tribe itself) of that tribe. It was one of the beginnings of the problem of place; there were others. By then, British colonials had come to frame mobility as a particular kind of problem or, more appropriately, to install a distinction between the sort of (legitimate) "disciplined" mobility that indicated a rational citizen/man and the kind of (illegitimate) "wild" movement that implied a fundamentally irrational, savage subject (Kotef 2015).

Winston Churchill scribbled a whole snobbish and homicidal book about the wild frontier and its animal-like inhabitants ("These Afridi and Pathan companies of the Guides Infantry suggest nothing so much as a well-trained pack of hounds. Their cries, their movements, and their natures are similar" [2010 (1901)]: 189); George Curzon suggested that they were a childlike species of cat ("I am never so happy as when on the Frontier. I know these men and how to handle them. They are brave as lions, wild as cats, docile as children" [quoted in Roe 2010: 91]); and Denzil Ibbetson, the lieutenant governor of Punjab, groused:

2. "Now, I want to make one simple point here, and that is about . . . the *political-geometry* of it all; the power-geometry of time-space compression" (Massey 1993: 61).

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The true Pathan is perhaps the most barbaric of all the races with which we are brought into contact in the Punjab. . . . He is bloodthirsty, cruel and vindictive in the highest degree; he does not know what truth or faith is. . . . As the proverb says, “the Pathan is one moment a saint, and the next a devil.” For centuries he has been, on our frontier at least, subject to no man. He leads a wild, free, active life in the rugged fastnesses of our mountains; and there is an air of masculine independence about him which is refreshing in a country like India. He is a bigot of the most fanatical type, exceedingly proud and extraordinarily suspicious. (1916 [1883]: 58)

The tone of the descriptions varied according to the temperament and political moment, but whether spiteful or patronizing, British colonialists held the line on the general characterization of the Pashtun: an animalistic, barbarous being who roamed an undomesticated, rugged territory and therefore learned no discipline; he was coarse and given to his corporeal passions (like an animal) rather than deliberative rationality (like civilized man). At the back of it was a specific structure of liberal thought elaborated through an engagement with colonialism and land theft. Civilized man, argued liberal thinkers, could cultivate the land by enclosing it and laboring upon it, which marked him as a disciplined and self-regulating individual who manifested his freedom through an ordered pattern of movements; undisciplined wandering was tantamount to madness. It made one treacherous and suspect, or, as Ibbetson remarked, “He does not know what truth or faith is” (Kotef 2015; Byrd 2011).

They no longer say it quite like that, and I know there are new terrors now and new conditions. I know. Still, Ibbetson’s echo persists when a Punjab official complains that Pashtuns displaced by the 2009 military operation in Swat are troublemakers (“The IDPs can cause trouble for the province just like the Afghan refugees. So, we have decided not to permit their entry or setting up of camps for them in the Punjab” [Azeem 2009]); or when the chief minister of Sindh, in 2014, charges that “terrorists” are hidden among the refugees and blocks the entry of Waziristan Pashtuns fleeing a terrifying, heaving beast of an army assault (“Terrorists will not be allowed to enter Sindh in the guise of IDPs [internally displaced persons]” [*Dunya News* 2014]); or when a feted filmmaker tweets that the expelled ought to be contained because they pose a security risk (“IDP’s [*sic*] should have been contained in camps in KPK [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province]—allowing them to settle in #Karachi will not bode well for security” [Obaid 2014]). Once the purview of British colonialists, the racialized geography that splits and filters movement is today guarded by liberal thinkers and think-tank operatives, politi-

cians, generals, and columnists, all grinding out their own version of the appropriate mobility management of tribal Pashtuns.³

Mir Azad had gotten angry, and on the tape his voice is suddenly louder, pitching indignant response against unfair accusation.

I must be about fifty-five to sixty years old at least. And then think about my grandfather's age and my father's age. From that time till now, but we've never taken the name of Afghanistan [or claimed that] we're Afghans. Our doctor is in Islamabad. Our doctor is in Peshawar, in Bannu, in DI [Dera Ismail] Khan. We have our *shenakhti* [a computerized national identity card issued to every Pakistani citizen], but there's one inequity that happens with us: if you have an Islamabad or Karachi or Peshawar *shenakhti*, no one asks where you're wandering around in Pakistan. "Show your *shenakhti*." They show it, no problem. They see ours and they say, "Ah, you're from Waziristan. Why are you going to Islamabad?"

Islamabad is my home! Karachi is my home!

Leaving Laarh, therefore, is not simple. Afghan checkpoints dot the outer environs where the Pakistanis live, while to the east the Pakistan army has built a massive border checkpoint closer to the Durand Line; Mir Azad and the others are contained in between on a small patch. Their district, Paktika's Barmal, borders North Waziristan and the northern tip of South Waziristan, two of the most heavily bombed agencies (that's what each regional division is called) in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA, where there have been multiple Pakistani military, Taliban, and US military incursions for the past fifteen years.

Permanent checkpoints, makeshift checkpoints, temporary blockades, and spot-checks structure movement in the region, a patchwork of seven agencies and six "frontier regions" (the latter serve as a buffer between the Tribal Areas and "settled" Pakistan). Since the start of the operations, the security forces have been setting up a registration process at the checkpoints in Waziristan. At the first checkpoint a Waziri crosses on his journey (the politics of mobility are thoroughly gendered), the officials draw up a list of all the people, pets, cattle, and key items that are accompanying him, and he presents that record at each subsequent checkpoint. Once, a man's dog darted off in slow-moving traffic, and he dashed after the animal in a high-stakes chase, for he didn't want to be found missing an item at the next checkpoint, a story that is about either an extremely fastidious man, or fear.

Mir Azad crossed the border at the Angoor Adda checkpoint, where he was

3. Ann Stoler (2011) defines the political concept of the "colony" as "a principle of managed mobilities, mobilizing and immobilizing populations, dislocating and relocating peoples according to a set of changing rules and hierarchies that orders social kinds."

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issued a torn slip of notebook paper no bigger than a thumb, with a registration number on it that probably correlates to whatever has been recorded. He was told that, for the rest of his travel, it was his *shenakht*, his identity: “Show it all the way to Islamabad.”

Crossing at Angoor Adda put Mir Azad in South Waziristan; from there he traveled up into North Waziristan, where, at the time of his journey, the most tremendously pervasive military operation to date, Zarb-e-Azb, had been under way for about a year and a half. To get to Islamabad, Mir Azad had to travel roughly northeast. On the map, it looks as if he could have cut east through South Waziristan and then traveled north, but due to administrative and material issues he isn’t allowed to cut across that territory because his *shenakhti* card records him as a resident of North Waziristan; traveling through territory to which he isn’t affiliated can cause trouble. The address isn’t an error: instead of private property ownership, land distribution records in FATA are collective. Mir Azad’s *khel*, Saifali, collectively holds land in North Waziristan, specifically Shawal *tehsil* (an administrative division), and the government administratively ties the recognition of Mir Azad as a Pakistani citizen to his *khel*’s land. Civilian and military officials claim that residents of the Tribal Areas can only think and act collectively, as a consequence of which the state punishes them collectively. The Pakistani government, including the security forces, can hold an entire family, *khel*, or tribe responsible for an individual’s wrongdoing, real or alleged, and punish them all. Collective punishment is the linchpin of the colonial-era laws known as Frontier Crimes Regulations that still govern FATA. Attempts at reform, so far, have largely amounted to shuffling the laws from one legal regulation into another. Entire homes are burned down and razed not infrequently over suspected or actual violations committed by people related to the homeowners. Because punishment works this way, there’s no need for the government to know where Mir Azad actually lives; it only needs to know his *khel*.

If Mir Azad had traversed through South Waziristan, he would have been required to gain a *rahdari* (transit) permit. When, some months later, I asked another man who traveled between Barmal and Waziristan about it, he told me that Pakistanis from Barmal did and did not need the form:

Me: What’s the purpose of the form?

Ali Khan: Think of it as a governmental formality. It is also possible to pay money [read: bribe] at the checkpost.

Me: OK, but the people I spoke with seemed to be quite worried—

Ali Khan: Yes, it is so that the *rahdari* is necessary.

Me: So, it's important. They couldn't get out of South Waziristan without it?

Ali Khan: Yes. But, it is also so that it is not *that* necessary. If they don't come from the main road, there are lots of paths through the mountains.

Me: OK, but what if they come through the *pakka* road?

Ali Khan: Yes, the army will mess with you then, but then you say, "I don't have it. Let me go this time."

And anyway, said Ali Khan as we talked on, "parts of the *pakka* road are closed again these days." Listening to the stories gave you whiplash. It was frustrating and exasperating, and in some of the interviews I sound like a puritanical cross-examiner insanely digging for some cold, clean fact to slice the fog. I asked people questions about laws, rules, regulations, forms, permits, and permissions, and in return they kept patiently repeating the truth till I could hear it.

Walter Benjamin once wrote that "truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession" (2003 [1963]: 29). This distinction between truth and knowledge is a shift of the register. Knowledge is place grasped through a map as a series of spatial points; it functions in binaries, ones and zeroes. Truth is bodied spatial practice, movement, and limbs and anxiety, tension, release.

The truth was that it could be so and it could not be so. The ground could alter, crack, and re-form within an instant according to the mercurial whims of the top commander in chief right down to the lowest hair-trigger grunt quaking in his boots at a Waziristan outpost ready to gun down some poor soul who moved the wrong way. The lines of mobility changed all the time; they also remained hard and immutable. To keep breathing, one had to know how to chance the road, one had to know what was necessary when and what was not, and one had to know how to run, bend, twist, and move across a shifting jungle of laws, regulations, sudden curfews, and closures. One could survive it, people in the Tribal Areas are surviving it, but it could also inflict a paralysis: don't move, don't speak, and maybe you'll live. It's amazing how many times you could ask questions about violence and get answers about the price of tea in China.

I did ask Mir Azad about his village. I said, "Tell me about your place." I don't know what I was expecting in response, maybe the longitude and latitude and something about the seasons, but he cut straight to it:

We don't glance at the newspapers there. Nor do the newspapers come there. What happens in the world, what exists, can I ask for rights or not

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ask for them? Can I go to someone and cry, or should I not cry? Whether these [things] will benefit people like us or cause us harm—

That's the kind of place it is.

It has been thirty years for us. First, the Russians came, then America. We cry, die, exist in fear. There is not a single home where there is not sorrow.

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Every thing is speaking and talking and witnessing and testifying these days, it seems, except the people whose family members and neighbors have been blown to bits in this war. For some years, you couldn't get them into the newspapers; they would come to Islamabad, and, for the most part, the correspondents would treat them with a kind of crude suspicion that suggested they would even fact-check the potential interviewee's height and weight if they could. They came from villages and regions and nooks we had never heard of, and we cultivated our ignorance into a profound and brutal doubt.

The story Mir Azad came to tell is this. In July 2015, American drones bombed and killed two of his cousins, Gul Rehman Khan and Mohammad Khandan. After Zarb-e-Azb began in June 2014, thousands of Waziris fled in all directions, businesspeople, farmers, militants, and students, including to the Pakistani villages in Barmal, and there the drones followed. The military operation and the "surgical" operation, carpet bombing and "precision strikes," coordinated maybe, intentionally or not, they worked together to redraw the lines of movement, new containment zones, a shockwave that could start with ground troops in North Waziristan and end with a drone bombing a car in Barmal.

Mir Azad's story began with apricots.

Mir Azad: . . . There was a doctor there [in the village]. His name was Wali Rehman Doctor. He said—you know our apricots? In our region, there is an extensive season for apricots and apples. We sell them by the thousands.

So the doctor said that the apricots at his home had come in nicely. They had ripened beautifully. "Come to my place and take some." My cousin told me to come along, but I said no: "It's Ramzan, and it's difficult to travel back in the evenings. You have the car with you, so you go get them and come back."

So they left home around four, four-thirty, or five.

Wali Rehman Doctor doesn't live that far away. He's about one and a half to two kilometers from my cousin's place. On the way, there's a madrassa. They prayed there along with the *jamaat* [congregation]. During

Ramzan there, the men tend to sit around together in corners, in shops, and chat. So there were a lot of men there. They said *dua-salaam* to [exchanged greetings with] people, said their prayers, and went on to the doctor's place. The doctor has one son. They met with him and took the apricots from the garden.

When I saw the car later on, there were so many apricots. They were burnt, but the [apricot] pits were lying there under Gul Rehman's and Mohammad Khandan's feet. When we saw it, we said: "Oh, look, they took the apricots, but they never got to eat them."

He told me later the kinds of details you'd expect to consume with such news, but it was the apricots that I kept returning to, ripe fruit that stuck to memory: the hard seed of the story, a detail you couldn't eat.

I don't think it was much later that I heard a Massachusetts Institute of Technology academic, Fotini Christia, explain that drone bombardment in Yemen had only a localized effect. A mobile phone company had given the political scientist access to the cell phone records of 10 million Yemenis. The data showed that there was a spike in phone calls near the site of a bombing but that it had no "cascading effect" on a national level, meaning that there were no observable ripples of the news spreading through the country. Across the six-minute segment on drones during the *FiveThirtyEight* podcast, Christia (2016) repeated her finding roughly seven times, wavering between description and implied judgment. Nobody mentioned it, but Christia's work is one aspect of a larger project affiliated with the US Army Research Office. It addresses the apparent need for "a framework for analysis, prediction, and ultimately control of socio-political phenomena" ("ARO MURI" 2014, 2016). Knowledge is possession. De Certeau referred to it as a "Cartesian attitude" (2011 [1998]: 36). It is the way modern science, politics, and military strategy establish boundaries between what is their own place and the place of the other, that exteriority composed of targets and threats that must be rendered calculable and manipulable so that it can be managed (*ibid.*). By effacing the power relations that construct inside/outside, it's a disposition that presents its knowledge as merely a representation of the real, but the "data double" it produces is a performative fiction (Haggerty and Ericson 2000; Raley 2013); it's fictive because it's founded on a fundamental erasure of the conditions that make its specific knowledge production possible and performative because deploying it for management means grounding it "in targeting an actual life . . . [with] the effect of producing that life, that body as a terror suspect," who may be surveilled and, possibly, extinguished (Raley 2013: 128).

Doubt. Beat it back, shut it up, knock it down, it could still creep up. Mir Azad

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had brought a short video clip with him filmed on his mobile phone. It showed a twisting hole in the ground where, he said, the missile rammed into the earth. That kind of documentation is rare. The security forces and the opposition fighters don't allow it, but it's also rare because, ironically, the social space of the Tribal Areas has been so worked over by spies and informants collecting and surveilling that recording (of whatever kind) has become something of a suspect act. Why are you documenting? For whom? There's only one photographer, Noor Behram, who has attempted to compile a photographic record of drone attacks, but supporters of the bombardment have argued that it's difficult to believe the photos.

The production of doubt has a rich and dark history; where the Tribal Areas are concerned, it has a specific structure that frames the region as a kind of abandoned space and ties that to a suspicion of the material evidence. Any number of articles, papers, speeches, and reports characterize FATA as ungoverned, lawless, remote, forbidding, the "Wild West," autonomous, or, more explicitly, "autonomous terrorist controlled territory" (Barnidge 2012: 418); "there are terrorists holed up in those mountains" (quoted in Woods 2015: 145). The experts, reporters, analysts, and American president, a quartet that chanted it again and again till you began to experience a quiver of doubt and a shade of mistrust about anything or anyone that came out of there. With this affective architecture in the backdrop, supporters of the bombardment claimed that there was so much bombing and killing and shrapnel flying around in Waziristan from the Pakistani security forces that one couldn't say it was the American drones for certain ("What proof has Mr. Behram or others presented that the damages to property and injury to persons are due to drone attacks? . . . Shrapnel from hundreds of terror attacks as well as airstrikes by Pakistan's air operations are also possible causes of these varied damages" [Fair 2011]). They used the horror of one bombardment as a cover for another.

I said that they disbelieved the photos, but what I really meant was that they disbelieved the people. Without Behram's or Mir Azad's narration, you or I wouldn't necessarily know what we were looking at in the photos or the video. To narrate, Behram, Mir Azad, and others had moved through a geography pockmarked by bombs and checkpoints and drones and troops and fighters, but to those sitting in Islamabad or New York or London, these things signified that the territory was "wild" and its people therefore probably faithless. The doubt was unequally distributed, and there were stories that didn't appear to raise any apprehension, but the judgment was always made against the backdrop of a relentless distrust. A bitter pill: they endured the containment zone, but their experiences of it rendered the testimonies of their experiences unstable. As they were made mute, the forensic experts were called in to make objects speak.

Mir Azad and I talked for another hour, and then he excused himself to pray. After that, he said, he was going home.

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