

Terrestrial Things

War, Language and Value in Afghanistan

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Abstract

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This dissertation is an ethnographic engagement with the social and political space of Afghanistan and how it has been shaped by the intensities of warfare in the last decade, with a focus on the realms of language, representation and economy. Taking Kabul as the panoramic ground of profound social and epistemological transformations, the dissertation traces a crucial shift beginning in 2011-2012, from a highly speculative war economy (a “green zone economy” that privileged the commodification of language and culture and the privatization of war, with crisis as an alibi for governmentality) to one based on equally speculative practices of prospecting for natural resources in the Afghan underground: where an estimated three trillion dollars’ worth of copper, gold, iron-ore, marble and oil & gas is presumed to lie in wait. I illustrate the nuanced epistemological concerns and political contestations that stem from an Afghan effort to distinguish between sources of violence and sources of economic value (especially in the aftermath of Kabul’s demilitarization) in a milieu where foreign militaries presuppose that civilians and insurgents cannot be distinguished, except through the medium of war-time translation and collaboration.

The twin concern with generalized forms of death dealing and tragedy, on one hand, and the moral and political exigency for Afghans to distinguish between a world of appearances and one of essences (the Islamic and *Quranic* interpretation of *zahir* (exterior/surface) and *batin* (interior/ground)), on the other, opens onto a set of epistemological concerns undergirded by several oppositions, which I argue, are central to American war making. I illustrate that the

movement between these artificial binaries (Persian/Pashto and English, literacy and illiteracy, rationality and irrationality, repetition and transformation) inspires aspirational fantasy on an economic frontier and invests some Afghans (especially those who speak English and are literate) with the power of calculative reason (*aql*) and understanding (*fahm* and *dânish*), while condemning those who are illiterate (and sometimes those who only speak Persian and/or Pashto) to forms physical supplementarity and crisis--from literally being expendable prosthetic bodies (human body armor) to the breakdown of meaning in incestuous relations and the intensification of moral crisis. In this context, conventional writing and the felt lack of its absence illustrate for us the logic of war in more consequential ways. The belief that writing is the domain of what can be known (rationally understood) and universally applied invigorates the ideology of literate persons and war-time collaborators with shocking breadth and tenacity. It organizes antagonisms between persons and structures forms of death-dealing.

I trace how the production of a binary around literacy and illiteracy produces, even in moments of technological acquisition, the retrospective fantasy that orality is not only the prior but also the locus of unfettered subversion and ignorance of the law. This misrecognition of linguistic diversity as lack comes to inform, in contexts of unprecedented transnational war-time activity, the charge that Afghans are beholden to an excessive localism that fuels the predicaments of the Afghan State and errors of judgement (such as incestuous transgressions, and suicide bombing) which would destroy society altogether. The issue of vulnerability to ideological suasion and excess emerges alongside these presuppositions. It informs the belief that the incapacity to exercise reason (due to illiteracy) renders Afghans vulnerable to diverse forms of propaganda and the inability to distinguish between the world of appearances (both

technological media images and the Islamic notion of the *zahir* (surface manifestation)) and reality.

I trace these complexities through a series of intense contact points where these oppositions come into play and determine forms of access and violence 1) in translational contexts during combat missions where linguistic transformation results in deadly misunderstanding 2) in familial contexts and contestations over property, where the failure of interpersonal and extrajudicial mediation results in mass murder 3) in courtrooms where failed suicide bombers (who did not detonate out of technological error or because they were attacked by members of the Afghan National Police) are subject to the limitations of oral testimony and to the belief that photographic evidence proves that they will repeat their crimes if released from prison 4) instances of incest that arise out of illiteracy and, when exposed, generate moral crisis 5) the production of zones of exteriority and interiority (especially in Kabul's Green Zone) that rely on pharmacological inclusion and reproduce the literal supplementarity of Afghan bodies 6) the attempt to find the "real" sources of economic value as part of a multi-national gold and mineral extraction endeavor—the continuation of an obsession with the Afghan ground that has a long imperial history from the 1800's onwards (when it was assessed through botanical, railway and coal prospecting missions).

Together, these sites and the consideration of the earthen terrain alongside the terrain of rationality and linguistic difference situate us in the midst of wartime catastrophe. They foreground the fantasy that rationalism is the *sine qua non* of modernism, and the belief that literacy is the basis for reflective and intellectual thought, and for being human. But what they also disclose for us is that in its absence you can (and sometimes must) die.

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For Kiren, who taught me to listen.

1 Introduction

“So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.”
The Darkling Thrush, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928).¹

“The moon has split and the hour has drawn closer.”
The Qur’an, *Al Qamer*, (54:1).

Kabul

Kabul has assumed a privileged position as a metonym for Afghanistan in the imperial imagination of many states (Britain, Persia/Iran, Russia/Soviet Union, the United States) for more than two centuries. It has been the scene of dramatic military retreats, intelligence missions, proxy wars and direct intervention for more than thirty-five years of the last century. Kabul is strategically situated in the bosom of a precarious valley and commands access to the Khyber Pass, one of the main connections between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. It is a bustling city along the Kabul River and the edges of the Hindu Kush Mountain range, with steep and long clefts that melt into the softer creases of the large valley like fading crow’s feet on top of a bronzed cheekbone. Kabul spreads out from there like a broad brush of sepia and sits high above a sea it only accesses as the “insoluble mystery” Joseph Conrad metaphorized as a foreign and imposed law.

¹ I am grateful to Rosalind Morris and Marilyn Ivy for bringing this poem to my attention, and for the title of the dissertation.

Pinned down by the mountains and hemmed in by valley folds that lead from one to the next it sits six thousand feet above sea level as if trying to scale the limits of its own heights during a time when the forces of change are coming from elsewhere. Animals graze next to heroin addicts in what was once the Kabul River (*Darya e Kabul*) where the putrid swell of refuse has displaced that of flowing water and turned the river into a source of humor more than life: “In the Kabul River, frogs perform *tayammum*.”² A small sea of bodies move through the marketplace next to the river as the old quarter fills and teems, moves and transports. Pottery, drugs, foreign currency, knives and fake International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) badge holders are for sale. Or t-shirts for military personnel and expats that say in English: “BAGRAM—Been There, Done That.”

Looking up from there one can see mountains distend from every visible angle, jutting out of the chaos of the city with regal peaks that constitute sublime spaces of uninhabitability. In wintertime the white snow-capped peaks refract sun rays. In the spring and summer months they form a choking hermetic dust bowl. People take comfort in these mountains and many moved to Kabul in the aftermath of those early salvos because it is a fortified city. Kabul is still partially enclosed by an ancient sixth-century hilltop wall rumored to harbor the bones of laborers in its foundation, and also the Afghan King, Zamburak Shah, when workers revolted and killed him—burying him with his subjects underneath the wall he erected to keep his city safe. Afghans moved back to Kabul from Iran and Pakistan where they were in exile. They hoped to cull new and brighter memories but most only survived to be transfixed in the pale amber of their

² *Tayammum* is the ritual Islamic act of performing ablutions with sand or dust if water is unavailable and the joke is a common one that communicates anxiety about the loss of a pivotal water source within a rapidly growing city.

nightmares, fastened onto the landscape as inert and contemptible human remainders. Many of them were displaced further into the mountains as internally displaced populations who city residents would refer to as “illiterate mountain people.”

This entire mountainous terrain (*kohistan*) became actionable ground as foreign militaries proceeded with the assumption that insurgents hide, nest, burrow, and operate in mountains they need to be “smoked out” of. The mountains were renamed “Big Top” “Black Hill” or “Brown Hill” by British Special Forces and easily blown up with heavy mortar rounds. They were topped off and lopped open with their interiors splayed like a crooked open-pit mine. At night, and with the illusions of informal electricity, the mountains look different. The ranges are illuminated and they make the entire city resemble a star-studded coliseum with its levels set beautifully ablaze more than a horrific site of violence and forced migrations. Internally displaced persons precariously constructed dim and variously lit homes on the mountainsides as the cost of living in the city became prohibitively high during a war that demanded much more from people than just their homes. At times, this abject, upland community and its bright surround offers an ironic moment of respite to those who always say they want to be elsewhere but never leave: “Look at that view. Kabul is so beautiful at night. Look at all the lights on the mountains. I feel like I’m somewhere else!” an expatriate friend said one day.

Kabul is a dense panorama of both new and old forms of war, of social violence compressed into a single and tense landscape that accommodates the history of three imperial wars (Anglo, Soviet and American) while fraying at its own seams. Undulating low hills open onto the expansive social life of the city with seamless billows that children and history traverse. Calloused feet graze the land with indifference. On the sides of roads just outside the city old Soviet tanks are moored in the exact spot they were attacked and left as reminders in a rusted

open air museum. Within the city ancient ramparts and forts with cylindrical watch towers tell the story of battles that proceeded from ahead not above. Land mines are still buried on their grounds and occasionally one sees the cannonballs that used to be fired to mark the high noon prayer (*namaz e pisheen*), creating the rhythm and regularity of normative time out of a deafening resonance that now only makes people afraid. At a higher incline the technologies of what Paul Virilio calls a “pure war” are perched on mountain peaks as dense clusters of television antennas and higher still, in the air, are surveillance drones—the *deus ex machina* of a war in which visibility and perception are fused into a logic of military and cultural superiority. For some people the drones even corral and shape historical memory: “Look at those things in the air! The Americans are centuries ahead of us.”

Historical memory is fraught. The Anglo-Afghan Wars of 1839-1842, 1878-1880, 1919 the Soviet War of 1979-1989, the Civil War of 1992-1996, the Taliban Regime of 1996-2001 and the Afghan-American War (2001-) are the direct and proxy conflicts that transformed Afghanistan’s status in an international state system and entwined its political trajectory with those of global and regional powers. In the mid-twentieth century, when the Cold War was hot and the competitive provision of aid between the United States and Soviet Union created both a rentier state and fueled a fire between the Afghan intelligentsia’s Marxist and Islamist bastions, Kabul became the scene of repression and dissent, of intelligence gathering and tortured confessions. Later still, the Mujahideen spearheaded a civil war that would completely devastate the city and transform Afghanistan into the world’s fifth largest recipient of personal arms (Rashid, 2001). Many of the people I interviewed would start their personal stories with: “I was born during the wars.” For them generalized violence is always at the origin of both subjectivity

and national history: “Afghanistan has been like this since the day it was put on Earth,” one woman said.

In Kabul nature is fearless. It shakes the earth until homes collapse onto each others sagging shoulders or are swept up with rocks in enormous landslides that make survivors reckon with where they provisionally tried to live. Blooming flowers, dense muddied patches of green, and stubborn shrubs protrude unexpectedly alongside dirt that is drenched in the urine of a passerby or of feral dogs attracted to the city by the smell of waste. Imagine trees with leaves so dusty they look fake. They are fenced in on the side of the road as if they are about to burst into the city. On other tree-lined streets they seem to reach out to each other and form a lush canopy overhead, high above the dust kicked up by military convoys—dust that sneaks into lungs and kills three thousand people per year in a city described as deadlier than the war.

Men walk holding hands in ordinary moments of intimacy on the street. Some have flowers in their hair. Women work in small security booths where they check bags and bodies, lingering a bit to steal glimpses and small moments of touch. Smaller streets line the walkways of cafe entrances where you cannot walk without first being searched by the armed guard, his hands hesitating before he opens your bag: “I hate doing this, I’m sorry but it’s my job, a job is a job after all.” Inside the Flower Street Cafe a reproduction of Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* hangs proudly on the main wall and is noticed only by the expatriate patrons, never the Afghan staff. There are small tables, white tablecloths, polished silverware and numerous foreign aid workers and contractors. The drone of their conversations melts into the background as the title of a book from the cafe’s collection arrests the puzzled attention of a young waiter who moved to Kabul from Ghazni fearing Taliban reprisal attacks amidst heavy fighting. The German title is *Keine Angst* (No Fear).

In The Green Zone (where NATO and ISAF military bases are located in the neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan), the militarized destruction of a neighborhood once home to Kabul's middle-upper class gives way to a sprawling and forbidding series of military bases hidden behind barbed wire, concrete walls, security drop-arm check points and search dogs. Underneath the long hesco-lined (wire mesh containers filled with stones and used as blast walls) walkways flower-imprinted tiles resurface on the ground as reminders of a neighborhood in which walkways served social rather than military life. At the end of the walkway, when its two lanes (one for foreigners and one for "local nationals") end you will see 8" x10" framed and flower-wreathed color photographs of the Afghan security guards who have died outside the gates where suicide bombers are prone to detonate. There are also black and white photos of Afghan men who pose a danger and who are no longer allowed on the base because they are on the "black list"—a biometric database of Afghans who are explicitly prohibited from entering military installations. On the inside of the large base Camp Eggers (where former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates was rumored to stay) placards explicitly prohibit photography. The ritualized obeisance of military salutes are not allowed for fear they might indicate to the Afghans the chain of command, and incite "blue on green" violence. "You cannot do anything that indicates rank. You have to be very careful, just in case there is someone who wants to use that information or give it to some terrorist. You never know," my escort said one tense afternoon.

The bases are dwarfed simulacra of normalized social space, and reflect the transformation of socio-urban order that is a corollary of new practices of war-making and the result of global circuits of speculative economic practice rooted in the international real estate market. In Afghanistan, social space has been made newly discontinuous by war. The networks

produced by modern infrastructure have been physically destroyed and the enclaving of social worlds has been exacerbated by this fact. The military bases are full of shipping containers converted into shops and restaurants like the “Green Bean” cafe where a salacious advertisement for “salsa night” was taped onto the front door next to another for the military’s rape crisis hotline. A few hundred feet away, I worked with migrant laborers at Pizza Hut. We were stuffed into one of those cramped, metallic containers along with a hot pizza oven and a barely working radio they used to play old Bollywood classics like “*Mera Naam Joker*” (from the movie *My Name is Joker*). The laborers would reach into small bins of pizza toppings and generously toss them onto imported dough from the UAE with the hope that a well-made pizza might solicit the good will of the ordering soldier: “In the Quran we learn that acts of kindness don’t go unnoticed!” Inside the bathroom on another base called New Kabul Compound (NKC) there is a color-graded urine chart taped onto the wall of the gym bathroom. It had a Persian translation instructing Afghan workers to be mindful of hydration and to check the color of their urine. It should be yellow but not too yellow.

Outside the bathroom re-used cardboard boxes of “free goodies” are replenished weekly, full of hand-sown beanies, bibles, hand sanitizers, cremes, moist towelettes, and candy. On the table next to it there is a pile of the daily military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. On a whim some Afghan workers take the goodies home as gifts for their family members. The trinkets acquired in military bases, or as charity, end up on living room tables as fetishized fixtures. You might see a dolphin-themed snow globe, a Pepsi-Cola clock with a sunny island spread out behind unsignifying western numerals, a woman wearing a knitted sweater with a Christmas tree on the front. Trinkets and things double as occasions to change the topic, to talk about how they were

obtained and to enable drifting thoughts that are reined back. They fold in on overwhelming and inextricable questions: “What is it like in the camp? What is it like in the “*khar’ij*”(abroad)?

Beyond the Green Zone there are streets named after presidents and traffic circles named after guerrilla fighters and martyrs, which now includes the Deh Mazang Square renamed as Shahidan (Martyr) Square after two ISIS-inspired suicide bombers killed 80 and wounded over 200 people on July 23, 2016 during a protest to pressure the government to run a 500 KV electricity transmission line from Turkmenistan through the Hazara province of Bamiyan. The group that organized the protest is called “The Enlightening Movement.” There are tombs belonging to mythical Sufi protectors, Mughal era gardens, bleak Soviet-built neighborhoods and the skeletal remains of the modernist *Dar ul Aman* palace of King Amanullah Khan. There is the old city, the new city, Flower Street, Chicken Street, and Butcher Street. In an unpaved alleyway tucked into one of these streets there are bright floral faux mink blankets on the rings of barbed wires on the front gates of homes or woven into the rusted railings of large verandas as if with massive crotchet hooks that spin the fabric of social violence. The logic of securitization is transposed onto that of urban development, unleashing a chain of signification that turns a blanket left out to dry into the index of an attempted intrusion—a perduring warning for the foreign expatriates who rent large “villas” and pay upwards of \$20,000-\$30,000 per month in rent: “Don’t worry, you’re safe in the compound, nobody can see inside. It’s like not even being in the city. We’re not within view,” another escort said.³

³ To not be within the Afghan line of sight, has as its corollary the “complexes of visuality” that attend militarized segregation, visual technologies of surveillance and what Mirzoeff calls a “post-panoptic visuality” that combines those technologies with the cultural aims of imperialism, creating a permanent state of crisis (2011, 19-21). See: Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: a Counterhistory of Visuality*.

The emphasis on uncovering hidden intentions and insurgents has turned Kabul's quotidian world into a plethora of signs.⁴ Banal occurrences assume the power to convey inimitable threats. Bodies, clothes, accents, beards, a swaggering gait, cell phones, sim-karts, courtyards, and cars are the objects of both an intense regime of aerial and ground surveillance and general suspicion. For example, a "reconnaissance shooter" working for the private defense company Empire Security explained their criteria for risk assessment. He said that a man sitting idly in his car on the side of the road and wearing "clean and nice clothes" is a legitimate suicide bomber suspect: his idleness signifies his awaiting of an approaching target and his "clean and nice clothes" signify his expectation to enter heaven after being martyred. Examples of this logic abound.

The view of Kabul from afar would include numerous military helicopters flying overhead, providing the jarring acoustics that halt even the most transporting of reveries, as if the black whirring of wings catch drifting thoughts like feathers it adds to its span, turning sound into figure and figure into awe. To look at them out of a window, or a frame where one was blown out long ago and never replaced, is to try and still a moment— or a linear path out of the mystery of military life that rapidly shifts above.

Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Also see: Mitchell, W.J.T, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

⁴ For Neil Hertz there is something sublime about this kind of plurality, through which reading signs and affirming a subjective sense of self become inextricable. In his reading of Wordsworth's Bartholomew Fair he describes the city as a "scale model of urban mechanisms" designed to "focus" fear (55). In Kabul that focusing takes on the explicit form of also distinguishing between insurgents and civilians. The baffling, sometimes overwhelming proliferation of signs and sensations are not only what Hertz describes as "consciously chosen and exhibited modes of representation" (56) but in some instances the distinguishing line between life and death. See: Hertz, Neil. *The End of the Line*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

In Kabul things are not where an expatriate might expect them to be, neither in the sky nor on the ground. Furniture and beds are usually in the center of the room, away from windows that shatter during explosions. Uniformly empty window sills host only the endless accumulation of dust that makes its way in from an unpaved, unscreened outside. Objects become things, providing an opening onto social life as they call and address one another, sometimes pricking your sensibilities as Roland Barthes said about images that rupture rather than corroborate expectations.⁵ Some homes are made of mud and others more proudly of *konkrete* (concrete) and mortar. Their front, side and back doors are equally arched and inviting. The walls very rarely have wallpaper and sometimes bear the water stains of a roof that gave way under the wintry weight of snow and rainwater. Leakage makes the task of putting up framed pictures a repetitive one that enables small moments of remembrance, when dust is lovingly wiped off the glass before it is put up again.

On the new road to the Kabul International Airport cars are stopped by the traffic police and move slowly against the inertial force of law and order in a city simultaneously steeped in anarchic chaos. One afternoon as I approached a circular roundabout where dozens of red, heart-shaped velvet pillows had been yanked out of the back seats of cars (where they are common adornments) the police officer explained that we needed to be vigilant. “Was there an explosion in the city today?” I asked, expecting to hear a story about a car bomb and a pillow.⁶ “No, but you never know. Anything can happen and we have to be ready for it. We received a *rapport* (report) this morning. Something might happen. That is why we are taking precautionary

⁵ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, pg. 27.

⁶ For a global history of the car bomb see: Davis, Mike. *Buda's Wagon a Brief History of the Car Bomb*. New York: Verso Books, 2007.

measures”. He emphasized the word *rapport*, raising his eyebrows in order to accentuate its absolute facticity. He believes the information shared between the Ministries of Defense and Interior, the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, the Traffic Police, The Public Protection Service Force, Counter-Terrorism Units, private security firms, and NATO/coalition forces retains its facticity, traveling with as much veritable conviction between splintering and counter-posed agencies as the original data transmission.

In Kabul communication can be a medium of deception and danger. Invisible wires produce the possibility of an accusation like the oxidized green skarn of doubt on the copper that makes it all possible. To speak is to assume liability: “This is the spying capital of the world, all your phone calls are always tapped. You have to be careful, every word is listened to and logged in,” a friend said to me when I bought my *sim-kart*. Afghan interpreters working for the US military regularly disguise the names of their family members in their phone contact list, or delete them altogether out of fear that if stopped while traveling outside of Kabul they will be killed for espionage. There is palpable anxiety and obsession with cellular technology. Triple *sim-kart* phones are common and offer people three networks to resort to even if the ringing of phones only makes them anxious: “O Allah may we not hear any more news of death or destruction.”⁷

Those who cannot read find themselves in a city littered with graphic signs. “Private English Courses,” “Police Ring of Steel,” “The Land of the Brave,” “No Photography No Phones,” “Kabul City Center,” “5Afs. per minute,” “Thinking Before Your Eyes,” “Kabul Bank

⁷ On the perception of a relationship between middle-class political power and cell phones see: Rafael, Vicente L. “The Cell Phone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines” in Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong, and Thomas Keenan. *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Fortune Account: The Easiest Way to Earn Million,” “Karzai a Symbol of National Unity” “This is a Gift From the People of the United States.” For them, graphic signs possess no unity of meaning and cannot cull memories. People ignore them: “There are so many posters in Kabul, anyway did I tell you that during the civil war dogs used to eat dead bodies on this road? You think things are bad now? You should have seen it then!”

Some people say: “I’m alive, anyway” when you ask how they are. They complain of unlocalizable pains that shift like phantoms from their head to their chest, to their kidneys, to their legs. A woman named Janat lost her leg and does not know why. They talk of having “given up their nerves” and are going deaf, blind, or standing with “one foot on the edge of the grave (*qabr*).” Those same senses are acutely tuned into the landscape. The smell of burning refuse and wood in the winter chokes them like the inert words held hostage in their throats. The toxic air pollution burns their eyes like recalled images of trauma and the sun shines on them until they are “struck by it” and collapse from the heat. They describe life as an approximation, an attempt, a deferral. They remind you to tread lightly, that: “death is closer than one’s jugular vein” or that: “the world is a matter of days.” It is “disloyal” (*beh wafa*) and rolls off like the filth on the palm of your hand (*chirk e dast*).”

On the back of windshields there are stickers: “Jack Bauer 24 CT,” “No Girls, No Tension,” “King of the Earth, Don’t Follow Me,” “The Final Model is a Grave,” “No Time for Love,” “Landcruesir.” On any major street fingers tap and beg on your car windows. One day a man shoved a “curriculum vitae” into my cracked window and asked if I had any work for him.

Curriculum Vitae

Personal Information

Name: Zaher Ahmad

F. Name: Mohammad Ahmad

Date of Birth: 1972

Place of Birth: Herat Province

Gender: Male

Marital Status: Married

Present Add: Herat Province

Contact No: 0774789833

We are living in Herat I am very poor and I haven't any money for bread of night and day, please give me a task for me forever. you come here for Peace and Security helping. I hope help with me and we eat bad bread every night and day I haven't any someone that help me you know that the Afghanistan there is not work. My families are sick and I haven't any money for doctor. Please give me a task for me and help me. Please contact me as soon. I worked in ISAF (International Security and Assistance Forces) for Cleaner for 3 years.

My days is very bad. Please Help me for a ever work. My families is sick and I haven't money for doctor. Please help me for work You Know that there isn't any work in Afghanistan and give me a work for me. You come here for Peace and Security helping.

Sincerely.

Zaher Ahmad

People live with the force of repetition: "Nothing will change. It will always be like this in Afghanistan." For some a fleeting glance at a patch of grass is enough to bring back a violent personal history: "My son died while playing in the grass. The grass killed him. He ate a little bit and died, the grass had rocket powder residue on it, the grass killed him just like that. Snatched him." For Sita (the procurement officer at Millenium Mining Services), the warm aroma of freshly baked bread, decorated with black sesame seeds and the ends of a fork, remind her of her dead brother: "He went out one morning to buy bread and a rocket hit him as he walked home. Hit him just like that. They brought his body back and laid him out in front of our house. He was dead but he looked scared." For others it is the sight of chicken sold in the market: "One day

during the Taliban years I was walking to the market to buy vegetables and saw what I thought were small chickens hanging from a traffic post. But they were hands! The Taliban had cut off the hands of some thieves in the *bazaar*. They wrote a note too: ‘If you steal, this is what will happen to you.’ I hate chicken. Oh I hate chicken!” Stories like this are told all over town. They circulate in homes, mosques, graveyards, and makeshift pharmacies, sprouting like ripe seeds under the rain of a collective memory condensed to hold over thirty-seven years of war, or one hundred depending on how and why you count: “I was born during the wars, I’m not sure which one to be honest. I don’t really know how old I am.” They emerge amidst the humdrum of the everyday like a sign suddenly hung over a door to remind you of where you have arrived: “This is Afghanistan, miss. Why are you here, anyway? Are you here to convert us?”

For many *Kabulis* an entire economy vanished before their eyes. Jobs snuck away like thieves in the night and left them with the task of mining endless aporia for signs: “You just never know. You go to sleep and you have a job, and you wake up and it’s gone. I’ll be damned if I know how these things work!” Some took the demilitarization of Kabul as a personal affront: “Why am I so cursed? Even a job is too much to ask for. Everyone is packing up and disappearing. But where should I go?” Alongside this there was unbound optimism. Rumors of vast amounts of untapped gold, copper, lithium, iron, gas, oil, and marble spread like unattended fires. They ignited hopes and seared them onto a single discourse, one that eschews historical experience for marvelous expectations. Conversations travelled from mouth to ear and turned incredulity into certainty: “If I can’t find a job in Kabul I will just work for a mine (*ma’dan*). We have a lot of those and they are here to stay. That’s the thing about mines you’ll always have work.”

Fault-lines

Many of these encompassing scenes occur along the schism of literacy and illiteracy.⁸ We may be tempted to characterize them as ethnographic aperçus that illustrate wartime hysteria or the social fallout that ensues in a conflict undergirded by overwhelming military force and the imperial demand for cultural transformation—a demand inscribed in sites ranging from maximum security courtrooms and shipping containers to multi-national corporations and secret mineral assay laboratories. We can also retrospectively read the development of the Afghan State as the failure of its own centralization, a project undermined in a fraught geopolitical arena and that now erupts in local sites of fissure and displacement. The violence of war is unequally distributed in part because of the Afghan State’s decentralized authority and loss of monopoly over the means of violence. But the principle that organizes the conflict again and again by distributing an investment in reason and value (both economic and intellectual) on one hand, and superfluity (which results in the crisis of what I call “prosthetic bodies”) on the other, is the ability to read and write.

The question of writing necessitates a careful, though at times difficult distinction, between its historical and structural dimensions.⁹ The first clarification is a terminological

⁸ Walter Ong distinguishes between illiteracy and literacy as a matter of consciousness, arguing that the internalization of the alphabet (and the space in which reflection and introspection occur) in literate cultures results in the projection of abstract, linear thinking onto the thinking process of people who inhabit predominantly oral lifeworlds (2002, 102-104). He contrasts the redundancy and repetition of orality with the “sparse linearity” of writing (2002, 40). The definitional basis of words in oral cultures comes not from the storage and archive of dictionaries (where meanings and secondary meanings are recorded) but from the everyday world of usage, gesture, and expression (2002, 46). See: Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 2002.

⁹ For an overview of the concept of writing (*l’écriture* and its emergence as a philosophical problem) in the works of Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida see: Johnson, Barbara. “Writing” in Lentricchia, Frank, and Thomas McLaughlin. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago:

distinction between the sociological binary of illiteracy/literacy (and ethnographic consideration of its contact points) and the philosophical binary of speech/writing. In the structuralist-linguistic perspective writing is the basis for enabling political hierarchy, empire and abstraction.¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss describes writing as “a strange invention” and “artificial memory” that attends the rise of empire and cities, and social integration by virtue of the force of law.¹¹ It enables social hierarchy (including slavery) by augmenting “the authority and prestige of one individual—or function—at the expense of others”.¹² This much Derrida agrees with. He admits that it has “long been known that the power of writing in the hands of small number, caste, or class, is always contemporaneous with hierarchization, let us say with political difference.”¹³

University of Chicago Press, 1990. Johnson also carefully demonstrates the non-intuitive logic of supplementarity and illustrates that its logic is “not only the logic of writing—it is also a logic that can only really exist *in writing*” (1990, 45).

¹⁰ See: Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropique*. London: Penguin Books, 1992 and De Saussure, Ferdinand. *General Course in Linguistics*. LaSalle, III : Open Court, 2002. We know after reading Derrida, that for Saussure despite writing’s utility for preserving languages, it is still fundamentally dangerous, and usurps “the principal role” (2002, 25) which belongs to speech as the truer expression of thought. He goes so far as to say that the “tyranny” of writing distorts the true nature of language and its constant evolution, especially in “highly literate communities where written documents are of considerable importance” and where the perversity of writing is part of a vicious cycle of disguise (2002, 29).

¹¹ For a discussion of the relationship between the authority of sacred texts and the space of critique, between divine command and human understanding, that comes to be *sharia* see: Messick, Brinkley. *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*. University of California Press, Berkeley: 1993, pg. 16-17. For a discussion of how the oral-aural emphasis of recitation (*qara'at*) is deeply entwined with "diverse textual worlds" see pg. 24-25, and for a discussion of "recitational logocentrism" and the problem of authorial legitimacy (including the specificity of vowelings, which can be altered through graphic signs) see pg. 26-27.

¹² Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropique*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, pg. 297- 298.

¹³ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pg 130.

But Derrida distinguishes between the “vulgar” concept of conventional writing and arche-writing in order to illustrate that writing (the production of difference and delay) is at work “not only in the form and substance of graphic expression but also in those of nongraphic expression. It would constitute not only the pattern uniting form to all substance, graphic or otherwise, but the movement of the *sign-function* linking a content to an expression, whether it be graphic or not.”¹⁴ Derrida de-centers the binary of speech and writing by showing the “originary violence of a language which is always already a writing.”¹⁵

The distance between historical forms of phonetic and conventional writing and writing as a trace structure that is always displaced is crucial. However, one must also be careful not to continuously reproduce a binary between the experiences of historical subjects and the forms of loss that occur *through* language. This discrepancy, and the possibility of displacing one with the other while championing a reckoning with the past is what constitutes Eric Santner’s illuminating critique of Paul de Man’s later writings.¹⁶ Santner contends that for de Man the valorization of the structural loss of inhabiting language as distinct (or autonomous) from historical pathos and subjective pain alerts us to the violence of refusing to integrate mourning as

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 60.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 106.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Marilyn Ivy for alerting me to this critique. For a discussion of the complexities of post WWII mourning in Japan, and of Santner’s notion of “sedimentation,” see: Ivy, Marilyn. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, pg. 13-15.

a historical and political task, a task which does not overshadow the production of historical victims nor subject them to the “dismemberment” of the signifier.¹⁷

The task is neither to displace one dimension of writing with the other, nor to completely collapse them but to allow for a “sedimentation”¹⁸ that enables an analysis of how they are mutually entangled, and illuminate aspects of each other. This dissertation traces the literal and material force of writing in order to demonstrate that modern war and capitalism require a concept of graphic writing that negates its own logic as it attributes to orality the tendency for compulsive destruction. This dissimulation repeatedly crosses the boundaries of literacy and illiteracy, and calls for additional concealment through the production of literal supplementarity (of limbs and bodies) in order to institute a difference between generative repetition and destructive tendencies.

To see this fully at work, and to grasp how writing has again become the *sina qua non* of rational vitality, we will have to traverse a lot of ground, situating ourselves in the midst of economic, ideational and physical distortions in a range of sites and transcripts, and under conditions of industrial and late capitalism. These phenomena and analyses may seem wildly different from one another at first. They include untamed nature (botanical specimens, fish, and trees), telegraph stations, intimate family meetings, shocking courtroom encounters with failed

¹⁷ Santner, Eric L. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, pg. 29. He argues: “The error of Paul de Man in this historical series was, I suggest, that he sought to *displace* and *disperse* the particular, historical tasks of mourning which for him, as is now known, were substantial and complex, with what might be called structural mourning, that is, mourning for those “catastrophes” that are inseparable from being-in-language” (1993, 29). I will return to this distinction in chapter seven when I consider the role of narration and my informant, Timūr’s need for a witness to this trauma.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*,

suicide bombers, the rural milieu of combat missions, prosthetic bodies and limbs inside and outside Kabul's Green Zone, and the corporate and scientific headquarters of a multinational corporation (Millenium Mining Services).¹⁹ Up in the mountains during the 19th century explorations of botanists and in the valley of Kabul, above and in the mineral underground these places and moments extend across imperial and contemporary fantasies of the linguistic landscape and earthen ground (*zameen*). They are condensed in moments when one accidentally steps on a land mine. They encompass discourses that range from the imperial science of naturalism to infrastructural development. They illustrate scenarios when the ignorance born of illiteracy leads people to make exceptional mistakes of judgement (like incestuous relations) that, when discovered, generate moral panic and crisis.

We will encounter figures and read transcripts carefully, in order to discern how they express the opposition of literacy and illiteracy, and how the subordination of orality also makes it possible for the proponents of writing to offer an interpretation of orality's duplicitous functions. Through an in-depth reading of archival material I illustrate that this subordination is first achieved during the early to mid twentieth century when the acquisition of media technologies (telegraphy, telephony, and radio) enabled mechanical reproduction and reconfigured linguistic plurality into a dyad between literacy and illiteracy. Those technologies introduced the problem of authenticity (between real and fraudulent telegraphic transmissions), and transformed the question of (mechanical) repetition into a discourse on falsity in the imperial imagination, one which we will trace in its inverted form into the present as the fantasy of

¹⁹ This is a pseudonymous company name.

turning graphic signs into instruments of good will and intention.²⁰ By inhabiting a certain recursivity and returning to transcripts, persons and logics we will repeatedly encounter incredible fantasies about literacy. These fantasies are anchored in the modernist belief that literacy is the basis for reflective and intellectual thought, and the conviction that to write is to think and be human. But what they also disclose for us is that in its absence, you can and (and sometimes must) die.

These are radical claims about the nature of contemporary war-making, if less so about the nature of contemporary thinking. But if we consider exactly what it is that writing does we will see how it organizes the divisions and ambiguities that enable the experiences of wartime catastrophe and opportunity. Writing opens onto two orders: the material and epistemic. The material consists of paperwork, titles and deeds, legal case files that necessitate signatures or supplementary thumb prints. For those who can read it enables access to *Qurānic* script, and the codification of law.²¹ These are related through the logics of theological and legal authority and

²⁰ This is of course not always true, but it is certainly the aim of textual propaganda including the messages that are displayed in Persian and Pashto (usually on behalf of the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior—*wizarat e defā va dākhila*) after pedagogical infomercials on the dangers of joining the Taliban insurgency, Al Qaeda or ISIS. It also underwrites the logic (which we will confront in Chapter Six *On Suicide Bombers*) that access to written law (especially *Sharia* and the Quran) can enable moral rehabilitation. It also undergirds the more banal presupposition that Afghan employees (particularly in the Green Zone) are more loyal to their foreign employers if they can read and understand their work contracts. In Chapter Eight, *Terrestrial Things*, we will see how the inability to read a work contract becomes the basis of a perception of disingenuousness between Millenium Mining management and its local labor force in the village of Qara Zaghan.

²¹ *Qurānic* script, as Benedict Anderson explains, enables the Islamic *ummah* (community) as an imaginable entity even when members are incapable of communicating orally. This is achieved through the medium of a shared sacred text in classical Arabic. Anderson draws our attention to the political force (and spatial imaginary) of Arabic script (which is the same as Persian and Pashto) and how it grants “access to a pure world of signs,” despite the existence of various languages. Crucially, this depends on the non-arbitrariness of the sign, which are “emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it.” See Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso Press, 1991, p. 12-14.

the forms of bureaucratic rationality that have burgeoned alongside a culture of bribery and ministerial rehabilitation as part of the effort to shore up the Afghan State's legitimate authority. They determine not only how the law is accessed (and whether it is accessed at all) but also the comparative value of oral testimony and interpersonal mediation (the displaced and informal practice of *wikâlat* within and between families).

Material forms of writing express levels of generality and relations of exchange: between written copies, translations, the self-same signature (or thumb print), the perduring legitimacy of a land deed and so on, but they do so at the expense of the expressive legitimacy of orality: in Kabul what one says at a particular moment is never as good as what can later be shown in writing. We will witness scenes in which orality is not accorded the veracity that accrues to writing, and even its displacement by the photographic image in juridical encounters where illiterate defendants are deemed irrational and subject to derogation as their case-file photos do all the speaking for them. We will witness the exact moments when writing's constitutive forms of repetition become generative of an epistemic order, one in which literate persons can recognize general relationships beyond the particular convergences of immediate experience while illiterate persons are believed to be in the grip of devastating habits.²²

²² The perceived relationship between speech and compulsion also raises the question of voice, and what it means to speak through a voice that is not one's own. This would of course be the voice of witchcraft, and also of magical speech. It is also a product of the division of self that is achieved through traumatic force. See: Siegel, James. *Naming the Witch*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, pg. 78-79. For Siegel the force of the witch's voice stems from its demonstration of a non-dialectical power that others (including those in positions of power) do not have access to. The Zuni witch speaks as a witch, and makes his power palpable through his speech by expressing a "foreign power" that speaks through him and "asserts a nondialectical possibility" (2006, 217).

The presupposition that severance from the ability to write places some people in the grip of destructive compulsion has been understood differently, and more tellingly as the outcome of trauma. Again, the question of voice is raised as the cry through which the destruction of repetition-compulsion

One may be tempted to reduce the complexity of these encounters to the perception of rural credulity (and many *Kabulis* do in fact articulate this distinction as an intellectual one). But what they illustrate for us are the profound moments when people recognize that they cannot recognize the structures that determine whether and how they will live. As anyone who's experienced military violence on the ground knows all too well, this is exactly the traumatic logic by which warfare (especially aerial bombardment and suicide bombing) proceeds. It institutes a divide between expectation and knowledge. To know in a context of bombing is always too late, knowing happens after the fact when lives and bodies have already been decimated. It turns the everyday into the interminable anticipation of other future events to be known. Once they are known there is often nothing left to say, and war continues its violence through the production of silence that in turn inspires the perception that people do not know how to think about or articulate their experience.

There is pathos in all of this. But conventional writing, and the felt lack of its absence, illustrate for us the logic of war in more consequential ways. The belief that writing is the domain of what can be known and universally applied invigorates the ideology of literate persons with shocking breadth and tenacity. It organizes antagonisms between persons and structures forms of death-dealing. For example, we will meet *Matin* and *Zia*, two *Kabuli* translators for NATO/ISAF forces who believe they have survived the salvos of war (which occurred in their neighborhood) because they were meant to take advantage of the economic opportunities available to literate persons. They cast their illiterate and rural counterparts as persons who do not understand why they do what they do, and therefore who are prone to participate in terroristic

becomes manifest as *the address of a speaking voice*. See: Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996, pg. 2-5.

activity or confuse photographic content as real. For them, and others, writing activates a fundamentally temporal and ethical order. It makes possible the Afghan future as a peaceful and prosperous one.

The absence of writing is thought by literate *and* some illiterate *Kabulis* to entail the recurrence of loss and deprivation—forms of loss imagined to overtake the social and terrestrial landscape. We will meet an illiterate woman who does not know how she lost her leg, and a mother and son emerging from the trauma of an incestuous affair they understand and express as the inexorable result of illiteracy. At Millenium Mining Services, the loss is economic and illiterate Afghans living in rural, mineral-rich areas are accused of jeopardizing the efforts of corporate mining and the value presumed to be underground. This discourse of loss, and of the forms of positivity that would *otherwise* materialize, opens onto the second dimension of the dissertation: the earthen ground (*zameen*) which has since the early 18th century been the object of imperial fascination and presumed to harbor unrealized economic value.

While writing has become the condition for deadly ambiguities that encompass the failures of sexual prohibition and the production of literal supplementarity (prosthetic human bodies and limbs), it also invigorates an imagination of economic value. Tasked with granting systematicity to thought and enabling techniques of reason necessary for causal and scientific deliberation, the forms of rational calculation it enables have become inextricable from understanding the purportedly “real” sources of value in the mineral underground. I demonstrate that the universalizing of rationalization as a function of literacy has become the basis for the accumulation of capital in an exploratory mining industry, turning the uncertainty of any mining endeavor (and of ground rent) on an economic frontier into the remediable failure of illiteracy. By following this optimism from imperial expeditions to the Afghan modernist movement of the

early 20th century and its linguistic and infrastructural ambitions, to the dissemination of synthetic fertilizers, and finally the contemporary moment when a speculative economy is enhanced by the prospect of extractive violence (which is still of the order of speculation); we will see how the equation of literacy to the individual capacity to autonomously discern rational order and value has time and again invested the ground with destructive potential alongside the fantasy that it can become the auto-generating scene of wealth.

But writing can never stay clean of speech. It acquires its powers paradoxically. Writing contains the capacity to corroborate truth in different circumstances and to discern order in the ethical world precisely when its own logic is effaced. The quest for repetition, which always drives the desire to write, becomes transposed as its other—casting orality as the locus of repetition and compulsion that writing cures through expressive force.²³ If Afghans could learn to write, the logic goes, they would be liberated from the traditions and irresistible urges that otherwise threaten them with self-destruction (ranging from incest to suicide bombing).²⁴ This

²³ For a discussion of the relationship between writing and mechanical reproduction, and the question of authorship (in mid nineteenth century Thailand), or rather its displacement, through the author hearing “himself hearing in the act of writing” (2000, 23) see: Morris, Rosalind C. *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, 13-15, 20-23. I emphasize the idea of someone hearing him or herself through writing because it also captures the conjuncture of oral narration and writing that suffuses the chain of transmission known in Islamic historiography as *isnād*.

²⁴ The question of repetition and its relationship to destruction is a complex one. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud argues that repetition-compulsion has a temporal logic that relies on a condition of fundamental unfulfillment: “the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed” (1961, 21). The question of fate and destiny emerge for Freud as that which is explained by this compulsive repetition, such that: “A great deal of what might be described as the compulsion of destiny seems intelligible on a rational basis; so that we are under no necessity to call in a new and mysterious motive to explain it” (1961, 25). For Freud, repetition isn’t mysterious. We repeat because we enjoy it (and because it enables mastery in children) (1961, 42). Repetition stems from an instinct that is an “urge inherent in organic life to restore to an earlier state of

ironic effacement occurs alongside another one: the devastating forms of violence that occur on and in the ground (through ground warfare and improvised explosive devices) and which sever Afghan bodies and condemn people to literal forms of supplementarity. The contradictory belief that writing enables passage from the contingency of experience to general forms of reasoning occurs not just when a system of literacy disguises its own constitutive logic, but when the particularity of devastating experience (on the ground) is transformed into the supplement of greater aims thought to occur through a liberation from without.

Writing it Down

The dissertation does not begin with the power of conventional writing. I also do not periodize a historical progression defined by the tensions of modernist ambition and cultural refraction. To do so would be to repeat what much of the scholarship on Afghanistan has largely reduced to the political upheaval of state-led modernization and the foreign and local forms of resistance that intensified the centralizing efforts of the state and the centrifugal pulls of social and economic forces (Barfield, 2010; Nawid, 2000; Roy, 1990 and Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004; Shahrani, 1984). Instead in chapter two I open with the predicament of mishearing in conditions of linguistic translation, one of the defining features of contemporary warfare, in order to foreground the importance of an ethnographic analysis to forms of structural and symbolic

things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces”(1961, 43).

The question of repetition-compulsion (*tekrâr va i'jbar*) is articulated alongside that of habit (*âdat*) and, as we will read, illiteracy. But the nature of what is captured by repetition in these instances is on a different order than Freud’s analysis and it cannot be understood as that which explains destiny. It is destiny *as* inscription. Writing enables, through the production of material copies, an assurance that what was articulated or written in a moment is reproducible, and that it can be culled as part of an evidentiary or demonstrative claim. In this way, what is repeatable, also becomes an event in the sense that it achieves or makes visible what would otherwise remain unknowable. It emerges through the relationship between knowing and not knowing, though of course that relationship is not reducible to the operations of writing.

violence, which include but are irreducible to state-sponsored violence. Through a consideration of the experiences of two translators, Matin and Zia, we will see how those first salvos profoundly shaped the perceptions of Afghans who came under direct military assault, and the importance of ethnographically situating mistranslation between urban and rural Afghans within biometric, oral and aesthetic lineages.

In this context, where lives and words are dangerously on the line, we will read about Matin and Zia's experiences of the hierarchization of linguistic and ethnic difference. I argue that rural orality demonstrates for us the more obvious failures of translation between languages when English demands its own translation and Persian and Pashto increasingly signify what Afghans do not and cannot know. The perception of rural illiteracy by US military personnel and Afghan translators leads to failures which entrench the rural-divide as well as the Western and Afghan antinomy of modern and primitive. Reading these encounters as ideological heirs of an earlier moment, the Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, I illustrate how the fixation with orality is already a concern with nomadism and frontier movement, and how the contemporary fear about the status of dialect in the Afghan countryside conflates linguistic difference with the fantasized threat of dispossession. As we will see when we consider the notion of speaking to the enemy (i.e. the American soldier) speaking and pronominal usage can signify, for the Taliban, collaboration or guilt, which is to say: apostasy or terrorism. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the anxiety about both literal nomadism and linguistic particularism subtends a larger anxiety about an international war economy that commodifies both language and natural resources, and makes the former a medium of accessing the latter.

In Chapter Three I return to that historical moment of frontier anxiety not through a consideration of nomadism, but by examining linguistic and political suspicion in conditions of

unprecedented technological mediation—when the questions of mechanical repetition and telegraphic authenticity first emerge alongside the question of orality. Different media technologies (cable and wireless telegraphy, Radio Kabul, and propagandist cinema) reconfigure a rich world of political and linguistic diversity into a permanent dyad between literacy and illiteracy. The belief that communication technology could facilitate immediacy and access (and the connective powers which would enable propagandist assimilation and political suasion) is counterposed with the problem of uncontrolled transmissions and oral credulity. Orality was transformed in this moment from the imagined prior ground on which different technological orders were introduced (to mitigate the problem of illiteracy and tribal uprising in the hinterlands) to a technology of persuasion that reduces its capacities to the dissemination of propaganda and “whispering campaigns.”

From here we move to the contemporary moment and examine two tragedies, one of the failure of translation (which resulted in the torture and death of Abdul Wali at the hands of the CIA contractor in Kunar) and another of an incestuous affair and of murderous rage—two incredible traumas understood by Zaid (one of the sole survivors of his family’s demise) as the problem of his illiteracy, and as the loss of the informal practice of representation and mediation known as *wikâlat* in a context of proliferating paperwork. These stories share political and linguistic histories, and they illustrate that the failure of remedial gestures (promises, *zamânats* (avowals), prophetic legitimacy, and *wikâlat*) fail in contexts of oral mediation when the moorings of familial and social relationships have come undone as a result of structural violence (organized around the question of translation) and a booming war economy (which makes written contracts more important than ever before). They also demonstrate for us forms of reasoning that emerge to contain the force of destructive repetition—for example when the

relationship between the particularity of experience and general principles (and between forces and events) are understood as the continuous necessity of kismet.

These stories exemplify how the binary of literacy and illiteracy (and the kinds of social mediation it necessitates) is inextricable from pathos and loss.²⁵ That loss also occurs materially. To understand this we will read, in chapter five, the obsessive writings and journal entries of imperial botanists, whose writings granted them representations and enabled them to read the Afghan landscape like a text and discern its unrealized economic potential. By examining representations of the *zameen* in botanical-imperial and Afghan modernist discourses and the perception of an extended scene of agrarian and socio-political failure, I argue that the twin concerns of infrastructural development and linguistic standardization championed by the Afghan State in the twentieth century are indelibly linked to the perception of rurality as the site of non-productivity. This enables us to understand the Afghan modernist identification of the ground with an intensification of violence and capitalist accumulation. Through a close reading of the writings of the Afghan journalist and thinker Mahmud Tarzī (1865-1933) I argue that the effect of this was to turn the ground into a site of generalized anticipation: of technology, of imperial invasion, the consolidation of the Afghan State, and eventually the liberation of women from patriarchal gender relations.

Sometimes that anticipation ends with disaster. Between 2006-2015 approximately 1,052 suicide attacks occurred in Afghanistan, killing 4,845 and wounding 12,079 people. This incredible violence again sutures violence with the relationship between the failure of orality and

²⁵ For an account of the relationship between spoken and written Japanese, on one hand, and the relationship between reality and fiction, or the question of “How does one represent “reality” in prose fiction?” during the Meiji period (and the push for literary realism) see: Ivy, Marilyn. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 73-76.

mechanical technologies of reproduction, especially photography. Chapter six is based on the grueling trials of failed bombers, and their narratives, as well as those of the presiding judges. I consider confusion about the nature of bureaucratic authority (consternation with finger-printing, photography, public defenders, and due process), and I illustrate the force of photographic technology in establishing an evidential basis that obviates the actual oral testimony of the bombers. Crime scene photographs and cell phone images and videos of terroristic activity are interpreted as indexical signs of intensifying violence. Photographs not only double as testimony and evoke truth-value, but they also stage a repetition at two crucial levels: 1) the spectacular crimes they depict (which did not occur) will also happen again since they were attempted by compulsive and self-destructive persons and 2) the possibility of different outcomes are subsumed by the belief that suicide terror must keep on happening. It is in this chapter that the displacement of writing's constitutive repetition is achieved, and transposed onto the perception of compulsive habits and behaviors believed to inhere in illiterate persons. During the tumultuous decades of Afghan modernism technologies of reproduction were joined by the fantasy of ideological assimilation, and in the contemporary moment photographic and cellular technology also transforms repetition from a potential site of excess (the repetition of trauma, death, and bomb explosions) to the reclamation of photographic aura by Afghan judges.

In Chapter Seven we leave behind this aura to consider conditions of abject lack in the context of Kabul's vanishing economic bubble (the demilitarization of its Green Zone). I refer us back to perceptions of agrarian failure and the discourse of agricultural rehabilitation (that increasingly came to enhance the general aims of Afghan modernism) in order to also argue that the dissemination of synthetic fertilizers was at once a remedy and poison introduced to the make the Afghan ground fertile (and are now used to make deadly home-made bombs which sever

Afghan bodies). I argue that the loss of limbs (a prevalent occurrence due to land mine and improvised explosive devices) leads to a literal materialization of a general logic, namely supplementarity. Afghan bodies are the supplements of American military strategy, and in inhabiting that logic, are also reduced to needing supplements (prosthetic limbs) themselves. I consider how this logic unfolds inside of a private security compound in the Green Zone where we will meet Timūr, a young Afghan who considers himself a prosthetic body (human armor for his expatriate counterparts). I suggest that the ambivalent incorporation of Afghan bodies as protective shields and wartime collaborators relies on the concomitant production of a sense of interiority, of a *darūn* (the inside) which characterizes the militarization of Kabul and the allure of its Green Zone.

Here the naive opposition between writing and orality is transposed onto the spatial order of warfare. The production of the Green Zone's spatial interiority (where illiterate Afghans are much more likely to find employment as guards or service sector employees) is both a military tactic and mode of representation that partakes in the logic of the *pharmakon*. Through an ethnographic account of the Empire Security compound and the experiences of a young man named Timūr I illustrate that between efforts at sense-making and the violent events that sever Afghan bodies, a notion of necessity increasingly takes wing, situating the passage between particular experiences and general causes as the kind of deadly kismet that descends upon illiterate Afghans.

In Chapters Eight I depart from this spatial and representative order in order to trace the displacement of violence on the ground with the fantasy of mineral wealth in the ground: an estimated one trillion dollars' worth of copper, gold, iron-ore, marble and oil & gas and the possibility of ground rent. I return to the distinction between inside (*darūn*) and outside (*berūn*)

(so crucial to contemporary American war practice and counter-insurgency) in order to relate the madness of wartime economic speculation to the historical concerns of the Afghan modernists about the nature of capitalism and global imperialism. I argue that the ideology of real or natural value underground is linked to the sense of lost value above ground, and that this has transformed the dream of laborless extraction into a belief that ground rent is the site of endless generativity.

This occurs on the basis of a series of perversions that inform a much larger representational crisis, and that brings literacy and illiteracy into contact once again—shaping how appearances and causes are understood in relation to writing and reading, and ultimately shaping the belief in accumulation that shoots through the offices and laboratory of Millennium Mining Services as pure potentiality. I also illustrate a fascination with literacy, signatures, fingerprints, memory and attention—and argue that these concerns have come to supplement illiteracy at a time when the generation of wealth from the ground is itself grounded in the belief that both economic and representative value are inextricable from literacy.

The Field

The dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted in the summers of 2010 and 2011 (in Kabul, Herat and the Panjshir Valley) and then more rigorously from 2012-2013 in Kabul. The historical dimensions are based on extensive archival work both in Kabul at the Afghan National Archives, and in England in the British Library's India Office Records, and the Kew National Archive in Surrey. My analyses, however, are primarily driven by the narratives, life histories, fragmented memories, and fixations of my informants in Kabul. These conversations and the close to 300 interviews I conducted transpired in various neighborhoods: Shar e Nau, Wazir

Akbar Khan (including inside The Green Zone), Khushal Khan Mina, Taimani, Dibori, Shash Darak, Mikrorayan, and others.

Together these sites consist of the urban heart of the War on Terror, and the scenes that enable its experiential and ideological violence, as well as the kinds of fetishistic excess that undergird the effort to ground capital in mineral reserves. It may come as a surprise that in the midst of an intensified military and political culture of surveillance, one with far-reaching and devastating effects, many of my interviews are recorded in hundreds of hours of audio files (which include dozens of courtroom trial recordings). Those who did not wish to be recorded feared that my tapes would be found and that they might face reprisal. Their concern for privacy does not require further explanation, but it becomes even more crucial when one pillar of Taliban resistance relies on punishing Afghans who “collaborate” (or speak) with the enemy.

The majority of my informants were incorporated into the war economy, the Taliban resistance, the Afghan State and its judicial and ministerial extensions, the corporate and scientific world of multi-national mining, or in “The Green Zone” as service sector laborers. Others were removed from these scenes entirely, and lived in poverty-stricken neighborhoods where they were unemployed, subject to restrictions on their mobility, and often illiterate. In all of these spheres I was ensconced in the world of oral narration, an effusive world of talk that shaped my encounters and turned this diversity of settings into a scene of continuity marked also by discontinuous experiences and fears of being overheard, and thus by different forms of adaptability and resistance. All of the names that appear in the chapters are pseudonyms, for Najiba, my housemate, and Maira who appears in chapter eight. I feel that to deprive them of their names would be to inflict yet another loss. The age, occupation and biographical details remain true to what was expressed. The majority of persons who did allow me to record their

personal histories and narratives did so on the basis of having established a relationship of trust and friendship with me through other conversations and encounters which comprise my “participant observation.”

The fear of being overheard, one which turns speaking into the problem of not knowing when one says more than intended, quickly became my own and towards the end of my fieldwork I mailed all of my recordings to New York for safekeeping. That I was able to do so using a military APO address highlights the kind of fraught mobility enabled by my own bilingual fluency. That fluency diffused the defensive reactions often reserved for “local national” Afghans through a displacement of political and ideological difference by the presumption of shared nostalgia for the everyday of elsewhere (namely, the United States)—a nostalgia which was the content of the vast majority of my first conversations with military personnel.

The question of access is never reducible to the perception of affective or cultural similitude. It is equally indissociable from the shifting category of enemy, a moving target that infused the entirety of my fieldwork with anxiety but which also inspired the breadth of my ethnography because I treated most months like they would be my last in Kabul.

From the perspective of US/NATO forces the enemy is an ever-expanding class that includes civilians and combatants alike, and that has resulted in countless instances of torture and accusation on the basis of presumed guilt by association or the coincidence of mistranslation. For their “soft targets,” the Taliban, the figure of enemy is usually contained in the body of the foreign soldier. In 2012-2013, however, the expanded scene of counterinsurgency had transfigured this into a much more general category, sometimes including all expatriates, Afghan collaborators, and foreign passport holders suspected of collusion and intelligence gathering. In

particular, to hold an American passport (which I do) was to be marked as a foreign spy and to put oneself unremittingly in harm's way. In order to mitigate that danger, which arose on several occasions including a Sunday brunch when a geologist openly asked if I worked for the CIA (in front of a dozen Afghans), I relied on my fluency in Persian and always left my passport and identification at home (unless I was going to The Green Zone)—relinquishing my access to the US embassy and military installations in the event of an emergency for faith in the ordinary good will that *Kabulis* show one another in small and catastrophic moments. My decision to live in the local neighborhood of Kolola Poshta (far removed from The Green Zone) was informed by this belief, and repaid by the moving kindness of my neighbors and the local shop owners.

The forms of sociality that emerge in domestic and residential settings require that one first find a home. For women the difficulties of navigating the expansive scene of urban warfare and paramilitary activity are redoubled through the suspicion of sex work, a presumption that informs the general practice of refusing to rent an apartment to a single woman (a frustration I experienced for close to two months and which I finally circumvented by pretending to be married and leaving men's footwear outside my front door). Unsurprisingly, this was a fiction I could not maintain for long despite the frequent company of male relatives and dinner guests. One evening as I was leaving to meet an informant for dinner I opened my front door to find a young and well dressed man (I still remember his navy blue suit and purple tie) standing outside. His jet black hair was slicked back. He didn't ring the doorbell and I assumed he was on the wrong floor. We said *salam alaikom* and I asked who he was looking—thinking it was my next door neighbor. He became visibly nervous and ran down six flights of stairs (there was an elevator) with breakneck speed.

When I came home later that night (still disturbed by this encounter) I found my elderly housemate Najiba (well into her 70's) pacing up and down the hallway thumbing her prayer beads. She coolly explained that someone had tried to break down the door, first attempting to manipulate the lock and then trying to kick it open: "He kicked real hard, he really tried." She was remarkably calm. Najiba's youngest son Jamil (who is in his early thirties) was a translator for the US military. I never met him and when he came to Kabul to visit his family he only stayed a couple of nights. Najiba possesses an incredible sense of equanimity but when a few days would pass without a phone call from him she would become visibly anxious and irritated with her other children for calling her. She could not read their names or phone numbers on her flip-phone screen and she would answer: "*Baleh?* (Yes?) Jamil is it you finally? You have one mother and you'll put her in the grave! Soraya, it's you again. What am I doing? *Attan e seh chaka*. What do you think? I'm not doing anything. Stop calling so much."²⁶ It usually wasn't him. But in the end, he did always call. Najiba could not call him because he was not allowed to receive phone calls while on the military base or out on missions. So, she would wait and pray and wait for him to call. That night, I became angry with her for not calling my cell phone so that I could send someone to the house to pick her up, or to stay with her until I returned. She spoke with an air of irritation, the kind that results from the tension between one person's inurement to violence and the other's encounter with its traumatic novelty. She told me to lock the door, trust in Allah, and go to bed. I gave her a kitchen knife to keep by her side and she laughed: "Should I kill him or peel him fruit first?"

Outside of Najiba's cool detachment, the event again sparked various attempts to circumscribe my outings in the city, and prompted my landlord to fasten an iron gate door onto

²⁶ *Attan e seh chaka* is a variation on the traditional national dance, *attan*.

my front door and change all the locks. Najiba often made fun of all the locks and would say that we were much more likely to be killed trying to open them in the middle of an earthquake than by any intruder. On another evening I heard my next door neighbor Omar yelling, and found him outside my door accosting one of the day laborers (the apartment complex was still undergoing construction) for attempting to peer in through the peep hole. He instructed me and Najiba to pound on the wall if we ever needed help, and that he would immediately come out of his apartment. Both he and his wife (a journalist for the Afghan news agency Pajhwok) worked during the day and left their two young kids at home alone from 3-5pm, with the tacit understanding that Najiba and I would check in on them if we were home—which we often did. These intimate orders of surveillance bespeak the kinds of mistrust and paranoia that abound in a context where the local police are rarely trusted, and suspected of colluding with criminal networks to facilitate the kidnapping of foreigners and children for ransom.²⁷

In other contexts the nature of credibility depended dramatically on the perception of women as apolitical (and certainly less likely to engage in the forms of political violence that have rent Afghan society). This perception of docility as the other of masculine rage and my personal connections enabled me to gain access to diverse and highly securitized sites which I

²⁷ Mistrust is also purposely forged, sometimes in lighthearted contexts. I lived in an elevator building (on the 6th floor) and due to the frequent electricity outages Najiba was afraid to ride it. She insisted (despite the fact that I used the elevator frequently) on climbing up and down the stairs. One morning we left the apartment together and Omar was in the hallway standing by the elevator. He was waiting for the car to come up. He assumed Najiba would use it, and pressed the button again, to emphasize that he was pressing it for her. She, of course, had no interest in riding it. But she also did want to admit to him that she had a fear of elevators, which would also signify that she—a working class woman from an impoverished neighborhood by the airport—may never have actually been in an elevator before. Instead she pretended to be uncomfortable with the idea of sharing such a small space with a man, and she demurred and engaged in a rather long round of *ta'arof* (purposeful formality): “No, no I insist you first, please. I can’t possibly go ahead of you.” “How can you say such a thing? You are like a mother to me. How can I go first and leave you waiting?” In the end she won. He relented and went down and sent the elevator back up to our floor, assuming Najiba would ride it alone after he was out of the way. She took the stairs and laughed on her way down.

believe would otherwise remain impossible. The most restricted of these is the *amniyat* courthouse where the suicide bomber trials were conducted, and where (as far as I know) no observer has ever been allowed. I was also the only woman (with the exception of one afternoon when one of the defense attorneys was a woman) and hence a kind of limit figure that solicited awe and confusion, especially when I took notes in English and wrote from left to right. The question of authority and writing are cathected in much more dramatic ways in that setting, but the question of credibility is marked by access to secrecy, which is enhanced in contexts of writing where its content becomes exclusively the domain of graphic signs that elude illiterate Afghans and their faith in oral mediation. Secrecy is not necessarily performed through traditional practices (including storytelling) nor reducible to the “assertion of identity and of symbolic capital” as it is in other contexts of political violence.²⁸ Rather, the circulation of secrecy (and the ideological labor it performs) is predicated on the exclusion from access that results from practices of repetitive signification (writing, copying, reproducing) through which access to knowledge is circumscribed by the ability to read or transcribe.

The question of access and localized forms of behavior and linguistic expression (which I assumed) is betrayed by the instances I quote, when children called me “miss!” on the street or asked for dollars. Both the title and currency functioned as a limit to my fluency and as the threshold of alterity beyond which their secrets could still thrive. The perception of a speculative economy as unfathomable madness itself partakes of the logic of a secret (one withheld from Afghans until sources of value vanish), and thus the inscription of foreign currency as subjective foreignness betrays a structure in which difference is increasingly subordinated to the forms of

²⁸ Feldman, Allen. *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pg. 11.

political and social homogeneity imagined through the work of capital. The narratives and engagements we will read are mediated by the opposition that invests some people with the capacity for reason and others with only with being able to talk. The ascribing to illiteracy of a self-destructive compulsion, has valorized conventional writing as the condition of possibility for a future that is not merely a repetition of the past. This is set in overdrive through material practices of war that effectuate a shift from the volatile war-time economy of linguistic and cultural translation to a highly speculative (and as of yet unrealized) economy anchored in the earth. By tracing these eruptions and contact-points I hope to show how under conditions of late capitalism the relationship between experience and reason becomes inextricable from the question of translation and illiteracy, and how literacy has become the inimitable site where forms of understanding, estimation and virtue are brought to light and acquire their vigor at the expense of linguistic difference. The devastation this entails sometimes occurs through the mishearing of a single word, such as *rakât* (part of the Islamic prayer) which was misheard and mistranslated as rocket.

2 Alternating Words

“To read, to write, the way one lives under the surveillance of the disaster: exposed to the passivity that is outside passion. The heightening of forgetfulness. It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.”²⁹

Rocket

The encounter between orality and literacy frequently transpires in atmospheres where there is fear but no shame, and where confusions arise. Deadly misunderstandings regularly take place in southern Afghanistan in rural villages where the Taliban maintain strategic strongholds and where local Afghans (belonging to the Pashtun ethnicity, like the Taliban) subsist primarily on agriculture and animal husbandry. The Afghan countryside envelops and surrounds major cities like Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar and is invoked as their barren other. Stories are told about this expansive pastoral but usually to localize it as a site of enduring difference and unfading conservatism, as fertile ground for terrorism or as a pristine and romanticized elsewhere imagined as entirely unmediated by modern technologies of communication.

Villages and clusters of mud homes dot its arid landscape with patches of life and language. These villages are involved not only in a war that descends on them from above, but that also creeps up on them from the ground. The ground itself is also caught between these villages, where villagers are sometimes paid off by military intelligence units to betray their neighbors and divulge information about the whereabouts of hiding insurgents. Village elders or leaders sometimes respond to these overtures, to the bribes framed in the language of the gift and

²⁹ Maurice Blanchot. *The Writing of the Disaster*. The University of Nebraska Press, 1995, pg. 4.

stamped with the approval of collaborating anthropologists. Sometimes they lie and give misinformation, having being paid off earlier by the Taliban to point not in the direction of *this* village, but *that* one.

Imagine how this and that are caught up not only in the tactics of intelligence gathering but also in linguistic and ethnic structures of difference that have, among other things, the Afghan Civil War of the 1990's as a referential context. Imagine living in that village, and how in the middle of the night the sound of footsteps approaching your door might sound, to your ear, like the steady approach of danger, like the certainty of a threat that compels you to seek comfort in a prayer. Something like this happened in a remote village in Helmand when a search mission was led by a group of American soldiers and their Afghan translator. The story was relayed to me by a former translator (who was not involved in this particular mission). Arriving at the home of an elderly Afghan man the Afghan translator present asked if they could question him about possible insurgent activity in his village.

The man replied in Pashto that he would accompany them for questioning “after two *rakât*.” A *rakât* is a subset of movements that constitutes part of the Muslim prayer in its entirety, taken from the Arabic word *rakâh* which means movement. Prayer is never just a response to canonical injunction, and offering two *rakât* also indicates that the offerer is asking for blessings or protection, like when one feels endangered. The Persian-speaking Afghan translator then told the soldier that the man admitted that he had “two rockets” in his home. The outcome of this “mishearing” is hard to guess. It is plausible that after a search of the man's home no weapons were found and he was exonerated. It is equally plausible that he found himself in an increasingly tortuous web of interrogation, detention and possible deportation to

Guantanamo, his family left behind and without knowledge of his whereabouts like so many who still await “the imprisoned” (*bandihâ*).

Missing and mishearing, in this instance, was fused not only by the translator’s inability to understand Pashto (Persian and Pashto are not mutually intelligible) but also by the interval between “after two *rakât*,” and the translation “he has two rockets,” a duration determined not by the rhythm of ordinary conversation but the exigencies of war. These include the demands of search missions and military intelligence and combat units deployed to villages and door steps in search of weapons and insurgents, seeking out suspicious behavior and readily accusing those deemed suspect or guilty by association. Further still, it is an instance of mishearing that not only illustrates the anxieties and limits of translation but also offers a window into a world of idiomatic and metaphoric expressions, adjectives and nouns like “rocket” that have acquired a cultural purchase and circulate more than others. The word rocket, like the weapon, comes from elsewhere. Not only is there no Persian or Pashto equivalent for it, there is no domestically produced rocket despite its widespread use.

In an article titled “On Alternating Sounds” Boas warned anthropologists about the predilection to hear *from* different languages. He argues that “sound blindness” is not indicative of an inability to grasp subtle differences among sounds, for example the kind of mishearing that collapses monosyllabic and polysyllabic words, but rather of how we classify new phenomena. For Boas, we hear differently because we hear from different languages. Difference is apperceived by means of similar sensations (or sounds) and categorized differently. While there

is no “sound blindness,” alternating sounds are alternating apperceptions from different languages.³⁰

Boas also makes another subtle but crucial argument for why this happens. While, in general, phonetic elements are categorized according to the sounds of the hearer’s language, the interval and duration between sensations plays an important role. Boas notes that if there is a long interval between sensations (colors, sounds, etc.) we are likely to *psychically* mistake them as the same, whereas when they adjoin each other misrecognition is due to the *physiological* incapacity to perceive phonological difference. While mishearing after a long duration indicates apperceptive prejudice, in the latter case it indicates incapacity in hearing caused by a rapid shift. One could say that rather than a mistake; it is an accident with its origin outside the listener.

Boas’s insights take us a long way toward understanding not only the categorization of difference but also the subtleties and socio-political histories of why we might accidentally mishear. He offers us a way of thinking about the cultural milieu and contextual soundscape that permeates language at the lexical level and leaves behind words that sometimes fester like open wounds. The Afghan-Soviet War of 1979-1989 transformed Afghanistan into one of the world’s largest weapons markets and introduced the rocket and *Kalashnikov* as the weapons of choice for the American-backed *Mujahideen*, who at that time were fighting the invading Soviet Army. As Afghanistan became increasingly enmeshed in the Cold War and drawn into global circuits of weapons exchange, the “type 63” 107 millimeter rocket first produced in China in 1963 under Mao Ze Dung in order to free the People’s Liberation Army from its dependency on Soviet

³⁰ Boas, Franz. “On Alternating Sounds” in *American Anthropologist*. Vol. A2, issue 1: January 1889.

weaponry and imports, became a privileged weapon during the Afghan-Soviet War (when it was primarily used in rural areas), and then during the Afghan Civil War of 1989-1994 (when it was regularly launched in cities and especially in Kabul).³¹

These rockets are testament to much more than the continued use of Cold War ammunitions and a non-transparent global weapons market that invests proxy conflicts with duration they would not otherwise have. The word rocket stems from the Italian word *rocca*, which derives from the German word *rocko* (distaff), which ultimately comes from the root word rug (woven or spun fabric). This etymological root, like the prayer rug the Afghan man intended to pray two *rakât* on, contains not only the awful irony of this particular mishearing, but also the mechanism by which the rocket is a deadly and mobile weapon of choice that, via its pervasive use, became ingrained not only as a fixture of the physical and social landscape but also of the linguistic imaginary.³²

³¹ Chivers, C.J. “Mao’s Rockets and the Eastern Afghan Border War, Part I”. Notes From the Front Lines, *The New York Times*, October 26, 2011.

³² Maurice Blanchot reminds us of the danger of granting importance to “isolated words” (1995, 106) and hence of etymological seduction—which is for him the irrational transposing of a filial logic onto the relationship between words. The fecundity of language, and its “germinating principle” owes itself to the circularity of reasoning that etymology demonstrates and which turns roots into germs (1995, 107). We are attracted to etymology for the “form of enigma” it preserves, and its irrationality is what seduces the linguist (1995, 106). This enigma (the enigma of the word, the root, the origin) is hence also a discourse on the desire to feel connected to a linguistic and historical past and “the romanticism is to link the recognition of the religious character of all language to ancient, primordial times” (1995, 110). Above all, etymology enables a naturalism which grants writing a secretive power, and a revelatory power which could show us the “original secret” of a first and “lost language” (1995, 119) Writing, Blanchot says, assumes a teleological power. It becomes a force of history. See: Maurice Blanchot. *The Writing of the Disaster*. The University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

The question of alphabetic writing as enigma, and indeed as a force, is one we will revisit in juridical contexts, but the danger of etymology (including in the example of *rocca* where my etymological analysis can be read as the progression of technologies from primitive to modern weaponry, though that is certainly not my intention) is one that becomes even more complex if one is dealing with a sacred script, like Arabic, where relationships between words partake of ontological truths about the nature of what is

The 107-millimeter rocket is originally encased in a twelve-tube launcher; its cylindrical form is designed for the quick and steady infliction of firepower. But, ironically, these stacked launch tubes are also unnecessary because the actual warhead is attached to a rocket mortar that, when propelled, spins over 366 times per second.³³ It is this spinning that is at the origin of the word rocket and its various roots and that makes it possible for the rocket to fly straight regardless of from where it is launched—the earthen ground, a car jack, or a makeshift ramp. If a *rocca* spins yarn into textile, the spinning of the rocket produces the fantasy of a linear trajectory that guides the rocket to its intended target. The metal slots welded onto rockets, through which fabric is slung and rockets are carried on the backs of men are a testament to this belief in the disassembled rocket’s continued and linear efficacy.

The transformation of bulky rocket launcher systems into mobile rockets, with ordinary items used to launch them, made rockets a ubiquitous weapon not only in rural areas (where they were launched during the Afghan-Soviet War) but also in densely populated urban areas, and *especially* in Kabul during the Civil War of the 1990’s. Rockets became far-reaching and pervasive in the landscape. They were launched constantly from different neighborhoods held by different commanders. They veered drastically from their paths and hit schools, homes, cars and pedestrians. They littered the city with rocket remains that children still mistake for toys and that farmers re-weld into agricultural tools.

expressed (and about logical categories that organize words). That is beyond the purview of this chapter, and this example, which I read etymologically, is meant to offer us an insight into the linguistic ironies that dwell in instances of mishearing.

³³ See: Chivers, C.J. “Mao’s Rockets and the Eastern Afghan Border War, Part I”. Notes From the Front Lines, *The New York Times*, October 26, 2011.

The incessant firing of rockets eventually forged an uncanny familiarity out of the terrifying cacophony of urban warfare, turning noises into crucial signifiers. *Kabulis* learned to listen to the blasts of rockets and to discern from their residual echoes the intended targets and trajectories, spinning narratives about what happened, where and why out of abating sounds. They turned initial bangs and reverberating booms into language and speculation, into rumor and narratives of cause. Stories about rockets proliferated and became a source of local knowledge, and later of expertise for those who lived through that violent decade, invoked in the present to make sense of the alternating booms of car bombs, grenades, and suicide bombers.

Playing with Toxic Things

If for Boas the interval between alternating sounds determined the cause of mishearing (psychical or physiological), the duration between rocket blasts enabled stories to take on greater signification and detail, to circulate with the status of fact and to ascribe causes to devastating effects. Like the rotating airhead, stories spun out of control and the word rocket assumed a privileged position as cause *and* adjective. Well-known and trained guerrilla fighters were called “*râketees*,” explosions were ascribed to rockets *despite* their variegated origins, and death assumed an intimate relationship not only to rockets but also its residue powder and shrapnel.

One afternoon while talking to my elderly housemate Najiba (who was so remarkably calm after someone tried to break into our apartment) outside on a small patch of grass next to the mosque we went to for Friday prayer (she attended to pray, I attended for the sermon), she recalled those violent years and the death of her five-year-old son. He was playing outside on the grass in front of a home she was caring for (the owner, Habiba, had fled Kabul for her life) in the central neighborhood of *Shar e Nau* (the New City). For her, even now, it is obvious what happened that fateful afternoon nearly twenty years ago: “My son died while playing in the

grass. The grass killed him. He ate a little bit and died, the grass had rocket powder (*poudre*) residue on it, the grass killed him just like that. Snatched him.” The power of the rocket to kill is not only contained in explosive moments of physical contact but also transmissible through the most ordinary and natural of encounters: a boy playing on the grass.

The contact between the force of the weapon and her natural and domestic surround possess a temporality that evades her and “snatched” her son with rapidity. It confounds her, not because she doesn’t understand the source of harm (it was the rocket powder residue on the grass) but why it descended on her. It happened “just like that” (*aineh amoto shud*). In that instant—at once a moment of temporal compression and expansion—the rocket assumes a nearly magical power, it continues to inflict harm well after its explosive capacities have been exhausted and forges a temporality of its own, one which Najiba accesses through the retrospective narration of her son being “snatched” (*gereftesh*) from her. Stories and experiences like Najiba’s help us understand the incorporation of the rocket into the social imaginary of causation and the lexicon of sense making, and as a materialized figure of death-dealing. These are the encounters that intensified its status as a linguistic sign. It caused the word rocket (*râket*) to be heard more frequently and to be uttered both more readily, and unintentionally.

This simultaneous intensification and normalization of the word accounts in part for the mishearing of the word *rakât* as rocket, the latter already a word that might be casually uttered and always expected to be heard: “My son ate some grass and died, the grass had rocket powder on it and killed him,” “Oh, it’s just another rocket going off,” “That boom is the sound of a rocket, I can tell the difference between the sounds of rockets and bombs,” “It was pouring rockets.” These were just some of the phrases I heard (or overheard) in Kabul. Under the rain of explosives and rocket fire expectations and ears were saturated in dread, while language

shriveled into an increasingly truncated space of exchange. Some words are heard preemptively and more often than others in a dissonant counterpoint between self-expression and over determined expectations.

If the adjectival form of rocket (*râketee*) represents those who wield its spinning powers, its status as a causative noun is a marker of the breadth of devastation it has wrought in Kabul. From the ground with craters burrowed first by rocket nose fuses and then historical forces, to the beds and tables gathered at the center of rooms and away from windows, to the bunkers and basements (*taqawees*) which are an indelible part of older homes and those newly under construction, the rockets of the Afghan-Soviet and Civil War have strewn a range of reminders and a panorama of destructive effects across the social and urban landscape. Rockets, as both words and weapons, were swept up in the eddies of a proxy war that morphed into the vertiginous maelstrom of a long and devastating civil war that pitted ethnicities and languages (that later had to be translated) against each other. The word rocket as a causative noun emerged from these conflicts and their social histories (“the rocket that kills,” “the rocket hit us,” “it’s raining rockets,”) and enabled the range of references and networks of associative relations sparked by the sensory act of hearing it, and the sometimes unwitting act of saying it. Or of being accused of saying it anyway.

That almost every Afghan seems to have a story to tell about a rocket is not only a matter of history. While on the international military scene rockets are a throwback, the corollary of a military-industrial complex that has been supplanted by a techno-scientific military complex and its precision guided and automated weaponries; for the Taliban rockets are a weapon of choice and a symbol of mastery and distinction. Their continued use is proof of a martial capacity that exceeds asymmetrical technologies and demonstrates the ability to wage war against the world’s

most developed militaries, *despite* outdated weapons. And indeed, it is rockets that Taliban fighters launch continuously at US military bases where Afghan interpreters also live.

These rocket attacks turn Afghan translators not only into the inheritors of the violence still meted out by Cold War weapons stockpiles, but also the associated images and representations that those who suffered fifteen years earlier during the civil war later conjured to tell stories and embellish their warnings of the dangers of war to a generation of children who now compose the primary population of translators working for the US military. Take, for example, the following statement a fifty-year-old male translator who was living in Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost (a city in Eastern Afghanistan and the site of the Soviet Army's helicopter operations during the Soviet-Afghan War) made: "Can you believe how primitive the Taliban are? They use the same rockets their fathers (the *Mujahideen*) used in Kabul, but now on us." Another Afghan man living in Kabul (who was not a translator and who was at the time experiencing a myriad of personal stressors) exclaimed that there was one solution for dealing with the Taliban: "Drop an atomic bomb on them." For these men, the Taliban both inherited outmoded weapons (from their figurative fathers, the *Mujahideen*) and could only be defeated through a final act of spectacular extermination enabled by the most indiscriminate and devastating of bombs: the atomic, fantasized here as the definitive end to weapons exchange and mastery, and to the kinds of trauma enabled by continuous attacks that can be permanently foreclosed through the infliction of one final and catastrophic moment of trauma.

Rakât was an alternating sound to the ear of the translator, and an indication of how the elderly Afghan man might have spoken in a consequential moment of fear over determined by the precedence of violent interrogations and arrests. If the interpreter's ear picked up what was

not meant to be heard, the elderly man's mouth might also have let out a hesitancy not meant to be caught, a reticence born of fear and exemplified in the mumbling of a word that already signifies more than its referent in the mind of the soldier and his military imagination. The word *rakât* has as its root *rakâh*, or ensemble/movement, an original definition it has come to strangely inhabit as the act of prayer has come to represent an excrescence of extremism, the moving channel through which men are "inspired" to take arms in unison.

The inspiration achieved through collective prayer turns it into the medium that incites and galvanizes men to launch rockets. But if definitions and etymological roots are woven into each other like a playful *roccoco* theme, it is also in these braided associations that fear can be recognized. The man in this situation was not spoken to ordinarily. He was interrogated about insurgent activity in his village and thus compelled to speak in the face of a terrifying authority. If for Althusser the moment of interpellation is when an individual becomes a subject, in the practice of interrogation to be subject to an address is also a demand to say what the interrogator expects and wants to hear.³⁴

³⁴ Some distinction is necessary here. The man who is interrogated or called out for interrogation is not being constituted as a subject, but is responding to an address. That address, does in turn, structure his social reality (and often entails corporeal violence) but the question of subject formation (the work of ideology) is different from this. For Althusser ideology is similar to what Lacan means by "reality." It has no history and is a perduring feature of human life (2001,xiii). Ideology situates individuals in relation to the complex and "unrepresentable totality of collective and institutional realities all around it" (2001, xiv). As Jameson clarifies this is not a collapsing of the Lacanian Real with the Symbolic but an emphasis that (except for when the Real breaks down, like if we lose a limb) "we normally apprehend reality only by way of the mediation of the Symbolic Order" (2001, xiv). Thus, Althusser writes that "the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects" (1971, 171).

This is achieved through the work of interpellation, and Althusser offers the example of being hailed on the street by a police officer who says: "Hey, you there!" (1971, 174). By turning around we become a subject through the structure of recognition that appears obvious but is the logic of ideological transformation that "furnishes us the options available in our social and historical moment" (2001, xiv).

But mishearing requires more than attention to proximity between words and traumatic images and experiences. To live and speak in Kabul is to risk the possibility of every utterance being crystallized into intention, to what you “really meant” to say. Speaking in Kabul, like anywhere, entails being hurried along toward the gist of things, except that the gist is not the crux of what you want to say but a sign of what you will do: “You say that now, but in the end you’ll do just as everyone else did,” your words and the future tense recast as an affirmation of what was already suspected. Or it might mean eliciting, like it always did for Najiba, an exasperated retort like “*beyazû!*”(Obviously or duh!) Language expresses what was known. It repeats what was established as that which goes without saying.³⁵

But if speaking in Kabul does not necessarily mean being listened to, words do lift off from the obvious, rising up and moving towards the ever widening arc of new modes of hearing, towards ears scanning for key words like “rocket” or “bomb,” giving up the practice of listening for the skill of picking things up, amassing words into “human intelligence.” Hearing in Kabul means to overhear, to let your ears be on the look out, pursuing not just intrigue and salacious

See: Althusser, Louis, Jameson Fredric, and Brewster Ben. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. NYU Press, 2001, (1971).

³⁵ Althusser also argues that obviousness (perhaps of the kind captured by *beyazû*) is the mark of ideology, or rather, the point at which its operations impose on subjects without being apparent as such. Obviousness (including the supposed obviousness of a word that names something or has a meaning) is a peculiar but an “elementary ideological effect” (1971, 172). There are other ways of thinking about obviousness, which I think account for dimensions not fully captured by ideological effects. Here, I find it helpful to think of obviousness alongside the notion of *kismet* (which Najiba ardently believes in) and which has a direct bearing on the feeling of surprise (one is less surprised by one’s fate, which reveals itself *throughout* one’s life, than through any single event). To not be surprised by what happens because events unfold through a fated logic, turns obviousness into the acceptance of the idea that one is never burdened with more than one can bear. This also helps us understand the obviousness of Najiba’s belief (and she very much spoke of it as a matter of fact) that rocket powder residue, on the grass, contained the power to take her son’s life.

rumor but also silence. On many occasions silence would quickly become a source of questioning (not an awkward tension) but a chance for more talk. Questions like: “Did you notice how that man fell silent all of a sudden, I wonder why...?” or “why so quiet all of a sudden?” (“*chura chup shudī?*”) were common in the middle of conversations. Speaking and hearing in Kabul means producing or avoiding silence at all costs, retreating from or engaging in endless small talk, hoping the prattle drowns fear, or exacerbates the patience of the person(s) listening in through invisible tapped wires: “Watch every word, or just keep talking until you drive those bastards crazy,” a local man said to me when I bought my cell phone.³⁶

However, if the ways and means of hearing have expanded, the space of language has simultaneously been circumscribed by a demand for transparency. This demand is the driving force behind the instrumentalizing of language as part of a larger counter-insurgency effort into which Afghan translators are incorporated. On one hand, the attribution of exchange value and the demand for transparency onto Persian and Pashto have drawn the Afghan interpreter into the

³⁶ The drifting of thoughts and words enabled by silence is different from and similar to what Vicente Rafael describes as the arbitrary “fishing out” of meaning that occurs in contexts of hierarchical and colonial speech. Citing a sermon delivered in Spanish (which the Tagalog speaking congregation did not understand) but radically reinterpreted, Rafael argues that the fishing out of words and attaching them to “imaginings” is both a “drift away” and redoubles the natives’ attention to the content of Father Damaso’s sermon (1996, 2). This drifting and arbitrary reattaching of meaning is one that Rafael characterizes as a strategy of decontextualizing through which colonial authority is de-centered in a context of subjugation (1996, 3). It depicts a social order “premised not on consensus between ruler and ruled but on the fragmentation and hermeneutic displacement of the very basis of consensus: language” (1993,7). See Rafael, Vicente. *Contracting Colonialism Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

When I purchased my cell phone and was told, somewhat facetiously, to talk until I drove the person listening in (through invisible wires— which we will consider in the following chapter— as the source of paranoia when Afghanistan acquired electoral telegraphy in the 1940’s) crazy this strategy of de-centering what is perceived as authority through technological sophistication is achieved not through “fishing out” meanings but through overwhelming ears with words. Just as linguistic translation (and the instrumentalizing of Persian and Pashto words as war time technology) is thought to aid the US war effort so too can it be used to confound its intelligence gathering practices.

military as both a friendly collaborator and a potential saboteur. On the other, translation has grounded the war and its arrival in unmediated places (usually, but certainly not always, disconnected from television, radio, and internet services) in the very work of *languages*.³⁷ In these places, where the nature of global events and political events in Kabul often remain mysterious to local residents, language is more than symbolic exchange. It is a powerful foreign code that facilitates the transmission of violence and war. One language, English, literally brings war.

The powers of a language (or what Lacan describes as *une langue*), and particularly of a language that demands its own translation (English) into one that increasingly signifies what Afghans do not know (Persian or Pashto) are a harbinger of a disaster whose origins remain mysterious to those most vulnerable to the often arbitrary violence of the war. Moreover, it is also a force that resists localization as the arrival of translated language occurs in contexts of interrogation where speaking, and particularly using the pronoun “I” opens onto dangerous

³⁷ We need to distinguish between the existence of linguistic difference (primarily the *languages* of Persian, Pashto and English which require translation between them) and Lacan’s insight that the unconscious is “structured like a language” (or put differently that “the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious” and is irreducible to linguistic expression (2006,413)). We are unconsciously in the grip of a network of signifying chains, which evade a direct correspondence to signifieds through the movement from signifier to signifier: “For the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by deploying its dimension in some sense before it. As is seen at the level of the sentence when the latter is interrupted before the significant term: “I’ll never...,” “The fact remains...,” “Still perhaps...” Such sentences nevertheless make sense, and that sense is all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it.” (2006, 419).

The structure of the signifying chain is the *langue* we share with others. The unconscious exceeds the notion of a “seat of instincts” and language as the “the psychic and somatic functions” of the speaker. Language “exists prior to each subject’s entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development” (2006,414). See: Lacan, Jacques, H elo ise Fink, and Bruce Fink. * crits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2006, Pg. 416-421.

questions of responsibility. The anxiety that attends the awareness of this is probably what imbued the moment the Afghan man said: “after two *rakâts*” and not “After I pray two *rakâts*.”

Leaving Tomorrow

Gahista Zu. We are leaving tomorrow. But first people (and languages) must arrive. Translators and soldiers arrive via the dreadful medium of the military convoy: a seemingly endless parade of tanks and “humvees” with chained tires, momentarily occluded by the huge plumes of dust they kick up, clouds that spew out from the thick nets draped over them like additional layers of easy camouflage. When the fine dust settles the furrows of the harrowed, turned-over soil reveals crops laying in ruin. This is also how languages arrive, fast and uncontrolled, plowing the surface of conversation with deep grooves and troughs that remain unfilled, sometimes out of fear and at other times out of rage. Consider the story of twenty-six year-old Zia, an International and Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) translator originally from Kabul who learned English in private courses (readily available all over town).

Zia never left Kabul and even during the height of the Afghan Civil War, when his neighborhood was under direct attack, his family decided to stay. He describes those “as very bad days” (*roz ha e bisayar bad*) and his family would take advantage of brief cease-fires to buy food, or to check if their relations were still alive. His father was a doctor and worked in the local hospital, where the wounded (*zakhmiha*) were brought in on a daily basis. The horror of war was everywhere. But for Zia the most difficult thing about the Afghan Civil War (even more difficult than the wounded and the destruction of his neighborhood) is the deadly politicization of linguistic difference, which he perceives as the war’s underlying motive. This was exacerbated during the Taliban regime, as they inherited the problem from their ideological forefathers (like

the perception of their endless mastery of weapons which can only be foreclosed through atomic violence).

“During the Taliban things became worse. We had even more difficulty because we speak Persian and not Pashto. They ran everything. The whole town. And they were very authoritative about Pashto. They treated Northern Afghans and Persian speaking Afghans badly. They would harass us on the streets. They didn't like people to dress nicely, you had to dress as they did in traditional clothing (*perahan wa tunban*), wear your hair and beard as they did. They used to harass my father and beat him in public many times, because he speaks Persian and does not dress or look like that. They would make people attend the same prayer session twice, even three times. It was madness (*diwanagi*).”

The madness came to an end with the American invasion, which Zia experiences as salvation despite the horror he witnessed. He became a translator, first with the Texas Agricultural Development Team and then with ISAF and NATO forces. Zia went to numerous villages in the Afghan countryside, translating between various languages (English, Pashto, Persian, Polish). Zia was in the middle of languages, exchanging borrowed words for a wage that peaked at \$700 per month and cash for the crops destroyed by the convoys' monstrous tires.³⁸ Zia described being “in the middle” earlier, not between languages but between battle strongholds during the Civil War and again during the initial weeks of the Afghan-American War.

His family's home was located in a small neighborhood next to the Kabul International Airport (an area known locally as “unmapped” (*beh nakhsha*) and now under threat from the surrounding apartment construction of a sprawling “modern” complex called *Shahrak e Aria*—where I tried to rent an apartment but was refused on account of their policy not to rent to

³⁸ Zia was hired by Mission Essential Personnel, a US defense contractor.

unmarried women). His unmapped neighborhood, too marginal to be included in the urban development schemes of the 1950's and 1960's, was of strategic value and heavily attacked. American cruise missiles frequently hit his neighborhood, and even his block. He describes those as "very serious, heavy bombs" which flattened seven houses on his street. One missile hit his friend's house and his father, in a moment of exceptional bravery, went inside to check if anyone was alive. There was only a little girl in the house and he checked for her pulse but she was already dead.

"There were always rockets, bullets and bombs in the air, hitting houses. One night an American cruise bomb flattened seven houses, that's how it was... things whizzing in the air... you see during the Civil War the airport was controlled by General Dostom and so his enemy, Hekmatiyar, would fire rockets at it from the Meranjan hilltop and then during this war the Taliban would cut off the electricity at night and try to hide in our neighborhood, but the Americans figured it out and bombed them. American cruise bombs would often hit our neighborhood and one day one of those hit our block. They are very serious and heavy bombs, very dangerous. It fell one house away from my friend's house. It flattened seven houses. We were always in the middle, literally in between the fighting."

He says the arrival of ISAF changed things dramatically. People were happier because they had jobs available. Zia's first job was in that same devastated neighborhood. He worked in a military camp inside Kabul International Airport and, along with people he describes as "middle to upper class and educated." He seized the opportunities that came with war, describing "the poorer and undereducated families" as becoming more and more resentful. After he quit that job, he worked for a company called Mission Essential Personnel and studied English in a private school.³⁹ "It was a very popular thing, everyone knew that Camp Phoenix was the place to learn

³⁹ Zia explained that Mission Essential Personnel would receive a commission for every translator trained and dispatched to a combat unit (or transferred *between* units), irrespective of whether they knew the necessary languages for the province they were sent or transferred to. "For them its about making money off of each transfer of translators. So we often end up in places where people don't speak a common language," he said.

English and become a translator (*tarjomân*).” In class his teachers first spoke in Persian, and then in Pashto, which was emphasized because the main battlegrounds of the war were in Pashto speaking provinces. At the end of his course Zia took a multiple-choice exam. There were 100 questions, with 4 possible answers each. He answered questions about the structure and meaning of various English sentences. He passed.

Zia describes translation as one of the opportunities offered by the war, but one for literate, settled urbanites such as himself: “These other people who have recently poured into Kabul and cannot read or write will never get a job translating, that’s why they call us apostates and traitors, it’s just because they can’t get work. That’s the problem with illiteracy and nomadism, it makes brutes of men.” For Zia illiterate people have no ability to think rationally. They cannot distinguish between someone else’s opportunity or good fortune and the sin of apostasy. They encourage dangerous confusion, which necessitates the moral intervention of translation and turns literacy (especially the translator’s literacy) into the domain of what can be known, and of judgments, which are based on reason and the ability to distinguish between danger and ordinary civilian activity. But in actual moments of combat encounter the distinction between languages and between civilians and combatants could not be made. This began when Zia was first dispatched to accompany a team of Polish soldiers in Ghazni, a largely Pashto speaking city, where they stayed at Forward Operating Base Ghazni (FOB Ghazni). Zia didn’t speak Pashto, but made do by learning “through work experience” (*tajrobeh-kar*).

“I learned Pashto through work experience and English from the course. It’s enough to interpret daily and ordinary things. But I was sent to Ghazni with a Polish team and it was very problematic because they also didn’t speak English well so I had to learn Polish a bit as well.”

The problem of linguistic difference and learning Polish became the site of a tension which would escalate between the soldiers and Afghan interpreters, requiring American mediation and even subjecting Afghans to deadly forms of physical violence, including the loss of limbs and arms. Zia said his fellow Afghan translators hated the Polish soldiers because they reminded them of the Afghan-Soviet War. They were harsh and cold to one another and the situation became increasingly tense, at times violent. The Polish soldiers did not want the Afghans eating in the same cafeteria or using the same gym, and eventually a group of American soldiers from Texas defended their rights and persuaded and secured equal access for the Afghans. But the tension never dissolved. One night it erupted in a horrifying division between whole and severed bodies. We will encounter other severed bodies, especially outside of Kabul's Green Zone where bodily trauma signifies accident and not wartime violence, but these bodies were already incorporated into the collaborative and symbolic network of military-translational bonds, bonds that fell apart the moment that real bodily injury arrived on the scene:

“The hardest thing was when they would bring injured people to the door of the camp. One night I was standing guard at the gate and it was 10:30 at night and the Afghan guards who worked for a private security and escorted convoys of arms or military supplies had a scuffle in their rooms off base. There was a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) in the room and somehow, by accident, it went off and several people lost legs and arms. They called us and brought them. It was an awful sight. A horrifying scene. Missing limbs and arms. They had fought over a lost bet; it was after a night of gambling. And somehow the RPG was set off in the midst of it.”

Zia does not question that the RPG went off accidentally, and his perception mirrors that of Najiba's belief in the continued efficacy of rockets to seize bodies and lives in moments of contact that bear the logic of chance—when one happens to be playing with toxic waste on a patch of grass or when a scuffle accidentally activates a weapon. The accident as trauma occurs through that moment of physical and temporal contact. In Persian the word for trauma (*zakhm* or

sadameh) is the same as the word for a physical wound.⁴⁰ For Najiba trauma devastates bodies and ruptures her sense of time through the irreducible moment when certain conditions of possibility irrevocably obtain and enable the “seizing” of persons and frames of mind.⁴¹ For her, to experience a traumatic accident is to be in the grip of something over determined which returns not only through a structure of experience but through the materiality of the rocket powder itself which repeats its devastation in different contexts.⁴² For Zia the experience of trauma unfolds differently, though he insists on the accidental nature of the event. But what is over determined is not that the RPG went off (it just “somehow” went off) but that the loss of limbs was transposed as the fetishistic, and indeed gruesome perception, of enhanced momentum. Zia is possessed not so much by the immediacy of the traumatic event but by a perceptual transposition, which we will read about in other contexts, and that shapes his linguistic imaginary.

“But they were refused treatment! This was often the case with civilians, who would be turned away, but the guards? *These* guys were working for *us*. The translator (an Afghan-American) who worked for the American Special Forces is the one that brought them inside the base, brought them all the way to the front gate, only to be turned away. The *Polandiha* were the ones who refused to let them in. One of the young men died that

⁴⁰ This is also true for the English word trauma, which is etymologically linked to the Greek word *trauma* which means to be wounded, defeated or hurt. *Trau* is the extension of the root *tere* which means to turn, twist or pierce.

⁴¹ Trauma is irreducible to the event as such or the desire to repress its occurrence. Cathy Caruth argues that it consists “solely in the structure of its experience or reception” and this enables the possession of the person who experiences it (Caruth, 1995, 4). Citing Freud on WWI and war neuroses she adds that for Freud that neuroses and the repetitive “bringing the patient back to the situation of his accident” is neither explained by unconscious meaning or wish fulfillment. Rather, it is the “literal return of the event” (1995, 5) and its “nonsymbolic literality” is responsible for the delay in understanding that is constitutive of traumatic possession. The repeated immediacy of the event results in not understanding its nature. See: Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

⁴² It is important to point that Najiba did not offer a guess as to how old the rocket powder residue might have been, how it retained its harmful efficacy, how the powder landed in front of Habiba’s house in central Kabul or even which war the rocket was first launched during.

night on the base and we had to send his body back to Kabul. I'll never forget that. But I've seen a lot of that. Drivers, guards, ordinary Afghans come to the base for help. They are in the middle of life and death and they are turned away. That night, the Polish soldiers (*sarbaz e Polandi*) refused that group because *several people showed up at once and there was commotion*, obviously they were in extreme pain, *so the soldiers became afraid of the noise and crowd. They were afraid it would turn into a mob style attack once they were all inside, even though they were so hurt, missing limbs and arms* (emphasis mine)!”

Inclusion, limbs and the specter of a mob come together powerfully here. The inversion of lack as excess also mirrors the logic of Zia's own perception of illiterate Afghans who do not have access to writing, and therefore to the kinds of opportunity that Kabul's booming war economy might offer (and which would attract people to the city in search of employment) but who “pour” in from the countryside and from mountainous villages anyway. For Zia they figure a limit, and are rightfully excluded from the burgeoning forms of sociality available to wartime collaborators. But what precisely does not occur—what does not enable that coveted inclusion to fully materialize on the night of the accident—is recognition of the guards' collaboration and the sacrifices they have already made to protect military convoys.

Those dangers and the notion of Afghans as expendable prosthetic bodies will become even more apparent as we read other accounts from security guards working in The Green Zone. Zia accepts these risks because he deems them a fundamental part of a structure of sacrifice through which he is granted recognition and relief from the *otherwise* indiscriminate forms of violence that devastated his neighborhood and childhood. He specifically cites the commencement of the Afghan-American War as the end to the Taliban regime's generalized forms of death dealing.

But on that night, while standing guard outside of FOB Ghazni, none of his expectations were met. The distinction between collaborators and combatants horrifyingly collapsed in front

of his eyes. The loss of limbs and the absolute helplessness of the guards became the site of a nefarious identification, one in addition to being a translator or convoy guard. They were, while in the midst of physical trauma, suddenly potential members of a mob: “That night, the *Polandiha* refused that group because several people showed up at once and there was commotion...so the soldiers became afraid of the noise and crowd. They were afraid it would turn into a mob style attack once they were all inside...”

The Polish soldiers (and gatekeepers to medical care) could not recognize the literal loss of physical capacity before their eyes. Instead, through a perversion that approximates hysterical delusion, they saw the Afghans as persons who refuse to inhabit their bodies and could at any instant turn into an undifferentiated mob. The Afghans were out of bounds. Out of their body and out of their minds. They were beyond the limits of reason and ready to engage in an attack. The specter of the mob emerges exactly where it is physically and psychically impossible, and where the momentum it requires is displaced by severance. This enables, and requires, a misapprehension and the betrayal of a limit to Zia’s own sense of self as a translator.

The bodies and lives that could have been saved posed no actual danger to the Polish soldiers, but became potential sources of harm anyway. Zia’s recognition of a limit (to inclusion and medical care) was based, initially, on literacy. It is literacy that enables one to seek employment with foreign militaries in the first place, and *then* to access the forms of recognition, which might result in medical care. His trauma consists in recognizing the radical uncertainty of that inclusion. But what that recognition betrays is also an awareness of a limit predicated, not just on literacy, but on what else is opened up by these divisions: the production of literal supplementarity. Thus, as his awareness shockingly adjusts to the situation, he emphasizes what

should have enabled the Afghans to traverse the outer limit of the camp. He is angry because they were refused “*even though they were so hurt, missing limbs and arms.*”

The political power of Afghan bodies emerges through severance, at once a condition for recognition and, as we will see, the effects of a distribution of violence predicated on the distinction between literate and illiterate persons. To pour into the city or transgress limits. To lose your limbs. To form a mob.⁴³ This tripartite predicament is one we will see again when we consider the relationship between land mine and improvised explosive device violence and the distinction between inside (*darūn*) and outside (*berūn*) that structures how Afghans outside The Green Zone are perceived in the accounts of security contractors and the US Embassy in Kabul, which consistently warns US citizens through “travel warnings” about the insidious agility of the “local nationals.” What the example of the guards shows us is that the perception of kinetic transmission occurs even in contexts where bodies are not whole, or *should not be* whole (and hence refused treatment) precisely because they would otherwise transmit mob-like virulence.

For Zia literacy grants access to a moral order beyond contingency, one which he can corroborate by claiming to have survived the indiscriminate aerial bombardment of his neighborhood so that he could become a *tarjomān*, and help rebuild his nation. But the limit to

⁴³ The mob and the crowd are different things, but the soldiers’ perception of an uncontrollable mob forming at the gate can also be understood as what Canetti describes as the “open” crowd that suddenly appears (mysteriously) and then erupts. Canetti remarks on how the crowd seems to transmit movement between bodies and that its goal exists before it is brought into language. See: Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power*. trans. by Victor Gollancz. The Continuum Publishing Corporation, New York: 1973, 16-21.

For a historical overview of the relationship between the discourse on the crowd (and positivist “crowd psychology”) and that of mass society in the late 19th century see: Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. New York: Verso, 2007, pg. 31-46. Laclau locates Freud’s contribution to our understanding of the crowd (exemplified for him by the church and army) in this historical shift from a discourse on crowd pathology to the understanding of mass society as an inherently irrational formation.

that condition of possibility is one he could not independently think of, until he was faced with the moment when bodily severance became the condition for exclusion rather than inclusion. For Zia orality cannot designate individual intention or foreclose the formation of mobs and mob like irrationality (he said illiteracy makes brutes of men). He does not say the guards were illiterate, and he sympathizes with them, but what he does not recognize is that the violence of contingency has come back through the logic that structures his own experiences (and his perception of the great divide between literacy and illiteracy). It has been transposed from the site of illiteracy to severed bodies. It is missing limbs that indicate irrationality and imminent danger. His trauma stems from the space between these two misperceptions. Zia describes himself, when out on missions, as stuck “in the middle.” He is caught not only between logics but tensile forces and severed bodies—forces that refuse to slacken through the exchange of words and money— but that requires orality as the condition of radical uncertainty. Consider the time he accompanied a military convoy in Ghazni:

“We had a lot difficulty in Ghazni, the locals despised us, both *because we spoke Persian* (emphasis mine) and because we were interpreting for the Americans. We were stuck. They cursed us, they hated us, and the Pashtuns threatened us. They think that the interpreters are the reason for why the troops find and come to their villages. They say things like: ‘these people would never have found their way, but you showed them, you brought them, you interpreted for them.’ They think we are responsible for the war arriving to their village, *they think we caused the war* (emphasis mine). We would tell them that ‘without us you are in even greater danger, misunderstanding would become violent all the time if we weren’t here to mediate.’ There is a lot of propaganda. They think we are apostates because the water in Kabul has been poisoned. They will believe anything they hear.”

The danger, and the hidden threat of Afghans forming a mob in the face of apostates (a crime punishable by death) are transformed here into a problem of oral credulity. This is a radical concern given the context of Zia’s financial situation and the real dangers of his job. Zia made \$715 per month, and would receive a \$50 raise if he did land patrol (LP) and a \$200 raise

if he did Air and Land Patrol (ALP). If he took a day off (DO) he was considered absent and made nothing. Most of the time, Zia settled for the \$715 of being on LP because it was less dangerous. He recalls an incident when his friend Daud (who was also doing LP) stepped on a land mine and lost his leg. Daud's employer, Mission Essential Personnel, refused him compensation at first, and then after "much struggle and hard work" (*zahmat va koshish*) the company agreed to give him \$27,000—what they deemed the monetary value of one leg.

Zia himself sustained a nearly fatal injury when a land mine went off in the Andar district of Ghazni, shortly after the tense altercations he had with locals and as their convoy was retreating. During the retreat the convoy activated a roadside mine. Zia said he would never forget the sound and experience. He carved the date of the attack into his bedpost: May 9, 2010. The medic seated next to Zia almost lost his arm, as did the driver. The "gunner" hurt his back and Zia hurt his head. The land mine was powerful enough that the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected car (MRAP) he was sitting in flew up and then fell into the huge crater in the ground. One of its tires was never found. But still he returns to the problem of orality:

"The hardest part of this job is we get stuck. We make do this way or that way; we play with words until we finally make the other side understand the basic point. It's very hard...but do you know what the strangest thing is? It's the local dialects! The villages have very different dialects, especially the rural, nomadic populations. For example, they use several words for the same thing. They call nomads "*bondee*," or "*aylaq*."

It means "nomadic husbandry," and they move to the mountains with their livestock. The rural and agricultural accent is very difficult. So is Pashto. It depends on where you are. Kandahar is different from Khost, different from Logar. The accents are very difficult and it changes depending on where you are, they take it with them. Do you know how they say: "We're leaving tomorrow morning" in Wardak? They say: "*gahista zu*." Fine but they don't actually say it that way, they don't say it fully, they just say: "*gista zu*." How are we supposed to know that means: "*gahista zu*" That's the main

problem we face. It's hardly our fault when things go awry. These people don't know how to speak."⁴⁴

The essential distinction that structures the violence of these encounters is that of orality and literacy, and more specifically of the forms of confusion that those who “don't know how to speak” abet. For Zia, the problem and the boon of war was always language. The problem began with illiteracy and the inability of others (mainly Pashtuns) to acquire translational expertise and carve out a space for themselves in the country's booming war economy, resenting those who did find employment. Although Zia, a Persian speaking *Kabuli*, was “stuck in the middle of fighting” between the Taliban and the American army during the initial battles of the War on Terror as his neighborhood became the site of numerous and deadly attacks, his literacy also defused the

⁴⁴ Zia's description of his translational efforts as getting “stuck” also reveal his understanding that translation is unavoidable, it exerts a demand on him that exceeds the strategic nature of his encounters during combat missions and bears an existential weight. The only other time he said he was “stuck” was when he described the life and death situation of the first aerial campaigns of the US military in Kabul. Being “stuck” is akin to what Walter Benjamin describes as the “vital connection” between original and translation. The original is always connected to its translation by virtue of its translatability (1973,71). There is, for Zia (as frustrated as he may be) something about translation that goes beyond the transmission of content. That vitality or pressure that he attempts to work through is what makes him stuck and what invigorates his understanding of his own position, not just as linguistic mediator, but as someone *who survived in order to* translation and in order, as Benjamin says, to enable through translation the original to rise “into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were... the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages (1973, 75). See: Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1973.

Benjamin's essay is itself lost in translation and its translators, as Paul de Man contends, mistranslate it (1985,32). Paul de Man asserts that Benjamin distinguishes between translators and poets in order to marginalize an imitative task (which would try to convey the meaning of the original in the translation—which the translator necessarily fails at (1985, 33). Rather, the translator's task is critical and “Both translation and criticism are caught in the gesture which Benjamin calls ironic, a gesture which undoes the stability of the original by giving it a definitive, canonical form in the translation or in the theorization... That the original was not purely canonical is clear from the fact that it demands translation... But you cannot, says Benjamin, translate the translation... You can translate only an original” (1995, 35). See: De Man, Paul. “Conclusions” Walter Benjamin's “The Task of the Translator” Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983.” *Yale French Studies*, no. 69 (1985): 25-46. For a discussion of how a logic of mourning and totemization (of killing the original) is transposed onto translation and conveys a collapsing of the historical and structural experience of mourning see: Santner, Eric L. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press., 1993, pg. 27-29.

dangers of his proximity, ensuring a degree of separation and order that is only imaginable if the ability to read and write, in his mind, redoubles as evidence of his humanity and therefore as protection against indiscriminate violence. Others, of course, were not so lucky.

On the military base itself, the forms of sociality he accessed were also structured by linguistic expertise. Translators were divided into category (CAT) 1, 2, and 3. CAT 3 requires fluency in English and entails top secret clearance. “Local Nationals” (LNs) like Zia comprise CAT 1 and have no clearance. They cooked and ate together; they played cards and had tea into the night. Zia claims he makes an excellent beef stew and that he cooked it often for his co-workers. The CAT 3 translators rarely socialized with them. Zia has a friend who speaks English so well they call him “the American.” His friend learned while working in a laundry room at a base, but was unable to translate one day during a “very important meeting” (*jalseh bisyar mohim*) of generals. All the guys would tease him about this. They made a lot more money and were only taken to the most important of missions and meetings. Their security was utmost importance. An acquaintance of Zia’s was a CAT 3 translator at Forward Operating Base Shank in Logar. He was only sent to work with high-ranking generals on “intelligence jobs.” But Zia made \$715 per month and knew that Mission Essential Personnel charged the American Department of Defense much more. The Afghan government had no regulatory control over subcontracting and wages, and Zia had no recourse but to accept whatever MEP offered to pay him.

But still, despite these hierarchies and what he witnessed that night at FOB Ghazni, Zia is glad he knows how to read and write and that he moved from being “stuck” in the middle (of fighting and counterpoised militias), to positioning himself as a mediator and coveted translator. But proceeding alongside his good luck was the illiteracy of the rural nomadic others, those who

“pour into” Kabul and other cities but “don’t know how to live in cities,” who roam, who neither read nor write and make themselves both the victims of violence and the purveyors of dialects they take with them, moving and speaking while remaining vulnerable to what they hear: “They think we are apostates because the water in Kabul has been poisoned. They will believe anything they hear.”

Like poisoned water, language carries with it a potentially pernicious current of possibilities not only because of what people might hear and believe, but also because of how they say what they say. For Zia, the most pressing problem of language is abbreviation. The skipping of sounds and making words alternate through displacement, like in the case of the vowel in “*gahista zu*,” pronounced casually as “*gista zu*.” This is not indicative of the canny familiarity usually associated with colloquial talk and informal pronunciation, but a sign that both bodies and words resist localization: “Pashto depends on where you are. The Pashto of Kandahar is not the same as Logar, or Ghazni or Wardak and it is even more difficult because these people are nomadic, always moving with their animals and dialects.” For Zia, nomadism means moving not only with livestock but also the possibility of misunderstanding. This movement occurs in a war that collapses the distinction between civilian and insurgent populations, turning self-destructive “nomads” into the inevitable victims of a war that Zia otherwise fantasizes as distinguishing between literate, settled civilians (such as himself) and enemy combatants.

During World War One, Sigmund Freud reflected on the uncanny horrors of uncivilized war. For Freud, the war laid waste not only to Europe but also to the illusion that its cultural and scientific achievements represented civilizational and psychic progress. The shattered self-image of Europe was centered on instinctual restraint, on the ability to wage war as a war that did not

subject civilians, livestock, property and the wounded to violence. But then the war Europeans could not believe in actually occurred and subjected everything and everyone to violence. World War I refused the distinction between civilians and combatants and made the renewal of peaceful relations based on trust difficult thereafter, marking for Freud, uncivilized war and the erasure of ambivalence in relation to the dead.⁴⁵ But Freud's distinction rests on the assumption that war is fought by regular, national militaries and not by what Marx called the "soldiers of adventure" that comprise irregular fighting groups.⁴⁶

In the context of a counter-insurgency (COIN) this distinction between regular and irregular armies is of heightened importance. In the War on Terror, the figure of the Afghan man (always a generalized extension of the insurgent) is literally grafted onto terrain, understood more as a dramatic outcrop of geography than a product of socio-biological relations. The tactical logic of COIN rests uneasily on this assertion: insurgents embed themselves amidst the civilian population, turning innocent people into the shields and fodder of warfare and necessitating civilian casualties. They are endlessly mobile and disingenuous, easily camouflaging themselves in both the natural and urban landscape. As we will read, in both the archival record that details earlier Anglo accounts of the Afghan wars, and in the current discourse of counter-insurgency, Afghans are recounted as particularly adept at instrumentalizing their terrain. They are described as having learned how to use the landscape, both as camouflage and weapon, and as always emanating from caves, underground tunnels, holes in the ground,

⁴⁵ Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" in vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition* ed. and trans. James Strachey et al., 2003.

⁴⁶ Marx, Karl; edited by Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling. *The Eastern Question: A Reprint of Letters written 1853-1856 dealing with the events of the Crimean War*. Originally published Swan Sonnenschein & Co., London: 1897. Reprinted by Kirstasbooks.

valleys, etc. In the discourse of the war, Afghans are described as emerging from nature and the earth, literally.

This helps us understand Zia's opinions of the rural Afghans he encounters while on missions. For Zia the distinction between the populations of urban and rural areas (i.e., Kabul and the countryside) and between insurgents and civilians is effaced by the mobility that he ascribes to rural subjects. They are self-destructive. He juxtaposes their movement to his own settled, literate subjectivity and ascribes to them not only a threatening itinerancy but also a culture of orality that begets misunderstanding and unleashes the violence of war he otherwise imagines himself as helping contain. He admits his failures at this but contends that things go "awry" because "these people don't know how to speak."

For Zia taking your dialect with you means imbuing the entire terrain with the possibility of mishearing and imperfect translation, preventing him from positioning himself between two symmetrical origins of words and meanings, and from acting as a conduit through which diametrically opposed ideologies and desires can be resolved. Taking dialect with you means to roam with abbreviated language, turning new terrain into a groundswell of misunderstanding, extending the frequency of alternating sounds— like the soil furrowed by the arrival of convoys and foreign languages and the dead halt of crops that made those rural subjects move across a contested landscape to begin with— across a landscape that is also the fantasized object of total military surveillance and knowledge.

The possibility and politicizing of knowledge is precisely what drives Zia's anxiety about illiteracy. During another conversation, he brought up the question of applying for a US visa. Many of his friends could not afford to apply and did not have access to people who could help

them complete the paperwork. Moreover, every Afghan translator has a “file” (*doosiyeh*) in which the details of their missions and mistakes are noted. “If we make even a single mistake, it will impact us negatively,” he said. The problem of information is doubled for Zia, residing both the *doosiyeh* that could prevent him from accessing a US visa and the biometric database he expresses deep ambivalence about:

“They would do a biometric scan when we worked for MEP so we are in the system. We worked for a mine clearance unit once and we also did HIDE with people in the rural districts, they would try to HIDE everyone, they wanted to record everything.⁴⁷ We did HIDE on someone in Ghazni (HIDE *esh kadeim*) who was already in the system but had been registered in Paktika and I asked him why he moved. He explained that he was a student in Paktika. It’s good. I like HIDE. It’s secure and you know who and where people are, why they move, where they go. The danger is if it falls into the government’s hands (*dast e daulat*). That is our fear. In this political context you cannot trust your neighbor and our government is deeply divided. So what happens if the Taliban obtain this information? I wouldn’t be able to walk around in Kabul anymore. They’d know everything about me. I’d be in serious danger. I can always escape if I feel threatened, but what about my family. What if the Taliban exact revenge and kill my father or brother? They have no mercy. They like to make an example of everyone. So my demand of NATO and ISAF is exactly this, that if things deteriorate in Kabul, they are responsible for getting us out.”

The question of responsibility and political authority (who is actually in control of Kabul, the last place Zia is able to “walk around”) converges on the issue of mobility and usurped information, when the Taliban (who he characterizes as illiterate) assume power and can suddenly read and parse biometric files. He uses the acronym HIDE as a verb, turning it into the agentive act of obtaining information and, as he expresses, locating and situating rural Afghans (like the student from Paktika). By taking a biometric technology on as a verb he reinvests his task, as a literate person, as one of securing the whereabouts and intentions of others. Zia

⁴⁷ HIDE refers to the US military’s Horizontally Integrated Data Environment (HIDE) system. It is a biometric and personal database.

assumes some of HIDE's technological power as his own in order to mitigate his anxiety about being recognized, or worse, punished for his collaboration in his own city:

“Our lives are in danger. Right now I am not afraid in Kabul but I'd never leave to the countryside. I tried to cover my face and wear sunglasses most time, and wear a helmet so I was unrecognizable but in some meetings you cannot sit like that, you have to show your face. This was a tactic we translators came up with. And I have a lot of difficulty at the gate of the base, everyone would show up, spies, Taliban, insurgents, *injured and sick people ...and people would see my face once they came in, I even changed my name* (emphasis mine). Some of us would choose Polish names. Marion was a popular name. I am afraid of the future; it's dangerous for my family, and for me even though I have not been threatened so far. But the problem is their illiteracy. That is why they don't understand why people are here, why they do what they do, and that is why they are so brutish with everyone, never kind. They are never sympathetic.”

Zia returns us to the front gate he guarded on that fateful night when severed bodies arrived. But he feels himself immobilized, severed from places and safety. People show up the front gate, including the injured and spies. He fears them as he does the millions of people who have moved (or “poured into”) Kabul and do not know “how to live in a city.” The future of The Green Zone economy is radically uncertain and he fears massive unemployment. These tensions are compounded by the inability of illiterate and rural persons to understand the intention (and good will) of translators like himself. They lack the capacity to contextualize Zia's collaboration within this speculative economy, and as a choice he made to improve his life.

“There will massive unemployment when the camps close, businessmen are not investing money, and the government made no effort to jumpstart industry. The factories are stagnant so they cannot absorb all the unemployed. Not everyone can become a taxi driver. Who will ride the cars? People who've come here from the countryside cannot go back. People will hate them and suspect them of having worked with the Americans, which is what Kabul means for those people, so they have to stay here out of safety, but what will they do?”

The loss of investment, the closure of military camps, and the government's failure to take any kind of industrial initiative become sources of danger for Zia alongside the perduring confusions and barbarism of illiteracy. The pressures of economic volatility redouble the dangers

of linguistic difference, transposing the question of orality onto the divide between Kabul and its rural surround—a divide now reinvested with the possibility of deadly revenge-seeking. In Kabul the old factories “are stagnant and cannot absorb the unemployed when the camps close.” A reversal occurs and he speaks of the unemployed as if they will form a mob and overtake Kabul. All hell might break loose. His anxiety mirrors that of the Polish guards at FOB Ghazni, who invested incapacitated bodies with radical force except that that force now traverses the binary of countryside and capital city. The material and economic conditions of economic decline energize these polarities and even transpose them onto regional political disputes:

“It will become crazy and people will leave. I think they will leave for Iran and Pakistan again, another round of international refugees. They already are trying to be smuggled into Iran. A young friend of mine tried to go to Iran and the Iranian border police shot at their car and twenty-two people died, including him. Everyone assaults us. Iran. Tajikistan. They redirect our water supply. They prevent us from creating dams. They shoot at us. The Iranian government paid the Quetta *Shura* to disrupt work at the dam and demolish it, they need the water, and on another project Indian engineers were killed because they were working on establishing electrical grids.⁴⁸ Pakistan wants Afghanistan to cut all ties with India before it considers participating in the peace process. Who can stay here?”

The gift of writing is poisoned and Zia finds himself further and further in dangerous territory as the virulence of orality follows him from his missions in the countryside to life in Kabul, making him consider an escape that is stymied by complex regional and international political dynamics (ranging from access to water sources to the difficulties of obtaining a US visa, *despite* one’s military collaboration). Unable to pin his hopes on an escape, his thoughts return to Kabul, where people are, nonetheless, more enlightened than ever before:

“Naturally other countries (*Ta’bist keh degeh kishwar ha*) have experienced and surpassed these challenges and stages, and we will too with time. People are learning English. They have access to the internet, they know what the rest of the world looks like

⁴⁸ The Quetta Shura is an Afghan Taliban organization based and operating out of Quetta, in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan.

and have changed a lot. They have access to media. Media has had a wonderful impact on peoples' lives. We never had media before; we only had one channel before the Taliban. But people in Kabul are not who they were ten years ago. They are enlightened (*roshan*). People dress differently. They are interested in the world, especially in Turkey. School uniforms have changed. These are all signs that the future will be different. With every shift in a regime, the upper class becomes impoverished and vice versa. It is what time does. It enriches you and then takes it all away. It's a matter of luck. It's the wheel of fate" (*charkh e sarniwisht*).

In the Cornfield

Matin is twenty-six years old and from Kabul. One afternoon he thought he saw something in a cornfield in Helmand while out on patrol. Suddenly shots were fired at him and his commander. The shots came from somewhere in the field and barely missed them. He recounts grazing the land with his eyes. He was bewildered by the bullets and the golden haze of dust and taken aback by the color of the field and its effortless camouflage. He was stumped and scared. Out of nowhere a strange man appeared, holding a large cob of corn in front of his face, trying to hide a sardonic look. Matin knew the obvious:

"I knew it was him, I know he had shot at us. It was as obvious as day. But he pretended like he had gone into the field to get some corn to eat, he tried to cover his face and then he started pretending to be insane so we just let him go, but I knew it was him and I remembered his face. And you won't believe what happened next! A few days later that same man, now clean-shaven, was introduced to us as the local police chief who we were supposed to support and train. That's how it is. One day they are with the local police force and the next they hide in cornfields and shoot you. They mock and fool you."

Matin is a young and handsome man with a gentle demeanor and soft voice, his face betraying his attempts to seem older than he is, though his experiences are enough for several lifetimes. Matin and Zia were neighbors in the "unplanned neighborhood," next to the Kabul airport. Like Zia, Matin also recalled a childhood filled with violence during the Afghan Civil War. He heard numerous rockets explode, many of them falling onto his neighborhood and killing his neighbors and playmates. But those horrors, of exploded homes and body parts, some

of which he helped locate and bury with the help of a small propane lantern, were preferable to the Pashtun Taliban's extreme moral rules and regulations which "interfered in every part of our lives," he said. The Taliban regime represented for him an unbearable transgression that he would find elsewhere and in a different form when out on military missions, where he encounters rural Afghans as dangerously itinerant. Matin decided to become a translator because his mass-mediated expectations exceeded his poor means:

"The best thing about these last ten years is that we finally have television! I can see what the rest of the world looks like: Turkey, India, Europe, America all of it. And it looks a lot better than here and I want what I see, the things people have, and of course I couldn't afford any of it unless I learned English and became a translator. And I did. The same is true for many of my friends."

Matin learned English in private courses and later inside tanks, wearing headphones and listening in over the radio in order to better acquaint himself with military parlance and dialect, listening to American, British and Scottish soldiers and slowly learning to differentiate the accents that they also took with them when they travelled. If for Zia the dialects of Pashto constitute insurmountable hurdles to the transmission of meaning, for Matin English accents were eventually learned after being heard on the military radio, their alterity ameliorated by the pedagogical stream of transmission that he listened to while en route to various villages in purported Taliban strongholds.

Through wireless radio, he became not only familiar with the dialects he had to differentiate and translate but also overwhelmed by sheer difference, his ears overloaded by the nuances of accent and the discourse and code of military protocol. He realized the burden of difference when he arrived in a small village just outside of Helmand. But in that village he was frustrated not by the various English accents he became sensitive to but the local dialects he encountered with his naked ears:

“They are so different! I’d never seen or heard anything like that before, it was my first time but the difference between those people and *Kabulis* is like the difference between ground and sky (*zameen o asman*). They don’t know how to speak! I couldn’t bear it. They are completely illiterate. There are basic things they don’t understand, that they don’t know how to say or express. But that’s not all. We would give them gifts and in return they would plant IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and land mines by the roads. All they cared about was their crops, mainly corn and wheat. We would have to use their lands because all the major roads had roadside bombs and mines, so our convoys would pass through their agricultural fields, and of course the tires would destroy the crops and land, and they would come to us for compensation. We always gave them more than the price of their harvest and sometimes they invited me over for dinner and sometimes they tried to kill us.”

Radical uncertainty erupts for Matin. The locals not only possess impenetrable dialects but also do not understand symbolic exchange. The “gifts” of good will imparted by Matin and the soldiers or the monetary compensation for the destruction of crops were reciprocated with violence. The planting of explosives is a symbolic mimesis of the planting of crops that was no longer possible and that Matin understands as *senseless* violence. The IEDs express for Matin a symbolic incapacity that derives from linguistic difference. It frustrates his efforts to gather meaningful intelligence. Consider his lament:

“It’s almost impossible to translate perfectly between English and Pashto, I’d explain that to the Americans and tell them that I was just trying to get the basic meaning across. I’d tell them these people are different from you. They don’t know how to use language. They don’t know how to talk. They talk for an hour, and the translation takes five minutes because these people are illiterate, they’ll repeat themselves ten times, but they never get to the point, adding so much flourish to their words that you get dizzy running around with them, this way and that way, but never towards an answer. After an hour they might get to the damn point, but even then they’ll repeat it in ten different ways, not wanting to shed light on your question. *You have to force them, otherwise they daydream while they talk. They never come out and say it, they’ll never say: ‘I think this or I want this’* (emphasis mine).”

There is a great deal of uncertainty in the speech Matin wants to translate, and convey meaningfully. He finds himself lost not only in the midst of the daydreaming of others but their dizzying sentences. As was the case for Zia in Ghazni, oral flourish fails to express rational thought or intentionality. The rift between Matin and the locals is not just the issue of linguistic

difference, but also its intensification as a site of a differential capacity for rationality. On other instances this becomes dangerous. He recounts that while on patrol in the village someone shot at him, not from a cornfield, but from the only house on a large plot of land: “It’s land, just land nothing but one house,” he kept repeating. When Matin and his group of soldiers went into the house to investigate the men inside obfuscated:

“Shots?! What shots? Didn’t hear anything. What a shame! Someone shot at you? Sorry to hear that.”

After searching the house and finding weapons and testing their fingertips for gunshot residue the men pleaded not to be arrested:

“Wouldn’t you be afraid if you lived in a place like this? One lone house in the middle of nothing and nowhere and all of sudden a bunch of white armed men show up. You’d shoot too.”

The locals of Helmand spoke with both an “impossible” dialect to translate and worse, refused to settle not only in their villages but also on a point while speaking, refusing to inhabit personal pronouns and to say explicitly what they saw and, more importantly, *really knew*. They resisted Matin’s desire to get to the gist of things, to possess and exchange the meaning of inhabited speech through translation. If their dialects were brazenly different and unmediated by the standard Pashto of television and radio Matin was accustomed to, their refusal to employ the pronoun “I” or “we” is not indicative of the guile Matin discerns in his encounter with the man in the cornfield, but of not having language: “They don’t know how to use language. They don’t know how to talk. They talk for an hour, and the translation takes five minutes. They never just say: ‘I think this or I want this.’” For Matin language is an instrument that, when mobilized

through translation, should make rural communities transparent to their military counterparts.⁴⁹ For him, this is impossible because language is subordinated to the techniques of reason that the locals of Helmand do not understand or possess. They do not know how to use language. Instead, language *inhabits them* as a dangerous force. Matin shares another story. Again, he began by recalling the impossibility of understanding the local Afghans whose words he was attempting to translate:

“The local villagers were hard to understand. *They wouldn't open up to us, they wouldn't communicate to us what was in their hearts (roz e dil)* (emphasis mine), I guess it's because if they helped us the Taliban would punish them later, and we couldn't be there to protect them. The Taliban kill, they literally cut peoples' necks if they talk to foreigners or help them. They have no tolerance or mercy. At one village meeting, a man got up and spoke and said to the others that they should help us and not let the Taliban use the village to plant mines and plan operations. That very night the Taliban found out, they found him and cut his head off. He was about thirty years old. We tried to help, we gave blood money to the family.”

One economy and three limit points emerge here. The first limit is that presented by a closure (of hearts and language) when the villagers refuse to open up to Matin, and communicate what was in their hearts (*roz e dil*). That refusal, of course, is indicative of the terrifying atmosphere in which speech can indicate only one of two things: either the speaker is guilty of

⁴⁹ Naoki Sakai cautions against the seduction of the pronoun “we” as a marker of collectivity based on the presumption of a “homolingual” community. There is, within the “we,” misunderstanding and heterogeneity and in situations of address the “we” (or “us”) that Matin yearns for is itself a heterogeneity that cannot assure immediate understanding, uniform responses or “empathetic transference” (1997, 3-4). The invocation of “we” or “us” is performative and cannot be conflated with a group of speakers, which “can be posited only imaginarily and *in representation*” (1997, 5). This representation (and determining the sameness of information shared in a group) requires *translation as repetition*, which is prior to the binary of translatability or untranslatability that follows. Citing Benjamin, Sakai notes that translation does not depend on communication of information (or its end) because it is an inscription that “ineluctably ensues” (1997,5). For Sakai the relationship between translation and the formation of national subjectivity is a question of translational registers between genres (regional dialects) and national languages (which in Japan could not be presumed prior to eighteenth century) and which comes to subsume the differences that can be represented configuratively (1997, 16). This hierarchization of difference and “translational registers” plays a crucial role in the formation of national subjectivity. See: Sakai, Naoki, and Morris Meaghan. *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

supporting the Taliban (determined guilty by the translator or soldier, such as when *rakât* was heard as rocket) or suspected of apostasy by the Taliban for talking to the enemy, like when the young man was beheaded. Speech confirms guilt or collaboration. Terrorism or apostasy. This is the limiting and dead serious binary that determines what can and cannot be said. But for Martin there is a third limit, one more certain than the one he guesses at (“I guess it’s because if they help us the Taliban would punish them later...”), and which forecloses the ability to convert their words into any form of positivity: useful information, reassurance about the status of their village, or persuasive speech (like the young man who tried to convince others to help the soldiers rather than the Taliban). That inability--to work their words into a chain of useful meanings-- results in an economic exchange, of blood money for life and returns us yet again to the scene of a severed Afghan body (a headless body) as the locus of linguistic tension.

To be a subject is to inhabit a pronoun. For this reason, first person pronouns constitute a special class of linguistic signs. They are both empty until assumed by a speaker (“I” has no real world referent) and enable subjectivity (the speaker becomes a subject only after assuming the position “I”). Émile Benveniste discusses them at length and emphasizes the important relationship between the use of pronouns and the “present instance of discourse,” which is to say the discrete act by which language is actualized by a speaker through the use of “I.” The acquisition of the pronoun “I” in speech enables both the formation of the subject through language and of the other as “you.” Similarly, words like “here” and “there” or “now” delimit the

spatial and temporal instance of the discourse containing “I.” They are contemporary with it and an indicator of person. ⁵⁰

Benveniste says of pronouns: “The importance of their function will be measured by the nature of the problem they serve to solve, which is none other than that of intersubjective communication. Language has solved this problem by creating an ensemble of “empty” signs that are nonreferential with respect to ‘reality.’ These signs are always available and become ‘full’ as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse.”⁵¹ Related to first, second and third person pronouns are adverbs that indicate time and space and that share the same status and depend upon the pronouns they contextualize: “These other classes are the indicators of deixis, the demonstratives, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the ‘this, here, now’ and their numerous correlatives, ‘that, yesterday, last year, tomorrow’ etc. They have in common the feature of being defined only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur that is, in dependence upon the I which is proclaimed in the discourse”.⁵²

⁵⁰ Benveniste, Émile. “Subjectivity in Language” in *Problems in General Linguistics*. University of Miami Press, 1971, p 219, 226.

⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 219.

⁵² Ibid., pg. 226.

For Michael Silverstein referential indexes, like signs that indicate tense, have a fundamentally temporal logic. They presuppose knowledge of a time prior to that of an utterance (1976, 24). This distinction is what he describes as that between “the time of the proposition of a referential speech event” and “the referential speech event itself.” These are also called “shifters” because the reference shifts according to the “factors of the speech situation.” Silverstein notes that shifters operate at both the level of code and message, uniting in a single sign a “quasi-semantic” meaning and a pragmatic one. The value of one depends on the other (1976, 24-25). In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze reminds us that this duality of tense does not only belong to propositions, but is everywhere where there is sense, which he defines as that which refuses the binaries and hierarchies of inside and outside, or prior and after. For Deleuze a proposition (or event) moves in two directions, or what he calls “the law of becoming” (1990,33). The

Fully inhabited speech that makes use of pronouns and the indicators of deixis like “here” and “there” would give Matin a sense of meaning and spatio-temporality. But what happens to simple sentences like “we are leaving tomorrow” (*gahista zu*) when vowels are elided (i.e., when the locals in Helmand said to Zia “*gista zu*”) is enough to indicate a split for Zia between the domain of temporality and the domain of subjectivity, two planes brought together for Benveniste by the existence of both pronouns and adverbs in a sentence (“we” and “tomorrow”). *The missing vowel functions as a missing pronoun*, disjoining the sentence from the specificity of what was spoken. For Zia, the abbreviated sentence marks tense and time in a general rather than specific way, making it impossible for him to understand that they still meant, “We are leaving tomorrow.”

Without the crucial “we,” *gista zu* was, for Zia, inflected with infinite possibility. Thinking about pronouns and adverbs and about instances in which personal pronouns are elided out of fear enables us to see how each instance of discourse or speech becomes radically generalized. If it is true, as Benveniste contends, that the subject literally comes into existence through the exercise of language, then the refusal to inhabit “I” (or “we”) can in some contexts be transposed onto a refusal to fully pronounce vowels, which in turn is misrecognized as the refusal of individual and collective subjectivity. Speaking quickly, or anxiously out of fear is one example of when vowels might be skipped (so is familiarity between speakers though it is unlikely that is what transpired in this setting). The skipping of vowels and the contraction of *gahista zu* into *gista zu* illustrates the impossibility of a speaking subject in conditions where

event is possible in the future and real in the past, it is subdivided not through the work of shifters but because denotation (which he defines as the association of words with particular images) cannot ground sense (1990, 35). See: Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

language is instrumentalized both as a weapon (i.e., intelligence gathering & interrogation) and as evidence of collaboration (when the speech of locals is reconfigured as proof of collaboration with the US military or apostasy by the Taliban).

With no indicator of subjectivity and no subjective context in speech that indicates the attitude of the speaker with respect to his statement, we are left with what Benveniste calls “simple statements.” Except that the statements are not so simple. The gap between a pronoun and statement produces not only doubt about the intention of the missing speaker but is also used as evidence that the potential speaker(s) resist localization both in language and in space. Those who “refuse to say what they mean” and “take their dialect with them” become figurations of a dangerous nomadism that threatens to spread not only misunderstanding (and mistranslation) but also the possibility of dispossession. Encountering different Pashto dialects and leaving behind ravaged plots of agricultural land and blood money became the beginning and end of reconnaissance and “support” missions that devastate social and material livelihoods and force local populations to migrate out of fear and necessity, adding to the already large population of internally displaced persons and conflating forced migration with nomadism.

The word nomad stems from *nomos* (to graze for pasture), which comes from the more telling root *nom* (to divide, distribute, allot). Its root conjoins the necessity of moving for new pasture with a distribution of land that proceeds according to agricultural necessity, not legal ownership. It is this prospect of redistribution, hidden in the etymological root that Matin unconsciously alludes to when he describes the “nomadic” populations of Afghanistan, those people who left their villages because he arrived as part of a chained military convoy that destroyed their lands and left them vulnerable to the retaliatory counterattacks of the Taliban. But again Matin sees their privation as excess power:

“The nomads are all completely armed. They leave villages behind and roam and pitch tents, and a week later they claim new land as theirs and nobody can get them off. I don’t care how powerful you are; you can never get a nomad off your land. They are armed and untouchable, and take land wherever they go, passing through and taking... and now especially in Kabul where land and real estate is among the most expensive in the world. Well, it depends, I guess...some neighborhoods like ours fall prey to the elements.”

Matin’s fear of the acquisitive nomad is shared by Zia and others in Kabul, and especially those Afghans who left property behind after fleeing the Afghan-Soviet war (to learn decades later that it had been informally taken by those who fled the countryside and moved to Kabul). Their fear bears little resemblance to the reality of the vast majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who find themselves in conditions of bare subsistence in refugee camps on the fringes of Kabul or on mountainsides that collapse on them in devastating earthquakes and landslides, turning them into the actual victims of the elements that Matin conjures as a metaphor when he described the “rain of rockets” that destroyed his neighborhood. Matin’s fear of the roving Afghan is dissociated from their fear of reprisal and retaliation, a fear that serves as one of the primary motives for why Afghans leave their villages after reconnaissance missions or actual fighting has taken place.

But perhaps more tellingly, Matin and Zia’s apprehensions are inextricable from an underlying fear of a more technologized reprisal via the medium of photographic and biometric control. If the village locals can move in an effort to shield themselves from retaliatory violence, Matin and other “local national” translators cannot. Translators are not allowed to quit before their contract ends (regardless of the danger they are in). They relinquish their freedom of mobility to the strictures of contracts that many of them do not understand or read and more importantly to new biometric technologies.

Horizontally Integrated Persons

Translators are hired after having their biometric identities (iris scans and fingerprints) entered into the Horizontally Integrated Data Environment (HIDE) system. This database of information is also used to “black list” translators and other Afghans who work for foreign militaries from further employment (in any military installation) in the event that they quit prematurely or are fired for misconduct as trivial as stealing milk from military bases. The itinerancy of the Afghan nomad becomes the site of a double lack for Matin and in the military imagination. On one hand, it is expressed in dialect and associated with the nomad’s supposed willingness to move and invade new lands. On the other hand, language is property and its status as a coveted commodity in the Afghan war economy makes it only recognizable as such, and not as the grievous liability that it is for those who are not only compelled to speak (who are questioned by translators and interrogated by military officials) but also subsequently punished for speaking when that compulsory speech is signified as “collaboration” or “apostasy” by the Taliban.

It is this double bind and fantasized lack that constitutes the difference as great as “that between ground and sky” (*zameen o asman*) that Matin remarked on when recollecting his initial encounter with the people of Helmand. Like his friend Zia, Matin’s possession of language as a commodity with an exchange value and his subsequent inability to move as villagers do (to quit his job and move back to Kabul), a movement curtailed by new technologies of visual and biological capture, forges his desire to formulate the rural Afghan both in the landscape and in language. It is that desire which produces the idea that dialect signifies transience and perpetual misunderstanding. Dialect is understood as a refusal to say what you mean clearly not just in the mass-mediated standard of Pashto (the same Pashto that Matin heard on the radio and on

television) but in conditions of differential mobility. Dialect expresses the danger that moves linguistically and physically closer and closer to Kabul. For Matin, it is redoubled as a portent that rural Afghans will refuse to express what they really mean (the gist of things which Matin can then efficiently translate) and that they do not intend to speak from where they *temporarily* are. The skipping of syllabus and pronouns are as much about the traversal of space in a war economy that has turned land into its most profitable commodity, as it is about the obfuscation of meaning during combat encounters. While Matin and Zia's fears are newly mediated by both new media and bio-political technologies of war, and by their relationship to language as a coveted source of exchange value; these fears are rooted in anxieties about the Afghan nomad and frontier that are much older than this war and its mistranslations.

A Little Swagger

At the Kabul National Archives, housed in a converted summer palace originally belonging to King Habibullah, Mahmoud the archivist told me about his twenty-one-year-old son Taha. Taha was his only child and worked as a translator for ISAF until his neighbors callously killed him for his collaboration. Stepping out to meet them one afternoon in the alley behind their homes, he was stabbed to death and died soon after in Mahmoud's arms. Mahmoud pulled out a picture from his wallet and wept openly, apologizing moments later and hurriedly taking me to the back office where he wanted to show me a collection of old British newspapers from the Anglo-Afghan wars, hoping to distract himself from the painful memories I had conjured when I asked if he had children.

That large collection contains many editions of the London based weekly-illustrated newspaper *The Graphic*. It features a series of illustrations from scenes and persons encountered

during the British survey for the Kandahar railway. The Afghan railway project is one we will read about in greater detail when I consider the relationship between writing about the Afghan landscape as a means of representing it as a site of economic value, and the subsequent infrastructural aims of the Afghan modernist movement. But in 1880, this project was very much a dream. The images were sketched by Captain J.E. Robinson of the 30th regiment on September 11, 1880. They illustrate not only the fantasy of converting a barren landscape into the traversable scene of profit and military movement, but also a much older preoccupation with nomads and the confusions they inspire. The first illustration is satirically titled “the Gentle Shepherd,” and portrays a figure described as carrying “beneath his ample cloak a whole armoury of knives and pistols, and is ready at a moment’s notice for any cut-throat work which may happen to fall in his way.” The diabolical looking armed shepherd is drawn next to a more telling scene of men aiming their rifles from behind their tents at an unidentifiable mob riding towards them on horses. The description of a “False Alarm in the Arugtai Ravine” describes the situation:

“...An incident which occurred in the Arugtai Ravine, where early one morning the surveying party were awakened by the clattering of hoofs and the jingling of accouterments. The whole camp turned out, under the impression that it was an attack by one of the surrounding tribes, *who were in a very unsettled state* (emphasis mine) at the time, and the sentry was just about to fire at the new arrivals when it was seen that they were some of our own men who had been left behind to bring on some mules, and who thought they would come in with a little swagger.”⁵³

The team of British surveyors was on a mission to assess the landscape. They wanted to determine whether its rugged features could be tamed by a railway that would make the country continuous and less forbidding, enabling people and troops to travel smoothly between cities and

⁵³ *The Graphic*, Sept. 11, 1880, 248.

more importantly, connecting British India with Afghanistan in order to secure the latter as a traversable buffer state against Russia. One can imagine that these men were lost in reveries of where to lay down civilizing tracks of iron when they were suddenly jarred by the cacophony of approaching horses and jingling accouterments. They heard the clarion call of danger in the rhythm of hooves and the overlay of bells. They mistook the return of their own company men for an invasion, nearly firing at them because of this “false alarm” by the ravine.

Ravines are deepened by the eroding effects of water. So too, it seems, were the nerves of the surveyors who were challenged by the rugged landscape they wanted to transform. Lost in thoughts and ambition, they heard danger when there was none and recognized enemies in friends. That this incident and illustration featured in *The Graphic* is telling both of the resonance it presumably had and of the kinds of stories the British public was receiving about the “back of the beyond” Rudyard Kipling popularized in their literary imagination. But the mistake of men returning for an invading mob *did* actually happen in another instance when shots were fired before the reality of a “false alarm” could settle from the debris of doubt that arose in the face of unsettled men.

Death by Misadventure

Sometime in November of 1921, a trading party of men on horses returned to Afghanistan from Quetta in Baluchistan with grain and cloth. British soldiers at the frontier village of Toba attacked them and their goods were seized. Two men, one horse and one donkey were killed. After the surviving men's innocence was established, they were released from imprisonment and ambivalently compensated with blood money in the amount of 3,500 *Kabuli* rupees for the deaths of their companion Nasir-ud-Din and “another” man whose name was

never recorded, and for the value of damaged goods. In a memorandum sent from the Governor General and Chief Commissioner in Baluchistan to the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India in Delhi the incident is described as follows:

“The officer commanding the Pishin Movable Column, whilst searching for Waziri raiders encamped at Sabura on the 26th November 1921. A caravan of Ghilzais arrived and encamped in the hills near by. The officer Commanding thinking that they were Waziris surrounded them and shots were exchanged on both sides. After a short interval, the Officer Commanding discovering that they were not Waziris and took them to Sabura. One man named Nasir-ud-Din son of Mohi-ud-Din, Tajak of Ghazni, died on the spot from his wounds and another was wounded. A horse and a donkey were also killed” (Memorandum No. 881, April 9, 1924).⁵⁴

Stating the facts, the tone and language of the memorandum shifts to one of inevitability:

“In reporting the matter the General Officer Commanding Baluchistan District, observed that if raiding parties from Afghanistan made inroads into Baluchistan such incidents were *inevitable* as it was *often impossible for Military Commanders to differentiate between armed but innocent caravans and raiding parties* (emphasis mine)” (Memorandum No. 881, April 9, 1924). A series of memorandums were exchanged and the blood money paid by the British Government was finally accepted as an “act of grace” because the “death by misadventure” occurred in British territory.

The inability to distinguish between an innocent caravan of traders and a raiding sortie reflects anxiety not only about the status of the Afghan frontier in the British imperial imagination but also about the mobility and invasive threat of “irregular” armies. It is that kind of invasion that was characteristic of the Afghans (and Tatars) for Engels and that also shaped

⁵⁴ Ghilzai and Waziri are the names of two Pashtun tribes.

Marx's own assumptions about the regressive nature of the social mob.⁵⁵ As Rosalind Morris argues, for Marx, the Muslim mob was exceptional because it illustrated an indistinction between civilian and military populations: "In the absence of such distinctions, Islamic polities will be deemed not opponents in civilized war but sites of criminality, confusers of the opposition between war and not-war, origins of a resurgent barbarism."⁵⁶

Marx's articles on "the Eastern Question" are not only useful as a discourse on the nature of the mob, but also for his inextricable observations on the importance of rugged terrain in war. His article, "the War Question," begins with a telegraphic misfire that sets the tone for some of his subsequent observations, turning the ambiguity of a possibly undeclared war into certainty only after the cannonade of Isaktschi, which for Marx constitutes a symbolic declaration of a war that: "at last opened on the Danube."⁵⁷ Although Marx describes the Crimean War as one between the imperial ambitions of the Russians and the fatalist zeal of the Turks, he also notes an advantageous circumstance: the frontier territories of Russia and Turkey, which "divide themselves, in a military point of view, into two quite distinct theaters of operation." For Marx the "the concatenation of ridges" between the Caucasuses and Central Armenia, a high ridge-land characterized by rugged terrain and natural fortifications, constitutes a broken landscape that

⁵⁵ Engels's letter to Marx *On Religion* cited in Morris, Rosalind C. "Theses on the Questions of War: History, Media, Terror." *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002), pg. 157.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 158.

⁵⁷ Marx, Karl; edited by Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling. *The Eastern Question: A Reprint of Letters written 1853-1856 dealing with the events of the Crimean War*. Originally published Swan Sonnenschein & Co., London: 1897. Reprinted by Kirstasbooks, pg. 146.

makes it possible for an irregular army to successfully wage a defensive war against a superior one.⁵⁸

Marx also remarks, somewhat bemused, on the form and content of the Turkish army: “We know, besides, that the Turkish army of Anatolia, recruited as it is from the Asiatic provinces, the seat of old Moslem barbarism, and counting in its ranks a great number of irregular, unreliable though generally brave, soldiers of adventure, fancy warriors and filibusters, that this army of Anatolia is nothing like the stern, disciplined, and drilled army of the Rumili, whose commander knows how many and what men he has from day to day under his command, and where the thirst for independent adventure and private plunder is held in check by articles of war and courts-martial.”⁵⁹

Marx’s assumption that a relationship between a rugged terrain and irregular armies of adventure prone to private plunder and unchecked by the conventional articles of war also constitute his views on the “Mohammadan forces” of Afghanistan who invaded both India and Persia, consolidating diverse populations in India and instigating Persia to later invade the city of

⁵⁸ Ibid., pg. 154.

Writing about the nature of peasant insurgency in colonial India, Ranajit Guha contends that insurgency is as old as colonialism, and its necessary antithesis. The imperial concern with uprising (which as we will see in the following chapter was projected onto the Afghan frontier) enabled a regime of documentation and the writing up of reports or “despatches on counter-insurgency” which partake of a fundamentally comparative logic through which peasant revolts were understood with respect to other incidents. See: Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. This was not contained to colonial India, but also informed the nature of reports on frontier uprisings in Afghanistan, and which became especially prolific alongside the Afghan government’s acquisition of cable and wireless telegraphy.

⁵⁹ Marx 1897, 223.

Herat in Western Afghanistan.⁶⁰ That attempted invasion, of Afghanistan by Persia under Nadir Shah, led to what Marx calls the “mysterious” Anglo-Afghan wars that occurred despite the eventual retreat of Persian forces from Herat.⁶¹ For Marx those wars were mysterious because they were strategically unnecessary (Herat was no longer threatened by Persia, or by extension Russia). For him they are examples of an unpredictable and extraordinary “turn” in historical events that shattered Britain’s self-image of invincibility in the Asiatic world: “Here one would have supposed the operations of the English might have ended; but so far from that, matters took a most extraordinary turn. Not content with repelling the attempts of Persia, made, it was alleged, at the instigation and in the interest of Russia, to seize a part of Afghanistan, the English undertook to occupy the whole of it for themselves. Hence the famous Afghan war, the ultimate result of which was so disastrous to the English, and the real responsibility for which still remains so much a mystery.”⁶²

Illustrating a growing apprehension about the “irregulars” that also perturbed Marx, *The Graphic* reported on the meeting of Afghanistan’s King Abdur Rahman Khan, General Sir D. Stewart and Mr. Lepel Griffin. The account is told from a Major Woodthorpe’s perspective, and

⁶⁰ Marx discusses the unifying effects of “Mohammedan” pressures from Central Asia (i.e. Afghanistan and Persia) as cementing the otherwise “independent and conflicting States” in India: “Just as Italy has, from time to time, been compressed by the conqueror’s sword into different national masses, so do we find Hindostan, when not under the pressure of the Mohammedan, or the Mogul, or the Briton, dissolved into as many independent and conflicting States as its numbered towns, or even villages” (Marx, 1853). See his article “British Rule in India” in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853.

⁶¹ The British Government was interested in ending the siege of Herat because they feared the annexation of the city would make it easier for Russia to use Persian territory to gain access to India. The British government believed Afghanistan constituted a more impermeable buffer state than Persia and had an interest in its territorial integrity.

⁶² Marx, Karl. “The War Against Persia” in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, No. 4937, February 14, 1857.

bespeaks the anxiety of approaching the Ameer's camp in Kabul and not knowing if the meeting was a pretense to lure them into a deadly trap:

“In the distance a crowd of horsemen was seen advancing...and in front a rider...when the cavalcade had arrived within a hundred yards of the tent...he turned out to be the Ameer.”

The article then refers to an earlier meeting between Griffin and the Ameer and the irregularity of the Amir's armed forces:

“The Times of India in describing a previous meeting of Abdur Rahman and Mr. Lepel Griffin, says, ‘The troopers of the 9th Lancers formed a striking contrast to the men of the Ameer's bodyguard, whose ‘uniform’ only deserves its name because of its uniform irregularity; no two of them were clad alike, and the arms of these men of motley were equally curious and diverse: Martinis, Sniders, *Chassepôts*, *Miniés*, double-barrelled shot guns, matchlocks, and *jhezails*. They were evidently picked men who he could thoroughly trust, as he could easily have selected from his Turkestan regiments an equal number of men clad alike and armed with rifles of the same pattern.’”⁶³

Related to the anxiety about irregular troops was also this other fear of irregular arms.

Like the disassembled rocket that was taken into Afghan cities during the Civil War of the 1990's, and that is now frequently fired at US military bases with makeshift launch ramps; the breech and muzzle loading rifles of the Amir's men represented a multiplicity not only suggestive of the men's movement across a terrain that was largely forbidding to British troops but also of the possibility of being enmeshed in regional, social and trading networks that made the “Afghan frontier” even more porous and menacing to British India's attempts to circumscribe her.

⁶³ *The Graphic*, Sept. 18, 1880, 267.

Crucial to the enigma of the first three Anglo-Afghan wars, and to why the mob was conflated with the tribe was Afghanistan's status as both frontier and contested buffer zone.⁶⁴ In that context, the Afghan railway project became an important symbol of Britain's political failure. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (ironically known as the "Iron Amir" because of his harsh authoritarian rule) believed transnational iron rails would incorporate Afghanistan into an economic and cultural grid of easily traversable spaces that the British could use to wage a military campaign. The railway, whose lines the British surveyors were planning at the Arugtai Ravine, was at the heart of competing British and Russian aims during the Great Game and became an important symbol of cultural difference that reflected Afghanistan's complicated status as a frontier following the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857.

Let us return to the scene of the "false alarm" by the ravine and the real firing at the Ghilzai tribes in November of 1921, and also to Matin and Zia's anxieties about the itinerant figure of the rural Afghan who takes his dialect with him, spreading misunderstanding across a landscape he also threatens to forcibly acquire. The false alarm at the ravine and the 1921 incident with the caravan of traders was a fear of unsettled tribesman. These tribesmen were presumed to be amenable to becoming "filibuster" soldiers of adventure that Marx saw as a regressive threat to the conventions of war. Marx's choice of the word filibuster is uncanny as its

⁶⁴ In the 19th century Britain implemented a dual policy of both fostering internal discord in Afghanistan and encouraging Persia to establish dominance over Western Afghanistan. The British simultaneously secured a treaty of "eternal friendship" with Kabul. Subsequent and substantial Russian military and diplomatic gains during this period led to a shift in British policy toward Afghanistan. Any Persian encroachment on Afghanistan became tantamount to a Russian assault on British India's dangerously proximate neighbor and "doorstep". This crucial association of shifting political alliances with imminent territorial threats transformed Afghanistan in the British imperial imagination from an empire against which a Sikh buffer zone was maintained in the Punjab to an unstable frontier between British India and Russia. This anxiety spawned the British "forward policy" that resulted in the disastrous Anglo-Afghan wars. See Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*. Stanford University Press: 1969, pg. 95.

first meaning indicates the obstructionist use of language. But what subtends the anxiety about the mob, whether in an instance of mistaken or actual violence, is a fear of dispossession of property and of losing one's life.

This anxiety still animates the fears about nomads, as Matin expresses, but what is different in this war and about the apprehensions Matin, Zia and other translators communicate is the shadow of linguistic misunderstanding that both leads and trails after the fantasized figure of the Afghan vagabond. What in one instance was a fear of looting and ultimately of the loss of property to an unsettled frontier that threatened the territorial integrity of British India, is in the current war, a fear about the status of language and its representational capacities at the moment that language is explicitly commodified and incorporated into war as a strategic commodity. Language's representational capacities are effaced in two ways: 1) the refusal of speaking persons (namely rural Afghans being interrogated) to assume the pronoun "I" (or "we") while speaking and 2) the conflation of a misunderstanding born of linguistic difference (dialect) as the threat of nomadism and dispossession.

In the late nineteenth century and during the Anglo-Afghan wars looming "men of motley" threatened the possibility of a buffer state smoothed out by a railway that would enable British troops to move quickly in the event of Russian encroachment. The mob in the War on Terror is now exemplified by nomadic Afghans who travel between the countryside (where the Taliban have their strongholds) and various cities (mainly Kabul) without settling down (because they cannot afford to, financially or practically). These "mobs" threaten the prerogatives of a counter-insurgency that is highly technologized and seeks to locate and settle populations through surveillance and biometric control.

These technologies are the cornerstones of a new mode of warfare that mimics the fluid mobility of the mob it also seeks to annihilate. However, just as the tribesmen are suspected of being “filibuster” soldiers of adventure who might join the ranks of irregular forces and subject others to indiscriminate looting, so too are Afghan, or “local national” translators suspected of infiltrating the US military and collaborating with the Taliban. Thus, if Matin, Zia and other translators do not have the freedom of movement they see as a threatening excess in the Afghan “nomad,” they do share with him the cloud of suspicion that hangs over their every move, so to speak. While for nomadic Afghans (or IDPs), it is their literal movement that makes them threatening, for translators it is the moves and rhythms of their daily behaviors and translations that make them potential filibuster agents of terror.

Men of Motley

While rockets and mobs imbue the social and linguistic terrain with imminent force in Afghanistan, in Western military doctrine they provoke anxiety and motivate a paradigm shift in military organization. The concern that Cold War weapons became outmoded in an information age where so called cutting-edge precision weapons are increasingly the norm shaped the strategic “smart weapons” discourse that was seen as giving the American military a competitive advantage and that, in turn, made it possible for America’s enemies to rely on terrorist tactics and new organizational idioms, making them harder to target.⁶⁵ This discourse is partly rooted in the aspiration for an isomorphism between the US military and its enemies. Known as the “Revolution in Military Affairs” this transformation in military organization involves a transition

⁶⁵ Weber, Samuel. *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

from “platform centric warfare” (centralized, hierarchical, closed system) to “network centric warfare,” (NCW) a flexible organization that produces value from the nearly instantaneous real time sharing of information and enables knowledge of “all elements of battle space and time.”⁶⁶

The fantasy of knowing all elements of battle is crucial to NCW and indissociable from the belief that total knowledge generates value and “increasing returns.” In NCW, the rapid pace of information technology can create a real time network that will displace a warfare of attrition with “self-synchronized” warfare based on integrated sensors, models, display technologies and simulation. Samuel Weber argues that this epochal transformation from the multilateral deterrence of the Cold War to preemptive attacks and endless war against acephalous and elusive terrorist networks stresses the ideological role of narration: narration and story telling bind members of the network together through shared ideals and beliefs. The “network,” in the military imagination, is horizontal in structure and indeterminate, extending itself in time and space amorously through the work of language. Network members (i.e., insurgents) are bound by the power of stories that disseminate from doctrinal leaders and hold the network together. The medium of storied language does the work performed by hierarchical relations of authority and submission in traditional military formations.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ The connection between “network centered warfare” (NCW) and network centered business and retailing practices spearheaded by companies such as Walmart and banks like Deutsche Morgan Grenfell is detailed in the 1998 report entitled “Network-Centric Warfare-Its Origin and Future” by Vice Admiral Arthur K. Cebrowski, USN and John H. Garstka. The authors discuss the emergence of NCW in response to parallel transformations in the nature of information technology, commodity chains, and the increasing commodification of weapons, changes which also entail a “new era in warfare”. The report can be found here: <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1998-01/network-centric-warfare-its-origin-and-future>

⁶⁷ If in the military imagination stories are a source of cohesion, for Weber they are also indicative of that kind of “targeting” made possible by the novel. Weber refers to Walter Benjamin’s distinction between stories and novels and the different forms of sociality they involve. While the narration of stories forges a network of listeners who re-tell, forget, and select stories, the reader of the novel is in the solitary

If for Weber the role of storied narration gives life to the ideology of the network by forging solidarity, in the War on Terror and the US military's attempt to become more of a network, this enables an ambivalent inclusion. In the insurgent network, language is a binding medium of ideological transmission that is a *substitute* for the ordered and regular relations of hierarchy found in traditional armies. But in the United States's campaign to win "hearts and minds" (a campaign that emerges in its current form out of the larger shift to NCW but which was developed in Vietnam) one of the paradigmatic cornerstones is the necessity of cultural and linguistic mediation between the US military and Afghan natives. Translation is a crucial part of an overarching effort to gather human intelligence and dissuade civilians from supporting the Taliban. *Persuasion*, however, is less the outcome of linguistic exchange or narration (as it is in the insurgent network) than a fetishization of the Other's cultural and linguistic fluency. This is further complicated by one of the war's many governing fictions: that insurgents are indistinguishable from ordinary civilians, and therefore that anyone might be an enemy. This assumption plays a crucial role not only in tactics of interrogation and generalized targeting but

pursuit of outliving the character's death. But for Weber, the telos of the novel is also present in the narration that keeps the network together. The narrating of cause, buttressed to motivate network members into action and a sense of purpose, involves for Weber the determination of a contrasting other against which the network mobilizes, achieving in collective form what the novel achieves for the individual reader. Thus, the targeting of the other that transpires in the narration of the story the network tells itself also constitutes the guilt (guilt over the killing of the figurative father) that then holds the network together not only through inspiration but by turning the network into an "irreducible virtuality". Weber's analysis is somewhat of a psychoanalytic tall order. The stability forged out of shared guilt relies both on a reading of patriarchal authority as irrevocably vexed and of the "allegorical-figural network" as marking the recurrence of the "fall," rather than the expectation of salvation.

Weber refers to Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to make this argument. He emphasizes that the difference between the soteriological narrative (*Heilsgeschichte*) and baroque allegory (exemplified by the German mourning play) is that the latter expresses conventional meaning theatrically and not doctrinally (because the theological and historical basis for its symbolic value has eroded), and that the allegory is tied to a politics of the court (realized also in the theatrical stage) and thus "marks the recurrence of the 'fall' rather than the coming of the resurrection," giving baroque allegory the endurance and stability of shared guilt (Weber, 2005, 105).

also in the mechanism of inclusion that ambivalently aggrandizes the Afghan interpreter as a source of knowledge and value.

The translator's position constitutes the ductile divide between language and violence, internalization and annihilation. Counter-insurgency is predicated on a wide range of techniques essential to combating "adaptive" and "agile" foes. These attempts to become a relativist and isomorphically flexible organization (like the network) are attempts to overcome the limits of conventional warfare by encouraging a mode of asymmetric fighting in which counterinsurgents can "come from behind." But first, counterinsurgents must establish themselves as a "learning organization" that harnesses cultural and linguistic difference. In this effort, counterinsurgents must prove to be "open to soliciting and evaluating advice from the local people in the conflict zone" because insurgents have the distinct "advantage" of cultural knowledge and linguistic fluency.⁶⁸

The translator's mishearing of *rakât* as rocket illustrates a series of associative relations that dangerously animate the space between an utterance, recalled traumatic images, and what was heard—but the translator's very incorporation into the US military as "source" and medium exemplifies a more complex relationship. The Afghan translator marks for his commander a possible threshold between life and death. He is both a source of doubt and tactical efficiency. His cultural and linguistic fluency are valorized and a source of abiding suspicion. Like the insurgents he is helping to find and interrogate, he might also be "one of them," susceptible at any given moment to theological and ideological inspiration by the transmission of a "narrative,"

⁶⁸ United States Department of the Army. U.S Army/Marine Corps counter insurgency field manual: U.S. Army field manual no. 3-24: Marine Corps war fighting publication no 3-33.5/ with forwards by General David H. Petraeus, and Lt. General James F. Amos, and by Lt. Colonel John A. Nagl: with a new Introduction by Sarah Sewell. University of Chicago Press, 2007, lii.

and always prone to a change of heart. More importantly, the instrumental passage into language (and cultural pedagogy) that he enables is first and foremost deployed to compensate for the loss of visual command and control over an insurgent population presumed, like its nomadic corollaries, to always be on the move.

The refusal to distinguish between insurgents and civilians extends to interpreters and also makes possible their ambivalent position. In *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, Roberto Esposito argues that an “immunitary” paradigm constitutes the “symbolic and material linchpin around which our social systems rotate.”⁶⁹ Immunity is pervasive, cutting across the biological, virtual, political spheres and providing us with a common discursive denominator. In this paradigm a contagion is neutralized through an acquired immunity which “functions precisely through the use of what it opposes...,” activating a protective mechanism that proceeds via a precarious balance between the protection and negation of life and the rejection and internalization of a foreign agent. This aporetic structure entails that life (understood as the domain of bios in which desire and liberty are translated into property) must submit to a hostile force (and the “taste of death”) if it is to sustain the immunitary apparatus that protects it from the unbridled excess of community and contagion: “Evil must be thwarted, but not by keeping it at a distance from one’s borders; rather, it is included inside them.”⁷⁰

The negation of the threat so crucial to immunity is also the obvious threshold at which immunity not only protects against violence but incorporates violence into its own working logic.

⁶⁹Esposito, Roberto. trns. by Hanafi, Zakiya. *Immunitas The Protection and Negation of Life*. Polity Press, 2011, pg. 2.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pg. 8

The dialectical figure of this exclusionary inclusion, the antidote, has its anthropological analog in the figure and body of the Afghan translator. The translator is a symbolic and strategic asset crucial to the military's COIN doctrine and the corporal site at which the idealized and the contagious violently intersect. The Afghan interpreter is "like" the soldier he assists but also "like" the insurgent he understands and identifies with. It is in this bind between a kindred and dangerous other, that he is caught "in the middle" as Zia describes, not only between languages but also between different social forms of organizing men in war. The translator's position is inherently ambivalent with regard to both soldiers and insurgents, neither of whom can afford to trust him entirely.

For the American counter-insurgency the importance of linguistic mediation is necessitated not by the logic of cultural and symbolic exchange but the exigencies of a shifting battlefield that is visually challenging: "Because the United States retains significant advantages in fires and technical surveillance, a thinking enemy is unlikely to choose to fight U.S forces in open battle. Some opponents have attempted to do so, such as Panama in 1989 and Iraq in 1991 & 2003. They were defeated in conflicts measured in hours or days."⁷¹ Counter-insurgents operate in an opaque atmosphere in which the mosaic of an insurgency is difficult to trace and visually capture. This obscurity combines with the porosity of geographic borders (such as the contested North West Frontier Province separating Afghanistan from Pakistan, a heterogenous area conveniently condensed into the acronym "Af-Pak"), a decentralized organizational structure, and transnational financial and weapons networks, all of which cement the notion that

⁷¹ US Army Field Manuel, section I-8, 3-4.

insurgencies operate in clandestine and cellular networks that make it “difficult to envision (them) as a coherent whole.”⁷²

This imaginative failure bespeaks more than the territorial and organizational frustrations of asymmetrical warfare. It also exemplifies that recognition is the core of an interpretive structure that brings an unremitting demand for resemblance to bear on socio-political structures otherwise deemed pathogenically contagious (because the Taliban have no centralized structure, anyone might be inspired to join them) and hopelessly obstinate. US military counter-insurgents are advised to take heed of this intractability and encouraged to “kill or capture” insurgents as “true extremists are unlikely to be reconciled to any other outcome than the one they seek.” Translating resistance as consent to be killed, the field manual offers the following hope: “with good intelligence, counterinsurgents are like surgeons cutting out cancerous tissue while keeping other vital organs intact.”⁷³

The constitutive paradox of immunity is captured in the COIN doctrine’s twin insistence on the annihilation of insurgents and the objectives of cultural and linguistic inclusion and translation: “In most COIN operations in which U.S. forces participate, insurgents hold a distinctive advantage in their level of local knowledge. *They speak the language, move easily within the society* (emphasis mine), and are more likely to understand the population’s interests. Thus, effective COIN operations require a greater emphasis on certain skills such as language and cultural understanding than does conventional warfare. The interconnected, politico-military

⁷² US Army Field Manuel, section I-37, 14.

⁷³ US Army Field Manuel, section I-126, 41.

nature of insurgency and COIN requires immersion in the people and their lives to achieve victory.”⁷⁴ The linguistic-cultural fluency of the insurgents is deemed a comparative advantage because insurgents resultantly “move easily within society,” a conflation of fluency with itinerancy. This fluency in language and terrain (recall that for Matin the most difficult part of translating was encountering dialect and slang that Afghans “took with them” when they left their villages) is the object of annihilation in a far-reaching campaign that seeks to “win hearts and minds.”

Language and the ideal of a transparent translation is summoned to rectify the obscurity of a shifting and nebulous terrain of guerrilla warfare. Linguistic transparency, in turn, requires a hyper-identification between soldiers and Afghan translators who provide prophylactic cover against an insurgency that, for the US military, cannot be dissociated from the civilian population. In the context of a war that doesn’t distinguish between civilians and insurgents the markers of distinction between collaborator and saboteur are also effaced, thereby allowing for a never-ending projection of suspicion. Nowhere is the fundamental ambivalence toward Afghans as clear as it is in the discussion of language and interpretation in the COIN manual’s telling appendix on “linguistic support.”

The Double Bind

The Afghan interpreter marks the conjunction between the limits of translation and the possibility of semiotic transparency and linguistic mimesis. Afghan “linguists” are categorically differentiated between “organic” linguists who are US citizens and fluent in both English and the

⁷⁴ US Army Field Manual, I-125, 40.

“host nation” languages of Persian and Pashto and inorganic locals. While organic linguists are “scarce commodities,” local Afghans are sourced from an “abundant resource pool” and possess an innate propensity for disloyalty: “If interpreters are local nationals, their first loyalty is probably to the host nation or ethnic group, not to the U.S. military.... Some interpreters, for political or personal reasons, may have ulterior motives or hidden agenda.”⁷⁵ The manual urges soldiers and marines to engage cautiously with local interpreters, building trust slowly so “deeply held personal beliefs” can be gently extracted and purposeful mistranslation and deceit detected.⁷⁶

Afghan interpreters must mirror the subjectivities of both the interviewee and the soldier, refraining from the introjection of his or her own emotions and speech patterns. The interpreter's flawless resemblance in diction, tone and expression is mobilized to do the work of closing cultural and signifying gaps and rendering further hermeneutic effort on the part of the “target audience,” or interviewees, futile. Their insistence on the free flow of dialogue and natural discourse are registered as interpretive failures that reveal the interpreter’s capacity for subterfuge. Accordingly, the manual dictates that interpreters should not engage in simultaneous translation and “while translating the interpreter should mimic the speaker’s body language as well as interpret verbal meaning...after speakers present one major thought in its entirety, interpreters then reconstruct it in their language.”⁷⁷ The mediating and cooperative Afghan may

⁷⁵ US Army Field Manual, C-3, C-15, 336, 338.

⁷⁶ US Army Field Manual, C-3, 336 & C-14, 338-339.

⁷⁷ US Army Field Manual, C-33, 343.

always regress into his “cultural predisposition to an indirect approach to conflict,” turning urban centers into cellular battlegrounds and entrusted weaponry into unsuspected instruments of terror. Language is tasked with clarifying relations that are predicated on the general opacity of protocols on the ground for determining the identification of insurgents.⁷⁸

Returning, again, to *rakât* and to Boas’s warning about hearing differently from different languages, we can situate that mishearing in the structural and symbolic ambiguities that infuse interactions between variously positioned and variously speaking subjects. The conundrum of the translator exceeds that of his ambivalent status in the US military as a strategic asset. It also involves being tasked with separating warring parties from peaceful civilians through the medium of translation at a time when language is both uninhabited by interrogated Afghans and threatening. The refusal to use personal pronouns and to “communicate what is in their hearts,” as Matin lamented, buttresses his fear about mistranslating and of being asked to translate a language (in that instance Pashto) that is a moving target, traveling with its speakers and threatening to “pour into” cities like Kabul, as he remarks.

Leaving behind villages and refusing to relinquish their dialects, those local Afghans displaced by the war are also the figures of resistance. The discourse of COIN and of the Afghan government, and also of the Afghan media is one of cultural and political transformation. This discourse maintains that the future of Afghanistan and the “survival of the nation” depends on the establishment of a democracy and free market. But procedural democracy and its spectacles of participatory elections require an optimism that is dissociated not only from the ongoing

⁷⁸ US Army Field Manual, I-52, 18.

violence of the war, but also from the ethno-linguistic fissures that rend Afghan society. The roving and voting Afghan are not the same.

The voting Afghan, whose image circulated so widely during the 2014 presidential election is one who says: “I” without hesitation. Captured by the ink-stained index finger and images of long lines at voting stations, the “I” of procedural democracy is not only an “I” that can be incorporated into a global and mass mediated circuit of images, but also an instance in which those subjects who do not use pronouns and are afraid to communicate “what is in their hearts” are cast as a people “without language,” as Matin describes. But they are also the uncanny markers of what, as Freud describes as “is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old established” estranged by a repression of the social and technological histories of a century of imperial warfare and propagandist violence.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny” in *Studies of Parapsychology*. Collier Books: New York, 1963, pg. 47.

3 The Whispering Campaign

A metallic rod is the modern harbinger.
Listen to the telephone;
the time of speechlessness is over.
Mahmud Tarzī

Covert Voices

On June 26, 1943 the London tabloid *Evening Standard* published an article, “Secret Axis Radio,” on the presence of a covert wireless station in Western Afghanistan, fifty miles from the ancient city of Herat (known earlier as Aria). Herat had captured the imagination of Ptolemy, Herodotus, Timur Lane, Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, who left behind a stunning citadel, and Rumi who likened the city to an oyster’s pearl. The greater Herat region was now the alleged site of a station broadcasting a clandestine radio voice that spoke in two directions, one toward Europe and the other beckoning Asia, the same directions that bound Afghanistan to the devastating passage of the twentieth century. The article explains that the twin voices announced secret messages that appeared meaningless, such as, “Tea will be ready at dinner time tonight,” but that the ghostly prattle was a deceptive cover for the coded exchange of Hungarian military information for Axis aircraft flying between Berlin and Tokyo.

The Hungarian announcer was ostensibly financed by the Berlin Academy of Science, and also an expert on Afghan tribes and dialects. It was a preposterous allegation. An official in the Foreign Office’s Eastern Department described it as “complete nonsense,” though he also

betrayed a preoccupation with “Axis intrigues in Afghanistan.”⁸⁰ He remarked that there had been a German expedition in Eastern Afghanistan, and that the population of the Nuristan region was of Greek origin; a racial ancestry that could be buttressed by German agents to solicit Afghan support for the Axis powers during the war. More dangerously, in the British imperial imagination, Afghanistan was: “a country which lends itself particularly well to German intrigue against Great Britain; for it borders on the North West Frontier of India; and to stir up trouble amongst the turbulent tribes of the borderland is an easy matter.”⁸¹

The preoccupations with furtive voices, deviant radio waves and restless tribes illustrates an anxiety that was the aggregate of multiple fears, hovering like cumulus clouds over the introduction of wireless telegraphy and radio-telephony. These were among the first mechanical technologies in Afghanistan to carry language. They separated time from distance by enabling nearly instantaneous communication and displaced voice from body. They were marvelous technologies that became, rather than familiar, increasingly uncanny with the passing of local and global time. They were interwoven with the Afghan experience of modern technology like the iron lattice of the twentieth century’s innumerable communication towers.

This chapter theorizes the prehistory to the contemporary war, in which a discourse of counter-insurgency and new modes of war making conceive of language as technology and as a medium through which to access subjects of violence and war-time propagandist efforts (the

⁸⁰Peel, Letter from Foreign Office's Eastern Department. London, 1943. Propaganda: Publicity Arrangements between India and Afghanistan (Kabul Radio Station). India Office Records, The British Library.

⁸¹ Excerpt From Telegram Sent From The Government Of India Department Of External Affairs To Secretary Of State For India In Simla. London, 1941. Propaganda British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Record, The British Library.

“hearts and minds” campaigns of the US military and State Department). The story of how techno-linguistic translation in the current war has come to assume this status (and is thought to be the ultimate means through which connectivity between persons otherwise separated by languages and ideology can be established) is also the story of how different technological orders (in moments of introduction and rupture) reconfigured a rich world of political and linguistic diversity into a permanent dyad between literacy and illiteracy. This reductionist opposition now informs translational efforts in deadly encounters between Afghan translators and civilians, encounters such as those instances when mishearing the words of the other is inextricable from the fantasy that translation should enable transparency and persuasion.

In Afghanistan, different media technologies neither constitute a straightforward history of acquisition nor abrupt junctures where one mode definitively displaced another. Rather, the concomitant presence of various technologies illustrates the complicated geo-strategic and ideological webs they were caught in and the force with which those ideologies would reconfigure linguistic plurality. The early and mid-twentieth century was a time of modernist aspiration as various Afghan governments sought to enhance their relationships with European states and to cement the authority of the central government in the Afghan countryside. In this context, the steady ingress of communication technology abetted the belief that media could enable immediacy and access to Afghans. British intelligence agents fantasized this connective power as political suasion, and thought it could prevent a frontier crisis which would further compromise England’s colonial authority in India.

Technological interruption (the breakdown of Afghan wireless stations and later the prohibition on cinema screenings) became inseparable from technological excess (the unconfined voices of radio broadcasts and cinema, and also the dangerous heterogeneity of telegraphic

transmissions that came not only from London, but also from Rome, Berlin and Tokyo during World War Two). Through a complex process of technological disavowal and capture, a recursive British discourse retrojected orality and illiteracy as the prior that technology could help mitigate. The abiding fantasy that communication technology could breach the gap, both between literate and illiterate cultures and between political ideologies, became the imagined site of linguistic failure and promise.⁸²

As we will see, orality was not only cast and re-cast as the prior, but also as the final solution in the face of technological prohibition. The introduction and silencing of technology, and also those moments of excess when mass-mediated voices and transmissions could not be contained, turned communication technology from a medium of fantasized access into one of dangerous proximity that threatened the cultural hegemony of Great Britain through telegraphic subversion. However, the introduction of cinematic propaganda displaced this anxiety with filmic images that communicated a threat to restore Afghanistan to its primal origins through industrial military violence. These alterations in technological possibility also transformed orality from the imagined prior ground on which different technological orders were introduced

⁸² This project of linguistic assimilation begins in Europe with what Benedict Anderson calls “print-as-commodity” and which signals the ‘age of mechanical reproduction’ and the rise of national consciousness (1991, 39). Anderson states that: “whatever superhuman feats capitalism was capable of, it found in death and languages two tenacious adversaries” (1991, 43) and the impossibility (he calls it the “fatality”) of “general linguistic unification” (and the incomprehensibility it entails) was the object of print technology’s assembling of languages into print languages (1991,43). Anderson argues: “Nothing served to ‘assemble’ related vernaculars more than capitalism, which, within limits imposed by grammars and syntaxes, created mechanically reproduced print-languages capable of dissemination through the market” (1991,44). This not only enables national consciousness but also creates “languages-of-power” and dialects that are closer to print-language. See: Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, New York: 1991.

In Afghanistan, telegraphy was always predicated on contact with English as a language-of-power that Afghans accessed initially through carbon copies (routed through India) and then directly when telegraphic services were established between Kabul and London.

(to mitigate the problem of illiteracy) to a technology of persuasion that reduces illiteracy to the target of translational labor in our contemporary moment.

The Wire

The Afghan encounter with modern technology began through the wire. Cable telegraphy was introduced after the third Anglo-Afghan War (1919) as a complex gesture of compensation, fettered even in those early days by the same political aims that eluded the British Government both in the Anglo-Afghan Wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in associated railway prospecting missions. That aim was the controlled centralization of the Afghan State, through which Britain sought to subdue Afghan tribes on its Indian frontier by enabling the movement of Afghan and British troops and information between Kabul and its peripheries. In the aftermath of failed and competing British and Russian plans to build a transnational Afghan railway in the 1920s, telegraphy was Afghanistan's first transformative technology. Its protean metallic rods were praised as harbingers of modernity by the poet and journalist Mahmud Tarzī, and the Afghan government was almost gleeful with anticipatory energy before signing radio-telephonic and radio-telegraphic agreements with various European and Asian governments that included Great Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union and Japan.

Members of the Afghan Government could finally communicate their messages and release their voices in an international network of imagined recipients, where the acts of listening and responding entailed an exchange, and offered the possibility of finally addressing the world through endless reproducibility. Members of the royal family and cabinet ministers ruminated over the diplomatic and political concerns they would communicate, extending political desires

into a future time bequeathed by technology and turning what Anderson describes as “infinite quotidian reproducibility” into the site of state power.⁸³ Their thoughts drifted into an electromagnetic field of possibilities, a galvanized destiny that would enable them to bypass colonial telegraph stations in Delhi and Simla and be in direct contact with European capitals. They would finally, after three Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839-1842, 1878-1880, 1919), be in touch with the British Foreign Office in London. Until that moment, its name and S.W.1 postal code had only been known through the telegraphic second hand of carbon copies that were sent to Kabul from the Indian Foreign Office, thin facsimiles that added to official communication a translucent reminder of distrust.

The end of the third Anglo-Afghan war, which finally established Afghanistan’s independence, was an exciting time. The state-led modernization of Amir Amanullah (1919-1929) promised an economic and cultural take off and the Afghan ruling elite saw in the telegraph’s taut wires a last but firm hope, drawn tightly around a life line to the modern era that had hitherto excluded them, but which overshadowed their every political calculation and gesture. Awash in dreams of a post-war and modern future, the Afghan government hoped that by agreeing to abide by international protocols they would also dislodge the skepticism of the British Government that had hampered their efforts to acquire telegraphic technology sooner. The Afghan Government acceded to the International Telecommunication Convention of Madrid

⁸³ By this Anderson refers to the census, map and museum as three institutions which enable the state to imagine its domain and legitimacy (1991, 163-164). Specifically, colonial archeology (which made museum practices possible) and an “archeological push” at a time when “more and more Europeans were being born in Southeast Asia” (1991, 181) was crucial in demonstrating the patrimony of the colonial state (and its imaginative practices) and depended on “infinite reproducibility” of print and photography (reports with photographs, illustrated books, postage stamps, etc.). It enabled a “pictorial census” of the state’s preservationist achievements and turned that reproducibility into the normal and quotidian demonstration of state power, which state officials were largely unconscious of (1991,183).

on October 3, 1935 and notified the Bureau of the International Telecommunication Union on February 3, 1939 that it had also accepted the Cairo Telegraph Regulations.⁸⁴

Soon after circuits were opened and the landscape transformed. Stations were built and telegraph posts were erected. Daily and evening wave-lengths were determined. In 1942, the Cairo Telegraph agreement also became the basis for the regulation of radio-telephony communication between Afghanistan and Great Britain. Rates were fixed at 1.80 gold francs per word and 36 gold francs for three minutes of radio telephonic communication. The languages of communication were agreed upon and included Persian, Pashtu, English and French.⁸⁵ The “back of the beyond,” Rudyard Kipling conjured as one of “the dark places of the earth, full of unimaginable cruelty, touching the railway and the telegraph on one side, and, on the other, the days of Harun al-Raschid,” was finally beaming, ensconced in the bosom of technology and its associated practices of modern state-craft.⁸⁶ Afghanistan became a place where, in lieu of trains, telegrams could finally go. They could spread news and winnow through the wire like little homing pigeons released from the lonely edge of the world.

But land-based telegraphy was a poisonous gift. Its circulatory powers became the site of rumor and suspicion, as the technology became more and more assimilated, incorporating in its wide span both the grandiose ambitions of the Afghan government and the imperial aims of its

⁸⁴ Correspondence From The Telecommunications Department, General Post Office, London To Under Secretary Of State, Foreign Office. London, 2015. Afghanistan: radio telegraphic and telephonic agreement between Afghan government and HMG. India Office Records, The British Library.

⁸⁵ Wylie, F.V. Memo. London, 1942. Afghanistan: Radio telegraphic and telephonic agreement between Afghan government and HMG. India Office Records, The British Library.

⁸⁶ Kipling, Rudyard. *The Man Who Would Be King: and Other Stories*. ed. by Stanley Appelbaum. Dover Publications Inc. New York: 1994, pg. 44.

British counterpart. The suspicions assumed political force, shaping perceptions of the Afghan government even after the Treaty of Friendship (which included the gift of cable telegraphy as a token of good will) was agreed upon by both states in July of 1920 in the aftermath of the third Anglo-Afghan War. Despite its status as a good of the modern era and a token of political good will, it was primarily intended to staunch the flow of pro-Bolshevik propaganda, and to dislodge a perceived Russian monopoly on Afghanistan's access to international news. From the perspective of the British Government, it was a suspect technology from the beginning and doubts were raised both about the Afghan Amir's integrity and the Afghan government's ability to stop the Bolsheviks from using the telegraph lines for their own purposes. In February of 1922 Sir Francis Humphrys, the first British minister in Kabul wrote:

“We learn from a very secret source that Bolsheviks will try to use for Herat and Kabul line telegraph material presented by us to Amir. It is most undesirable that effect of this gift should be to facilitate communication with Russia and you should exercise such pressure as may be possible to prevent this.”⁸⁷

The gift was always an ambivalent one and rumors of a Bolshevik take-over threatened British control, and also determined certain constraints.⁸⁸ It was presented to the Amir as a choice between 160 miles of double-wired steel telegraph posts, 10 large motor lorries and 20 new touring cars (American made and with spares) or 460 miles of steel telegraph posts. Two of the most visible signs of modernity, the car and the telegraph, could not be had at once. This

⁸⁷ Humphrys, Sir Francis Henry. Letter. London, 1922. India Office Records and Private Papers, India Office Records, The British Library.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of the political role of rumor in establishing state power (and also in determining the dissemination of written records based on the assumption that the public already knows their content through oral rumor) see Siegel James. “I was not there, but...”. In: *Archipel*, volume 46, 1993. L'Indonésie et son nouvel ordre. pg. 59-65.

turned the possibilities of modern communication and movement into a choice and into the prerogative of language. More than moving freely, to speak and be heard was to be modern.

Amir Amanullah chose the latter option, and soon after things took on a life of their own. Four hundred and sixty miles of firm steel posts between the British-Indian frontier and the cities of Kabul and Kandahar were built, incorporating the newly independent capital city into a capillary network of political intrigue and social desire that hung overhead like a large web of aerial cross wires. The telegraph was quickly incorporated into Afghanistan's physical terrain. Its poles were implanted in the soil of cities, and stations were built. Afghan youth were sent to India to be trained as telegraphists, and iron made its debut in the Afghan sky in a dramatic and vertical manifestation of change that could be looked up at, both in awe and anger.⁸⁹ No longer touching Afghanistan only on its frontier boundary, telegraphy shot through and connected major cities, also suturing geopolitical aims with a modern culture of verification that granted stories, official correspondences and ordinary communication with the fabulous guarantee of technological facticity now that telegrams could be directly exchanged, compelling people to believe in referents not unlike the violent magic of photography. But the promise of technology, of access and immediacy, was also a looming specter. It was precisely what couldn't be contained once incited.

⁸⁹ Rudolf Mrázek describes the laying of telegraph wires in Indonesia as the opening of the "old and... previously closed landscape" at the same time that radio broadcasting (an indoor activity) became the "organizing principle of a modern colonial house" (2002, 166-167). This relationship, between the alteration of the landscape and mass media of orality (radio broadcasting voices) turned the latter into a tool that "defined modern colonial space" as a space which could be made silent through the cutting of electricity and the switching "off" of radio voices (2002, 168). In this way, radio achieved what "railways, asphalt roads, and even wire telegraph or telephone hardly could," it cast the prior of mass mediated orality as silence. See: Mrázek, Rudolf, *Engineers of Happyland*. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2002.

Technology generated its own fear and fantasy. The threat of unwanted contact, initially with the Soviet Union and in later decades with Germany, Japan and Italy, turned the first moment of telegraphic silence into a consequential moment of political action. In 1922, Sir Humphrys reported to the Foreign Affairs Office that the Afghan Government approached him to request supplies to erect “with least possible delay” a land telegraph line between Torkham (a border town between Afghanistan and then British India) and Kabul as well as men to work the line until the Afghan students (who were in India undergoing an eighteen-month telegraphic course) would return. Humphrys described his satisfaction with the request and the urgency of the Afghan Government:

“I have been manouvering for some time to induce Afghans to prefer such a request, and have *lately taken advantage of the breakdown of Afghan wireless to urge the importance of regular through telegraphic communication with India* (emphasis mine). This will involve extension of one-mile line on British side of border of Landi Khana to Torkham. There would be telegraph offices, buildings for which are already available, at Dakka, Jalalabad, and Kabul, which would be open from 8am to 4pm. Required number of signallers, lines-men and inspectors would become temporarily the servants of the Afghan Government, and would be paid for by Afghans at rates considered suitably by Government of India. Inspectors would still be required after return of Afghan students from India”⁹⁰

For Humphrys the breakdown of the Afghan telegraph system introduced a rupture in the Afghan Government’s access to the world and an opportunity for political suasion. The breakdown was so jarring that the Afghan Government immediately sought both material and technological support (“without delay”) from the British Government, and also personnel and scientific expertise. Thus, that moment of consequential silence, perhaps the very first instance of telegraphic fissure, bound Afghanistan both to the technological expertise of the British

⁹⁰ Humphrys, Sir Francis Henry. Letter. London, 1922. India Office Records and Private Papers. India Office Records, The British Library.

Government and enabled the latter to re-assert its predominance in the face of competing Soviet attempts to incorporate Afghanistan into her sphere of influence. However, the very instance of rupture being mobilized to manipulate the Afghan Government to accede to a British monopoly on the reconstruction and maintenance of its telegraph stations was also the site of technology's uncontrollable powers. That same moment was recast as an opening through which clandestine Soviet activity could materialize:

“At present Russian Legation enjoys monopoly of up-to-date news of outside world, it is at first rather disturbing. We have been assured that the Russians have not been allowed to maintain a separate wireless installation, though a suspicion remains that the *“Afghans”* who have taken it over may be Russians nominally employed by the Afghans (emphasis mine). But the meaning, I suppose, is merely that the ex-Russian wireless, by whosoever worked, works only to Russian stations, so that, the wireless between Kabul and Peshawar having been out of order for some weeks past, all the telegraphic news that comes into Kabul at present comes from Russian sources, and is in practice apparently all addressed to the Russian Legation. If this reading of the position is correct, the relative disability of the British Legation is not due to discrimination but merely to temporary *mechanical misfortune* (emphasis mine). But the question naturally suggests itself whether, if the “Russian” station has been genuinely de-Russianised, *it could not, with good will, be arranged that this station should work to and from Peshawar also while the “British” station at Kabul is out of order* (emphasis mine).”⁹¹

Humphry's correspondences constitute a crucial shift in concern with mechanical failure, (whether it is the effect of discriminatory action or accident) to a fear of multiplicity and contagion. His second letter belies the triumphant tone of the first, locating in the possibility of “mechanical misfortune” the more menacing possibility of “Russianized” transmissions. Humphrys concludes by arguing that even when the British station is repaired the simultaneous transmissions of both a Russian *and* British station constitute bad political will on behalf of the Afghan Government. Thus, if the introduction of modern technology was presented as a choice

⁹¹ Humphrys, Sir Francis Henry. Demi-Official Letter. London, n.d. India Office Records and Private Papers. India Office Records, The British Library.

between the automobile and the telegraph, its continued functioning was premised on a choice between the origin of transmissions: either the United Kingdom or the Soviet Union.

The mechanical transmission of linguistic multiplicity became a liability at the same moment that communicative technologies were fantasized as the medium through which political differences (in the aftermath of three Anglo-Afghan wars) would be resolved, a potential that was both imputed by the Amir himself and that granted the telegraph an enormous power: it came to occupy the space between language and violence, carrying out the work of negotiations that would otherwise primarily take place through personal communication in an effort to stave off the possibility of the latter, an issue that was especially urgent given the ongoing Near East Crisis: “I warned the Afghan Foreign Minister that serious view might be taken of Russian monopoly, however accidental in origin, of telegraphic news, especially during recent Near East crisis, and have reminded him since of the urgency of that matter.”⁹²

Cable telegraphy coincided not only with political unrest but also the sudden possibility of diverse transmissions, each attended by different ideological aims and distinct fantasies about what they could enable. For the Afghan Amir, it was both a token of the modern era and the very medium through which he would assert his status as a “free agent” to the British minister in Kabul:

“I discussed the use of telegraph material yesterday with Amir alone in the absence of Foreign Minister, who is at Jalalabad. Amir pointed out that gift was unfettered by conditions, and that material was his absolute property to employ in whatever direction he pleased. I said that intention underlying the gift was clear, and use of material elsewhere other than Torkham-Kabul-Kandahar line could not fail to produce most unfavorable impression on His Majesty’s Government. Finally, Amir said he could not

⁹² Humphrys, Sir Francis Henry. Telegram. London, 1922. India Office Records and Private Papers, India Office Records, The British Library.

make me a promise, as this would savour of dictation in a matter in which he was a free agent, but, speaking as man to man, he informed me that material would be used between Torkham and Kabul, and between Kabul and Kandahar.”⁹³

Telegraphy was an emboldening technology. It encouraged the Amir to assert himself and also incited violence on the Indian border where telegraph stations and staff members were looted and lines were cut. If in Indonesia the cutting of wires by natives resulted in the Central Telegraph Office’s advice to closely watch the “line watchers,”⁹⁴ in Afghanistan those incidences did not solicit redoubled surveillance but became primary examples of “regular crimes” used by the British authorities to highlight a general and troubling Afghan culture of “lawlessness” that required military mobilization on the frontier.⁹⁵ The cutting of wires did not communicate the failure of an imperial optic but, more importantly, the specter of frontier movement by the Afghan tribes, who were already deemed dangerously itinerant and, as we’ve seen, killed for being “raiding parties” The contemporary fear that Zia and Matin express about nomadic populations (who spread misunderstanding and obfuscate the US military’s surveillance attempts), is in part rooted in this earlier fear that telegraphic subversion and physical itinerancy are two facets of a “lawlessness” that occurs despite the fantasy that communication technology could enclose colonial anxiety.

⁹³ Foreign and Political Department, Viceroy. Telegram. London, 1922. India Office Records and Private Papers. India Office Records, The British Library.

⁹⁴ Mrázek writes that the native cutting of wires (2002,167) was preceded by the threat posed by animals (especially elephants) and floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes. Thus, the threat of native rioting and unrest was already understood against the natural threat of the landscape, and came to inform the idea that radio could create a “new landscape” (2002,169), and move people inside of homes “to move closer to the radio set, and to make the house even more all-electric...” the house and the radio set “were expected to enclose, keep away, or, best of all, absorb without a trace all the anxiety there was.” (2002, 170).

⁹⁵ Crimes against telegraphic infrastructure featured regularly in correspondences between British officials in the Political and Secret Annual Files 1924: IOR L/PS/11/243, in the India Office Record, British Library.

Soon after diplomatic stand-offs were instigated and the powerful novelty of the telegraphic gift became a discourse on cultural superiority. In 1923, when land-line telegraphic communication between London and Kabul was inaugurated, a small diplomatic row erupted over who should send the first congratulatory message. Amir Amanullah and King George V, each awaited a note of thanks from the other. It was a telling moment of confusion over which country benefited *the most* from the telegraphic connection. When the Afghan Amir did finally send the first message, he used it to clear an unobstructed place for himself in a modern world of political crisis. He urged King George to take heed of Muslim suffering in the Near East and imbued his message with political import in lieu of customary formality.

Through the wire, a politics of nationalism and Pan-Islamic solidarity travelled through telegraph posts and across regions. It was as if the materiality was inspiring. The hard and contiguous capacity to link cities and continents, earlier separated by a lack of infrastructure and technology, had a grip on the Amir's imagination. He felt encouraged to be bold and tough, to speak from the steely edge of a new and independent angle of repose. The Amir took heart in the telegraph. He turned the cable-based transmissions into a declaration of equally tangible political solidarity and the possibility of a Pan-Islamist alliance. The telegraph was the stuff of progress, envisioned alternatively:

“On the occasion of the inauguration of telegraphic communication between Afghanistan and Great Britain I have the honour to express my sincere gratitude to your imperial majesty for the facilities rendered by the officials of your majesty's government in the progress of the work. I hope the installation of this telegraphic communication will be the key to good relations between Afghanistan and Great Britain. I do hope that the British imperial government would in view of her obligations toward humanity and civilization consider the miseries and misfortunes of the Muslims as a matter of great importance in

order that the friendly relations which existed for a long time between Great Britain and the whole Muslim world might be re-established. Amanullah, Amir of Afghanistan.”⁹⁶

But the telegraph and all of its hard-wired and towering materiality never relinquished its status as foreign. Its technological alterity threatened to mitigate Afghanistan’s political independence. Just as quickly as it fastened itself onto the natural landscape, it was also contested and cut into. The telegraph and its wires, veritable channels of transmission that suddenly condensed, encoded, and relayed language across distances most Afghans would never cross, also enabled an ambivalent relationship to temporality. It introduced, along with the possibility of addressing the modern world, an anticipatory perspective on the future that was inseparable from technology’s representational powers. Afghan nationalism would either triumph by completely domesticating new technologies, or in the event of failure, would free itself from their ingress. The future became the anticipated *mise en scène* where the wars of the past would be fought, where they could recur at a time when everything ethereal was suddenly becoming solid. Telegraphy would either hasten or completely foreclose Afghanistan’s attempts to enter the modern fray on its own terms, a hesitant entry that would be soon forgotten.

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Friedrich Kittler remarks that telephony and telegraphy became the technological supplements of the central nervous system. They augment the functions of the ear and mouth, and they alter the human experience of memory and self-awareness. They enable the storage of

⁹⁶Amanullah, Amir. Copy of telegram. London, 1923. India Office Records and Private Papers. India Office Records, The British Library.

language and sound, and the technologization of memory.⁹⁷ Orality and its poetic capacity to expand the threshold of memory, one that gave, in the words of Nietzsche, "...thoughts a new color, making them darker, stranger and more remote," waned with the technologization of memory.⁹⁸ That storage, in turn, makes it possible to be critical of one's speech and "solve a problem that literature had not been able to tackle on its own, or had only been able to tackle through the mediation of pedagogy: to drill people in general...to adopt a pronunciation purified by written language."⁹⁹ But it also turns humans into channels for abstract forces like the music hits that we can't help but sing along to, or the gramophone tunes that typists unwittingly kept pace with, turning music into another "cheaply purchased miracle," that enables the extraction of additional labor power.¹⁰⁰ Technology enables a mindless forgetting. Something like this happened in Afghanistan after the introduction of telegraphy, and a loss touched the Afghan

⁹⁷ Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Flim, Typewriter*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Writing Science. Stanford University Press, 1999, pg. 28.

⁹⁸ Although Kittler, citing Nietzsche on poetry, emphasizes the role of poetry in augmenting memory, for Nietzsche poetry is utilitarian because it shapes words, enabling a more rhythmic petition to the gods: "In those ancient times in which poetry came into existence, the aim was utility, and actually a very great utility. When one lets rhythm permeate speech—the rhythmic force that reorders all the atoms of a sentence, bids one choose one's words with care, and gives one's thoughts a new color, making them darker, stranger, and more remote—the utility in question was superstitious" (1974, 138). Nietzsche also remarks that poetry binds the present to the future, enabling the future to be modeled as if by rhythmic compulsion: "Asking for prophecy meant originally (according to the etymology of the word that seems most probable to me) to get something determined...as the formula is pronounced, with literal and rhythmical precision, it binds the future" (1974,140). Thus, Nietzsche's reading of the origin and function of the poetic is more complicated than Kittler intimates. See Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books, New York: 1974. For Nietzsche the poetic compels and reveals, like the logic of technology for Heidegger, which he describes as a "bursting open" (1977, 10). See Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. Harper & Row Publishers, 1977.

⁹⁹ Kittler, 1999, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Kracauer, Siegfried. *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*. Translated by Quintin Hoare. London; New York: Verso, 1998, pg. 43.

State during a time they hoped would be the dawn of post-war technological and political redemption.

If the introduction of telegraphy enabled the dissemination of Amir Amanullah's Pan-Islamist political overtures and the violent ambivalence illustrated by frontier attacks on telegraph stations and personnel, some ten years later this political temerity was supplanted with an enthusiastic embrace of technology at the same time that the early post-war (1919) British faith in their technological bequest was displaced by cynicism.¹⁰¹ But the more the Afghan government became enthusiastic, and desired to be modern, the less they were trusted.¹⁰² Reliability, and the presumption that the Afghan government could not be trusted with telegraphic content (which is to say a technology of mechanical reproduction) became a matter of wartime policy. In fact, as far as the British Government was concerned, propaganda was seen as the only benefit of establishing wireless communication with Afghanistan:

“From the practical point of view there is, of course, little or no advantage to be gained from instituting radio-telegraphic and radio-telephonic communication with Afghanistan since it would not be safe to trust the Afghans with the handling of official communications for our Minister by wireless, and the volume of public business apart from this is likely to be very small. However, the Afghans are obviously anxious to conclude agreements with us, having already done so with Germany, Russia, Turkey, and Italy and there may be some political advantage to be gained from meeting their wishes...It will have to be made clear to the Afghans, however, that it will not be

¹⁰¹ Propaganda was seen as the only benefit of establishing wireless communication between the UK and Afghanistan. See: Coverley-Price, A.V. Memo. London, 1940. Secret and Political Department Files. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹⁰² With media technology the question of trust is a matter of verification that is not just about the hermeneutics of transmission (i.e. what telegrams *really* say) but also a constitutive impossibility that owes itself to the structure of media. Media technology dissolve the “feedback loops” that make it possible to hear oneself speak or see oneself write. They are, as Kittler describes, a “second order” that registers communicative events (acoustic, typographical, etc.) (1999, 23). Similarly, frequency (vibrations per second) quantifies movements too fast for the eye (1999, 24).

possible to bring public radio-telephone communication into operation until after the end of the war.”¹⁰³

The eagerness of the Afghans became the source of British paranoia. Aside from a fear of an Islamist-Axis alliance, evidenced for British intelligence by Afghanistan having signed radio-telegraphic agreements with Turkey, Germany and Italy, this ideational shift (the cynicism of the British Government and enthusiasm of the Afghan Government) was also enabled by the steady centralizing efforts of the Afghan State and its wish to marginalize Soviet political influence. This was a political conjuncture already suffused with material history and with technological turns not taken. The urban and rural divide that characterizes translational violence in the contemporary moment, was at this moment the site of infrastructural lack which required the supplement of communication technology. For the British Government the gift of telegraphy was an attempt to compensate for their failed efforts at incorporating Afghanistan via the Indian-Khyber Railway System, and for the Afghan government the appeal for enhanced technologies was an equally important attempt to compensate restrictions on travel between Kabul and the countryside. Then, as now, poor road conditions make the movement of troops and civilians difficult if not impossible.¹⁰⁴

These fantasies of iron-work and movement, and closing the divide between rural lawlessness and urban centers of control, were realized in telegraphic form, a substitution that also enabled a retreat from the Soviet-Union, and its threats to “Bolshevize” Afghan institutions. Faiz Muhammad Khan, the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs, discussed this in 1932 with Sir

¹⁰³ Economic and Overseas Department, Secretary. Secret Political Minutes Memo. London, n.d. File PZ 5086/40 in the Telegraph and Postal File. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹⁰⁴ In the early 1930’s the Afghan government had the triple aim of improving telephone, telegraph and road conditions between Kabul and the provinces of Northern Turkestan and the Hindu Kush in order to consolidate its authority and counter Russian influence.

Richard Roy Maconachie, the British minister in Kabul. Faiz Muhammad Khan explained that Russian demands on the Afghan government included an increase of cotton cultivation with Russian agricultural assistance in Afghan Turkestan, an agreement for a Soviet purchase of the whole crop, a demand for a monopoly of the sale of oil products in Afghanistan, a demand for an additional Russian consulate, a monopoly on the purchase of Afghan “*karakuli*” (lamb skin), and compensation suffered from locusts (they had ostensibly flown into Russia and destroyed crops), to which the Faiz Muhammad Khan humorously replied that the Afghan government would compensate for the damage only if the locusts were found with Afghan passports.¹⁰⁵

For Maconachie, the Russian demand for extra-territorial rights for trade officials signified “nothing less than a network of spies and propagandists all over Afghanistan up to the India border.”¹⁰⁶ These Russian demands were perceived as propagandist at the same time that radio-telephony and telegraphy found their new audience in the Afghan Government, proving to them through direct wireless contact with Europe that they had in fact become modern. Afghan excitement over the introduction of wireless telegraphy was inextricable from the concomitant Soviet fantasy of the extended Afghan pastoral scene and a British fantasy that Russian policy in Afghanistan was nothing short of a plan to send spies to the Indian border.

The Soviet discourse on Afghan primitivism would later govern how the Soviet army fought during the Afghan-Soviet War of 1979-1989. But first Afghanistan would be ensnared in World War Two, which loomed in the European metropolis at the same time that Afghanistan

¹⁰⁵ Maconachie, Richard Roy. Letter to British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in London. London, 1932. Soviet-Afghan telegraph wireless agreement. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

began its excursion into technological modernity. World War Two would spawn a new era of talk and secrets that quickly made their way into Afghan radio waves and ears, bringing the modernist ambitions of the Afghan Government in close and uncomfortable proximity to the political aims of its British counterpart. Just as the wire had emboldened the Afghan imagination of technology, wireless begat its own passing fancies. In 1933 (though wireless technology would not be inaugurated until 1947) it was decided that the British Marconi company would introduce electrical telegraphy by outfitting Afghanistan with two short-wave telegraph and telephone stations and two power plants in Kabul and Herat.

The short-wave transmitters were designed for use in land stations where a higher degree of frequency consistency enabled a smooth transition between wavelengths (as compared to ship to shore service), and unexpectedly harmonized Afghanistan's land-locked predicaments with the post-war political aims of the British government and the ambitions of its telegraphic counterpart, the Imperial and International Communications Company.¹⁰⁷ The rippling doubts of the Afghan Government were displaced by a seamless faith in technology. It was as if their apprehensions were banished along with the cables, both of them swallowed whole by the sea.

Bertolt Brecht said that with the invention of the radio it became "suddenly possible to say everything to everybody but, thinking about it, there was nothing to say."¹⁰⁸ But this wasn't the case in Kabul. Silence neither loomed as the alienated reality behind technological production, nor revealed itself to Afghans as shelter from the dangerous powers of language, the

¹⁰⁷ Marconi Company, File, n.d. Afghanistan: telegraph, telephone and wireless services. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

¹⁰⁸ Brecht, Bertolt. 'The Radio As A Means Of Communication: A Talk On The Function Of Radio', 1979. <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/3-4/24.full.pdf>.

way it does now when linguistic difference and speech have become the basis for violent war-time interaction. Things were different in the anticipated lead up to the mid-twentieth century, when the rest of that century might still have made good on its promise of modernity and its bid to incorporate Afghanistan into the sphere of Asiatic late-development, portending a larger and more important role for state officials and proliferating a need to talk. The ruling Afghan elite immediately relished electrical telegraphy and radio-telephony and they became, with all of their novel complexities, the ascendant sphere of technological communication.

News poured in from abroad, from the *khârij*, most Afghans would never lay eyes on. It reached and captivated its new audience with information about the vast expanse of an industrialized and European elsewhere that was now in direct contact with Kabul, a city long fought over and belatedly addressed. News was plentiful. There were tales of cultural and military achievements, stories of wars won and lost, and the rise of evil ideologies; or, the effects of naval sea power in war, the output of factories and farms, the staggering loss of life, the story of a total war finally put behind though it also lay just ahead. The *khârij* and its second total war would soon turn that mediated address into the basis of a relentless suspicion of being overheard, and into the presumption that Afghans were listening without having been addressed. These accusations of transgression and listening would embroil Afghanistan in decades of political propaganda, granting with each technological turn, the status of the mass-mediated voice and later the world of cinematic images with unprecedented powers.

The experience of the Afghan twentieth century was in part the story of how this new world of images and voices began to co-exist, spawned by the perceived failures of earlier technologies and bound to both the Afghan imagination of change and a European insistence on hegemonic continuity, on things as they were. On June 1, 1947, the first wireless telegraph was

sent directly from London to Kabul. The transmission took the form of congratulatory messages sent between the Afghan Ministry of Communication and the London based Cable and Wireless Corporation. They read:

From: Cable and Wireless Company London.

To: H.E the Afghan Minister of Communications

On the establishment of the first wireless telegraph service between Kabul and London, I take this opportunity of offering my congratulations to Your Excellency and hope that this service would tend to bring these two countries close to one another. I assure you of the highest degree of cooperation which the Cable and Wireless Company are desirous of rendering to Your Excellency's Ministry, with a view to ensuring that each of us achieve our aims.

From: H.E the Afghan Minister of Communications

To: Cable and Wireless Company London.

It is with utmost gratification that I convey to you my congratulations on the establishment of direct wireless communication service between Kabul and London. I also convey to you my gratitude for the first wireless telegraph message which you so kindly addressed to me. I am confident that the continuity in the direct radio-telegraph service will contribute to strengthen further the good relations subsisting between the two countries.¹⁰⁹

Both of these were hopeful messages. They located in wireless telegraphy an imagined concordance between different political aims and national interests, as if magically equalizing them through the currents of electrical transmission. Print media enveloped wireless media and that first transmission travelled further, making its way into the Afghan newspaper *Islah* which printed the text of the telegrams on June 5, 1947 and transformed them into the objects of mass

¹⁰⁹ Extract from the Kabul based newspaper *Islah* no 247 dated 5th June, 1947 reproduced in a June 14th, 1947 letter from British Minister in Kabul Sir Giles Frederick Squire to Ernest Bevin, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in London, file 7033, in L/PS/12/4106, India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

mediated reproduction for the Kabul based class of literate readers, and also for the friends, relations, and colleagues who would listen to them read it aloud. Ears were sharp and attuned. Expectations were sourced from historical disappointments. Imported transmitters and telegraphists were enabled by a large labor supply, and financed by global capitalism. All of it was unified by modernist aspiration, and the earlier calls of anti-colonial and Pan-Asian solidarity (which had been expressed just a decade ago and given England pause and concern) fell on deaf ears. Telegraphy, and soon after telephony, became powerful metaphors for the dawn of modernity, breaking through and finally spreading against the canvas of a shared social consciousness with colorful optimism.

Kabul was finally in direct contact with the “great capitals” of the world. It was the beginning of a renewed confidence, one that had been carefully predicted by William Kerr Fraser-Tytler, the new British Minister in Kabul, when he wrote to London about the Marconi telegraph installation, remarking that the Afghan government was:

“pleased with their new and expensive toy and are naturally anxious to use it as much as possible. It would certainly add to their self-esteem to know that they were in direct communication with London as well as with the other great capitals of the world. The general effect however is in some small degree comparable to that of the establishment of the Lufthansa air services between Berlin and Kabul of which I wrote in 1938: ‘So far as German influence in Afghanistan is concerned it is a valuable piece of propaganda, providing as it does the one direct link between this country and Europe, and giving the undoubted impression that in Europe Afghanistan will find their first and warmest welcome in Berlin.’”¹¹⁰

Circuits were abuzz and the British Marconi Company was asked to install a 10,000 line telephone switchboard. Direct radio telegraph services were also established between Kabul and

¹¹⁰ Frazer Tytler, William Kerr. Memo to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1940. India Office Records and Private Papers. India Office Records, The British Library.

New York City, Moscow, Tokyo, Berlin, and Rome.¹¹¹ Wireless telegraphy and telephony became the emblems of both modernist aspiration and nationalist loyalty. Messages and voices were suddenly disembodied, unhinged from their origins and set loose on a magical international grid enabled by electrical and radio transmission, a grid full of listeners newly revealed by the promise of modernity and the work of capital. Messages travelled from transmitter to receiver, metropole to frontier and mouth to ear, connecting markets and ministries and forming a riveting new atmosphere that inspired Afghans.

Rumors, news, paranoia, subterfuge and talk between lovers travelled between persons and cities on relays that carried language long before there was the infrastructure to carry persons. Voices transcended not only bodies but also the limitations of a topographic and political landscape that prevented the formation of a national rail or road network during the earlier decades of anti-colonial resistance and the Anglo-Afghan wars, decades when crimes against the telegraph wire constituted the “frontier lawlessness” the British Government feared might instigate general unrest on the Afghan border.

Telegraphy surpassed what the poet Mahmud Tarzī reduced to the slow-gaited camel and its straddling messenger. It was a protean technology that quickly shaped a new world of cross-cutting communications ranging from romantic and diplomatic messages to literary-aesthetic production. Mahmud Tarzī’s poem, “*bugzasht-u raft*” (“it is over”) illustrates this spirit:

¹¹¹ Kabul Charge d’affaires, Memo to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in London, 1945. Afghanistan: telegraph and telephone services. India Office Records and Personal Papers, The British Library.

“The time for poetry and versification is over
The time for magic and sorcery is over...
The age of the camel, that slow-gaited creature, is over...
The telegraph connects East and West
The age of traveling messengers is over.
A metallic rod is the modern harbinger
Listen to the telephone;
the time of speechlessness is over.”¹¹²

For Tarzī, the telegraph not only connected East and West, displacing the age of travel messengers with the immediate connectivity promised by electricity, but also promised the end of poetry as art, as that which was not yet a profession.¹¹³ Tarzī’s poem illustrates how the mechanical reproduction of speech was also experienced as the death of orality, the end of a “time of versification” and personal messengers that became superfluous with new technology. In its stead, Afghans newly yearned for disembodied voices, estranged by cultural and physical distances, and now addressed through the magic of the telephone receiver and its ability to bind those voices to the labors of memory and imagination, to make them seem close by again. But the British Legation, which was afraid of being overheard, was also listening in. It reported to London on November 15, 1947 that the Afghan Government wanted to use radio telephone communication for private purposes:

¹¹² Cited in Ahmadi, Wali. *Modern Persian Literature In Afghanistan*. Routledge Press, 2008, pg. 53-54.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

“They say, and with much apparent force, that if they do not mind transacting government business over a line which is not confidential they do not see why anyone should object to a private or business conversations on this ground. What in fact they want this communication for is primarily so that members of the Royal Family may talk to their relations in London and I believe that it has been so used for such purposes almost exclusively during the experimental period. Ahmad Ali has spoken to his wife almost every week. The Afghans are therefore very keen that there should be no restrictions made on the use to which this telephonic link is put.”¹¹⁴

Levied in Parity

Ahmad Ali, who had served just two years earlier as the Afghan ambassador in London and undoubtedly an avid telephone user, was perhaps still enchanted by hearing a kindred voice in Kabul from a distance of 3,546 miles away. But even if telegraphic communication could not be contained, the going rate of messages was fantasized as preventing a deliberate forcing of communication onto wireless circuits. The standardized price of telegrams, set in gold francs, served as a defense against the deception of disembodied voices:

“ The Gov of India, in connexion with the proposed parallel agreement for the institution of a wireless telegraph service between Afghanistan and India, have drawn attention to the desirability of the rate for wireless messages being the same as that for messages sent by cable, because of the danger that if the rate for the former is higher than that for the latter the Afghan Government might deliberately make communication by landline difficult in order to force traffic on to the wireless circuit. I am to enquire in this connection how the rate of 1.80 gold francs per word, which Cable and Wireless Limited have informed the Afghan Administration that they will be ready to accept, compares with the charge for cable messages between Afghanistan and the United Kingdom.”¹¹⁵

While Ahmad Ali and his wife were talking, wireless technology began to threaten cultural and political hierarchies in novel ways. Their introduction in Kabul was soon followed by a deluge of anxiety over whether international regulations were being implemented, leading to

¹¹⁴ British Legation in Kabul, 'Letter To Mr. Donaldson In The Commonwealth Relations Office In London'. Letter, 1947. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

¹¹⁵ Steel, C.E. Letter to the Director General of Post Office, 2015. Telegraph and Postal. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

accusations of technological and moral misdemeanors by Sir Francis Verner Wylie, the British Minister in Kabul in 1943:

Dear Caroe,

You will remember that when the International System of accounting was introduced in Kabul, telegrams from Kabul to London had to be booked and paid for in Kabul right through to destination, whereas previously we had only been paying, in Kabul, the cost of the telegrams to India where they were redirected. *At the same time, telegraph charges in Kabul were levied in parity with the uniform scale of charges in gold francs in operation in all countries where the international regulations were in force* (emphasis mine).

2. Recently Engert, the American Minister, informed me that they were saving money by addressing their telegrams to Delhi from where they were re-addressed to Washington. We examined this procedure and found that in fact, although the charges on such telegrams amount to 15 gold centimes more per group, the procedure provided a saving of about Rs. 5-10 (Indian) per group. The reason for this will be readily understood from the attached note.

3. Unfortunately it was also found that this procedure was morally, if not technically contrary to the International Regulations... Such breaches of the rules are of three kinds. *Firstly, while admitting that all Government telegrams automatically have priority as such, they are unable to accept our decision as to what order of priority should exist between them* (emphasis mine). Thus, in order to ensure that any really urgent telegrams lying in the telegraph office from the previous day, we have to mark it "immediate" and pay double charges. Such double charges are, of course not catered for anywhere in the Regulations. Secondly, although Government code telegrams are supposed to be sent at preferential rates, this is never done as the Afghan authorities naively say that they cannot afford to do this. Thirdly, we are always charged for repeated telegrams even though the repetition indicates errors in the original telegram.

4. I am reporting these facts as they will probably be of interest to you and will indicate what goes on in the telegraph office here, *whose potential nuisance value might, if used willfully to corrupt our telegrams, far outweigh the advantages...* (emphasis mine).¹¹⁶

The Government of India and the British Foreign Office found itself suddenly close to the Afghan government, closer and audible, and anxious about having dislodged a long established technological hierarchy as the Afghan Government was either willfully or mistakenly ignoring

¹¹⁶ British Legation in Kabul, Letter to O.K., Caroe, Esquire CSI Secretary to the Government of India in External Affairs Department, 1943. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

the scale of charges that had earlier granted its telegraphic agreements a standardized value, securing at the very least the cost of telegrams if not always their content. The Afghan Government's breach of established charges unleashed a repetition in error for which the British Government was charged, a double charge that not only indicated monetary theft but also a loss of control as telegrams seemed to take on a second life of their own, transmitted without purposeful origin or imperial intention. The repetition enabled my mechanical reproduction suddenly seemed nefarious. The telegraphic iterations that defied the British government's "order of priority" became the uncontrollable reverberations that would echo through the Marconi transmitter's GMX 15020 kc/s territorial call sign and wavelength, not as the manifestation of synchronized political interests but as an uncomfortable and sudden proximity between London and Kabul that spawned deception through the necessary iterations of technological transmission.

This deceptive closeness dissolved the distance forged out of decades of political and military contention (and also economic and technological inequality). It suddenly enabled the presence of the unknown (as theft, repetition, the reversed order of priority and unintended communication) to materialize in the interstices of telegraphy. This undoing was not an entirely new apprehension. Electrical telegraphy enables instantaneous contact as much as it does the moving speed of information. For Marshall McLuhan, electricity and especially electrical telegraphy lie at the heart of a profound social transformation from mechanical and fragmentary social relations to the instantaneous and expansive experience of contact with the world, with everyone everywhere.¹¹⁷ McLuhan describes electricity as organic. It creates interdependence

¹¹⁷ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet Books, 1964, pg. 218.

both between persons (their languages, desires, anxieties) and between institutions (for example the disparate news sources that became the Associated Press): “This peculiarity about the electric form, that it ends the mechanical age of individual steps and specialist functions, has a direct explanation. Whereas all previous technology (save speech, itself) had, in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system itself, including the brain”.¹¹⁸

Kabul’s new electrical field extended far beyond contact with kindred relations in London. It created a global scene in which events and persons became newly available. These powerful impulses were intuited and fixated on by the British Legation in Kabul, which reproduced the newspaper text of telegraph agreements between Afghanistan and Axis countries in an effort to discern the amount (and of course the fantasy of accessing the content) of communication that was transpiring on the basis of established rates, which is to say its affordability. The *Islah* of September 8th 1940 published the following details regarding direct radio telegraphic and telephonic services between Kabul, and certain foreign countries.

- (a) Germany. Direct telegraphic and radio-telephonic service was inaugurated on 6th March, 1940. Charges are Rs. 6.25 Afghani per word for en claire telegrams and Rs. 3.75 per word for code telegrams. Persons desirous of telephonic conversation with Berlin can carry this out at 1300 hours on Mondays and Thursdays at a charge of Rs. 120 Afghani.
- (b) Japan. A radio-telegraphic service was started on 1st July, 1940. Charges for en claire and code telegrams are Rs. 7.50 and Rs 4.50 Afghan per word respectively. Press messages are dispatched at a cost of Rs. 2.40 Afghani per word.

¹¹⁸ McLuhan’s concept of mechanical and organic relations are originally Durkheimian concepts, the former referring to segmentary relations that entail less interdependence than the organic and highly interconnected relations that are the result of a division of labor (McLuhan, 1964, 218-219).

(c) Italy. Negotiations are still in process, but a radio-telegraphic service commenced on 1st September, 1940. Charges are Rs. 5. 60 Afghani per word for en claire and Rs. 3.35 Afghani per word for code telegrams. ¹¹⁹

The reproduction of the cheaper rates became the evidentiary basis of unfettered Afghan contact with the world. The British Government soon pressed the Afghan government to purchase additional encoding technologies, fearing they had traipsed into a minefield of possible sabotage and overhearing. On one hand, the Marconi transmitter and receiving stations displaced the disappointment of the British, when Afghanistan refused the laying of railway lines, with a confidence that in telegraphy the British had achieved what the Germans only managed to do by introducing direct Lufthansa flights from Frankfurt to Kabul. On the other, it was a source of possible subterfuge, a contamination of the efforts and intentions so carefully considered and now vulnerable to the immaterial powers of technology.

The earlier fears about the “lawless” frontier that threatened the territorial integrity of British India was encrusted with a new fear of being overheard through the bold openings of a technology that concealed its political force (or potential for subterfuge) through repetition. We will return to the question of the relationship between repetition and photography in order to discern how it directly bears on the Afghan State’s self-understanding in the contemporary moment, when it displaces the content of speech with the truth-value of photographs that depict terroristic intention. But in the 1940’s, the Afghan government didn’t share the qualms of its British counterpart and responded to those requests by saying that their messages, transmitted in Pashto, were sufficiently illegible. For them, linguistic difference was a sufficient defense and

¹¹⁹ Extract from intelligence summary no. 37 for the week of September 13th, 1940 from the British Legation in Kabul. File # PZ 5913/40 in “Radio Telegraphic and Telephone Services between the Afghan Government and HMG” in India Office Records and Private Papers: IOR: l/ps/12/4106, the British Library.

the transition from land-based to electrical telegraphy didn't portend a fear of invisible presences or the possible dangers of its revelatory powers; the work of translation would be insufficient to bridge the gap between intentions and meanings. The capacity to close hermeneutic gaps through additional technological concealment (encoding) or through being overheard was superfluous in contexts of linguistic difference. The Afghan encounter with modern technology was made in earnest. As far as they were concerned, in those early decades of state led development and modernist frenzy, there was “no ghost in the machine.”¹²⁰

British paranoia steadily increased in pitch and erupted in cacophonous acts of destruction and sabotage. The Afghan Government was suspected of deliberately making communication harder via landlines in order to force traffic onto wireless circuits, which were suspected of being deliberately jammed by enemies:

“The Afghan Government's suggestion that this matter may be settled under the International Telegraph Regulations is not so sound as it appears to be. The relevant articles certainly give the sender the right to route telegrams as desired, but the provisos in Article 387 seem to give a loophole which might in practice be used as a reason for sending official telegrams by wireless. This would be undesirable not only from the security angle, but because of our special arrangements whereby the Government of India receives copies of all telegrams to and from Kabul.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ In “The Ghost in the Machine,” John Pemberton argues that the archived photographs of traditional rituals and modern technologies (like telegraph lines and radio towers) reveal not only a photographic obsession that associates culture with tradition and technology with modernity, but another obsession which transcends that binary: “a truly singular obsession with a force that is (now) ritual, (now) mechanical, (perhaps always) habitual. This is the force of repetition, of repetition itself” (2009,31). This force directly effects the camera, which is “drawn to a scene of repetition and enmeshed, momentarily, with the click of its shutter...” (2009,33). The precise moment when the camera should have the advantage of a critical distance from its subject, is the moment when “the machine consumes its own mechanism of reproduction” (2009,33) in Rosalind Morris, ed. *Photographies East*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

¹²¹ Extract from a note sent by the Deputy Secretary of the Government of India in the External Affairs Department to His British Majesty Envoy Extraordinaire and Minister plenipotentiary at the court in

Wireless technology increasingly became the hallmark of sabotage. It also solicited nostalgia for the wire: “Transmission by cable is ...generally considered to be preferable to wireless. In present circumstances owing to the possibility of jamming of wireless by the enemy this consideration appears to be even stronger. The only messages of ours that ever go by wireless are those for the Persian Gulf and then only on rare occasions when there is an interruption in the cables.”¹²²

Telegraphy, earlier aggrandized by the British as a defense from infiltration (Axis, Soviet, and American), was beginning to fail. It gave way to a haunted technology at a time when British colonial authority was waning. The disavowal of efforts that introduced the Afghan Government to modern technologies of communication in the first place was also a fear that language and ears might go awry and give way to indiscernible presences: to ghostly voices like the ones presumed to speak through the secret wireless station that haunted the radio-waves of Herat and that now threatened to compromise the political secrets of the Allied Powers during the war.

As a result, wireless stations were left in disrepair. Direct communication between Tokyo and Kabul and Berlin and Kabul was disrupted, spare valves and batteries were at times denied under the pretense of trade-quota restrictions. Communication between Afghanistan and the world it had recently acquired as one of interlocution was curtailed:

Kabul, 1942. Radio Telegraphic and Telephone Services between the Afghan Government and HMG. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

¹²² A hand written note by an unknown author on the back of the official India Office Minutes on Kabul, despatch #34 of April 19, 1940 in file # PZ 3150/40 in “Radio Telegraphic and Telephone Services between the Afghan Government and HMG” in India Office Records and Private Papers: IOR: l/ps/12/4106, the British Library.

“In March 1942, we decided to support the supply of equipment for the Afghan wireless telegraph station from the UK, because the station is one of the few British enterprises in Afghanistan and refusal of supplies would have given the Afghan government a serious grievance against us. There was also the possibility of alternative supplies being smuggled to Afghanistan from Italy. We did not take into account the possibility that a breakdown of the station would interrupt communications between the Axis legation and their Governments. Subsequently in June 1942, when some of the UK supplies were already on high seas, we considered whether in order to disrupt the communications of the Axis Legations we should not reverse our decision...I think that our policy should be to keep the Afghan Government's station supplied with spares, but that we should avoid the accumulation at Kabul of any substantial reserve of spares.”¹²³

On the heels of three unsuccessful Anglo military campaigns, the British Government experienced radio-telegraphy with profound ambivalence. Unlike the transparent sabotage of the frontiersmen who cut signal wires and looted telegraph stations two decades earlier, electrical telegraphy could not only be used by the Afghan Government to overhear, but more dangerously, made it possible for enemy agents to also take advantage. In an *aide memoir* between the Afghan minister of communications and the British minister in Kabul, these failures were addressed. The British Postal Office had been conducting engineering tests in Kabul: “The tests have not proved very satisfactory and the performance of the circuit is considered to be relatively poor. It has not been possible, however, for the engineering department of the Post Office to obtain sufficient technical information from the Afghan authorities to enable them to discover the reasons for the poor performance of the circuit.”¹²⁴ Moreover, the Afghan Government refused to purchase inverters to ensure privacy on the circuit, a matter of great concern for the British government:

“This is a matter of considerable concern to the Post Office, since should the possibility of interception of conversations conducted over this service, become generally known, the public might conclude that similar conditions obtain over other circuits and it would

¹²³ Letter to Mr. Peel, n.d. Afghanistan: telegraph and telephone services. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

¹²⁴ Aide Memoir, 1948. Proposal to open a radio telephone service between the UK and Afghanistan. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

tend to destroy public confidence in British radio telephone services generally. As a matter of principle, therefore, the British post office have for many years refused to operate any radio telephone service unless some form of privacy can be provided. A simple form of privacy device of the inverter type can be purchased in the United Kingdom at a reasonably low cost and His Majesty's Government would be glad to assist.”¹²⁵

The Afghans, having acquired technology before they were ready for it, now threatened its status everywhere. Electrical telegraphy's enhanced powers of transmission introduced the possibility of unknown presences, and for the British Government the unsettling specter of observation. The political force of telegraphy resides in this prospect. In Afghanistan, the British neither secured a colony nor relinquished that abiding dream. Telegraphy was made foreign to both sets of users by its shared status as technology in two different cultural terrains, united by the persistence of imperial dreams but also disconnected by the technical and economic hierarchies that enabled a policy of “a low margin of spares,” and threatened Afghanistan's capacity to address the world through technological media. These technological overtures and withdrawals were subordinate to questions of political alliance and military advantage, and ultimately to a British policy of maintaining Afghan neutrality on its Indian border, where it feared Afghan revolt:

“Our relations with the Afghan Government are at present in a somewhat delicate state and it is more than ever important to us on military grounds to maintain the goodwill of the Afghan Government *in view of the ever increasing menace to India from the East* (emphasis mine). In these circumstances there would seem to be strong grounds for meeting at any rate the more essential requirements of the Afghan Government if this can possibly be done without very serious dislocation of our own war effort. In a recent telegram on economic policy towards Afghanistan, the Gov of India proposed that special arrangements should be made to help the Afghan Government to obtain increased supplies of the imports which they require from abroad during the critical months ahead...information from most secret sources suggests that if the Afghan Government fail to secure some of the valves which they require their communications with the outside

¹²⁵ Ibid.

world may be cut off except for those routed via India and it appears that the Afghans may already suspect of us of holding up supplies in order to bring this about. In some ways this might be to our advantage but any such gain could hardly be expected to compensate us for the grievance which the Afghan Government would have against us. Another possibility is that the Afghans might possibly be able to obtain their requirements from Axis sources if we failed to supply them. This solution would also be unfortunate from our point of view.”¹²⁶

The discourse on technological deception was already a discourse on tribal vehemence.

The policy of maintaining “a low margin of spares,” rather than outright denying Afghanistan the batteries and spare valves required to sustain wireless stations illustrates a fear of increased anti-British activity on the Afghan-Indian border. Thus, the “increasing menace to India from the East,” and the necessity of maintaining the goodwill of the Afghan Government, became indissociable from maintaining wireless technology, and by extension the very multiplicity of telegraphic transmissions that had given Humphrys so much concern when he wrote about their “Russianized” content. Unlike the Afghans, for whom telegraphy was not haunted, in the imagination of the British intelligence community the ghost in the machine emerged from having introduced communication technology to Afghanistan in the first place.

Rather than extinguishing these undesirable transmissions (through a complete sabotage of wireless stations) or allowing Afghanistan to “to double the station,” which might enable unhampered access to Europe, the Afghan wireless system had to be precariously maintained between excess and complete silence. A low margin of spares, which could curtail Afghan contact with the world and solicit the kind of anxiety that prompted the Afghan government to seek immediate assistance from the British Legation when its wireless station broke in 1922, was

¹²⁶ India Office Minutes for week of March 12th on Kabul wireless equipment, 1942. Telegraph and Postal Afghanistan. India Office Records, The British Library.

envisioned as a permanent dependency that could be buttressed to forestall tribal revolts during a period of colonial anxiety.

The story of the ghost in the machine is greater than a fear of contagion and the unwanted presence that threatened to shatter the sanctity of British privacy and cultural superiority. The ghost in the machine is also the effect of the speed of technological advance and the ways it upturns its previous cultural worlds, relegating what it leaves behind to the dustbin of history, or the purview of the occult. But if wireless telegraphy, which reduced voice to visual sign, became increasingly haunted for the British, cinema and film became new technologies of redemption. Where deviant telegraphy failed, the filmic image promised both an objective reflection of reality and an incorruptible substitute for the mass-mediated voice.¹²⁷ An image is worth a thousand words, so to speak. But first there had to be a speaking voice, again. The spread of political propaganda during and immediately after World War Two had its ambivalent start in telegraphy but then expanded into the bold Persian and Pashto wings of Radio Kabul before it would spawn the marvels of cinema, two new sources of broadcast and imageric violence.

¹²⁷ Writing about the distinction between film and cinema Adorno contends that film is “primarily representational” and places an emphasis on its object rather than on “autonomous techniques” of cinema (1981, 202). There is never a full disintegration of the object and film does not enable “absolute construction,” but is always a representation of something potentially real. It conveys the irreducible “mark of society” (1981,202). This “mark” helps us understand Afghan reactions to propagandist film and the force with which it spoke from one sociological perspective of military-industrial development to another which was lacking precisely that. Moreover, film is particularly suited for conveying ideological content because it provides “models for collective behavior” and “The movements which the film presents are mimetic impulses which, prior to all content and meaning, incite the viewers and listeners to fall into step as if in a parade. In this respect, film resembles music just as, in the early days of radio, music resembled film strips” (1981, 203). See: Adorno, Theodor W., and Levin Thomas Y. “Transparencies on Film.” *New German Critique*, no. 24/25 (1981): 199-205.

The Kabul Broadcast

Like the powers of language, and also the logic of mass media, technology holds the promise of more technology. It begets both new mechanical bearers of speech and modes of representation, each producing novel indeterminacy but also cultural resolve and imaginative reconstructions. When the first Radio Kabul broadcasts zoomed through air waves and crackled through radio sets and speakers that hung above Kabul's main intersections, they introduced new voices to a public still imagining the possibility of communication at a distance. Radio waves, having earlier carried the select voices of the Afghan elite, now relayed more common broadcast voices that resounded forcefully in the aftermath of Afghanistan's eager establishment of telephone and telegraph services—speaking to anyone who could listen and gather in the streets. By August of 1940 the Kabul broadcasting station was audible over northern India at medium wave lengths, between the hours of 8-11pm, though in Kabul it was broadcast from 1:20-4:40pm GMT, as an afternoon retreat into a faceless world of voices that discussed literature, music, news bulletins, agriculture, Afghan history, health, economics, geography and household affairs. It concluded with fifteen minutes of Persian or Pashto music, breaking out into peals of classical and contemporary Afghan music that bid listeners farewell until tomorrow's show and perhaps also imparted the gift of collective song, encouraging listeners to sing along.¹²⁸

Radio technology not only broadcast audio content but used that dissemination to counteract the voices of speaking agents presumed to be engaged in propagandist efforts in the Afghan countryside. If with telegraphy the problem of diverse transmission was the greater

¹²⁸ For a full account of British propaganda efforts via the Kabul Radio see: Publicity arrangements between India and Afghanistan (Kabul Radio Station). India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

problem of their origins (Japan, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and Germany), the radio introduced the mass-mediated voice amidst the speaking voices of foreign political agents whose “wagging tongues” threatened to incite the very tribal revolt on the Indian frontier that British agents had so carefully considered alongside their policy to keep Afghan wireless stations beholden to a “low margin of spares.” The problem of spoken language, which in the German case was echoing the efforts of their propagandist radio programs, was a problem of control. From the perspective of British intelligence, the Afghan government was deemed incapable of monitoring the presence of these intelligence agents and of counteracting their political influence:

“ The situation in the world is at present so strained that the Government of India should be in possession of as complete a list as possible of the measures to be put in operation so far as Afghanistan is concerned immediately on the outbreak of war, as well as some notes on action which we are now taking here, or which they might now take in India...the Afghan Government’s intelligence system in regard to the movements and activities of foreigners is not very good, and we must do everything possible to add to it.”¹²⁹

The incapacity of the Afghan government, aside from encouraging infiltration, was considered especially troublesome given the problem of illiteracy:

“It is not easy to convey the truth in a country in which so many of the inhabitants are as illiterate as they are credulous, where the press is small, Government controlled and painfully neutral.”¹³⁰

The problem of illiteracy was both a problem with orality and with credulity. But Fraser Tytler’s letters belie a more fundamental issue. The world of orality was perceived as one of

¹²⁹ Letter from British Legation in Kabul, 1939. Propaganda: British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹³⁰ Frazer Tytler, William Kerr. Confidential Despatch to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1940. Propaganda British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

capture where the ideological content of language was thought to colonize dupable Afghan minds, a dangerous potential that the mass-mediated voices of British radio were hoped to both harness and counteract:

“The most important aspect is, in my opinion, the immediate and effective dissemination of news in and through the tribal areas. I consider it essential to have ready a system for this purpose which can be put into immediate operation along the whole frontier. I think it is quite certain that the outbreak of war would be the signal for a virulent anti-British campaign on the part of all enemy subjects in various parts of Afghanistan... a vigorous counter offensive is essential, particularly in the tribal areas whence the greatest menace will come, and steps should now be taken to work out a system of propaganda so that the machinery will be ready to set in motion at once... It would be advisable to make preparations for such broadcasts now, from Delhi or Lahore, both of which stations can be fairly well heard in Kabul, Kandahar and Herat and probably also in Jalalabad, though there are at present no receiving sets at the latter place. It would be advantageous to start a daily Persian broadcast of news without delay, but such news would of course have to be carefully edited, and to consist mainly of world affairs and matters of general interest.”¹³¹

The worlds of oral and mass-mediated propaganda, and of the human and broadcast voices, began to vie for supremacy at the same time that the Kabul broadcasts brought the rhythm and regularity of normative and shared time to Kabul’s radio listeners, attuning them to the sounds of mediated voices and making them vulnerable to the expectations those voices would help hatch. The broadcasts clutched their attention and created the conditions for more communication, shaping a world of talk that ranged from the challenges of small-scale farming, to literary form to the popular imputations of geological misfortune that are still frequently uttered, instigated then as it is now by a glance at mountain peaks or a retreat in the face of plumes of dust.

¹³¹ Letter from British Legation in Kabul, 1939. Propaganda: British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

The electro-magnetic radiation of Radio Kabul threatened to vibrate beneath the radar of British knowledge and more importantly, across new political lines of solidarity at a time when Europe's political identity and India's colonial status were immersed in uncertainty. Weekly intelligence reports began to assiduously document the broadcast programs. An extract from the Kabul Legation's report for April 9, 1943 itemized the problem:

- (i) "The Persian broadcasts of the *Azad Hindustan* (Free India) radio at 9pm Kabul time, are being listened to by a number of Afghans in Kabul who are said to enjoy pro-Asiatic and anti-British tone of the broadcasts. This station marks out that it is working from Waziristan but some *Afghans believe that it operates from Saigon* (emphasis mine).
- (ii) Persian broadcasts from Rome Radio at 8:30 pm Kabul time are said to be popular with Afghan civil and military officials. The subject matter is largely propaganda of a type calculated to stir up anti-British feeling in both Afghanistan and on North West Frontier of India."¹³²

Saigon: a city that experienced French colonial propaganda through Radio Saigon and later American-inspired propaganda during the South East Asia War, and that was subject to the devastating violence of American fire-power and militarism just as Kabul would be, was imagined as already speaking to Kabul, conveying the shared fate of these cities through radio voices that spoke from the crevices of a technology thought to be so radically open that it might actually be anywhere and everywhere at once. The problem with the Kabul broadcasts was not only a problem with its purportedly anti-British and pro-Axis tone (a concern which prompted the British to press the Afghan government to broadcast additional British news, which it did); it was also a problem with the status of media in a non-industrialized nation where mediation took an uncanny hold without any kind of industrial history, prompting wild thoughts like the Saigon origins of the Kabul broadcasts or the Hungarian weather services traveling through Afghan

¹³² Extract from Kabul Intelligence for week of April 9th, 1943. India Office Records and Personal Papers, The British Library.

radio waves near Herat. Technological media both came from elsewhere, and incited that elsewhere in the collective imagination, making the world both suddenly and newly available as the site of Asiatic solidarity and hyperbolic Allied fears of pro-Axis persuasions. The radio directly gave way to that outside, refusing a single external origin through its powers of sheer mediaticity and receptivity. It was uncontrollable.

Radio broadcasts carried the problem of telegraphic heterogeneity to radio waves. The broadcast voice, unleashed through the powers of technology, both retains its authoritative force and conceals the dependency of any media system (or mode of transmission) on repetition and recursivity, on the certainty of tomorrow's show.¹³³ But in Kabul that necessary repetition became the site of an Asiatic contagion, a different kind of host, and an opening through which the operations of repetition were conflated with pure reception and technological capture. The British Legation in Kabul wrote to the India Office's Foreign Affairs Department repeatedly about the issue:

“Kabul Radio broadcast news from both British and enemy sources. When experimental transmission started they showed distinct anti-British bias and I represented matter to Afghan Government. Since then there has been improvement. As Afghan official in

¹³³ Luhmann argues that a system of mass media achieves differentiation from other systems because technologies of dissemination “not only circumvent interaction among those co-present, but effectively render such interaction impossible for the mass media's own communications” (2000, 16). He distinguishes writing in this regard, which did not have this effect until it too became mechanically reproducible through the printing press and the volume of publication “multiplied to the extent that oral interaction among all participants in communication is effectively and visibly rendered impossible” (16). Self-Reproducibility is achieved when interaction among those who are co-present is foreclosed or rendered superfluous. See: Luhmann, Niklas. *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

charge of broadcasting and Press is known to hold anti-British views most we can hope for is that British news should receive equal treatment with that from enemy sources.”¹³⁴

“Lately we had some reason to suspect pro-Axis bias in the way war news is put out on Kabul Radio. There is so far not much to go on but there is tendency to give Berlin news prominence without stating clearly that it comes from Berlin. I propose to speak to the minister for foreign affairs about this at first opportunity. Meantime would be grateful if tone of Kabul broadcast could be watched carefully at your end where you have better facilities for monitoring than we have here.”¹³⁵

“Kabul has given prominence to reports from Tokyo. These reports deal mostly with Japanese military achievements. The Japanese Press had been freely quoted, indicating the losses suffered by the Allies in the Far East. Perhaps it is premature to suggest that this development in Kabul broadcasts is prompted by the closer Japanese menace to India.”¹³⁶

Kabul’s radio waves were suspected of harboring something other than audio content.

They were also seen as the direct channels of political influence and inspirational zeal. The problem with the repetition and surety (of scheduled times and programs, the very stuff of radio broadcasting) was not so much a problem with enhanced dissemination as it was a fantasy that access would result in political alliance. Radio Kabul provided Afghans with an additional aperture onto the world, enabling them to surpass the written reception of telegraphic text and instead to listen to what other subjects (in Rome, Berlin, Sydney, Tokyo, and London) were also listening to, creating not an imagined national community but an imagined world of co-listeners

¹³⁴ Frazer Tytler, William Kerr. 'Telegram To Secretary Of State For Foreign Affairs In India Office', 1940. Propaganda: Publicity Arrangements between India and Afghanistan (Kabul Radio Station). India Office Records and Private Personal Papers, The British Library.

¹³⁵ Verner Wylie, Sir Francis. Telegram to Secretary of State in External Affairs Department, 1942. India Office Records and Personal Papers, The British Library.

¹³⁶ Letter from monitoring officer in Simla to Sir Francis Verner-Wylie, British minister in Kabul, 1942. Propaganda: Publicity Arrangements between India and Afghanistan (Kabul Radio Station). India Office Records and Private Personal Papers, The British Library.

who might become interlocutors and political forces in a country where illiteracy acted like an intellectual leaven for pro-Axis propaganda:

“This situation is entirely to the advantage of the enemy for, even if the Afghan Government succeed in stopping German written propaganda as effectually as they have succeeded in stopping ours, there remain at least 150 German tongues, whose wagging the Afghan Government are powerless to control. In a country where the percentage of illiterates is so high, oral propaganda is by far the most effective form. It is most necessary that our broadcasts in Pushtu and Persian should be increased.”¹³⁷

The credulous world of illiteracy was not only a prior reality confronted by radio technology but also its limit. Language, especially colloquial Persian, was aggrandized as a counter-measure to the heterogeneous world of radio voices that had shattered the hold of parochial interests (Afghan agriculture, geography, history, household affairs, etc.) that British authorities expected radio broadcasts to adhere to a daily and scheduled basis. Verner Wylie’s concern with the radio broadcasts was simultaneously mitigated by his faith in the powers of mechanically reproduced and indigenous Persian:

“On the question of the language to be used on the All India radio broadcasts to Afghanistan, the idea which has been canvassed in India that “Iranian Persian” is a more suitable language than Afghan Persian was discussed with various persons, including Aqai Habibi and it appeared quite clear that the best possible language was good Afghan-Persian only if good Afghan Persian could not be produced the officials suggest that we revert to “Iranian Persian” as a *pis aller*. They emphasized that any attempt to produce Afghan Persian should not show traces of conscious imitation; and said that what we appeared to regard as Afghan Persian was in fact more like Indian Persian.”¹³⁸

In the absence of a national history of technological development, which might otherwise contain the excesses of audio media through an experience of gradual assimilation, the

¹³⁷ Extract from intelligence summary for week of April 11th, 1941. British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹³⁸ 'Report On Tour'. Extract, 1945. Propaganda: Publicity Arrangements between India and Afghanistan (Kabul Radio Station). India Office Records, The British Library.

reproduction of Afghan Persian without “traces of conscious imitation” was fantasized as restoring radio broadcasts to the canny purview of British political influence amidst the speaking of a dangerous multitude.

The Afghan Mission

In 1945 “the Afghan Mission” took a field trip to Delhi. The mission was composed of high ranking government and media personnel, including Mr. Habibi, who advised Verner Wylie on the importance of Afghan Persian without “conscious imitation” and Mr. Rishtya, the director-general of information and broadcasting. They went to discuss literary and cultural activities. However, when they arrived in Delhi on March 10, 1945, they were almost immediately taken to a Railway Exhibition. A press note reported:

“They saw every branch of the Indian Railway activities, particularly in the direction of war-effort and were struck with the modern methods of utilization of scrap which were demonstrated to the party by experts. Mr. Rishtya (the vice president of the Press Department of the Afghan Government), who had visited India on many occasions remarked that judged by what he had seen the improvement in the field of modernization of industry in India in such a short period held a great promise of rapid post-war development.”¹³⁹

Mr. Rishtya was struck, as if with a sharp scrap of steel. His surprise (and understanding of Indian colonial history) conflates the violence of colonialism with the progressive march of industrial development. But this pedagogical tour was intended to do more than whet the mission’s appetite for a similar promise of rapid modernization. It was a reminder that Afghanistan’s modern technological infrastructure, confined to technologies of communication, was both premature and embryonic. While colonial subjects could extend themselves in space,

¹³⁹ See Press Note “The Afghan Mission Arrives in Delhi,” in: IOR L/PS/12/4591, India Office Records and Personal Papers, The British Library.

the Afghans could only communicate. For the British, the Afghan encounter with technology was incomplete. It still contained possibilities that the Afghan government itself could not entirely understand, that could not be imagined in the absence of a longer historical experience of diverse technologies, an experience that conditioned a cultural know-how ranging from the mobilization of railway networks in war to the utilization of scrap metal. The Afghans came up short. Two days later they were taken for a tour of the All India Radio broadcasting house for an additional reminder:

“The modern apparatus for broadcasting, recording, controls and effect production was demonstrated to them. ‘While we had heard that the All India Radio Broadcasting House was one of the best in the world,’ remarked the visitors, ‘we had no conception of its immensity, ultra modernization and perfection.’”¹⁴⁰

All India Radio was perfect. It was immense and ultra-modernized. It exceeded the mission’s expectations and presented them with a technological sublime not unlike one that might have stirred them by looking up at the Hindu Kush Mountain range, a geo-strategic and natural range that separated two distinctly different national encounters with both nature and colonialism. The mission was deeply satisfied and impressed by India’s modern industry and media, by the height of the power transmitters they were shown and also by Indian methods of archiving, preserving and indexing old records, and especially by large-scale drawings in the art of poster-making. The image, the archive, steel, trains, wars, and historicity were powerfully brought together, in a carefully choreographed series of powerful encounters that impressed the mission with the enduring power of something that simultaneously horrified them. India’s “ultra-modernization” not only surpassed their expectations, but also their capacity for imagining the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Afghan future. That modern future suddenly seemed out of reach again and disjointed from the enormous stream of progress that had concatenated the Indian experience of diverse technologies. Thinking about what they couldn't actually experience, and about a narrative they couldn't yet tell, the mission concluded in a statement published by the Kabul based newspaper *Islah* on April 3rd that: "India has made great strides in social progress and has a bright future." They retreated into reason and into the radio world of "a fairly low margins of spares," a policy of dependence that hampered *Kabulis'* unbound passion for contact with the world.¹⁴¹

Night Train to Munich

The Indian Railway was not the only railway that would shape Afghanistan's encounter with Europe and Asia in the twentieth century. Earlier, the strategic value of the Trans-Siberian railway partly instigated the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, both the first great war of the century and the first Asiatic defeat of a European power. Russia's defeat became an inspirational referent for Afghan leaders, and especially for Amir Amanullah who saw it as the beginning of a seismic change in global power relations that portended the end of British rule in India and the restoration of an Islamic caliphate in South Asia, with Afghanistan potentially at its helm. This global context shaped Afghanistan's acquisition of communication technologies, and also the contradictory response of the British Government, which both enabled and subverted those technologies in an effort to keep Afghanistan confined to its sphere of political influence. As

¹⁴¹ A March, 1943 letter from the India Office to the British Foreign office states: "I think that our policy should be to keep the Kabul wireless telegraph station operation with a fairly low margin of spares. The project now put forward, so far as I can understand it, is to double the station, with the object of improving communications between Kabul and Rome. As communication with Rome is at present possible, although not perfect, the project has little to commend itself to us." Coll 35/3(2) Afghanistan: telegraph and telephone services, File 1018/43, IOR/L/PS/12/4104, India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

those technologies became increasingly more fluid so too did the task of securing Afghan contact with the world, an uncertainty that inspired decades of propaganda and also of experimental relationships to technology, attempts to see which machine might be best for curtailing the Afghan imagination. In this context, images would make a fabulous debut.

Photographic and cinematic images were tasked with resolving the problem of undesirable radio voices by displacing them with a new, and controlled form of mediatic address.¹⁴² The answer to both Afghan and British imaginings of clandestine and friendly voices seemed guaranteed by the ideology of the image, a reflection of the real that could be disseminated through films in foreign embassies and later in Kabul's cinema houses. But the cinematic image was not only a supplement for radio-technology, it was also introduced in its propagandist forms to counter illiteracy, a lack that was central to British and later to Soviet and American fantasies of the extended Afghan pastoral landscape and its subjectivities. Enhanced propaganda efforts were first considered in 1939. The emphasis of these efforts, executed out of a fear of a Japanese-Afghan alliance, was the dissemination of news in tribal areas. On the outbreak of war, the tribal frontier between Afghanistan and India was to be subjected to quick dissemination: "a vigorous counter offensive is essential, particularly in the tribal areas whence

¹⁴² Writing about the advertising image (which is of course a form of propaganda) Roland Barthes says that the message of the image is intentionally redoubled. The images contain signs (linguistic, coded, and noncoded) that are "full and formed with a view to the optimum reading" (1977, 33). One type of message contained in the image is what he describes as "qusai-tautological" which is the paradox of a message without a code that requires an investment to read, and an anthropological knowledge that perceives a message that is not so much symbolic as it is literal (1977, 35). See Barthes, Roland. "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang, 1977.

the greatest menace will come, and steps should now be taken to work out a system of propaganda so that the machinery will be ready to set in motion at once.”¹⁴³

This redoubled vigilance and desire for something quick and fast, spewing out of an ideological machine that would suffuse the tribal territories with information was the only form of infiltration that could match the anticipated “virulent” anti-British campaign, an imagined fourth campaign between Anglo and Afghan forces, this time buttressed by the support of Japan, the “real menace” to India.

It wasn’t long before photographic and film images were heralded as isomorphic to the potency of tribal virulence, as an equally fast affront. The mass mediated image was as illiterate as the tribesmen. It eschewed the need for linguistic mediation and for print and radio based media, becoming the fabulous guarantee of a discourse that equated literacy with meaningful intellectual labor and illiteracy with a form of slow and risk-laden mediation displaced through image reception (reduced to the substitution of awe for one imperial power (Japan) with another (Great Britain)).

Cinema was first proposed by Sir Fraser-Tytler as the most efficient form of propaganda. In a 1939 letter to the government of India’s External Affairs Department he outlines the best form of propaganda in Afghanistan and emphasizes a range of efforts in agriculture, road building, afforestation, *coal prospecting* and films that would provide “concrete benefits” rather than the abstract mediation of the press. In particular, he emphasizes the exhibition of “suitable” movies at the legation and in cinemas and agricultural development and training in scientific

¹⁴³ Ibid.

methods of farming and horticulture, including selective breeding and the provision of experts in animal husbandry. He concludes that in an illiterate and credulous country:

“I do not consider that there would be much, if any, advantage in attempting to influence the Afghan people in our favor by means of the press, by pamphlets or lectures, or similar methods commonly adopted in more civilized countries. The only thing that really appeals to the Afghan temperament in its present state of development is the feeling that he is deriving some concrete benefit from association with a particular country or people.”¹⁴⁴

The failures of print media, evidenced by Kabul’s shop keepers throwing pamphlets into the street, enabled agriculture and cinema and their associated feature films, animals, and crops to fill the British imagination with a hope that through “concrete benefit,” Afghans might equate material assistance and the content of images with their socio-political future. Inconspicuous messages, the very source of fear over telegraphy and radio technology, were once again the secret weapon and semiotic purview of British agents, this time enabled by the whimsical wonders of cinema and the authority of scientific farming.

Afghan rusticity and illiteracy was never considered to have also been impacted by earlier technologies of communication, an ironic and telling neglect given that telegraph stations had existed in tribal territories for decades. Rather, the Afghan pastoral had an autonomous progression, an impervious duration subject only to the cyclical rhythm of nature but not the cycles of technological change, with the semiotic and experiential ruptures they unleashed everywhere.

As far as Kabul’s British Legation was concerned Afghan illiteracy was a monolithic screen against which a new world of image and fantasy, war-time anxiety, desire and violence

¹⁴⁴ Letter from British Legation in Kabul to Major W.R Hay Deputy Secretary to Government of India in External Affairs Department in Simla, n.d. India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

could be projected; it was the smooth surface for an optical extravaganza that aimed to speedily overcome illiteracy with new forms of recognition. If the camera itself has been a figure of the occult in other colonial contexts, in Afghanistan its fruits were considered an earthy and natural supplement to the inadequacy of language.¹⁴⁵ These images, photographs and films didn't demand that Afghans make themselves known, as the camera has elsewhere by forging new forms of recognition, but it did disseminate a desire to banish difference and solicited a new relationship to immediacy and force.

Films such as *The Conquest of Poland*, *Down Argentine Way*, *All This and Heaven Too*, and *Night Train to Munich*, the last film to be screened at the British embassy, were shown to Afghan government officials and civil audiences by both Allied and Axis powers during World War Two. The British Council supplied films for the British embassy in Kabul at 1,000 GBP per annum in addition to pamphlets, leaflets, cartoons, and a Persian edition of the French political-culture review "War in Pictures." The films had remarkable results. An excerpt from the intelligence summary report for the week of March 28, 1941 details the near hysteria that led the Afghan government to ban citizens from attending the cinema:

"On 26th March the *Chef de Protocol* informed the first secretary of this legation (British) that the Afghan Government were much disturbed by the numerous cinema performances being given by the Russian Embassy and the German and British Legations... A few days previously the Afghan foreign minister had mentioned to his majesty's minister that he was very disturbed by the bewildering effect on Afghan officials and military officers of the various cinema performances. Officials and soldiers rushed madly from one to the other and ended up in a state of complete perplexity. It seems probable that the last performance at the Russian Embassy, when 25 Afghan military officers attended and at which an impressive film of the Red Army was shown may have led the Afghan Government to take this step. The Afghan officers are said to

¹⁴⁵ For a history of the camera and its relationship to representation see: Morris, Rosalind C (ed). *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and South East Asia*. Duke University Press, 2009.

have been impressed and oppressed by the spectacle of such military might, and depressed by the comparison between their own army and that of their powerful Northern neighbour. These feelings are said to have caused dissatisfaction with the ‘old men’ of the Afghan army, who have failed to equip them with modern weapons of war. Whatever the real reason may be this move is a further set back to British propaganda for there is no doubt that the British Legation was leading the field as far as cinema propaganda is concerned. The concern now shown by the Afghan Government over the effects of cinema propaganda on their officials and officers is in somewhat amusing contrast to the assertion, recently repeated *ad nauseum* to officers of this legation, that Afghans are impervious to propaganda.”¹⁴⁶

The reaction of Afghan military officers and soldiers who rushed “madly from one to the other and ended up in a state of complete perplexity,” particularly in the aftermath of a film depicting the extraordinary powers of the Soviet Army, illustrates how cinematic pedagogy took on an almost schizophrenic reality in a context where both the origins and development of increasingly abstract technologies are mysterious and perform the labor of mediation that would otherwise be the work of languages, deemed impossible by British officials because of linguistic difference and Afghan illiteracy. By April 11, 1941 the Afghan government had banned all its subjects from attending cinema shows in foreign embassies.¹⁴⁷ The last movie to be screened was *Night Train to Munich*, shown to Afghan audiences throughout the first week of April as if to remind them of that first and consequential refusal of the railway.¹⁴⁸

The films did much more than just inspire Afghan audiences with dreams of cultural progress— they scared them. Images of German and Soviet militarism, “imposing cultural subjects” like skyscrapers, riveting trains, Bette Davis as a French governess, the dissemination

¹⁴⁶ 'Intelligence Summary For Week Ending March 28th'. Excerpt, 1941. British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. See also: ‘Intelligence Summary for week ending April 11th.’ Excerpt. 1941.

¹⁴⁸ The climatic scenes of Carol Reed’s *Night Train to Munich* take place on a train to Munich, where British reason and ingenuity manage to defeat the imposing powers of Nazi policing.

of radio and wireless sets, a Reuters service, talk of afforestation and selective breeding were not only signifiers of the modern, but also limits and reminders of what could always be otherwise, of the Afghan primal (disconnected from the world) that could be restored at any instant through military violence. But the mark of the foreign in technology is neither unique to the Afghan experience, nor to colonial histories. Nor is it only a question of how cultural difference becomes manifest or how new modes of representation emerge and demand new forms of self-disclosure.

The foreign is the very logic and essence of technology, the guiding principle of both its form and purpose.¹⁴⁹ Within this continuous logic of revelation, there was a twist in how the twentieth century became known to Afghans. Films and images of German and Soviet militarism, warships, guns and of “imposing cultural subjects,” like towering buildings, riveting Munich-bound trains, Bette Davis as a French governess, the dissemination of radio and wireless sets, a Reuters service, talk of afforestation and selective breeding were not only signifiers of the modern, but also limits and reminders of what could always be otherwise, of the Afghan primal (as a site of lack and technological silence) that could be restored at any instant. Modernity was revealed through a process in which the Afghan pre-modern was made “on call,” available through the forces of military powers that could bomb the country back to earlier days. This was the message of the film, especially its depicting of military might, and it incited in the Afghan

¹⁴⁹ The bewildered Afghan officers running between maddening screenings demonstrate this logic, which Heidegger describes as the essence of technology’s revelatory powers and technology being ruled by appearance and the need for “bursting open belonging to bringing-forth, the bursting of a blossom into bloom” (1977, 10). For Heidegger technology is a process and a movement from the realm of the concealed to the unconcealed, including from raw materials to more (and more modern) technology. Heidegger also makes a crucial distinction between technology and modern technology. The latter does not so much participate in revelation as it does in command, a “setting up” (1977, 15) more than a presencing. Heidegger, Martin. *The Question concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

audience the uncanny fear that what they thought they had surpassed might also lie ahead. Modern technology doesn't just presence, as Heidegger says, it challenges.

The Afghan experience of media technology in the twentieth century was both chimerical and capricious. New technologies unleashed a slew of voices and images, and scattered discontinuous reminders of techno-cultural inferiority in the realms of the symbolic (through glamorous movies of Europe) and the real (for example, the very refusal to sign wireless agreements with Afghanistan during World War Two, the policy of "low margin of spares," or the transition from print media propaganda to image-based propaganda). The cinematic display of imminent British, German, and Russian military force, in reserve, not only threatened its audiences with violence (the capacity to bomb Afghanistan to its imagined primal past) but also illustrated that the past was the lack of communication technology.¹⁵⁰

The status of achieved modernization in Afghanistan, at the beginning and middle of the twentieth century, is distinguished by the introduction of media and technology. The other crucial hallmarks of modernity such as a centralized state with a monopoly on force, control over borders, a centralized monetary and fiscal policy, a standing army capable of self-defense, and

¹⁵⁰ Writing about the "realistic tendency" of film Kracauer describes the reality of film--which can overwhelm consciousness--not just as a matter of ideology but as the nature of the medium of film itself: "Elemental catastrophes, the atrocities of war, acts of violence and terror, sexual debauchery, and death are events which tend to overwhelm consciousness. In any case, they call forth excitements and agonies bound to thwart detached observation. No one witnessing such an event, let alone playing an active part in it, should therefore be expected accurately to account for what he has seen. Since these manifestations of crude nature, human or otherwise, fall into the area of physical reality, they range all the more among cinematic subjects. Only the camera is able to represent them without distortion" (1997, 57). What Kracauer, and the confused Afghan officers draw our attention to, is not just that the medium of film has an affinity for such depictions, but that it also renders visible "what is commonly drowned in inner agitation" (1997, 58). See: Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film the Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1997.

bureaucratized forms of reasoning and authority were as much in a state of structural disarray in the 1940's as they were at the turn of the century. All that was new was the possibility of global communication, of listening to mass-mediated voices and watching associated images, imagining the world in “standing-reserve” as Heidegger says, and ready to listen.¹⁵¹

The Whispering Campaign

The threat of restoring Afghanistan to a place that: “touched the telegraph on one end and the days of Harun al-Raschid on the other,” as Kipling paraphrased, was already happening. The prohibition on cinema attendance, like the breakdown of the Afghan wireless system, introduced the jarring experience of dead air into the very history of Afghan modernity and technology. Voices were suddenly mute and the fiction of mediation, gesturing toward an inimitably virtual future, caved in on itself. In the aftermath of the ban, the horror of filmic imagery gave way, yet again, to the powers of the human voice as the British Legation resorted to sending propagandists into towns and the countryside to disseminate written material and, more importantly, tell oral stories about the horrors of Nazism. After having realized that their supremacy in cinema had rendered ineffective, the opposition between literacy and illiteracy— which had in large part shaped the introduction of different media technologies— became a permanent dyad as both

¹⁵¹ Heidegger describes this “standing-reserve” as a challenge and potentiality (which includes that of natural resources) made possible by the revelatory powers of technology, or what he calls their power of “unconcealment” (1977, 21). In the era of technology we are “challenged forth into revealing. That revealing concerns nature, above all, as the chief storehouse of the standing energy reserve” (1977,21). In chapter four, *Prospecting the Modern*, we will return to the relationship between nature (the potential of the Afghan landscape and mineral underground) and the acquisition of infrastructural technologies in order to interrogate an imperial fantasy about a kind of “standing-reserve” of economic value in Afghanistan, but also in order to understand the preoccupation of the Afghan modernists with technological development and territorial anxiety.

possibilities were leveraged to mitigate the failures of communication technology and cinematic imagery as a *pis aller*:

“We have set up an agency suitable for a whispering campaign in and across the frontier. General lie should be to put out incidents illustrating practical meaning of unwise Nazi rule to a villager in a subject country and how British victory will ensure safety of Islamic Afghanistan, the tribes trade and general progress...such stories would be related by agents in village guest houses, tea shops and on journeys and supported by guide notes which would take account constantly of movement of public opinion in Afghanistan.”¹⁵²

The transition to written and oral propaganda was deemed especially urgent “in countries between India and Iraq,” where expenditure on British propaganda was increased three fold and renewed efforts were made to increase the Persian broadcasts from Delhi to three times per day.¹⁵³ Written and pictorial propaganda, which included “loose photographs of warships, guns, and striking cultural subjects such as imposing buildings that have a great appeal and might be inserted in newspapers and magazines” was smuggled into the country in bundles, carried on the backs of agents that now executed the work previously entrusted to cinema and radio, and before that to telegraphy.¹⁵⁴

Human agents, like men who went by the names of Noel, Mahbub Ali, Sher Ali, and Shaikh Abdul Hamid largely replaced those cinematic images and propagandist broadcasts,

¹⁵² ‘Extract from telegram from Government of India External Affairs Department to Secretary of State for India.’ 1941. Propaganda British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹⁵³ ‘Telegram From The Government Of India External Affairs Department To Secretary Of State For India’, 1941. Propaganda British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

¹⁵⁴ Frazer Tytler, William Kerr. Letter to Sir Olaf Caroe, 1941. Propaganda British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

clandestinely making their way into the tribal hinterland across the border of the North West Frontier Province, the scene of imagined revolts and tribal alliances with Nazi Germany.¹⁵⁵

It is the world of oral propaganda, of stories told in mosques and tea shops and in government ministries, shrines, and village council meetings that reveals the greater fantasy underwriting this shift: orality, having remained unconquered by different technological orders, was itself reduced to a technology, entrusted with the work of disseminating propaganda in the aftermath of cinematic failure. A paid intelligence agent, described in a memo as a Pashtun nationalist, gave an account of his work in Afghanistan:

“Since the introduction of Pashtu as the official language of Afghanistan, I have had a mind to visit that country and see for myself what steps have been taken by the Government to popularize the language. *I have been busy doing what I could for Pashtu on this side of the Khyber Pass, for I believe that it is the only medium by which a real and vital contact between the North West Frontier Province and Afghanistan can be made* (emphasis mine). The Pathan (Pashtun) race inhabited a vast area and the best method for arriving at a definite decision was to call a conference of the leading poets and ulema (clerics) and literature of all the leading Afghan tribes, where they might be, and to decide upon the standard language to be used in writing. The second problem, I said, seemed to arise from questions promoted by the Germans in Iran and Afghanistan and did not matter very greatly. The Afghans were Afghans and nothing else. As Muslims, they had no business to think of any such nonsense. Islam had fixed good deeds as the test of human nobility and not blood or heredity.”¹⁵⁶

In the margin of the original correspondence, somebody from the India Office External Affairs Department wrote: “excellent” next to the issue of standardized Pashto. The Afghan encounter with communication technology was haunted, not always by ghosts in the machine but by the specter of silence. After decades of isolation and war, the progression of the twentieth

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Robinson, J.A. 'Progress Of Dissemination Of Publicity Material In Afghanistan Across The Frontier Of The NWFP'. Memo, British measures for propaganda in Afghanistan during war-time. India Office Records, The British Library.

century promised Afghans contact with a world previously withheld, and now available as much by the movement of global capital as it was by the cables that ran between the British frontier and Afghan cities, or the radio-waves that travelled between London and Kabul.

The fusion of these chimerical changes, the results of changing political tactics, looming World Wars and the linguistic and cultural upheavals they entailed, turned technology from a mode of immediacy and access to one that threatened to restore Afghanistan to its pre-modern days, while transforming orality from the prior ground on which different technological orders were introduced to a technology of persuasion. What lay at the heart of both the shifting strategies of political propaganda, and the threat of plunging Afghanistan back to its primeval history, was an imagined origin without literacy and without the supplement of technological communication.

4 Tortured

“And it is He who created of water a mortal, and made him kindred of blood and marriage.”¹⁵⁷

“But that atmosphere of feverish excitement and sensitivity which engendered symbolic thought, and social life, which is its collective form, can still with its far-off vision kindle our dreams. To this very day, mankind has always dreamed of seizing and fixing that fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded, that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing.”¹⁵⁸

Abdul Wali

Sometime during the month of *Saraton* (Cancer) 1382, or June of 2003 an Afghan man named Abdul Wali died under torture. Abdul Wali was approximately twenty-eight years old and lived in the densely forested Kunar Valley, a wooded place where windswept moors lead to fertile plains and the vernal equinox is celebrated. The spring equinox marks *now roz* (the new year) when the Earth’s axis is tilted neither towards nor away from the sun, and a perfect counterpoint between light and darkness prevails on earth like a faithful epitaph to an earlier time when perhaps for half the day gesture and sign were possible, and during the other half only speech.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ The Quran. Chapter (25:54) *Sūrat l-Fur'qān* (The Criterion).

¹⁵⁸ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. New edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, pg. 497.

¹⁵⁹ In *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau discusses the transition from language as gesture to vocalized speech, and remarks on the important role that natural light must have played: “When the ideas of men begin to spread and multiply, and closer communication was established among them, they sought more numerous signs and a more extensive language. They multiplied vocal inflections and combined them with gestures, which, by their nature, are more expressive, and whose meaning is less dependent on prior determination. ...But since a gesture indicates hardly anything more than present or easily described object and visible actions; since its use is not universal, because darkness or interposition of a body renders it useless; and since it requires rather than stimulates attention, men finally thought of

Now roz also marks the beginning of the forty-day *Meleh-ye-gol-e-sorkh* (the red tulip festival), the archetypical *meleh* when song and commemoration intersect at the holy shrine of Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam who was Prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law. Kunar is famous for its population of illustrious and literate *Saids*, the descendants of Prophet Mohammad, who live in this valley tucked in the North-East of the country behind boundless verdure and fulsome swathes that look like they have been gently blanketed with emerald green carpets, fraying like half-spoken words and empty promises at their velveteen edges. Its upper Kurengal and Pech valleys reach the remote Nuristan Mountains ("the land of light"), a province famous in the Afghan national imagination for its blue-eyed population, the beautiful Nuristanis, who were forcibly converted to Islam by the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1890, when their province was still called Kafiristan ("the land of pagans"). The Kunar River cuts through this history, variously evoked as evidence of prophetic or Greek origins, sometimes carrying timber towards Pakistan as the other end gives way to the flow of the Kabul River just below steep slopes that end in softer hills.

The valley's plains and hills are filled with crops like wheat, barley, and cotton and adorned with bougainvillea, jasmine, alfalfa clover, mustard brassica, and confederate roses, called *gol-e-ajayeb*, or wondrous flowers. Ligneous plants and fruit trees like fig, apricot, pear, cherry, pomegranate and quince grow in its fertile soil and timber is provided by forest trees, like the poplar and pine trees, and the mulberry trees with red berries. Alpine meadows and weeping

replacing them with vocal articulations..." (1987, 50). See: Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Peter Gray. *The Basic Political Writings*. Edited by Donald A. Cress. 1st edition. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987.

Derrida doesn't discuss the interposition of lightness and darkness, of the sun, of clouds, of bodies, or shadows in his discussion on Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, also foregoing an analysis of what the role of light means for an orientation towards orality that is also an orientation towards time.

willows intersect with forests of juniper and larch, just as wonder (*ajaibat*) and mystique (*afsun*), miracles (*mujizat*) and invisible beings (*jinns*) move through the semi-arid valley and its *derras* (shady spots) with as much force as the Kunar River. More often than not, the sun casts a shimmering net of silver on the surface of the river, offering the enchanted illusion of a glinting place touched only by the grace of prophetic lineage and the boon of raw nature.

For the US military and its International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) counterparts, Kunar is a “N2KL” region, one of the four most dangerous regions along the precipitous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶⁰ The US military’s Regional Command East considers Kunar “the scene of relatively steady insurgent activity,” a naturalized constancy imagined to perdure through time in an inimitable way:

“Insurgents have long used the Kunar-Nuristan corridor for attacking Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. Alexander the Great saw the strategic importance of Kunar and invaded the valley in fourth century B.C. on his way into Bajaur, the tribal land to the East. When he invaded, the local inhabitants burnt their houses and fled to wage guerrilla warfare against his troops, a style of warfare their descendants would continue right up until the modern era.”¹⁶¹

Abdul Wali was born sometime in the year 1353 of the Solar Hijri calendar (1975) three years before the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) staged a *coup d’etat* in Kabul with the support of the Soviet Union, soon after sending Afghan military officers to Kunar to brutally repress a local uprising in what is known as the Kerela massacre. Later, the

¹⁶⁰ “N2KL” is an acronym for the eastern Afghan provinces of Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar and Laghman.

¹⁶¹ Williams, Brian Glyn. “Afghanistan’s Heart of Darkness Fighting the Taliban in Kunar Province,” *Combating Terrorism Centinel*, November 15, 2008. see link: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/afghanistan%E2%80%99s-heart-of-darkness-fighting-the-taliban-in-kunar-province>

Afghan-Soviet war, fueled by Soviet militarism and American military aid, killed one million Afghans over a period of ten devastating years, leaving in its wake a much smaller world, especially in Kunar where much of the local population had fled to neighboring Pakistan through the porous and inviting border, known in British imperial circles as “the Durand Line.”¹⁶² Kunar became increasingly autonomous from Kabul. It hosted not only resistance fighters but also the foreign fighters that newly found their way into Afghanistan in the 1980’s, funded by the Saudi regime some 1500 miles away in one of the Cold War’s hot proxy battlegrounds. The local population was beholden to the blunt force of these changes, to the whim and rule of local militias and commanders, especially Gulbudin Hekmatyaar’s *Hizb-i-Islami* (the Islamic Party), which launched another invasion of the valley in August of 1991. Abdul Wali’s world undoubtedly changed several times, expanding and collapsing on itself in a dim counterpoint, perhaps pushing happier memories to a distant past, and changing his relationship to time and the verdurous valley.¹⁶³

By 2003 Kunar was known as “the crucible of the insurgency,” and the US military’s combat and counter-insurgency efforts were at its peak. In this context, Abdul Wali, became a suspect in a June 7th rocket attack on Firebase Asadabad, a US military base located in the

¹⁶² The Durand Line refers to the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and was established in 1893 between Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and Sir Mortimer Durand, a civil servant of the government of British India. The border was agreed upon for 100 years, and it is a contentious issue for the Afghan government and the Pashtuns of the borderlands, though it remains the internationally recognized border.

¹⁶³ Gulbudin Hekmatyaar was one of the founding members of *Hizb e Islami* in 1977, and soon after became one of the seven figureheads for the Mujahideen resistance front, and was especially favored by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency (which distributed US military aid to the various Mujahideen parties) for his social conservatism. After the toppling of Najibullah’s government in 1992, Hekmatyaar refused to accept the newly established Mujahideen government, and instigated a civil war to recapture the city of Kabul for *Hizb e Islami*.

provincial capital of Asadabad,¹⁶⁴ where local lore about valiant resistance during the Soviet-Afghan War assumes an almost mythical status and reaffirms a masculine prerogative in the nature of political life and in oral history.

In order to prove his innocence, Abdul Wali arrived at the Kunar governor's palace one afternoon along with his brother and some tribal elders. The governor is a man named Fazel Akbar, who was living in the palace with his son, Hyder Akbar, whom I met in Kabul through the mediation of a friend. Hyder spoke with me approximately six months after I initially tried to contact him. His car had been ambushed (I did not know this when I first contacted him) and he had gone into hiding, or as he describes, was "laying low."

When I found out about the gravity of his situation, I refrained from contacting him again, until our mutual friend told me that he was ready to talk. We met in May. In earlier years, Hyder had spoken candidly to the media about his experiences in Kunar, especially with Ira Glass of the popular NPR show "This American Life," (he even recorded his early trips to Kunar for the show). He also wrote a memoir, *Come Back to Afghanistan*, which we will read alongside my transcripts in order to understand the complexity of the situation in Kunar but also his perception of his own prophetic lineage and of Abdul Wali. Hyder also testified against David Passaro during his trial in 2006.¹⁶⁵ He loves to speak and revels in attention. Thus, his hesitation

¹⁶⁴ A firebase is also called a fire support base. They are temporary bases and were used widely in the Vietnam War to provide artillery fire support. In Afghanistan, fire bases primarily provide support to forces fighting the Taliban along the "Af-Pak" border, which includes Kunar.

¹⁶⁵ David Passaro is the CIA contractor who tortured and killed Abdul Wali.

about initially meeting me is indicative of the trauma of the ambush (*kameen*), and the depth of his fear for his life at a time of “no rules,” as he describes.

Hyder and his father are *Said* descendants of Prophet Mohammad, and Hyder surmised that Abdul Wali trusted them for that reason.¹⁶⁶ Fazel Akbar is a clean-shaven man, an oddity that was appreciated by the local *Kunaris* because they could see his Adam’s apple, or conscience (*ghairawan*).¹⁶⁷ The cartilage protrusion of Fazel Akbar’s larynx was not only a symbol of his voice, but also of his promise of just rule, a promise grounded in both orality and in his prophetic lineage:

“My father is uniquely qualified for the governor’s position. He has legitimacy from the resistance, yet he is an educated moderate, not a warlord or fundamentalist... We are a family of *Saids*, a title that means we are descended from the Prophet Muhammad. On a practical level, this means that my father is Said Fazel, I am Said Hyder, and my brother is Said Omar. More important, Saids are afforded great respect in Afghanistan. Karzai—half-jokingly, half-respectfully—likes to call my father pacha, which means “king.”¹⁶⁸

Fazel Akbar was born north of Asadabad in a village called Shal. He was raised by his grandfather, a mythologized saint named Shal Pacha (the King of Shal), who was renowned for his spirituality and who is said to have urinated milk and taught classes on Islam to *jinnns*—the largely invisible beings who co-habit the earth with humans and also have their own parallel

¹⁶⁶ *Said* and *Sayyid* refer to the same title. *Said* is an honorific title that denotes prophetic lineage, and part of Hyder and Fazel Akbar’s full name: Said Hyder Akbar, Said Fazal Akbar.

¹⁶⁷ Hyder explained to me that someone made a joke to his father about his ghairiwan when he was governor, based on a popular saying. His father’s refusal to grow a beard (which has important symbolic weight in Afghanistan) resulted in someone joking that it was good to have a governor without a beard because it didn’t block his ghairiwan from view, and therefore forced him to be introspective. Because of the location of the ghairiwan, looking at it also used interchangeably to say: looking within oneself. This doubling also refuses any distinction between self-consciousness and voice.

¹⁶⁸ Akbar, Said Hyder, and Susan Burton. *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager’s Story*. English Language edition. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005, pg. 148.

universe (*Djinnestan*), making themselves visible only to the spiritually gifted or the possessed.¹⁶⁹ The prophetic and the supernatural infused Fazel Akbar with an aura of legitimacy in the aftermath of a complex history of guerrilla warfare in Kunar, much of it fueled by the failed land reforms of the Afghan communist party between 1978-1979, and still vividly recalled by survivors. Fazel Akbar was active in that resistance movement, partaking in shifting alliances that were forged or dissolved on the basis of strategic need and social desire. He now buttressed his personal history and prophetic lineage to consolidate his authority in the Kunar Valley upon his return from exile.¹⁷⁰

Asadabad, the rural capital of Kunar just south of Fazel Akbar's enchanted birthplace, is now also famous as home to Firebase Asadabad. Abdul Wali was afraid of the remote base (*toopchi*), an old complex recently fortified by the US military who used it to store weapons and house soldiers and CIA civilian contractors, including David Passaro.

“Everyone in Kunar calls the base *Toopchi*, which is Pashto for “artillery man.” Since the late 1970's, this small complex, in one of the most remote regions of one of the most remote countries on earth, has housed a series of artillery men whose fusillade has had worldwide reverberations. First came the Afghan Communists, who were followed by their backers, the Soviets. The Soviets were succeeded by the mujahideen, who eventually gave the base to local Arabs. The Arabs used it as a terrorist training camp before ceding it to their new hosts, the Taliban, who, of course, lost it to the Americans... If you stand out back and look across the fierce Kunar River, you can almost hear the galloping horses of

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pg. 149-150.

¹⁷⁰ “When my father's convoy reached the Kunar border in late April, two hundred cars waited there to greet him. Two hundred cars is a lot of cars for a rural province. After my father crossed—on foot, as a ceremonial gesture—the convoy continued along the dusty roads, and somewhere south of Asadabad stopped for lunch... There are schoolchildren waiting to greet my father, and soldiers patrolling with guns the length of some of the kids in line. Necklaces are hung, confetti is strewn. My father sits on a raised platform, preparing to speak, an Afghan flag before him” (2005,151).

Alexander the Great, who scurried away for safety after being hit by an arrow in this very valley.”¹⁷¹

More recently, Kunar has also become the site of an underground timber trade heaving with feuds and vendettas. Abdul Wali was undoubtedly familiar with this cascading history, and with Kunar’s dangerous blackmarket. Abdul Wali had heard stories of brutal torture tactics used during interrogation sessions with Afghan prisoners. He was terrified of sexual violence, and had asked: “Is it true the Americans disembowel people?” Even though Abdul Wali had never spoken to the Americans, he certainly knew of them and witnessed the dramatic changes that rent his local village in the aftermath of its occupation. In 2003 the Kunar Valley was the spectacular scene of an intensified counter-insurgency effort, a mission that entailed direct military violence and developmental aid, inciting volatile social changes that would pluck the valley out of the rural isolation that Hyder fantasizes as its pre-history and into “immediate contact with global events,” newly beholden, as Hyder imagines, to the sudden force of the world.

Hyder has been living in Kunar between visits to the United States since 2002, when his father Fazel Akbar was appointed the governor by the former president, Hamid Karzai. He narrated his personal history to me and emphasized the sudden changes in his life and the unexpected boon that befell his father when he suddenly went from being an unremarkable small business owner in California to the governor of one of the most important provinces in Afghanistan, and a major front in the War on Terror.¹⁷² In a similar vein, for Hyder things happened suddenly in Kunar. He describes the province’s rapid transformation as a result of the

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 155-156.

¹⁷² Fazel Akbar and former president Hamid Karzai are (or at least were) friends, and had met each other while fighting for the Mujahideen during the Afghan-Soviet War.

US military's provincial reconstruction efforts, a project with an annual budget of \$105 million in a sparsely populated valley:

“The locals don’t think about economy the way I do. I think about it in terms of the long-term consequences and what happens when this bubble bursts, which is already happening. The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kunar had one of the highest budgets in the country, because the Taliban were strong in Kunar, and so there was an emphasis on ‘winning hearts and minds.’ The PRT’s budget was \$105 million in a place where the population is 400,000. We’re talking about pure cash at the end of the day, an influx of over a hundred million just from the military base. That’s chaotic, but if you want real chaos take it away and see what happens. But the locals don’t think about it in these terms, for them money just comes and goes and that’s how they see it, kind of like ‘Oh, there are just less projects happening now.’ ”¹⁷³

Hyder imagines that only he understands the long term, and structural violence of economic volatility. The local *Kunaris* simply experience it as an innocuous diminution in projects and budgets. Hyder understands that the valley is at the edge of a steep fall, subject not only to the sudden injection of a large amount of foreign capital, money that came directly from the remote base in Asadabad and distorted the local economy, but also to new political alliances, dangerous black markets, extortion practices, and personal vendettas that were all cloaked in the language of the War on Terror. This access to a deeper understanding invigorates his perception of his own role as a mediator, someone who translates the complexity of the situation to both the unsuspecting *Kunaris* and the ignorant Americans:

“I felt the potential for a counter-insurgency immediately. I saw the foundation being set, and my father quit in 2004 when *we saw where things were headed* (emphasis mine). I remember going to the Kurangal Valley, it was one of the main areas of fighting between the Taliban and the Americans. There was active timber smuggling in the area, and serious rivalries between people in the Kurangal Valley and the neighboring Pech Valley, where locals wanted in on the smuggling. At the same time, Shah Wali, who was famous for being brutal in that region during the communist era, was appointed a local leader. I remember an American major, we called him Major Mark, trying to explain, in a meeting with the locals from the Kurangal Valley, that none of this was cause for retaliatory

¹⁷³ Personal interview, May 2013.

violence. He told them to ‘take it easy’ and said: ‘If I’m in America and I’m driving down the road and I get pulled over because I am speeding, I don’t get out of the car and shoot the police officer. I go to court and follow the process. It’s not cool to shoot the officer.’ I had to explain to him that things were a little more complicated and there was a massive civil war just twenty years earlier and you and the police officer were probably duking it out, and maybe the police officer also killed your sons and now he’s back and powerful and stopping you for speeding. Anyway, the Kurangalese couldn’t have been more clear. They wanted local authority they could respect and said to the Americans ‘We do not respect criminals but if this is what you want to impose on us, then you do what you have to do, and we will do what we have to do’. Shah Wali was killed not long after that.’¹⁷⁴

In his memoir, *Come Back to Afghanistan*, Hyder describes the meeting between the Kurangalese and Major Mark (who was mediating for Shah Wali) as “both sides speaking in code,” by which he meant their first languages. Fluent in both, Hyder translated at the meeting and emphasized the local council’s (*shura*) response to Major Mark’s discussion of the need to implement a moratorium on the cutting and smuggling of trees, a directive that came directly from President Karzai in Kabul. Hyder wants to tell Mark what the locals have said, but he is cut off from doing so: “the speaker (Afghan) has noted that a lot of regimes have passed through Afghanistan in the last couple decades. During Rabbani’s time, during the Taliban’s time, during the time of Jahan Dad—the villagers did not smuggle because the government was in on it. It was almost like a competition. ‘But we appreciate the appointment of the new governor,’ I translate, ‘and we respect him and will obey him and we will listen to him.’”¹⁷⁵

They also tell Hyder that Shah Wali extorts them, resorting to violence and imprisoning those who refuse to pay him. “When Shah Wali finally joins the conversation, you can tell he’s a little worried. He speaks super fast, his beard flopping over his belly, and soon the shura

¹⁷⁴ Personal Interview, May 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Akbar, Said Hyder, and Susan Burton. *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager’s Story*. English Language edition. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005, pg. 168.

members are interrupting, and everyone's words overlap." "Stop! Stop! Stop!" Mark yells. "They are just pouring their hearts out," I try to explain. "Oh you did this, then you did that." "It's like the Ahmed Springer show," Mark says. "One person at a time," he declares. "In short paragraphs or short sentences."¹⁷⁶

The displacement of *Kunari* expression (the speech of the *shura* members) is achieved by the authoritative interruption of Major Mark, who demands logical intervals. His demand for short sentences reveals a perception of excess that overtakes the translation. He describes that excess in the idiom of an American tabloid talk show. Like the participants of the Jerry Springer show, who often become hysterical or angry and yell over one another, the *Kunaris* are also incapable of engaging in collective speech that is, simultaneously, paced and logical. They need to be told to "stop! stop! stop!" Before they were interrupted, the *Kunaris* were expressing to Hyder and Major Mark that Shah Wali (the local leader) had exhorted and threatened them. They were speaking about how they had been victims of his authority.

This is analogous to what Zia witnessed at the front gate of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ghazni, though it was a dramatically corporeal form of victimhood. But what these stories share, in the moment that the Afghans (the guards and the *Kunari* locals) express (through their bodies or words) how the violence of the war has affected them, is the foreign soldier's perception of an unstoppable excess which either turns linguistic exchange into hysterical prattle or physical severance into a mob-like capacity for organization and violence. This logic is one that will come up again when we consider the Green Zone and the US State department warnings

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pg. 170-171.

(issued to US citizens) that warn of the local population's capacity to get into militarized zones and sites despite heavy security measures.

About this time, in the neighboring city of Asmar, local businesses catered to the base and sold its second-hand goods, as they do in Kabul, disseminating commodities like old combat boots, t-shirts (“Bagram—been there, done that”), cooking oil, potato chips, cookies, toilets, and air conditioners (which also cool down “massage parlors” on bases) to locals who can afford them as tokens of modernity, imbued with the enigma of a mysterious origin from a base they are barred from entering unless they are losing “life or limb.” Elsewhere in Kunar, the first car dealerships opened, offering those who were becoming enriched by the surge in timber smuggling to Pakistan or the US military's direct cash payments the opportunity to partake in automotive wonder. Local power brokers and commanders were propped up and given money by organizations like International Relief and Development (IRD) and Development Assistance International (DAI), which Hyder claims are fronts for intelligence agencies who collect sociological information through the pretense of rural surveys in order to buttress counterposing local commanders as the War on Terror moved onto its Iraq theater and US military and ISAF soldiers were needed elsewhere.¹⁷⁷ Hyder describes how these commanders became not only wealthy, but deeply entrenched in the local social fabric, a stature that was anathema to the tribal discourse of egalitarianism, a discourse that he describes as having prevented the rise of any single powerful warlord in Kunar:

¹⁷⁷ International Relief and Development is USAID's largest non-profit contractor, and has been awarded some \$2.4 billion dollars in contracts. IRD was suspended from further work by the U.S government in January 2015 because of “serious misconduct” in its performance and management of taxpayer funds. See: Higham, Scott and Rich, Steven. “USAID suspends IRD, its largest nonprofit contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2015.

“a lot comes down to the way tribal politics works. The Pashtuns have a hard time working with someone outside of their tribe. People from within tribal structures emerge as spiritual and political leaders. The Taliban also emerged from the Pashtuns even though it was not concerned with tribal politics. But the important thing is there is no powerful regional warlord, there are multiple leaders, a lot of local commanders at the local level.”¹⁷⁸

Hyder recounts a nefarious underground world responsible for Kunar’s transforming social and physical landscape, cutting through age-old tribal and political alliances like the swift force of an axe through a prized deodar cedar tree. Assassinations, rocket attacks, black market deals, government collaboration, and the felling of a “timber mafia” reverberate in Kunar, corralled in moments of accusation through the force of language:

“It was a volatile time in Kunar, when there was a lot of cash floating around and a lot of people were becoming powerful and rich, and making enemies. It was a time in Kunar when, if you hated someone for any reason, all you had to do was tell the Americans he was a terrorist or hiding the Taliban in his house and your problems would be solved. They would bomb your enemies for you.”

The violence was multifaceted and often involved explosions, like the rocket attacks on Firebase Asadabad: “These rocket attacks, for example, are not the work of a single group. The attacks are probably funded by Arabs who are sheltered by Pakistan; orchestrated by loyalists of Gulbiddin Hekmatyar or the Taliban; and carried out by deeply impoverished men who are paid for their efforts.”¹⁷⁹ But perhaps more volatile than the rocket attacks, though we have seen that they are never indissociable from spoken words and mishearings, is the fact that speaking with the Americans newly constitutes a mechanism for violent retribution and accusation. Here, again, there is a parallel with what Matin and Zia encounter in Ghazni and Helmand, except that for

¹⁷⁸ Personal Interview, May 2013.

¹⁷⁹ Akbar, Said Hyder, and Susan Burton. *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager’s Story*. English Language edition. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005, pg. 186.

them (speaking to me from the perspective of a military mediator) the accusation of collaboration was made by the Taliban against Afghans who speak to foreign military personnel, whereas in Kunar, it is the locals who accuse other locals (for various reasons, but most of them undoubtedly about money) of collaborating with the Taliban. The palpable fear of this kind of betrayal does not only suffuse the world of talk but also, as I've described with my own experience of using a cell phone, the world of telecommunication—which redoubles the fear of being overheard with that of one's voice being recorded, and stored, for future corroboration.

These myriad forces converged in unknown ways to render Abdul Wali a suspect in the *Saraton 17, 1382* (June 7, 2003) attack, a day he could not recount in the western calendar when he was forcefully drawn into a different temporal order by David Passaro's (the CIA contractor interrogating him) question: "Where were you on June 7, 2003 when the rockets hit our base?" Abdul Wali struggled, and said he didn't know in a burdened moment when perhaps some of his memories came to him in a flood while others scattered like brittle leaves blown off a tree, with no reason to stay together anymore: "I just, I go to sleep, I wake up, and there's the next day. I feed myself, I go to sleep, and there's a next day."¹⁸⁰

The Plow

Hyder describes Abdul Wali in his memoir as a simpleton, perhaps slow: "There's a kind of simplicity to him, and *it's easier for me to picture him plowing a field* (emphasis mine) than plotting a terror attack...maybe he's slow or perhaps he's just lived such a simple life that he's at

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

a loss in any unfamiliar element.”¹⁸¹ But Hyder’s own account shows us that Abdul Wali wasn’t at a loss. He understood the violent intersection of international forces that were upturning Kunar’s social terrain, and he even expressed his misgivings to Hyder:

“Abdul Wali believes he’s been targeted by some adversaries in a tribal feud. After so many years of war, there are very few people in Kunar without enemies. Everybody has a side, but there aren’t just two sides, like Taliban and anti-Taliban—there are dozens. I can’t even name all the tribes in Kunar...their ubiquity is fodder for jokes: The men went to the moon and they ran into a guy from Safi who was already there.¹⁸² Of course the Americans are used as tools in these internal battles. Don't like a certain Ahmed or Mahmoud? Say that he has a Taliban hideout in his home. If you’re lucky the Americans will bomb it for you, wiping out your enemy and his male relatives in a single swoop.”¹⁸³

Abdul Wali had attuned his ears to the sounds of these multifaceted forces and recognized that the valley was beholden to changes that came from elsewhere. These, like a road being build by the Provincial Reconstruction Team, had a soundscape he had become familiar with: “When asked how he could not have heard the rocket attacks he explains that it could be U.S. firing practice, the sound of explosives used in new road construction, a tribal fire fight.” These were different but ordinary noises for Abdul Wali.

“Afghans have become pretty savvy over the last thirty years, most are uneducated and illiterate but have experienced a lot and are much more immediately impacted by global events. People are very aware of things, of how the world works, how wars work, because they are impacted by them. So they would say “why would we let you build a road, you need it as much as we do, in fact you need one more than we do, so why don't you give us electricity instead?”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pg. 187-188.

¹⁸² Safi is the name of a tribe that inhabits the Pech Valley of Kunar.

¹⁸³ Ibid., pg. 187.

¹⁸⁴ Personal interview. May, 2013.

Let us return to that moment of interrogation in Hyder's memoir. When David Passaro fatefully asked him "How could you not know where you were on the night three rockets were fired?", Abdul Wali replied: "*I don't know* (emphasis mine) ... Maybe they woke me up, and I just went back to sleep and didn't pay too much attention to it.' Abdul Wali explains that his nights are often punctuated by explosions. Missiles are launched from nearby locations, including the American base. Feuding tribesmen exchange gunfire or grenades. And explosives are sometimes detonated in the construction of new roads."¹⁸⁵

For Hyder these complexities dissipated when he first laid eyes on Abdul Wali. Instead of a wartime subject beholden to a cacophony of noises and transformations, he saw a man who looked like he should have been trailing a plow. Hyder saw an image of labor, a hunched over rustic innocence who bordered on quixotic imbecility. He saw Abdul Wali as someone who disseminates seeds and gathers crop, who shears, digs, cultivates, perspires, and exhausts himself bent over the land and oblivious to its horizon. Hyder saw him as the subject of the failed revolutionary reforms of the Afghan communist party, reforms that promised arable land in places like Kunar to every peasant; it was a moment and gaze that stilled Abdul Wali as someone better acquainted with the content of his experiences than their sources, experiences forged in a cloistered place (Hyder describes Kunar as "one of the most remote places in one of the most remote countries in the world"), a place that had newly come into contact with global events, suddenly turned over like the earth beneath a roving plow. Abdul Wali was evidence of a

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., pg. 191.

forgotten agricultural origin, a man destined to live in simpler and earlier times unperturbed by the ingress of modernity and its noises.

As was the case during the translational encounters of Zia and Matin, the perception of rurality has dead serious implications. For Hyder this emerges through a moment of irritation, which he expresses when Abdul Wali and his brother first entered his father's palace: "'Please, please,' the man says to me in shaky English. 'Please save my brother.' I don't like the fact that the man, an Afghan in his twenties, is speaking English. Someone has probably told him that the governor's son is here from America and he thinks he knows how to ingratiate himself with me."¹⁸⁶ Hyder saw the brothers, and especially Abdul Wali, not just as people who were forged metachronously between places and times but who (unlike himself) *do not know* how to instrumentalize linguistic difference. He describes the brother's attempt as "shaky," and as a transparent attempt to ingratiate himself with Hyder. His irritation with the brother's English bespeaks a deeper ambivalence about his own encounter with a local who is not dependent upon him for his bi-lingual fluency (but for his political and social relationships). The brother was perceived as a challenge to Hyder's linguistic authority. Again, the specter of a certain excess emerges here, precisely at the moment when the brother is soliciting help, and it informs Hyder's desire to foreclose that capacity (of having his own words corroborated or overhead by another person who speaks both English and Pashto), through the projection of a rural subjectivity that becomes the site of linguistic failure (this time of trying *too* hard).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., pg.185.

The universalization of English cannot be distinguished from the history of American imperialism and military intervention or from transnational capitalism, which has in Kunar and Kabul (and across Afghanistan) transformed the structures within which social and linguistic exchange occur. The critique of this on the “basis of a particularism premised on the identity of national language”¹⁸⁷ is what Hyder partially expresses, when he wants Abdul Wali’s brother to speak in his *own* language, as opposed to English. Hyder perhaps intuits that the exchange of information through the schematic arrangement of two languages, under situations of duress, would serve to disarticulate rather than express intended meanings. Spoken alternately by the same persons, the exchange of English and Pashto was too much for Hyder. We will return to that excess during the actual moment of Abdul Wali’s interrogation, when for Hyder the words of David Passaro became “too much” to continue translating.

Abdul Wali was looking ahead at the horizon of his future and his life in Kunar. While many *Kunaris* had escaped the valley out of fear for their lives or of being sent to Guantanamo, Abdul Wali wanted things to be otherwise. By seeking Fazel Akbar’s mediation he expressed that he wanted to be free from the oppressive suspicion that hung over his life, from the grip of false accusation. He was encouraged by the example of a powerful commander named Salih Mohammad, who was also from Kunar and suspected of orchestrating similar attacks. Salih Mohammad was exonerated after speaking with American intelligence officers who had failed to find him during a raid on his house one night. Fazel Akbar intervened after the raid and agreed to arrange the meeting, giving Salih Mohammad the option of either speaking to the American

¹⁸⁷ See: Sakai, Naoki, and Morris Meaghan. *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pg. 19.

military or going into self-imposed exile in Pakistan, a departure referred to by local *Kunari* men who face such decisions regularly out of a fear for their lives as a “*hijrat*,” or migration.

This is occurring more frequently as Afghan provinces become increasingly unsafe, and as ways of living are eclipsed by the long shadow of military doubt that hangs over the extended span of the South and East of the country. “Local Afghans are known to plan explosions for no reason, just to have an excuse to go to the Americans and ingratiate themselves by appearing to do the right thing. Another common trick is to bury a mine, then call on the Americans to “alert” them to the hazard.”¹⁸⁸ We will return, in detail, to the violence and dissemination of land mines and improvised explosive devices in chapter six where I consider how the discourse of Afghan mobility (their ability to “get into” places they are prohibited from, to orchestrate attacks, etc.) is deeply implicated both in the material proliferation of land mines and in the materialization of the logic of supplementarity. But here, Hyder also situates for us the problem in a linguistic terrain where it is incorporated in a milieu of accusation and in the desire to demonstrate innocence in contexts overdetermined by terroristic doubt.

Abdul Wali was inspired by Salih Mohammad. He didn’t want to undertake a *hijrat*, though that concept shaped his orientation to time. The Islamic notion of *hijrat* refers to a special kind of journey undertaken for self-preservation. It signifies the story of Prophet Mohammad’s original migration from Mecca, where he was persecuted, to the oasis of Madina where he arrived with his companions on September 27, 622 AD, the first day of the *Hijri* calendar.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pg. 191.

¹⁸⁹ It is important to note that the Islamic, or *hijri*, calendar does not commence with Prophet Mohammad’s birth, ascension to paradise, or the revelation of God’s word. It begins with a journey

Prophet Mohammad, who was facing a groundswell of retaliatory violence from the tribes of Quraysh was commanded by the archangel Gabriel to leave the origin of his inspiration, and to seek safety in Madina, a city that offered the promise of new political and spiritual alliances. But Abdul Wali wanted to continue living in Kunar where he had always lived, with and for others. He sought out Fazel Akbar and Hyder to persuade them to talk to the Americans, a persuasion that Hyder attributed solely to the buttressing of a history of political relations. Whether or not that was true for Abdul Wali, we'll never know, but he did volunteer himself in a consequential moment of faith.

“This happened in 2003, a time when people became deeply alienated from each other and targeting one another for personal reasons, telling the Americans that so-and-so is a terrorist just because they had a personal problem. This was when Abdul Wali got in touch with us. He was also implicated in the attacks on the Americans and said he was innocent and agreed to talk. Just a few days earlier, a commander named Salih Mohammad, one of Guldbudeen Hekmatyar’s commanders, was also suspected of having close ties with the Al Qaeda wing in Kunar. The Americans tried raiding Salih Mohammad’s house but he had fled; they spent a lot of money trying to capture him. My father intervened and said: *‘let me do this my way,’* (emphasis mine) and the Americans agreed. We knew Salih Mohammad, and a close friend of his talked to him on our behalf and we asked him either to leave or to come and talk. The next day he showed up at the palace and said: ‘I was ready to go on a *hijrat* to the Punjab, but I’ve decided not to. I’ve decided to talk.’ He talked and he was clean, he was released three days later. And then Abdul Wali got in touch with us, and he also showed up at the palace, and we started talking. He was weird. He was afraid. He arrived with his brother and some tribal elders. He was afraid of the Americans and said he had heard horror stories about how the Americans tortured people. We told him: ‘Do not worry, you will be fine. We will make sure that you will be fine.’ *He still didn't want to go to the base to meet the Americans,*

undertaken after the recognition of a conspiracy, and in order to preserve his own life and that of his companions. Thus, the Islamic calendar illustrates an orientation to time that has as its origin both the importance of recognizing malice and a migration from a place where social relations had become menacing, to a place that offered the hope of renewed alliances. It is a relationship to time that emerges from a migratory, or nomadic relationship to space, spurred by the desire for alliance. *Hijrat* is a process and a manifestation of hope, not an event. This association is not lost on the *Kunaris* when they evoke the concept and say they are on the verge of a “*hijrat*” abroad in the wake of increasingly sinister US military tactics of intelligence gathering and retaliation, tactics that have shorn the valley’s social fabric of trust and loyalty.

so my dad sent me personally as his escort and translator and we managed to convince him (emphasis mine)."¹⁹⁰

Three days later Abdul Wali "just passed away," as Major Mark and David Passaro described. He had been shackled, hooded and violently beaten with a one-foot-long Maglite flashlight. Among other injuries he had a shattered pelvis and was unable to urinate. In the minds of David Passaro and Hyder Akbar (who was *not* present during the actual torture), Abdul Wali's confinement and subsequent death was both spawned and murderously concluded by the failures of language, by words that became "too much" for the task of translation:

"We went to the Americans and I remember this one guy Dave Passaro very vividly. He bothered me a lot with how he asked questions, he was very arrogant and aggressive. *I stopped translating because he was so aggressive, it was too much* (emphasis mine). He was trying to intimidate Abdul Wali, asking him "Where were you on June 7 when 3 rockets were fired on our base?" This poor guy had no idea, he doesn't know how old he is, let alone where he was on June 7. He knows day, work, night, sleep. That's time as far as he's concerned. *Abdul Wali started freaking out and so I stopped translating* (emphasis mine). They kept him at the base, and I told him: 'You'll be fine; they just want to talk to you some more and you need to stay here for a little while.' Three days later, I get a call from David and he said: 'Come to base it's very important.' So I went with my father. Major Mark and David came in and said: 'We have bad news: Abdul Wali died.' I was shocked. They just said: 'He just passed away, just died a couple of hours ago. He had a heart attack.' I knew it wasn't true, he was fine and healthy and we found out later that they had beaten him to death. In 2006, I testified in North Carolina against David Passaro, and the government prosecuted him. That interrogation is an example on the ground of what will happen and could happen. With all the lofty language being used, it comes down to assholes like David Passaro and victims like Abdul Wali. It haunts me. *After we had gained Abdul Wali's trust, used all of our family connections, relationships that took decades to build* (emphasis mine), he was beaten to death and his body was covered up strategically. They knew exactly how to beat him without leaving obvious signs. Later the CIA showed me pictures during the investigation. We didn't allow an autopsy because the body would be opened up at the Bagram military base and his family didn't want more damage and pain so there was no autopsy and the US government couldn't try him (David Passaro) for murder. I was the one that broke the news to his brother, and his brother went

¹⁹⁰ Personal Interview, May 2013.

crazy and he thought I was going to kill him too, he was going crazy. *He was so afraid of me and I was just trying to drive him back to their family house. I'll never forget that.*"¹⁹¹

How do we begin to understand what transpired that day? A structure of repetition emerges, and again it is expressed as the inability to accommodate (or translate) the content of an excess: this time David Passaro's harsh words. This logic not only recurs, but has intensified. For Hyder, it occurred on several other occasions (the meeting with Major Mark, the day Abdul Wali and his brother arrive at the palace, and more generally as the *Kunaris* have become "savvy" and criminal, making it harder for him and his father to mediate on their behalf). Each time the perception of excess overtakes the possibility of translation and exacerbates the predicament of the *Kunaris*. What is depicted for us is not only the marginalization of translation (and the conveying of meaning) but a structure of exchange which necessarily ends in radical uncertainty or death. This will become clearer to us through Hyder's own near death experience.

Hyder emphasized two awful memories to me. The death of Abdul Wali, and the ambush on his own car (the traumatic event he went into hiding after), which is as irrevocably emblazoned on his mind. When he recounted the story of Abdul Wali, he immediately followed it with the even more personal story of the attack on his car. It was a shocking event that sundered his expectations, both of a valley devastated by violence and of the future, though he had experienced *kameens* before when driving with a group of American soldiers from Kurengal back to Asadabad. He describes that first *kameen* eagerly in his memoir: "I feel as if I've undergone the baptism for Kunar; the *ambush was a kind of initiation rite. Proud that I've*

¹⁹¹ Personal Interview, May 2013.

earned some legitimacy with the guard, I go to find my father (emphasis mine).¹⁹² But the second *kameen*, with him as the primary target, was different:

“Another *awful incident is when I was personally* (emphasis mine) ambushed in December (2012) in Kunar. I survived out of sheer luck. They shot a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) right through my car and the car blew up right after I got out of it. They wanted to kill me. It was personal. It felt weird. *Someone told me that in this place (Kunar) there are no rules, and that the future we feared was already here.* The social fabric is torn, there is nothing but fighting, the economy is going to shit and when there are no rules, it means *anybody* is a target. If a *Said* in Kunar is attacked in broad day light, *that is a sure sign that there are absolutely no rules. That’s the ultimate transformation* (emphasis mine), I saw it happen to others, and then it happened to me...there is no honor here, no rules, few opportunities for honorable action. I am confused and just trying to lay low right now, I am trying not to die until after 2014. I would like to play a long-term role in Kunar, to help stabilize the place.”¹⁹³

In Kunar, an entire natural and social ecosystem was disturbed. Hyder Akbar was wounded both before and after Abdul Wali and also when language became “too much” for him during the translation. David Passaro’s verbal aggressivity frightened Abdul Wali, to be sure, especially because it demanded an impossible and instant reorientation to time and memory, which Abdul Wali struggled with. Let us return again to the scene of the interrogation: “Dave fixes Abdul Wali with an unrelenting stare. Abdul Wali returns a nervous smile. ‘Translate this to him!’” Dave explodes. ‘This is not a joking matter. Don’t smile!’ ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend him,’ Abdul Wali replies anxiously. ‘It’s very hard for me, I can’t understand anything he’s saying. He was staring at me, and I didn’t know what to do. What should I do?’”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Akbar, Said Hyder, and Susan Burton. *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager’s Story*. English Language edition. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005, pg. 184.

¹⁹³ Personal Interview, May 2013.

¹⁹⁴ Akbar, Said Hyder, and Susan Burton. *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager’s Story*. English Language edition. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005, pg. 192.

Again, Abdul Wali is explicitly soliciting Hyder's help and intervention. But David Passaro's questions angered Hyder and he soon after left the interrogation session, leaving Abdul Wali alone and incredibly vulnerable. Hyder's anger was markedly apparent on his face almost a decade later when he recalled David during our conversation: "We went to the Americans and I remember this one guy Dave Passaro very vividly. He bothered me a lot with how he asked questions, he was very arrogant and aggressive."¹⁹⁵ Passaro's questions became aggressive not only when he threatened Abdul Wali and his family, which he did, but also when Hyder realized that an orientation toward time and the future based on the logic of prophetic lineage would no longer produce the continuity he had come to take for granted in Kunar:

"I stopped translating because he was so aggressive, it was too much. He was trying to intimidate Abdul Wali, asking him "Where were you on June 7 when 3 rockets were fired on our base?" This poor guy had no idea, he doesn't know how old he is, let alone where he was on June 7. He knows day, work, night, sleep. That's time as far as he's concerned. Abdul Wali started freaking out and so I stopped translating."¹⁹⁶

The prophetic *hijrat*, the very notion now invoked in Kunar in order to emphasize a fear of futurity and a need to escape an otherwise imminent death, was also the basis for the genealogical succession that defined Hyder's subjective sense of self.¹⁹⁷ The notion of the *Hijra* is indissociable from the *Quranic* verse that brought together the concepts of filiation and alliance (through marriage) and which, through subsequent centuries, oriented the unfolding of

¹⁹⁵ Personal Interview, May 2013.

¹⁹⁶ Personal Interview, May 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima married his cousin Ali ibn Abu Talib, for whom the verse in the Quran: "And it is He who created of water a mortal, and made him kindred of blood and marriage," is believed to have been revealed after the *hijrat* to Madina. It is the marriage of Fatima and Ali, and their two sons Hassan and Hussein, that *Saids* universally draw their lineage to.

time in Kunar, both in actual calendrical terms and in increasingly urgent terms as the *hijrat* is now invoked to communicate the specter of death at a time when neither kin based or social relationships warrant interpersonal trust or social protection, as Hyder describes to me:

“Because direct air strike support happens a lot less than before, there are more drone strikes in Kunar now and these attacks are really effective in terms of killing members of the Taliban but they create huge issues in terms of social dynamics because civilians are killed. Basically there is a huge hunt going on, and for that they require intensive on-the-ground intelligence. For that, they literally have a chip, a small thing you can put in your pocket, that they give to locals. It’s simply called “a chip.” So, lets say they want to kill person X, all they have to do to find him is to find someone *close to him, friend or family* (emphasis mine), and talk him into carrying the chip. *So the next time this friend or family member is close to person X, they can throw the chip on his bed and that signals to the drone operators his presence and they can drop a bomb* (emphasis mine). They got him. From the location of the dropped chip, they’ll know where to launch the strike. It has made things very tense in these areas, actually the environment is unbelievably tense. There is no trust, social relations have been destroyed, and this will create enormous long term issues. *Just a few weeks ago someone was beheaded in Kunar for having chips in his pocket* (emphasis mine). There will be no honor here, no rules, very few opportunities for honorable actions, you’ll get swept up in the chaos. There was an attack on me, and now I have to respond, and then someone will respond and then what?”¹⁹⁸

A chip tossed on a bed by a friend or family member, a bed where otherwise lovers might lie, where an entire family might sleep together and where secrets are confessed, is illustrative of the depth of social dislocation and violence involved both in the US military’s intelligence gathering tactics, and in modes of automated warfare typically understood as remote, though they pulsate with intimacy. In this context, while Hyder (like so many expatriates in Afghanistan) probably found it difficult to quickly convert June into the Persian month of *Saratôn* or the Pashto month of *Čungash* in his translation, Passaro’s question was “too much” because it introduced a disjuncture between Hyder’s anticipation of things as they were, and the radical uncertainty of a future in which the moorings of both familial and social relations had

¹⁹⁸ Personal Interview, May 2013.

come mightily undone, a dissolution that now required instrumentability as the hallmark of any meaningful relationship to the future: “There will be no honor here, no rules, very few opportunities for honorable actions, you’ll get swept up in the chaos. There was an attack on me, and now I have to respond, and then someone will respond and then what?”

Language and time were also crucial for David Passaro, the torturer. After his trial and sentencing in North Carolina, where he was convicted of brutal assault, he told the presiding judge: “He (Abdul Wali) is a human being. I failed him. If I could go back and change things, *it would have never happened. I wish I had never gone in to talk to him* (emphasis mine).”¹⁹⁹ For Passaro, the humanity of the man he forced into “stress positions,” kicked with enough force to lift him off the ground, and beat to death with a metal flashlight was redeemed in a retrospective reversal, a fantasy time when he would have “never gone in to talk,” foreclosing the possibility of murderous violence alongside that of communication with a man who was only human in a hypothetical moment in time. Passaro’s use of the past conditional tense, to evoke a hypothetical situation as a gesture of penitence, was a fictive moment in which violence was repressed through self-restraint and remedial recognition.

In a symbolic context where an orientation toward time could no longer be based on the example of self-preservation, only death could come from the future in the absence of new

¹⁹⁹ Dunbar, Elizabeth. “Ex-CIA Contractor Sentenced to Prison,” *The Washington Post*. February 13, 2007.

The actual judgement prosecuted David Passaro not on grounds of torture but because the “site” of the crime, a federally administered area, constitutes an element of the crime. Thus, Passaro was convicted for assault on grounds of territorial jurisdiction. See *United States vs. Passaro* published by United States Court of Appeals for the fourth circuit, decided August 10, 2009 before Wilkinson, Motz and Gregory, Circuit Judges.

alliances.²⁰⁰ This caused Hyder Akbar and Abdul Wali to misunderstand each other, but differently. The moment when the task of translation became “too much” for Hyder, was also a moment when the primacy of filial relations was misunderstood as an opening for a fateful alliance. When Hyder refused to translate, the cessation in mediation was understood by Abdul Wali as nothing less than an expression of empathy from a descendant of Prophet Mohammad. This was augmented for Abdul Wali, who suddenly found himself sitting in the governor’s palace, by the social history of the valley—by his memory of words and relationships: Said Fazel Akbar’s authority was legitimized on the basis of his charismatic lineage *and* his role in the Soviet-Afghan war, when he fought in a complicated network of alliances and shifting allegiances in a valley also famous for its residents sharing their food and weapons.

Fazel Akbar and Hyder Akbar persuaded Abdul Wali to speak with the Americans, and as Hyder tragically described: “*After we had gained Abdul Wali’s trust, used all of our family connections, relationships that took decades to build (emphasis mine), he was beaten to death.*” The fateful conversation, first at the palace and then at Firebase Asadabad, that invoked Hyder’s anxiety about a perceived loss of genealogical primacy, evoked for Abdul Wali the memory of past alliances, now culled to make a promise both about his safety at the hands of the Americans and about continued political relations. In persuading Abdul Wali to go to the firebase, Fazel Akbar tells him the stories of torture are ridiculous and “he does something known in Afghanistan as *zamanat*. In Islamic law, *zamanat* refers to a financial transaction, to backing someone as guarantor. But *zamanat* can also mean vouching for someone’s aptitude or

²⁰⁰ It was for the sake of new and life-saving alliances that Prophet Mohammad undertook the *hijrat*.

character—in this case, my father’s personal avowal of the American’s trustworthiness and virtue.”²⁰¹

Later, when Hyder refused to stop translating, Abdul Wali understood his fraught silence as a gesture of friendship or an indication that things would be ok. He did not ask to leave with Hyder, indicating that he trusted that he would not be tortured after the initial exchange and translation, though this was an impossible expectation in a context where both translation and social relationships were imbued with deadly uncertainty. Hyder’s words, both when spoken (“*After we had gained Abdul Wali’s trust...*”) and when left unsaid (“*I stopped translating because he was so aggressive, it was too much,*”) were not his own, they were the powerful traces of a social history in which both genealogical and political alliances were subordinate to the existential demands of a social landscape immersed in conflict and frequent transformation, both now and earlier. Thus, what Hyder describes as a new situation of “no rules” in Kunar was already there, reaffirmed by a history of political networks that inspired Abdul Wali’s tragic expectation from a moment of silence that would otherwise simply have been a cessation in speech.

²⁰¹ Akbar (2005, 188).

Part II: The Garden Meeting

Family

Zaid is a twenty-eight-year-old man from Kabul with a graceful mien and masterful poise he seems to begrudge. He had accidentally married his milk-sister and soon after lost most of his family to the murderous rage of his *literate* uncle, as he emphasized. Zaid is a cook at the Empire Security residential compound in Kabul's militarized "Green Zone" in the neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan. He is marginal at Empire, supervised by the head chef, a Bangladeshi man named Sharif whose years of experience cooking for various private military corporations in Baghdad secured his managerial status in Kabul ("I am good, so good. Very experienced, I live in different places same like you," Sharif said to me). Zaid took the job. He had no previous culinary experience, because he figured he had no choice: "Afghanistan doesn't have industry so we have to take whatever jobs come our way," he said.

I developed a close friendship with Zaid over the course of the year that I frequented the Empire compound. He often confided in me and spoke openly about his "shameful" work environment. He was embarrassed for his Afghan colleagues, who sometimes stole left over food from the kitchen or soda, gatorade and the popular Nestlé milk packs from the fridge. He emphasized how ashamed he would feel when they were often caught red-handed, and how he always strived to work with dignity, and refused to negotiate his low wage of \$240 per month out of a sense of pride, even managing to save from his wages to buy a car. He would arrive early and leave late, when the kitchen had been thoroughly cleaned after dinner was served. Zaid is shy, and sometimes humorous. When his boss Sharif offered to teach me how to cook (he is an excellent chef) Zaid seemed uncomfortable that I would be in the kitchen with him and so I

declined. Given that I was also working at the Pizza Hut on Camp Eggers (about a half mile from Empire Security) I was secretly relieved not to spend any more time inside of a kitchen. This created some tension, as far as I could tell, between Sharif and Zaid, though neither ever communicated it to me. Instead, Sharif would find recipes online and tell me about them, he gave me many tips (some of which he learned in Baghdad while cooking in various establishments) but never any real lessons in the kitchen. On the whole, he was proud of the meals he would serve, and of Zaid—his “best assistant.”

One afternoon I was walking around in the hallway hoping to run into Pari, an elderly lady who was the main janitor. I was having a difficult time getting her (or her female colleagues) to speak with me and I came to find out, from Timūr who we will meet, that their supervisor Elias had prohibited them from speaking with me. I knew stories of sexual assault, and of a sexual affair that occurred between one of the cleaning girls and an Afghan security guard, so I was also cautious not to seem too eager, though I did eventually manage to forge a friendship with Pari. She thought it was too bad that I was unmarried and that I would spend my time in Kabul (by which perhaps she meant inside a mercenary compound) when I could be “anywhere in the world.”

On that day, however, I did not run into Pari. Instead Zaid saw me in the hallway and offered me lunch, as he always did. He looked lost in his reveries. He said he wanted to share a story he had never told anyone before: “I don’t know why but I trust you, I just do. Do you have time to listen?” We talked in the general meeting room, where large strategic US military maps of Afghanistan were covered with long thick black curtains, as if they were hiding a literal theater of war in a room where the blue laser beams of projectors cast a subdued light. Zaid spent his childhood kneading dough alongside his father in a Kabul bakery during Najibullah’s

presidency from 1987-1992.²⁰² His family stayed in Kabul during the Civil War of 1989-1994, and lived in a poor neighborhood between two heavily contested areas, subject to the same indiscriminate “rain of rockets” (*raket baran*) so many survivors of that war metaphorize as a natural force they had to reckon with. Zaid is illiterate, and deeply ashamed of it. He attributes it both to the inability to go to school during the Afghan Civil War and the demands of wage labor, both of which “took so much from me,” as he said. He recalled the violence of those years, emphasizing his illiteracy and the public hanging of President Najibullah, as well as the spectacles that ensued during the early years of Taliban rule:

“We lived in a poor neighborhood in Kabul, between two strategic areas held by different commanders and were in the middle of it all. In the middle of the rockets and the fighting, bullets and explosions. I’ve seen it all. Dead bodies everywhere. Bloated bodies. Someone would be walking on the street, and a second later he or she was dead—their innards coming out of their body, or their fingers severed. I’d always stare at the bodies. I couldn’t avert my gaze even though it made me sick. Those were the years of Najibullah. I was in Kabul when they (the Taliban) hung him from a traffic pole. I was probably seven years old, working with my father in a bakery. I could only go to school until the second grade, and that is why I am illiterate. There was too much fighting, too much violence. My mind just didn’t work. I remember trying to learn to read and write, and I would just get headaches because of the violence. I didn’t have the patience and all I could think about were the dead bodies on the streets.”

Zaid describes for us the same scenario that Matin and Zia survived both during the Afghan Civil War and the start of the Afghan-American War. They were all in the middle of indiscriminate violence. But while Matin and Zia understand the structure of that confusion, a precarious dichotomy between survival and expendability, as the same structure they now

²⁰² Najibullah was the last socialist president of Afghanistan. His presidency ended in 1992 after the Mujahideen resistance movement took the city of Kabul, but he was hung in 1996 after being forced out of the UN compound he had taken refuge in. He was awaiting permission to leave Afghanistan for India, which the Mujahideen denied because they wanted him tried for war crimes, particularly for acts of torture during his tenure as head of the Afghan secret police, AGSA, later called KHAD. AGSA was established in May 1978 with the support of the Soviet KGB and is synonymous in the *Kabuli* imagination with torture.

mitigate through translation; Zaid expresses its outcome as something drastically different. It rendered him illiterate, it literally made his mind not work: “I remember trying to learn to read and write, and I would just get headaches because of the violence.” “Being in the middle of rockets and fighting,” constitutes a threshold, one which distributes the capacity for literacy and illiteracy through a mysterious mechanism which he does not understand (but which he is a witness to through the physical pain he feels in his head). But it is not only his own body that succumbs to this force, one that determines who lives and dies. There are also severed and dead bodies:

“I remember we were stopped by the Taliban on the day of Najib’s hanging, we didn’t see it but I remember the Datsun cars everywhere. My brother went to see the hanging. It was common. Somebody was hung all the time. I’d seen people hung, you were meant to see it. The Taliban communicated their power that way. They would put money around people’s neck and then hang them. Dollars, rubles, they did the same with Najib and put money in his mouth and hung him from a traffic post. If someone stole something petty the Taliban would paint their face black and give them a drum to play in the middle of Kabul, and they would have to sing while playing the drums: ‘anyone who steals will have worse done to them than this, anyone who steals will have worse done to them than this,’ And they would do that all day banging on the drum, with a blackened face. They would shave mens’ heads for harassing or catcalling women, and parade them around in the back of a truck and drop them off at the zoo. It was insanity! That’s why we left to Iran. Afghanistan was a spectacle. And of course, on the way to Iran, we were stolen from, threatened, robbed, we knew we were going from one hell to another.”

Several strands are interwoven in Zaid’s discourse. The public execution of the former president (an unforgettable hanging that was rife with symbolism), the violence of the Civil War years (1992-1996), and that violence as the ground for an understanding of his illiteracy, which will return to haunt him. On one level, Zaid is expressing the failures of Afghan socialism, which ended, first with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent collapse of Najibullah’s government and then more certainly when the Mujahideen came into power in April of 1992. He speaks of the hanging (an incredible and extraordinary event) as if it was expected, citing that: “Somebody was hung all the time...The Taliban communicated their power that

way.” For Zaid, the hanging of persons and the spectacle of the boys playing the drum and singing their punishment (performing their own shame), is a mode of performative communication that becomes indissociable from the violence of illiteracy and the failure of a political movement that championed both the transformation of property rights and the provision of mass literacy as its main tenets. This coming together of historical and communicative force marks a rupture for him, and constitutes the threshold of his own tolerance. He leaves for Iran hoping to make a better life for himself.

First, an Interruption

On April 28, 1978 Radio Kabul went silent for the first time for reasons unrelated to bad weather. The absence of the broadcast voices that had become so pervasive in towns and homes, especially in Kabul where the government's modernizing efforts were narrowly focused, became indelibly marked by a mysterious rupture. That silence was followed by the new voices speaking from both Kabul and Termez (a city in the former Soviet Union and now in southern Uzbekistan). The Afghan communist party had taken over Radio Kabul. Shortly after the silence they made an announcement, and it was reproduced in text a week later on the front page of the *Kabul Times* on the 14th of Saur (Taurus), 1357 or May 4, 1978 :

“For the first time in the history of Afghanistan the last remnants of monarchy, tyranny, despotism and power of the dynasty of the tyrant Nader Khan has ended and all powers of the state are in the hands of the people of Afghanistan. The power of state fully rests with the Revolutionary Council of the armed forces. Dear compatriots, your popular state which is in the hands of the Council of the Revolution informs you that every anti-revolutionary element who would venture to defy instructions and rulings of the Council of the Revolution shall be submitted immediately to the revolutionary military centers.”

That moment of unexpected silence, and the authoritative speaking that promised violence in “revolutionary military centers” belong to a complicated modernist history in which communication and media technology was fantasized to be an instrument of immediacy and ideological persuasion, both by the Afghan State and its British counterparts for much of the twentieth century. In that context, technological interruption typified by the breakdown of Afghan wireless stations and later the prohibition on cinema became indissociable from technological excess, the unconfined voices of radio broadcasts and film, and also the dangerous heterogeneity of telegraphic transmissions. The political force of this radio interruption relies on that earlier dissemination of the fantasy of connectivity, which turns silence into the absence of voices.

As we’ve seen, the abiding fantasy that communication technology could breach the gap, both between literate and illiterate cultures and between political ideologies, became the site of its failure and promise. After assuming power in the violent coup of 1978 the PDPA’s subsequent radio and newspaper announcement of the revolutionary decree to end illiteracy by 1984 constituted a crucial rupture in this discourse. The promise being made was not that technology would help bridge the divide, but that the gap between illiteracy and literacy would be sutured, not only technologically, but by any means necessary.

On December 27, 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Kabul, commencing the ten-year Soviet-Afghan war. The silence of Radio Kabul experienced a year earlier during the PDPA coup, was displaced that afternoon by a duplication of broadcast voices being transmitted from Kabul and Termez. The simultaneous broadcasts were inadvertently picked up by Kabul’s radio listeners just as they were announcing the rule of two presidents: Hafizullah Amin and Babrak Karmal. Radio listeners frantically called into the station during the very moments that it came

under Soviet firepower and control. Fazel Akbar (Hyder's father from Kunar) was the head of Radio Kabul during that time and was held hostage inside the station by Russian soldiers. Some of his colleagues were shot to death in a violent dissonance that resembled the loud confusion of the radio waves.

Fazel Akbar, who would become the governor of Kunar and entrusted with the task of mediating between the locals and the government, as well as with US military forces, was silent when he was asked to translate during those crucial and deadly moments. The Soviet officers were giving his colleagues instructions on what to do in Russian, a language they did not speak: "We want a translator to come right now," the soldier said. "Who knows Russian?" A bunch of people pointed at my father, who played dumb. He was lucky that night, the soldier believed him. But he knew he would not be fortunate in the months that followed....My father announced that he wanted to return to Moscow and work there as the director of radio programming. Under that guise, he and my mother began to sell their belongings, including their blue Fiat and their furniture."²⁰³

What happened seventeen years later for Zaid through the public hanging of Najibullah (who followed Babrak Karmal in 1989), had already happened for *Kabulis* like Fazel Akbar, and to the urban elite of frazzled listeners who were calling the radio station to ask who the president of their country was. Their disillusion was braided into their access to mass-mediation, which was a token of modernity that now signified political and technological chaos.²⁰⁴ Zaid

²⁰³ Akbar, Said Hyder, and Susan Burton. *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager's Story*. English Language edition. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005, pg. 69.

²⁰⁴ Silence on the radio, of course, does not always signify chaos or danger. For an account of nostalgia for silence and "stillness" and how perceptions of Indies Radio figure in Indonesian nationalist literary accounts of personal integrity and in Dutch accounts of sensorial excess see: Mrázek's discussion on "The

suffered immensely from the events that followed that chaos (though he was uncertain of when he was born—he is likely in his early thirties). Given his family’s poverty, it is unlikely that they owned a radio set during those years (though they probably do now given how readily available and affordable they are).

For Zaid this media infrastructure is lacking. Unlike the Radio Kabul listeners, he sees dead bodies through his brother’s eyes. His brother watched the hanging of Najibullah in person. But if his perception of violence is almost immediate, his illiteracy is mediated by political and historical failures he never mentions. Zaid’s disappointment is more ambiguous than the headaches that prevent him from learning to read and write. Given that everyone in his family (except for his uncle, who we will return to) is illiterate it is unlikely that he was familiar with the literacy decrees of the PDPA (which they released on October 7, 1978). That decree announced a mass literacy initiative and an end to marriage presentations. It aimed to liberate women from traditional practices of social exchange and give everyone the promise of the written word. As of 1978, had the violence that implanted itself in Zaid’s head not occurred, everyone should have been able to read and write. Instead, Zaid has headaches and writing remains a pure potentiality, one which dominates his sense of self and his sense that he lives in a time when everyone should be literate. As a witness to his own incapacity, one he is nonetheless enthralled by, Zaid’s life becomes increasingly possessed by the force of literacy—which he ascribes to others as if it is a gift that comes from elsewhere.

Voice”: Mrázek, Rudolf. *Engineers of Happyland*. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2002, pg. 174-179.

Land, Love, Literacy

The PDPA, or Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) dissolved with the Soviet Union in 1991 when its air force was grounded for lack of fuel, and then more certainly when the Mujahideen established a government in Kabul in April of 1992, causing Najibullah to seek refuge in the UN compound he lived in until his public hanging in 1996. But the PDPA (which was divided into the *Parcham* -banner and *Khalq*- masses factions)²⁰⁵ was in a state of crisis from its inception, when violence within the party leadership resulted in the murder of President Taraki, and his displacement by Hafizullah Amin, a man widely believed to have also been a CIA agent who was later killed by Russian military forces in Operation Storm 333, an attack on the Taj Beg palace where he was living.²⁰⁶ But the movement's failure and its loss of political legitimacy in towns and in the countryside is the direct result of the party's mass interrogation and arrest policy and the violent military reprisals it unleashed in the aftermath of its failed land and mass literacy reform programs. The transformation of property rights, marriage prestations and the provision of mass literacy became the central tenets of the PDPA's political platform at a time when up to ninety percent of the population was illiterate and eighty-seven percent lived in

²⁰⁵ The *Khalq* faction (which adhered to Leninist principles), is infamous for its violent tactics, and was composed primarily of Pashtuns, many of them of rural origins who had come to Kabul to attend Kabul University. The *Parchamis* were predominantly Persian speaking and Kabul based. They advocated a more gradual transition to social reform and many of them were imprisoned and killed by the *Khalqis* in 1979 in *Pul-i-Charkhi*, the same prison that the *Khalqis* sent Islamists and the "*mukhalifeen*" (those who opposed the revolution).

²⁰⁶ Kabul Radio announced Hafizullah Amin's death at a revolutionary trial for "crimes against the state," and also announced Babrak Karmal (who was the former Prime Minister) as the new President and Secretary General of the PDPA. See: Gwertzman, Bernard. "Afghan President is Ousted and Executed in Kabul Coup, Reportedly with Soviet Help," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1979.

rural areas.²⁰⁷ Already more than reforms, these decrees were universal promises offered to nearly everyone, gifts that were markers not of how things *are* but how they *ought to be*, and that would come from elsewhere to change lives like Zaid's and Abdul Wali's. The fact that this didn't occur helps us understand why Zaid says he *should* have recognized his sister, and why Abdul Wali looked like he *should* have been plowing a field.

In Kunar, where Abdul Wali wanted to stay, and elsewhere in the Afghan countryside the PDPA's battle for political control and revolution was waged around these crucial reforms, introduced just three months after the *coup d'état* in Kabul with the hope that they could displace a traditional and patriarchal social structure with nuclear families beholden to the government and politburo in Kabul.²⁰⁸ Envisioned as a five-year plan, the PDPA promised love, land and literacy to nearly everyone, turning the content of three decrees (decrees six, seven and eight) into the foundation of an entirely new and literate life.²⁰⁹

The *Kabul Times*, read by literate persons who would re-read articles aloud in their homes for relations, published the text of these decrees in English, uncannily reflecting the

²⁰⁷ Halliday, Fred. "The War and Revolution in Afghanistan." *New Left Review*, I, no. 119 (February 1980): 21.

²⁰⁸ For Engels, the relationship between of development of kinship along the lines of monogamous marriage is directly related to the crisis of paternity as the crisis of inheritance and the conservation of property (i.e. the transmission of his property to his own children, and not another man's). Engels calls this overthrow of matrilineal inheritance as a "revolution--one of the most decisive ever experienced by mankind" (1978, 736) and which was enabled, and became an enabling condition for the concentration of wealth in the hands of men: "Monogamy arose out of the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of one person--and that a man--and out of the desire to bequeath this wealth to this man's children and to no one else's" (1978, 745). See: Engels, Friedrich. "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State," in Tucker, Robert C., Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978 pg. 734-760.

²⁰⁹ It was believed the end to marriage prestations and dowry practices would enable romantic marriages between consenting individuals.

language of failure and the complicated history and political economy that subtended both the PDPA's dissolution and American foreign policy in Afghanistan. That failure is as much the story of international aid and debt, of proxy wars, and of traditional structures of social exchange as it is of counterposed ideologies and diametric Cold War alliances. Moreover, it introduced haunting distinctions in how the violence of the Soviet-Afghan and later the Civil War was experienced in places as different as Kabul and Kunar, the latter a place where social classification was inflected by tribal, religious-sectarian and ethnic fissures much more than it was by class. The complexities of classificatory differences, the small variation in land ownership in the South and the East, the migratory patterns of a nomadic population with no established relation to land, the scarcity of water, the mobilization of political Islam in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and a history of armed struggle against the central state in Kabul unsurprisingly combined into a powerful current of resistance.²¹⁰

The promise of mass reform encountered these forces, and resulted in widespread brutality against anyone suspected of "opposing the revolution," being a "rebel" or engaging in "negative propaganda."²¹¹ The PDPA initiated indiscriminate surveillance and intelligence gathering in towns, especially in Kabul where mass arrests and executions became increasingly common and where even brothers would betray each other, informing the "state intelligence agency" (KHAD) of subterfuge within their family. Kabul was teeming with informers and

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ In September 2013 the Netherlands National Prosecutor's Office and National Police publicized the partial "death lists" which the Ministry of Interior had meticulously kept during the PDPA's rule. The partial list has five thousand names of those killed primarily in the *Pul i Charkhi* prison, as well as the names of those transferred from the Ministry of Interior (where they were interrogated and often tortured) to various prisons. The lists can be accessed here:
<https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/internationale/afghanistan-death/>

“information offices” established in schools and government offices. The capital city heaved with fear and became a place, as many Kabulis have described to me, where everyone was afraid of being overheard. Rather than learning to read and write, the inhabitants of towns were afraid to even speak.

In places like Kunar, the ground quickly deteriorated for the PDPA in the aftermath of the Kerela massacre and failed land reforms, and the Mujahideen resistance movement consolidated their authority. The promise of Afghan socialism rapidly fell from grace as aerial bombardment devastated the very land that was to be redistributed: “Whereas in 1978 the air force had been used to warn or intimidate villages, now it was being used to strafe and flatten rural settlements where there was believed to be resistance. In one case a village in Kunar province was bombed merely because a local PDPA official was told that some of the inhabitants had been feeding rebels at night...the regime came, by the summer, to rely more and more on its air force as the one means of hitting back at the rebel forces. The second plank of the security policy was the attempt to reduce the rebels by denying them food. Air force planes were used to burn crops in such areas as the Kunar Valley, in the hope that, with the advent of the snows in November, the rebellion could be crushed, through surrender or starvation.”²¹² Indeed, by 1979 Afghanistan faced a grain shortfall of up to 1.4 million tons, about half of its requirements, though in places like Kunar food was still shared.²¹³ What began as a fabulous pledge, as decrees to give the written word and the harvest of fertile land to nearly everyone, resulted in massacres and forced

²¹² Halliday, Fred. “The War and Revolution in Afghanistan.” *New Left Review*, I, no. 119 (February 1980): 28.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

starvation, turning localized revolts into the countrywide resistance movement. This movement spiraled into the Civil War that Zaid understands as the origin of his illiteracy.

Zaid never mentioned this history. Instead, he orients himself toward a time when the violence of war and the violence of the conventional writing emerge together, guiding his recollections. Zaid was away from his family, working alone as a laborer in Iran for much of his youth. He returned to Kabul because he missed his family.

“I was fourteen when I returned to Kabul from Tehran and my family wanted me to get married. My brother was supposed to marry my cousin, but he refused, and my uncle came and told me that I had to marry her even though I only wanted to play football. I refused but when my father asked me I couldn't turn him down, after everything he had done for us, protecting us in the war, feeding us, caring for us, how could I say no to him? So I married my cousin. But she was actually my sister! I never knew that, we had drunk milk from the same breast, my mother's. But nobody cared enough to mention that we were siblings. My parents knew we had drunk milk together but they are illiterate and therefore didn't know the implications of this, they have never read the Qur'an and they asked around and other family members said: 'Who cares? Go through with it anyway.' So they did. My literate family members, like my uncle who knew what these laws meant never bothered to explain them to us.²¹⁴

Zaid cites illiteracy for the specific fact of not knowing the content of Islamic law (*sharia* law and its edicts on marriage and incest). But it isn't only ignorance of law, and the charged absence of access to the state, which accounts for the misunderstanding. It is also the failure of literate persons. His parents *did* recognize their authority, and “asked around” only to have other family members (presumably those better versed than Zaid's parents) say: “Who cares? Go through with it anyway.” That disinterest bespeaks the displacement of kinship (and the forms of interest and care it solicits) by radical individuation (a displacement we will return to when we consider Zaid's relationship with his brother Waheed, who also works for security contractors).

²¹⁴ In Islamic law persons who drink the same breast milk (milk kinship) are strictly considered siblings, and are prohibited from having sexual relations. The other categories include parent-child, brother-sister, aunt/uncle-niece/nephew. First cousins are allowed to marry.

In this instance it is intimately bound to the question of who negotiates access to the law, and to the violence inflicted on those who cannot autonomously adjudicate that access. For Zaid it meant his headaches, the physical manifestation of his illiteracy, returned:

“But from the second I was married to her I became very sick, *I had a headache everyday* (emphasis mine), *my hair started greying*, greying just like that! I got very ill. My parents came to Kabul and I stayed there another year. If I was well she was very ill, if I was ill she was well. We absolutely could not be together. *Eventually I put my thumb on the divorce papers and moved to Iran and worked another four years* (emphasis mine) as a store clerk. The second I was divorced my headaches disappeared, my health was restored, my hair stopped going grey. Awful things stopped happening to me.”

Greying Hair

Zaid was in a state of physical and psychic pain. He was bothered by headaches and the presence of his wife and greying hair.²¹⁵ Zaid puts an end to the power of illiteracy by putting his thumb print on the divorce paperwork he cannot read. This act restores the classification of persons (and hence symbolic law) by once again relegated his milk-sister to the order of

²¹⁵ Zaid brings together his physical symptoms (the greying hair and headaches) and the trauma of his marriage, both of which he puts to an end by getting a divorce. The question of the symptom is complex, and outside the purview of this chapter. For a discussion on the relationship between psychiatric diagnosis and the techniques associated with Qur’anic healing, and how culture itself becomes symptomatic of a malaise in post-colonial Morocco see: Pandolfo, Stefania. "THE KNOT OF THE SOUL: Postcolonial Conundrums, Madness, and the Imagination." *In Postcolonial Disorders*, edited by Good Mary-Jo DelVecchio, Hyde Sandra Teresa, Pinto Sarah, and Good Byron J., 329-58. University of California Press, 2008. There is a parallel between what Pandolfo describes as the perception of an attachment to a destructive culture, and how many of the Afghans (including, as we will read, Zaid’s colleagues at Empire) talk about Afghan culture. This perception of a self-destruction (which produces a variety of symptoms, including illiteracy), is at the core of how many *Kabulis* speak of culture and also, for Zaid, opens onto the question of incest as part of a structure of possibilities.

For Deleuze and Guattari incest is the point of non-prohibition. But in this insistence they miss Derrida’s more important point: “the point of non-replacement is also the point of orientation for the entire system of signification” (Derrida, 1997, 266). Thus, the indistinction Deleuze and Guattari recognize as exceptional (as an act, a moment in a mythical time or a festival) is actually *symptomatic*. For Derrida incest is a *point* reflective of and in a larger structure of possibilities. Deleuze and Guattari’s mis-recognition of this accounts for why they also distinguish between two orders of memory: the bio-filiative (the memory of filiation) and the memory of words (or alliances).

prohibition, and demonstrating that prohibition is not the origin of law but a limit which previously evaded Zaid because it was not reiterated by his other family members.²¹⁶ Zaid initially left Kabul after the hanging of Najibullah, during the reign of a new political order that transformed frivolity and play into the communication of a violence that would spare neither a petty thief nor the former president.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ For Derrida, genealogy is the origin of conventional writing (i.e. phonetic notation): "...the birth of writing (in the colloquial sense) is nearly everywhere and most often linked to genealogical anxiety. The memory and oral tradition of generations, which sometimes goes back very far with peoples supposedly "without writing," are often cited in this connection.... its function is to conserve and to give a genealogical classification..." (1997,124). He describes genealogical relation and social classification as the "stitched seam of ache-writing." Writing gives a "supplementary objectification" to genealogical relations (1997,125). What Derrida points out is that the passage is not simply (and he acknowledges that it isn't a simple matter) from speech to writing, but that it "operates within writing in general" (125). See: Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pg. 124-125.

But what Zaid is telling us is the opposite. When writing appears (in the figures of his literate family members, who do not include his parents) it is precisely the memory of generation (and generational continuity) that is endangered. The symbolic roles that constitute his family come undone because of their carelessness. Zaid explicitly mentions not having access to *sharia*, and to the Quran. The illiteracy of his parents made it impossible to read, and know about Islamic law. But Islamic law is based on an oral tradition (a chain of transmission) called *isnâd* in Arabic that refers to a structure of legitimation through which Quranic verse and prophetic examples (or *hadiths*) are conveyed and come to serve as the basis for *sharia* law. The notion of *isnâd* is important not only because of the relationship between conventional writing and orality (and writing did come to serve as a supplement for that tradition of individual reporting (*akhbâr ahâdîth*), but also because of the relationship between the mode of transmission and the content of the material (or *matn*). The relationship, is in part, rooted in a necessary ignorance where one trusts that the content is undistorted. Thus any severance from the oral chain can be a total severance from the content of law and from the subsequent legitimacy of texts. For a discussion of this and how it has shaped the Islamic philosophy of history, and especially the relationship between cause and event, see: Mahdi, Muhsin. *Ibn Khaldûn's Philosophy of History*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1971, pg. 133-137.

²¹⁷ Zaid describes through the painted faces and beating of drums a form of ritual performativity that draws its force from the establishment of power through the hanging of Najibullah. The punishment is one of self-mockery but its effectivity stems from what Judith Butler describes as the accumulated "force of history" (1997, 51). Butler argues that a performative succeeds not because intention determines the success of a speech/performative act but because "that act echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation or a prior and authoritative set of practices" (1997, 51). See: Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative*. Routledge Press, New York: 1997.

Zaid returned from Iran to a symbolic economy predicated on substitution and his position within the family was reaffirmed after he agreed to serve as a marital substitute for his brother, an interplay through which what was forbidden (sexual relations with his sister) was represented as an ordinary cross-cousin marriage. Zaid ended that marriage by putting “his thumb on paper,” a definitive moment he describes as the transmission of the substance of his identity to a written world of procedure and literacy, a world otherwise foreclosed to him.

Unlike Abdul Wali, who refused to understand alliances as derivatives of filiation or as a closed cycle (the prophetic cycle Hyder was so anxious about: (“If a *Said* in Kunar is attacked in broad day light, *that is a sure sign that there are absolutely no rules.*”), Zaid’s anxieties stem from a belief that writing can and should definitively demarcate the order of filiation: the world of fathers and sons, brothers and sisters. Zaid is ignorant of the political history in which the promise of writing was heralded and fetishized as freedom from the strictures of familial custom and kinship based relations. His anxieties about his own incestuous past and the failures of literacy in his family characterize not only his attribution of blame (his literate family members for not telling his parents) but also his understanding of a later event as well as an entire economic order predicated not on filial exclusion, as he claims, but on deadly substitutability. The event, the murder of almost every member of his family, occurred during what he called a “garden meeting.” Rather than interrupt the story with my reading, I quote it in full in order to

The ritual of making the boys play drums is in this sense a double ritual, and this doubled nature helps us understand why, of all the things Zaid witnessed during the Taliban era, this (otherwise comical example) is what stands out for him, and what eventually pushed him to leave Kabul for Iran.

convey the associative thoughts that shape Zaid's narrative, and the way that both literacy and illiteracy shape the arc of the tragedy.

The Garden Meeting

*"I always thought people who were educated and literate were inherently better than those of us who cannot read or write. But with my uncle this was not so (emphasis mine). My father and his brothers co-owned a piece of land with a small farm on it, about forty acres in all. It had been in the family for generations but suddenly my uncle wanted it all to himself, as if greed possessed him. He wanted full and legal ownership, which his brothers rightfully refused him. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened. A couple of years ago, my uncle had sold my grandfather's house, which was also shared with all the brothers after my grandfather died. But he sold it without telling anyone and my father discovered this when he returned from Iran and there was someone else living in it. Imagine that! The new owner was a man who lied while swearing on the *Quran*. Guess what? Now he has diabetes. Anyway, my uncle was only able to do this because he is literate, and he had all the paperwork for the house with him so my father helplessly ran around from one government office to the other, from one court to the next and finally we went to the neighborhood mosque and asked them to announce who the rightful owners are on the mosque speakers. After that announcement we sat with some elders and the issue was resolved. They gave back our house. But now my uncle wanted to take the remaining land and farm for himself and my father wouldn't put his thumb on paper and so my uncle called for a meeting. I remember it all began on Wednesday. That was the day my uncle called my father and invited him over for dinner that Friday. He was a special guest, because my uncle wanted him to serve as the family *wakeel* (representative). I had an awful feeling about the whole meeting and *wakeel* position, and this invitation that suddenly appeared. I told him there is something wrong here. *Someone will die, why on earth would he appoint you as a representative when he hates you?* Anyway, they all got together on Friday and my mom went to a wedding instead. *All this time I thought my father and his brother were real brothers*, and it was only after my father's death that I realized they didn't have the same mother, but we never knew. They picked him up at three o'clock from work and he spent the night at my uncle's house. The next day we all convened, my aunts were there, all the brothers, all my cousins, the whole family. We were sitting in the room together, my aunt brought tea and we waited while they discussed the land upstairs. Part of the land had been leased earlier by my father to a farmer, and he said he would divide the harvest profits among the siblings, but my uncle wanted the money before the harvest. My father said: 'I can't do that until the harvest is sold,' and so my uncle threatened to kill the tenant farmer, and eventually my father paid my uncle out of fear for the farmer's well-being. My uncle was the same man who I offered to look after when he had surgery, we even let him move in with us so we could tend to his health. And now he just wanted to bamboozle his brothers in this sham meeting so they would put their thumbprints on a document, and he would gain control over everything.*

.....

They kicked us out of the room so they could speak privately and I sat downstairs with my aunt and cousins. We were passing the time, having tea and chit-chatting about ordinary things, laughing a bit and letting our thoughts drift a little. But I was anxious about the meeting and wanted it to end. I felt heavy and burdened. My aunt sat next to me. She gave me tea and snacks, and was being kind. Then all of a sudden she looked at me, and her entire face changed. It became distorted, I was afraid and jumped back, I couldn't look at her face again! It was as if she was possessed. She became primitive. I can't explain it, her face just transformed. I told my other aunt to go and listen from behind the door and she went but was sent back down. And they had cursed her out real good for trying to eavesdrop. I had my mobile in my hands, and my father came down for an ashtray and cursed out my uncle and told us he was trying to fool everyone and that he would never put his thumb on such a document. I told him: 'you should have called in some elders and have them make the decision on behalf of everyone,' but he didn't listen to me. I had to leave shortly after and drop an uncle off at the wedding my mom was attending and I told my father to come with me but he said he was staying for lunch. I felt weird, like my heart was being pulled. My mobile battery died too. In the car I asked my uncle what the meeting was about and my uncle laughed a strange laugh, just like when my aunt's face was distorted. I dropped him off and went home, and then my car stopped working suddenly. And at that moment I got a call from my cousin to hurry back to my uncle's house. So my brother and I fiddled with the damn car and fixed it, and on our way we passed the market and saw my younger cousin who had been sent out to buy meat for lunch. We picked him up and went to my uncle's house, and the house was surrounded with police cars, ranger trucks, and neighbors. *One neighbor came up to me and said: "the brothers have all killed each other!"* We went in and everybody had been shot dead. My father, uncles, their wives, my cousins. Everyone. My uncle shot them all in the head. *My father was also hit in the chest twice and once under the chin (emphasis mine).* One cousin survived because he hid behind some furniture, he saw it all, he saw my uncle shooting everyone. He said my uncle came out into the hallway with blood shot eyes. He broke his phone, his favorite vase, and pointed the gun at his heart and fired but there were no bullets left so he put more bullets in. Then he pulled out a grenade and threw it into the room so his brothers would be dead for sure, and put the gun to his head, removed it, held it to his head again and finally shot himself. I almost went insane that day, there were body parts everywhere. *It was a primitive scene (wahshatnâk).* We buried what we could find that same night and that's what happened to me and my family. And now, here we are."

The Writing Disaster

Speech and conventional writing shoot through the tragic garden meeting with as much force as the final bullets, rending through a context of unsecured meaning and impossible

demands. Zaid followed the story of his marriage to his sister, when genealogical relations were disturbed because of the *silence of others* (a silence which severed his access to the content of Islamic law), with this literal end to his family history. It was a mass-murder committed in the interstices of speech and writing. Just like incest had turned the suture between words and persons into a thinning seam, so too did inter-personal mediation between brothers (the *wikâlat* of his father) hasten the failures of speech and writing. This reproduced a gap between the uncle's desire and its reception both at the level of abstraction (the written documents were not recognized by his brothers) and orality (the verbal quarreling and failed mediation, evinced by Zaid's father cursing at his brother when he emerged from the room to fetch an ashtray).

But the idea for the garden meeting was born when speech was elevated over writing, and when that modernist dichotomy came to structure the notion of interpersonal mediation. The uncle, the *only* literate man in the family, called on Zaid's father as a *wakeel* (representative) so that he could mitigate the opacity and violence of "the papers" (papers which required the brothers to disinherit themselves). He wanted Zaid's father to persuade the younger brothers to signify their assent through their thumbprints by offering a kind of *zamanat* (guarantee) as their eldest brother, like what Fazel Akbar offered Abdul Wali when he gave him his word: the Americans were trustworthy, they would do him no harm. Zaid's father was asked to avow his brother's intentions by mediating between the brothers and also between the written and oral orders of language, literally bringing them together like the point Derrida remarks on as the shared history of writing and genealogy.

On one level, the uncle's desire was straightforward enough. He hoped that because Zaid's father, the *wakeel*, was illiterate, his blind faith in illegible writing would restore the trust of the others. This occurred in a context where the value of the land had quickly sky-rocketed as

a result of the war-time boom in Kabul's property market (turning the potential loss of its monetary value into a greater sacrifice for the sake of family relations), and at a time when a family history of dispute had already left those relations bereft of solicitude and empathy. In this context, a mediatory gesture such as *wikâlat* could only fail, as the honor of *zamanat* had failed in Kunar for Abdul Wali.²¹⁸

This was what Zaid brilliantly intuited when he desperately stated and asked his father: "Someone will die. Why on earth would he appoint you as a representative when he hates you?" Zaid's question is also a meta-statement on the nature of events, as he perceives them. He anticipated his realized fears, not because a causal force would suddenly upturn the meeting (for example, the revelation of new information about the property already being sold as the grandfather's house was earlier or a quarrel about the brothers actually being half-brothers) but because of the very proposition that his father act as the representative, as the symbolic head of

²¹⁸ For Lévi-Strauss the sexual disavowal of one's female kin (the "gifting" of women) initiates relations of exchange (through a displacement of desire as property) that enable kinship and prevents war through the formation of alliances. The incest prohibition marginalizes the claims of paternity while simultaneously exchanging individual security for the assurance of alliance. Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Beacon Press, 1969. For an example of how this occurs among the Nambikwara see: Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropique*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, pg. 68.

Marriage, of course, is not always about keeping the peace. Gayle Rubin makes a crucial intervention in Lévi-Strauss's "implicit theory of sex oppression" (1975, 171) and argues that the exchange of women occurs through a "dual articulation" (1975, 171) of the notion of the gift and of the incest taboo, and requires that women are commodified and tethered to heterosexuality (they cannot have each other) while men assume the role of their brokers. Men acquire an organizing power in a system in which women do not "have full rights to themselves" (1975, 177-193). See Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Reiter, Rayna R. *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975. For a discussion between Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler, on the political and intellectual context that inspired the essay, and Rubin's take on the Marxist analysis of gender oppression see: Rubin, Gayle and Judith Butler. "Interview Sexual Traffic," in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2+3 (1994).

See also: Sahlins, Marshall. *What Kinship Is - and Is Not*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013 and: Bloch, Maurice. "What Kind of 'is' Is Sahlins' 'is'?" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 2 (2013): 253.

the family who was expected to give what he did not have—the assurance that the content of the papers was, without his being able to corroborate, what the uncle says it was.

Zaid's own life was subject to the violence of substitution both when he married his sister for his brother's sake and because of his precarious position in the Green Zone economy: "I didn't help my brother because I didn't want to risk my job," he said when describing his tenuous employment at Empire. He also understood *wikālat* as the substitution of a blind trust in orality for the lack of informed literacy. For him, the value and function of representation emerge from the interplay between substitution and lack, a gap as dangerous as the one between conventional writing and speech. For Zaid this was an impossible chasm to breach. Zaid's uncle, who had a loaded gun and grenade on hand (he had been in the Afghan National Army), perhaps also recognized that it was an impossible demand. However, for the uncle *the impossibility arose from Zaid's father's illiteracy*: Zaid's father "failed" to understand the written document as the phonetic notation of his brother's oral declarations (declarations of an abiding equality, the equal distribution of profits, and thus the triviality of "putting thumb on paper").

As we've seen, putting one's thumb on paper is far from a simple matter for Zaid. It has a transformative (and restorative) power. But in the case of the garden meeting, Zaid does not dwell on giving thumbs (or the violence that ensues when one infuses). For Zaid the meeting would fail not because of the barriers posed by illiterate incredulity or good will (which would have entailed a collective dispossession, the very goal of getting everyone to consent with their fingerprints), but because representation itself would fail to reconcile difference and to mitigate the radical impossibility of giving what one does not have: The uncle expected Zaid's father not only to mediate between the other brothers and his own writing but also to give him full ownership of the forty acre farm. This was, in a strict sense, an impossible demand because

Zaid's father could not give what he already shared with all of his brothers, including the murderer. This burden, placed on Zaid's father (the only victim to be shot multiple times, twice in the chest and once under the chin), indicates the violence of an unconscious desire for what might be likened to an impossible gift, unlike the gift of literacy which Zaid already ascribes to his uncle.²¹⁹

For Zaid the garden meeting was an event that took place at a transparent surface (*zahir*), dislodged from final cause or unknown ground (*batin*). Rather, multiple causes entailed one another, coming together like the pleated surface of an accordion, or as the kind of awful kismet in which everyone had to die *as if* all possible things had gone wrong. Zaid's discourse was devoid of cause-effect relations and scenarios, proceeding almost hypnotically like a haunting

²¹⁹ In *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* Jacques Derrida commences his discussion of the relationship between time and the (impossible) gift by considering the wish of Madame de Maintenon who writes: "The King takes all my time; I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give it all." (1992,1) Derrida characterizes her wish to give the time that she does not have (because the king takes it all) as the "whole of her desire," as that which she does not have but would give if she did, as her desire for the power to give: "This rest of the rest of time of which she cannot make a present, that is what Madame de Maintenon (as one might call her) desires, that is in truth what she would desire, not for herself but...for the power of giving..." (1992,4). See: Derrida, Jacques, and Peggy Kamuf. *Given Time; Counterfeit Money*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

The garden meeting presents us with the inverse of this. There isn't really any desire for the power to give. Only the desire to demand. The uncle demands that Zaid's father give what he did not have full ownership of. The uncle not only wanted the land but also the power to demand (to be like the king who took it all). In this complex and tragic scene, there is on one hand the desire (or quest) for power and on the other its realization through a dissimulation of actual power: the uncle *was* already powerful and he used the weapons obtained through his service with the Afghan National Army not to kill Taliban insurgents but his own family. The issue of dissimulation is one that came up frequently in my conversations about the political and security situation in Kabul. Many people believe not only that members of the Afghan army and police force are corrupt (participating in the drug trade and in kidnappings for ransom—something I was warned endlessly about—and which became a real source of paranoia for me) but also that they actually support the Taliban and use their position to infiltrate the Afghan State's security apparatus. The notion of infiltration is complex, and cannot be fully addressed here (nor do we have any such evidence regarding Zaid's uncle) but it does illuminate for us how a certain dissimulation of power (sanctioned initially by the state) is transposed onto a familial setting where it is buttressed, along with literacy, in order to make a demand. The authority that is recognized by the Afghan state (in the figure of the Afghan soldier) must be recognized by his brothers.

tune that gripped his mind with a drift of certitudes. But his story demands that we not only pay attention to how his thoughts associate and come together, but also to what he did *not* say, to both his father and to me.

Substitutability

Zaid is touched by the violence of writing both when he names illiteracy as the cause behind his marriage and the doomed garden meeting. I find it strange that after telling me this story in such detail he did not mention his sister's or his uncle's name. If we don't capitulate to the exaggerated notions of honor and shame that suffuse popular and mass-mediatised conceptions of Afghan masculinity, an honor that makes even less sense since almost every member of his family is dead, Zaid's refusal to share their names and identities becomes even more pressing, if also less enigmatic. In part it has to do with the question of substitution, and an economic context where substitutability has become one of the governing principles of value production and risk mitigation, the very logic of the economy that both Zaid and his brother, Wahidullah, inhabit in the Green Zone. Zaid has a deep fear of substitution, and is anxious that he will be expunged from the world of labor because he is not literate (as opposed to his brother). He, of course, was already a substitute for Wahidullah, when he agreed to marry his cousin (sister) after Wahidullah refused. But now the issue is different. His situation is more precarious: "I work. I mind my own business. People will foment trouble out of nothing, if you're late one minute, your Afghan co-worker will tell the manager and get you fired. I don't give people the room to do that...and I know how to be spoken to and how to speak to others. *But that doesn't mean anything anymore. Things just happen for no reason and you try to forget them.*"

For Zaid, events are uncontrollable. Employment appears and disappears: "I just keep my mouth shut and trust in God. I have a job now but I could be fired at any instant. They will happily fire an Afghan if he is even one minute late to work." The sovereign finds himself suddenly hung from a traffic pole: "I'll never forget the day Najibullah was hung. One day you are the president, the next you're hanging dead with rubles and dollars in your mouth." His body betrays him: "There was too much fighting, too much violence. My mind just didn't work. I remember trying to learn to read and write, and I would just get headaches," "... from the second I was married to her I became very sick, I had a headache everyday, my hair starting greying, greying just like that! I got very ill." And greed overtakes people: "My father and his brothers co-owned a piece of land with a small farm on it, about forty acres in all. It had been in the family for generations but suddenly my uncle wanted it all to himself, as if he was possessed."

Thus, while Zaid's narrative was bereft of the singularity of proper names, it was overcome by the language of pure events and unstoppable forces, like when he told his father: "someone will die." Zaid's certainty, in that prescient moment, reflects his understanding of the garden meeting as an event where the indiscriminate force of violence (that would indeed kill not just someone but almost everyone) would break through the restraints of oral mediation and *wikâlat*. For Zaid, the most concealed of possibilities (or the most clandestine of intentions) was the most obvious and what could have been reasoned as the possible effects of various causes (which would have entailed heterogeneous outcomes) was displaced by an unmitigated homogeneity: everyone died.

Zaid's chilling prediction to his father communicates a crucial moment of conflation in his thinking. His inference, that someone will die because his father is chosen as a *wakeel*, demonstrates how a single possibility was necessarily elevated over other possible causal

relations because they would fail to signify meaningful possibilities. For example, Zaid could have imagined a complicated context, suffused with the familial memory of brotherhood, a shared farm, a shared house, inter-generational relations, or even the legacy of an incestuous marriage. He might have said: “Uncle wants everyone to agree on collectively selling the land and dividing the profits,” “Uncle has already sold the land and wants to compensate you fairly,” “Uncle wants to collectively invest in the farm and increase its productivity.” Or, he could have predicted other outcomes: “You will all agree and resolve this fairly,” “There will be no need to go to court, you will sort it out amongst yourselves,” “You will end up going to the mosque and resolving this orally, like you did the issue of the house.” But Zaid said none of this. His proposition was autonomous from a rich contextual world of possibility and experience, one embedded in multiple webs of time with overlapping threads that could have enabled the appearance and re-appearance of relations and memories, like it did for Abdul Wali during that fateful translation at the governor’s palace, and then again at Firebase Asadabad.

Unlike Zaid, Abdul Wali demonstrated a faith in *wikâlat* and *tarjomâni* (translation) at that meeting, turning Hyder Akbar into a bridge not only between languages but also between an event and its possible causes and outcomes. For Abdul Wali it was possible to live in a world of wonder, where exhortations might still be heard from the prophetic past or a more proximate time, like the story and example of Salih Mohammad, the local commander from Kunar who was exonerated from blame and who partially inspired Abdul Wali’s optimism. Abdul Wali’s reflections on his own experiences, and those of others, were not yet liberated from the necessity of meaning and moral virtue. The spirited mesh of histories he unconsciously invoked, as well as the upheavals of counterinsurgency that had divided Kunar in more recent days, guided his

thinking and encouraged him to talk to the American intelligence officers. Abdul Wali was inspired by the fantasy of friendships, and perhaps the stuff of dreams and cosmological truths.

The certainty of any cause or outcome for his predicament was like an elusive phantasm, evanescent before any singular purpose like mist dissipating from view or a *jinn* running out of sight. Abdul Wali never inquired into the evidentiary basis of the accusation raised against him (although he did intimate its conspiratorial nature). Things were not inexorably related for him, nor was there a sense of certainty gathering his perceptions of events and risks, or even of audible sounds: the blasts that variously echoed around the firebase in Asadabad on June 7, 2003 could have been a bomb, or target-shooting, or road construction, he said.

Everything was always capable of being otherwise, of echoing in different ways, breaking and mending, containing an indefinite number of causes that could exist simultaneously and without the urgency of certainty: “How could you not know where you were on the night three rockets were fired?”, Abdul Wali replied: “*I don’t know* (emphasis mine)...Maybe they woke me up, and I just went back to sleep and didn’t pay too much attention to it.’ ” Not only was it impossible to have a final explanation for why he was in that awful situation, certainty and explanation were not inescapably related; there was always room to move, to invoke intercession, to maneuver, and to trust. That disjuncture enabled Abdul Wali to read. He discerned a series of distant and proximate causes that enabled both Hyder’s speech (the translation) and his silence (the moment things became “too much”) to signify multiple things, to turn the horizon of Abdul Wali’s fate into an unknown he gave himself over to, all while taking heart in multiplicity and *kismet*.

But Zaid's thinking was nothing like this. Zaid reasoned directly from his father's appointment as the representative to the certain outcome that someone would die, never mentioning other possible outcomes, not even as the defeated wishes of a lonely survivor. He didn't find inspiration in his own experience in resolving the issue of his grandfather's house, nor in the memory that family relations had been better in earlier days, like when he nursed his sick uncle (the murderer) after he had surgery. Thus, his statement: "someone will die," while a truth determined by myriad reasons, including those the victims all took to their graves, proceeds like an autonomous force behind an imminent event. Rather than being conditioned, that outcome assumes the status of an *enabling* condition, plowing forward with a menacing certitude that drove the meeting and his family's tragic demise with the force of an inimitable destiny ("in the end it was *kismet*," he said), *as if* every possible thing had gone wrong and everyone had to die. Zaid's thinking and anxieties are inseparable from his experience of incest, that originary prohibition he only recognized after transgressing and which became emblazoned by what he plaintively describes as the curse of illiteracy. They are also insoluble from the failure of signification to ground meaning, to ensure the truth of his proposition: "someone will die."

The notion of *faqad keh*, or as if, communicates something that Zaid perceives as a necessary force. This is different from the kind of ambiguity that "as if" conjures when we think of a prohibition, for example incest, which Zaid does *not* talk about as if it absolutely had to happen (it could have been prevented by the mediation of his family members and he did end it by obtaining a divorce). That reversibility, between having occurred as a tragedy and being undone, illustrate the predicament of incest that Derrida describes as something that is not "something" before a prohibition is instituted and that then, can take place as "incest" through the recognition of prohibition in a "present within which simultaneously the interdict is (would

be) given with the transgression: that which passes (comes to pass) always and (yet) never *properly* takes place. It is always *as if* I had committed incest.”²²⁰ Incest is not about one’s intentions but it is precisely the category for what one does not know. The power of its ambiguity stems from this necessary lack. This not knowing (or lack) helps us understand why Zaid adduces kismet as an explanation. Kismet or fate is written for one (as life unfolds). In a sense, life is a textual unfolding that reveals what was already meant to be, and which never burdens us with more than we can handle (hence what is written is also contained, free of excess). One cannot know one’s kismet until it has happened (it requires ignorance before the fact) and hence it bears the same force, for Zaid, that conventional writing does, this time not as the literacy of others, but as the idea that one’s fate is already inscribed.

General Forces

Zaid never adduced witchcraft (*jadoo*) or spirit (*jinn*) possession as an explanatory force for the murders at the garden meeting, though I expected him to the moment he described his aunt’s face becoming suddenly distorted *as if* she was possessed: “My aunt sat next to me. She gave me tea and snacks, and was being kind. Then all of a sudden she looked at me, and her entire face changed. It became distorted, I was afraid and jumped back, I couldn’t look at her face again. It was *as if* (*faqad keh*) she was possessed.” Instead, just as he refuses the two most important proper names in this saga, he also refuses the discourse of possession as a supplement to his meticulous account of empirical events, while also denying a multiplicity of causal relations (evidenced by all the possible scenarios he did *not* recount, and also the certainty of his

²²⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pg. 267.

prediction to his father upon learning about the meeting: the uncle hated him and *would* kill).

The actual outcome was of course much greater than a single murder, and that is the particularity that I expected would exceed Zaid's explanations, compelling him to invoke *jadoo* or *jinns* (which can possess ordinary people) as a causal force for explaining the magnitude of the mass murder or even Zaid's own survival—why did he decide to leave the house for an errand just before the shooting took place? Why did his cell phone die? Why did his car stop running? But he did not.

Witchcraft has a peculiar citational logic. For Evans-Pritchard, it is referenced as a causal force precisely when social convention or laws fail as ordinary explanations.²²¹ Witchcraft is thoroughly fabulous while supplementary, it is extraordinary but also secretly subsists in the failure of the most pedestrian and common sensical of explanations. It is as much a point in a structure of possibilities (or the internal dimension of ordinary causes) as it is a force or the site of a speaking not ones own.²²² This helps us understand Zaid's refusal of this discourse.

Witchcraft explains causal particularity through recourse to a general force: “It is the singular quality of an event that prompts explanations of witchcraft. But Azande witchcraft is not itself singular. That is, there is not a different power for every event. *There is one power, that of*

²²¹ Evans-Pritchard, E. E., and Eva Gillies. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976. For an illuminating discussion also see: James Siegel. *Naming the Witch*. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2006, pg. 20, 70-79.

²²² In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze talks about “wild discourse” as analogous to pure becoming (an unlimited becoming (for example, greying, hotter, colder) that eludes the present and any single signified. In this reading, the voice of the witch, for example, would be one dimension of language: “Or might there not be two languages and two sorts of “names,” on designating the pauses and rests which receive the action of the Idea, the other expressing the movements or rebel becomings?...is it not possible that there are two distinct dimensions internal to language in general—one always concealed by the other, yet continuously coming to the aid of, or subsisting under, the other.”(1990, 2) See: Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

“*witchcraft*” (emphasis mine) ...Azande witchcraft explains the particular, the singular even, by reference to a general power. It thus annihilates its singularity; which is to say, it rules out accident. We could at this point say that witchcraft among the Azande institutionalizes the accident by making it a category.”²²³ Witchcraft is nothing less than the explanation of the accident, and by extension an insistence on the possibility of a synthetic judgement in a symbolic world where nothing happens unaccountably, where general forces ply their trade.

But for Zaid, this kind of judgement could only be absurd. His entire system of signification (and all the particular causes and general forces it enables) had come undone, not through a general force (like witchcraft, God, or even wartime catastrophe) but because of the violence of substitutability (first when he took his brother’s place and agreed to marry his milk-sister, and second when his milk-sister became a substitute for a permissible (*halal*) wife). He claims he experienced this social violence *because* of his illiteracy. Zaid’s subsequent inability to seek substitutive relations (to invoke a general principle or criterion in order to address

²²³ Siegel, James. *Naming the Witch*. Stanford University Press, Stanford: 2006, pg. 77.

For a brilliant discussion of the relationship between magic and trauma, particularly the question of voice as it pertains to the traumatized subject see pg. 74-79. Siegel argues that the question of accounting for (or articulating) a conjuncture between event and singularity (when a misfortune befalls one person, rather than another through the conjuncture of agency and other forces already at work) is the explanation of accident achieved through adducing witchcraft as *one cause among many* (2006, 77) and the kind of dissociation that occurs when one is traumatized, and split into a subject without a voice (one’s own) but who speaks with urgency and compulsively nonetheless: “The hollowness of my voice is the sound of a power located outside myself. In magic, this power is named; in trauma, it is not” (2006,79).

Again, Zaid presents us with something different, if we stick to a strict reading of Siegel’s dichotomy. He did not adduce magic or witchcraft (*jadoo*) nor did he exhibit the characteristics of a traumatized person. His voice was calm, unhurried, and his language is full and detailed. He was not in the grip of a force or urgency that seemed to speak through or possess him. The question is not necessarily, as Siegel poses, whether one can articulate (i.e. make one’s words one’s own) or if one’s words are “the effect of accident, of the “force” but how it is that a general order of substitutability makes one’s words the site of something ineffective, of something without *enough* force.

particular epistemic concerns about either the content or the origin of experience (How did the murder happen? Why did the murder happen?), is inextricable from the relation that *does* exist for him between two registers of substitution: the substitution of his sister for another woman and of the supplementary objectification of one order with another (i.e. the substitution of writing for the otherwise fleeting classifications of genealogy and kinship). In a world of non-replacement, as Derrida says of incest, an entire order is flattened by an indistinction between words and things, persons (especially brothers), forces and events, cause and kismet, *zahir* (surface) and *batin* (ground).

The Curriculum Vitae

Unlike Abdul Wali, who lived in a wooded province subject to the violent uncertainty of the timber mafia, and also aerial bombardment and on-the-ground military missions, Zaid lives in Kabul, a city with natural and political fortifications, subject more to the booms and busts of a local economy based on the exigencies of military need and an expanding net of securitization. In that context, local Afghans like Zaid (who are called “LNs,” or local nationals), jockey for a position in a labor market in which Afghans are readily fired and even more easily replaced. In the introduction I reproduce the curriculum vitae (CV) of man who was begging for employment outside of the *Finest* supermarket in Wazir Akbar Khan, just across the street from the main entry into the Green Zone. I was inside of a car, with several of the security guards from Empire, on my way either to *Finest* or to a restaurant (I cannot recall) when the man gave me his CV through a crack in the window, soliciting my help and ignoring the expatriates, though he was of course expecting me to mediate his access to them.

CVs and resumes are everywhere in Kabul, sometimes typed out by literate relations on behalf of persons who cannot produce them on their own. They assume a double power in this sense. They are not necessarily one's words (or solicitations) but stand in for one's words, and enable access to a world of value and employment—which has become increasingly precarious as the site of deadly substitutability. Consider Zaid's account of his employment at Empire and also of his brother, Wahidullah. He said: "Empire has a hiring policy of not employing two brothers *at the same time*. Many places do not hire two brothers in the same office, because brothers compete with one another and try to get each other fired. They try to replace each other. I wanted to get my brother a job but I didn't make a case for him, because I didn't want to risk my own job. I'm just happy to have this job." Zaid's world of possibilities was structured by the logic of substitution, both with his family and within Kabul's service-sector economy:

"They moved me around, from Shashdarak (a neighborhood in Kabul) to here (the neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan) and I hate that. If I do my work well, I want to work in the same place. I've been working since I was seven, it isn't about laziness, it's about dignity. I'm not an object you can throw around from one site or office to another so I told them I was going to quit if they were moving me around and they didn't so I stayed for a year. Then a year later they wanted me to come to this Empire site but I refused. Eventually I came because I didn't have a choice. I was making \$240 per month. I cooked well and everything I made was spent on transportation to and from work. Then the bosses were transferred and my boss Alec said he would take me to America as his personal cook. I said no. I called in a translator and he confirmed that this guy was a general. He had shown me pictures of his house, his family, his land, and I told him that I don't speak English and he said it's not a problem. He gave me one day to make up my mind and I said no. He was a good man. He trusted me with cash, he would ask me to watch over cash because he trusted me, he would give me food and soda and say take it home to your family and I would refuse. I don't like handouts and I don't like tests of character."

The refusal to hire brothers at the same time, a policy that stems from a fear of collaboration and sabotage (a hysterical fear that suffuses all foreign military establishments in Kabul), enables the haunting absence that not only leaves a trace on "curriculum vitae," such as the one Zaid gave me hoping I would be able to find his brother a job, but also in the

unconscious association between thoughts, and forms of reasoning that must increasingly exclude kindred relations (and the temporalities and personal histories they represent) if they are also to accord with a sense of security, the logic of the economy Zaid inhabits.

Several weeks after Zaid told me the story of his family's ill-fated garden meeting, he gave me his brother's "papers" (*qaghazha* or *waraqha*) and asked if I could use my connections to find him employment with a foreign organization: "any organization or job will do," he emphasized.²²⁴ His brother's name is Wahidullah, and his work documents (which I was probably not supposed to see, let alone keep—something Zaid wouldn't have known since he could not read the content) illustrate his shifting identities, some familial and others connected to governmental agencies and international corporations, like USAID and Louis Berger. Wahidullah's documents begin with a *tazkereh* (the equivalent of a birth certificate or national identity card), a single page bearing the emblem of the Afghan flag and a Ministry of Interior stamp. In Afghanistan, and especially in Kabul, the *tazkereh* is the primary verification of identity. It is presented in contexts ranging from court trials to job interviews and its importance in recent years has doubled due to the prospect of employment with foreign companies, a trend which has also made January 1 a popular and fictitious birthday for many Afghans seeking employment.

A single head-shot depicts a young man. The document contains a series of vertical and horizontal boxes, each supplying identifying information. Unlike so many official documents, his

²²⁴ Wahidullah is the brother for whom Zaid married his own unnamed sister, unwittingly bringing the order of prohibition into the realm of substitutability when he agreed to the marriage in order to placate his illiterate parents. Wahidullah is also the brother that Zaid went out with that fateful afternoon during the "garden meeting," returning together to their uncle's house to find it littered with dead bodies in the aftermath of an event where mediation had irrevocably failed.

fingerprint is palpably missing. Instead, his identity is established by the second to far-right column, a descending order of personal origin that includes his first name, his father's first name, his grandfather's first name, city of birth, approximate birth date, religion, nationality, sex, marital status. Wahidullah's identity is established not by last name or date of birth (his date of birth is a vague approximation—"he was about 6 years old in 1368 (1989)"), but in two parallel registers that supplement one another: the photographic and patrilineal. His occupation is listed as a "poor worker," though it is much more complicated than that. His picture gestures towards what is otherwise only a world of inter-generational relations, a receding world of kinship that might have previously been sufficient to guarantee not only identity but also the veracity of a message and the dignity of a promise. Wahidullah is captured in a moment of photographic assurance, outside of which he would *only* be the son of Abdul Kareem (the ill-fated *wakeel*) and the grandson of Sakhi dâd.

If Wahidullah's *tazkereh* belongs to dual temporalities, situating him in an ambivalent skein, his work documents are undeniably modern. His paperwork from Strategic Security Solutions International (SSSI) include two unremarkable letters of recommendation attesting to his ability to fulfill "comparable positions consistent with his individual skill sets," and his "movement notification" papers for "missions" executed on February 14, 2010 and April 2-7, 2011. Both sets of papers are arranged in ten columns containing the names of the personnel involved, their rank/positions, their weapon serial and registration numbers with the Ministry of Interior (all the weapons were AK 47 or PKM *kalashnikovs*), mobile phone numbers and service providers, and more ominously: their blood types.

Wahidullah features as a "commander" on the third page of the first mission (a security convoy escort on the Northern highway protecting USAID employees who were traveling from

Kabul to Chintal, a district in the northern Balkh province) and a “commander and translator” on the second page of the second mission (which details their convoy mission from Kabul to Gardez protecting “expat personnel on mission for project number five Louis Berger Group”). In both documents the foreign personnel feature first on the list as team leaders and deputy team leaders. They have proper names. The “Local Personnel” make up the majority of the convoy, listed in no specific order and according to first names (even those names that appear like proper names are only first names, such as “Mohammad Mujeeb”). While the SSSI movement history features explicit dates, weapon serial numbers, rank differences between Afghan and foreign nationals and blood types, distinctions between the Afghan workers blur into an uncontested jumble of shooters, translators, “gunners,” and medics listed primarily by first names, giving the further impression that they can easily replace one another or switch tasks by enhancing weapons with translation, as Wahidullah seems to have done when he went from being a “commander” on February 14, 2010 to a “translator and commander” in the April 2011 mission.

Both missions had a total of ten Afghans, six of whom were either “shooters” or “gunners,” the latter designating someone who operated a *kalashnikov* PKM *mounted* machine gun while the shooters (and all four expatriates) operated AK 47 machine guns. The *kalashnikov* PKM is a lightweight version of the mounted machine gun commonly used in tanks (especially Russian) and armoured vehicles. The PKM is mounted on a bi or tripod and is designed to be mobile so that the gun is not unloaded and reloaded as it is moved through the battlefield. It is, for those who wield it, a perfect mix between heft and mobility, shooting up to 650 rounds per minute from its 645 mm reinforced barrel. Thus, the “movement papers” for the USAID development project, and the inscrutable “Louis Berger project number 5 project” tell a story not only of movement along the Northern highway or en route to the site of a reconstruction project,

but also of deadly stops along the way where mounted machine guns are set up and operated by Afghans who are nearly name-less, three of whom (Haroon, Mohammad Mujib, and Ghulamuddin) are listed in the 2010 paperwork but not the 2011 mission, likely killed in the cross fire, perhaps even as family members were trying to call their *Roshan--nezdik shodan* (Enlightened--getting closer) cell phone numbers: 078884865, 0772526342, 0799392729.

Zaid mis-recognized Wahidullah's literacy (which Wahidullah details in his CV) as access to the employment opportunities of the Green Zone and Afghanistan's war economy more generally.²²⁵ He fantasized that his brother's literacy would hasten his own demise, and his exclusion from the realm of value he associated so insistently with the privilege and violence of writing. But that world of value is the site of a different substitution, one in which Afghan proximity to their expatriate employers is predicated primarily on the value of risk mitigation they provide, and not only their linguistic or cultural skills. Wahidullah's CV, especially his "movement notifications" produces names, while effacing the singularity of the Afghan workers and demonstrating the practices of substitutability that lie at the heart of his work history and a lucrative industry that leverages Afghans as a first line of contractual defense, which we will consider in detail in chapter six through the story of Timūr (Zaid's co-worker). The first names (many of the names on Wahidullah's papers are very common) designate not only fungible persons but also reveal a classificatory order, where inscriptions (or marks) like "Wahidullah" are made but always predicated on the possibility and value of substitutability. The various

²²⁵ The jobs typically available for unskilled Afghan laborers inside Kabul's Green Zone (and inside other military bases) are service sector jobs (ranging from custodial to inside the kitchen), the private military industry typically hires Afghans as security personnel, a general rubric that includes private security details, "gunners," "shooters," drivers, medics, translators, reconnaissance men, etc.

names on the movement papers hide the violence of a gesture which institutes these Afghan workers only as they are also retreating from relevance, both in a diminishing economy that no longer requires their cultural or linguistic expertise and also on the dangerous missions (the “movements”) in which they die in disproportionate numbers.²²⁶

The obliteration (Zaid’s refusal) and signification (Wahidullah’s papers) of proper names are both remedial gestures made in a context where, on one hand the logic of signification and the distinction between words and things or between persons fails, and on the other where *Kabuli* Afghans like Zaid and Wahidullah find themselves increasingly marginalized in an economic order that was presumed to be the singular site of value production and fetishized cultural expertise.

Zaid’s sense of things, exemplified by his “greying hair,” his anxieties about substitution, and of course his uncanny prediction of the garden meeting’s outcome cannot be based on signification. With the exception of his own illiteracy (because of the Civil War) Zaid never recollected causal or significative relations. He never used words like “*az ein khater*” or “*az khater i keh*.” Things and events just happen, as he says, in a flattened world where distinctions melt along with names and where the most concealed of possibilities becomes available and

²²⁶ While the death rates of private security personnel are not publicized, the disparity in Afghan and expatriate death rates was emphasized by almost all of the Afghan men I interviewed in this line of work. Some went as far as to suggest that local Afghans were routinely seated in the second tank of a convoy, because the first tank activates any potential land mines but it is the second tank that takes the hit of the actual explosion. By way of comparison, the high rate of Afghan security forces illustrates this point. In 2013: “The Afghan forces’ death toll is as much as three times the combined coalition and Afghan fatalities in 2010 and 2011, when the U.S. took its heaviest casualties in the war.” See Hodge, Nathan and Stancati, Margherita. “Afghan Army Deaths Hit Record as U.S Exits,” in *The Wall Street Journal*, September, 20, 2013.

obvious, floating to the surface like an effect unmoored from cause, like reeds drifting apart on a reed bed.

The specter of swift injustice (“an Afghan is fired even if he is one minute late”), the violence of illiteracy (“I’m illiterate so I was afraid of all this computer stuff, of machines and buttons. What if I pressed the wrong button and made my employer’s wealth disappear?”) the feared substitutions (“Empire has a hiring policy of not employing two brothers at the same time,”) and the relativity of sacrifice (“I wanted to get my brother a job but I didn't make a case for him, because I didn’t want to risk my own job,”) are symptomatic of an order where persons and events can hasten their own demise, like the garden meeting’s definitive end, like the missing Afghans from the SSSI movement notification and like the PDPA’s *Saur* (April) Revolution of 1978, which never delivered freedom from marriage prestations, arable land for every peasant owning less than two hectares, or mass literacy in 150 hours of instruction per person.²²⁷ Zaid’s anxieties and certitudes are the traces of this volatile social world, and also of this history of disappointment which rendered him illiterate, as he says, and the inheritor of events that just happen, maybe like gifts and not unlike my luck in having access to Wahidullah’s “movement notifications”.

Toward the end of my time in Kabul Zaid asked me for a favor. He wanted me to purchase his mother a blood glucose monitor and have it shipped to Kabul, and offered to pay for it. I told him that I would but that he would have to accept it as a gift. Later, in a moment of paranoia after things had become more difficult for me, I decided against buying the monitor (I

²²⁷ Roy, Olivier. *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 1990, 86, 93.

was afraid of ordering any kind of device or electrical item online and having it shipped to an Army Postal Office. It could, in theory, be stolen at the military base and used for other purposes). When I last saw Zaid I apologized and told him I couldn't order the monitor. "That's O.K.," he said, "I *knew* it wasn't kismet."

5 Prospecting the Modern

“One thought the ground under one's feet, like the moving stage in a theater, had suddenly disappeared.”

Mahmud Tarzi (*Reminiscences*, 17)

The Afghan Herbaria

In the beginning it might have been the rushing surge of a flood or a bed of calm water that was responsible for the origin of the Afghan landscape. It is uncertain (though possible) that the energy of great floods carved out the major valleys and passes of Afghanistan, forming the soil and ground that would later be classified as the “Afghan herbaria” and plant kingdom, and later still as a source of mineral wealth. It is also possible that nothing so severe occurred between the mountain ranges, and that these valleys formed gradually, and that marshes and basins were occasionally subject to the inundation of water but more or less left as the hollowed tracts that the political forces of the twentieth century turned into continuously explosive ground.

But it is known that in the mid-nineteenth century the Afghan terrain was an endless expanse of scientific wonderment and potential conquest. It was obsessively written about, documented, and subject to the discourses of scientific and military analysis. Dr. William Griffith, a botanist and naturalist on commission for the East India Company was at the fore of both efforts, and embedded with the Bombay Sappers and Miners during the first Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842). He imagined the enduring origin of the landscape: “The formation of some of these valleys is easily and it appears to me naturally explicable by assuming their having been

the beds of inland lakes.”²²⁸ Griffith saw no evidence of “unusual water-action,” and no basis to presume “more energetic means in former times.”²²⁹ For him, the Afghan ground possesses an unchanging character: “Cabul...may even now be said to be a marsh.”²³⁰

The mountain ranges, interrupted by valleys, were suspected of sustaining nothing: “but arid loving and aromatic specifics,”²³¹ giving way to glacial slopes, boulders, shingles and generally stony ground remarkable for “the smallness in number and the size of its rivers and streams.”²³² Griffith’s own beginning in Afghanistan owes more to the Afghan underground than to his examination of its stony surface. His botanical mission in Afghanistan, during which he collected specimens from fifteen hundred species “almost three-fifths of the flora of Afghanistan,” as he claims and made recommendations on coal mining and the establishment of a wool trade, began with a consequential land mine in the underground during the famous battle of Ghazni, the tenth century capital of the Ghaznavid Empire. Griffith was a part of the contingent in 1839 that planted a land mine and eventually blasted the main citadel walls,

²²⁸ Reports By Doctor Griffith On The Productions Of Afghanistan. 1842. Report and Diary, pg. 57. European Manuscripts. London.

²²⁹ Ibid., pg. 59.

²³⁰ Ibid., pg. 58.

²³¹ Ibid., pg. 72.

²³² Ibid., pg. 61.

defeating the Afghans. This is how he began his botanical exploration of the Afghan landscape and herbaria, a vast expanse he wrote about with derision and awe.²³³

Griffith was celebrated in his obituaries as a prodigy of the natural sciences who achieved a “reputation for the higher walks of science, more readily appreciated by the philosophers of Europe than acknowledged (until too late) by his countrymen in the East.”²³⁴ His “Afghan Expedition” lasted from 1839-1840, and was brought to the East India Company’s attention when his bill of expenses cast doubts. Most of Griffith’s expenses were for the various camels, donkeys and ponies he used for carriage and transport of materials. He purchased an Afghan bird collection of “beautiful form” for Rs. 500, paper for drying and packing his specimens for Rs. 100, barometer tubes, specimen boxes, and a two-wheeled cart.²³⁵ He hired four cavaliers (*sepahis*) for Rs. 8 per month and sent “natives” to procure “choicest fruit tree” cuttings for Rs. 25- 50 per trip.²³⁶ If, in other colonial experiences, the encounter with nature was subsumed by labor and thoughts of technological progress in Afghanistan a sense of marvel pervaded the rambles of various military personnel, who stopped during their marches to test the temperature

²³³ For an account of imperial botanical science and the tensions between scientific archiving and local Naxi rituals of memory (and performance) in south west China see: Mueggler, Erik. *The Paper Road: Archive and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of West China and Tibet*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. 2011.

²³⁴ “Biographical Memoir of the late William Griffith,” in the *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, 1847: pg. 187.

²³⁵ *Ibid.* “Bill of expenses” on pg. 41-42.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

of thermal springs and collect fossils and relics, enhancing the personal collection that Griffith amassed under some duress.²³⁷ He wrote:

“But a naturalist in Afghanistan, was placed under peculiar difficulties, the very nature of his pursuits would lead to an increased share of exposure. During my short residence...I was attacked twice, escaping once by mere chance. I never went out in the enjoyment of that feeling of security, so essential to any investigation. I always acted as much as possible on the idea that it is useless to collect materials unless the materials can be safely disposed of. I might probably have carried through the plans I alluded to, but as by doing so the safety of every body and everything with me would have been compromised, I preferred the more prudent step of abandoning each plan, as I saw reason for supposing probabilities were against its success. I have learnt one lesson never in a disturbed country to allude to a plan, until has been carried into effect, and brought to a determination.”²³⁸

Griffith’s rambles quickly gave way to an obsession with the Afghan herbaria, as he indefatigably moved through the plant kingdom with the deliberate pace of a scientist and an intensifying but child-like sense of wonder. His journals and letters evince his ceaseless labor of gathering, cataloging and penning descriptions of specimens. He wrote a copious amount and through bringing his observations into writing, began to imagine that the landscape had unrealized economic potential. He hoped to collate a vast natural archive and proffer an account of “the mammalogy, ornithology and botany of the kingdom.”²³⁹ Armed with persons and supplies, he marched with British brigadiers to Kandahar, Herat, Ghazni, and elsewhere; he

²³⁷ For a beautiful account of how the Dutch railway prospecting expedition moved through the Indonesian landscape, subsuming its features through a “Baroque-like sameness of man and man’s surroundings (2002, 3), and how the labor of prospecting made the physical features of the ground seem amenable to imperial aims See: Mrázek, Rudolf, *Engineers of Happyland*. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2002.

²³⁸ Reports By Doctor Griffith On The Productions Of Afghanistan. 1842. Report and Diary, pg. 31. European Manuscripts. London.

²³⁹ Ibid. pg. 33.

carved out his own pace and rhythm. His writings convey a boastful disposition, as if the act of writing gathered the natural landscape and laid it before him in an undiscovered heap. With the help of his military protectors, Griffith moved through the terrain and fauna. He even resided on the hostile frontier of “Kafiristan” (now called Nuristan) despite “habitual Afghan anarchy and confusion.”²⁴⁰

He was absorbed in rumination about geographic and natural form in a country he perceived as: “So lately and so curiously subjected” to British domination.²⁴¹ His extensive investigations illustrate the relationship between the archiving of natural history and waning imperial control in what the British government considered her most pressing frontier. Indeed, archival mythology allows the notion of empire to become imaginable not only for subjects but also for the British public. As Mueggler asserts, the relationship between late imperial science and botanical perception was as much about enfleshing the idea of an extended, and at times lush empire, as it was about training the senses of the observer.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 46.

²⁴¹ Ibid. pg. 32.

²⁴² Mueggler discusses the relationship between imperial science and botanical exploration as a voluntary, labor on the self (which entailed new technologies of perception) and a new relationship to the senses. Crucially the role of writing is crucial to this endeavor and to the tension between preservation and intimate knowledge, a knowledge conveyed by writing, naming, and categorizing (2005, 446). See: Mueggler, Erik. “The Lapponicum Sea: Matter, Sense, and Affect in the Botanical Exploration of Southwest China and Tibet.” *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* 47, no. 3 (2005): 442–79.

For a discussion of the role of British natural science in the construction of the Amazonia as an ecological space through classificatory practices of metropolitan science see: Hugh, Raffles, “The Uses of Butterflies,” in *American Ethnologist* 28, 3 (2001): 513-548.

“I am encamped close to Baber’s tomb [in Kabul], lulled by the sound of falling water, and cooled with the shade of poplar and sycamore trees, with abundance of delicious fruit, and altogether quite happy for the nonce. I have not yet seen the town which is a strange place, buried in gardens: but nothing can exceed the rich cultivation of the valley in which we are encamped. Beautiful fields on every side, with streamlets, rich verdure, poplars, willows, and bold mountain scenery, which contrasts most favourably with the dreary barren tracts to which we have been accustomed. I go with the Engineers to Bamean in the course of a few days, when we shall cross ridges of 12,000 to 13,000 feet high.”²⁴³

...

“We have been gradually ascending since leaving Candahar, and are here at an elevation of 7,600 feet. The same features continue. I have as yet not more than 850 species. The mountains on every side, and indeed the whole face of the country, is still bare. Mookloor, a district through which we passed, about seventy miles from this, is well cultivated and inhabited. There are few birds to be seen, and scarcely any insects, but there are numerous lizards. The thermometer varies in tents from 60° to 90°.”²⁴⁴

Griffith distinguished his labors from vulgar collection by penetrating the superficiality of form in order to analyze the arcana of plant biology and the water absorbency of Afghan soil. Writing his observations down in detail enabled Griffith to distinguish between the achievements of British rule in India (where the landscape was cultivated) and the barrenness of Afghanistan, a bifurcation that reduces the complexity of the region (and the shared frontier between British India and Afghanistan) into a neat division.²⁴⁵ Moving through a natural panorama, which seemed to invite him to discover a new distribution of natural form “at leisure afforded by halts,”

²⁴³ Griffith, William. August 11, 1839 entry in *Journals of Travels in Assam, Assam, Bootan, Afghanistan and the Neighboring Countries*. Bishop’s College Press, Calcutta 1847, pg. xii.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. July, 25 1839 entry, pg. xii.

²⁴⁵ Rosalind Morris discusses the imposition of an imperial pastoral aesthetic in British Malaya, which conflates the native with nature (and native labor as that which needs “shepherding”), and that is achieved through the delimitation of access to English (2007, 160-161). Moreover, this “imperial pastoral” rests on the perception of industry as a “force from afar” (2007, 182), see: Morris, Rosalind C. "Imperial Pastoral: The Politics and Aesthetics of Translation in British Malaya." *Representations* 99, no. 1 (2007): 159-94.

he depicts a peculiar landscape, shaped as much by the British imperial imaginary of a place with “uncivilized tracts” and “rude tribes” as by the desire to see in India the fruitful manifestation of imperial labor and cultivation:

“The transition from the absolute barrenness of the Hindoo-Kush to the finely clothed Himalayas certainly takes place somewhere to the north of Pusht or between it and Jugdulluk. It would appear to be almost sudden both first and Fraitoon ceasing abruptly the Baloot only straggling as far as Jugdulluk about which it is a stunted tree very much like a Holly. During my stay at Olipore I was of course anxious to ascertain to what causes the general barrenness of the Afghan Mountains was to be attributed independently of considerations of climate, a primary cause appears to me to exist in the want of soil.”²⁴⁶

Between the Paropamisus and Hindu Kush Mountain ranges the country seemed stretched before him as a barren expanse. He imagines the geographic tumults that created the skirted mountain ranges, encouraging his readers to do the same: “A popular general idea of it may be formed by imagining the upheaving of an extensive and varied system of mountains through an enormous plain variously covered with boulders and shingle and presenting here and there deposits of soil generally in the shape of narrow strips.”²⁴⁷ He carefully walked through these narrow strips, tucked along the angular edges of mountain passes and valleys, looking up in guarded awe at the precipitous heights that he read like a text:

“The Eastern end of the Kohi Baba or its commencement is certainly grand, a magnificent view of its three snow clad peaks is enjoyed from a pass ... Its extreme eastern part shows itself in the form of a vast rounded mass on approaching it ... but to the West it rapidly assumes a different appearance presenting a succession of lofty peaks as far as the eye can reach. In this direction it loses itself and I believe becomes diminished in the Paropamisus. Snow exists on its eastern portion throughout the year and in sheltered places it occurs in beds of considerable size. In August 1840 I ascended this range near Kilahi Kaloo up to 13,500 feet, no change in the usual features occurred

²⁴⁶ Reports By Doctor Griffith On The Productions Of Afghanistan. 1842. Report and Diary, pp. 72. European Manuscripts. London.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., pg. 47.

but from that altitude the ascent became much steeper and was rendered much more difficult by the ruins of enormous ships--with all my endeavors *I was only able to read the general level of the connections of the peaks* (emphasis mine). These were completely inaccessible the nearest did not appear to be more than 1,000 or 1,500 feet higher than the spot on which I stood... The upper portion of the range appeared entirely bare the surface consisting but of angular fragments of the rock of which the peaks are composed. The snow in the upper beds was wrought if I may so express myself by the action of frost and thaw into pinnacles which during sunshine presented thousands of glittering objects.”²⁴⁸

Reading the landscape was crucial for Griffith. It subsumed its alterity (it’s precipitous heights, inaccessible peaks, and “angular fragments”) by transforming the reality of spatial distance (the distance between him and the lofty peaks) into one he could traverse— understanding the general level of connections at an altitude he could not actually ascend to, but which freed him to consider the peculiarities of the ground itself. Griffith and his native assistants, whom he resented for being fickle, encountered not only the sublime peaks of The *Safid Koh* (White Mountains) but also glacial slopes and fir tree forests, suggesting that unlike the mountains in the south of country, the northern slopes were by “no means uniformly bare.” He saw this verdure as co-extensive with that of India’s, recognizing the fir trees from the “return route” of the Bombay Army Engineers and in stark contrast to the barrenness of the Hindoo Kush and Kohi Baba: “which is a general quality equally affecting their low offsets and the culminating ridges as far as an altitude of 15,000 feet. This bareness may be said to be comparatively absolute... the lower ranges of the Himalayas between Bhar and Simla is rich and luxuriant compared with what occurs in Afghanistan.”²⁴⁹ Rocks unexpectedly jutted out from the sides of ridges, disturbing what might have been a more fulsome gradation, otherwise easier

²⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 49-50.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 52.

on the eye. Rather than clothed in greenery, the southern Afghan Mountains were “immediately rocky” except in the eastern Hindu Kush, and closer to the British frontier where areas are composed of “sand in all degrees of softness and induration,” and in the Bamiyan Valley where offsets are “composed of earthy or clayey materials of varied and rather vivid colours.”²⁵⁰

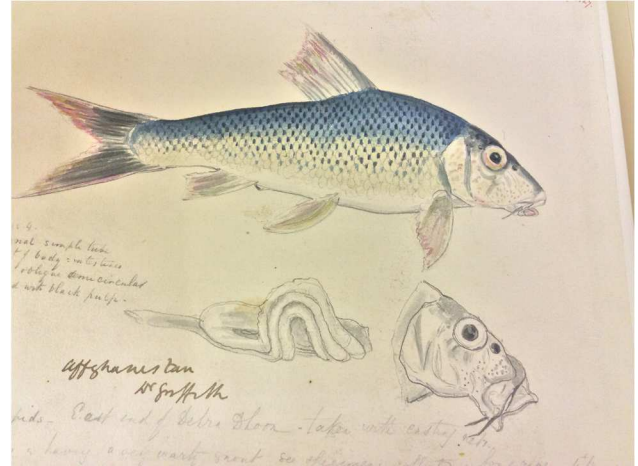
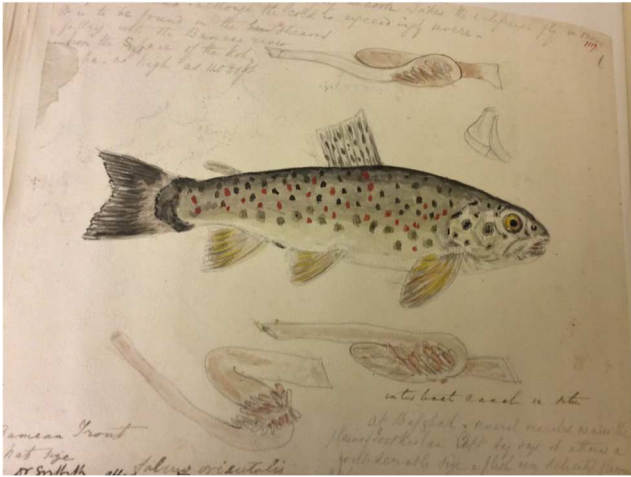
“This country is also I think remarkable always keeping in view that I write drawing my comparisons from India the country with which I am better acquainted than any other for the smallness in number and the size of its rivers and streams. From the general dryness of the climate perhaps many springs cannot be expected and the summer supply will be almost entirely confined to the streams which drain the loftiest ranges on which snow is to be found throughout the year. In most of the mountainous parts of India I have seen almost every ravine gives exit to a water course but this is not the case in Afghanistan in which the general scarcity of water is a most formidable obstacle to the movement of large bodies.”²⁵¹

Griffith, as much as he was concerned with a want of water, was also obsessed with capturing and dissecting those forms of life that exist in it, paying attention to the anatomy of fishes and their occurrence in various rivers.²⁵² The “dusky margins” of scales, the length of intestines, the span of gills. All of it mattered to Griffith, signifying a form of complex life that he could capture in the familiar categories of ichthyology. Such illustrations are common in natural historical writings of the period, but for Griffith the fish were also a surprising profusion of aquatic life in a country otherwise barren, a wonder worthy of artistic representation.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid., pg. 61.

²⁵² Drawings of fish of Afghanistan by William Griffith in Natural History Drawings from the Collections of Mysore and Griffith’s Afghanistan. India Office Records Special Material: NHD7/1117-1134.



But he was more keen to discern topographical difference, which became for him a sign that Afghans had not liberated themselves from natural forces. His writings become more specific, and he resorts to mechanical metaphors to illustrate geological variation: “A section of a Himalayan ravine may be I think correctly taken as wedge-shaped V—that of the Afghanistan ravines would be a broadly truncated wedge.”²⁵³ Afghanistan was different from India in a deeply unsettling way. It possesses a much harsher topography. At times, Griffith seems affronted by the onrush of difference, like the “great rise in the rivers” and the westerly winds that became hot and “quite deadly...dreaded by the natives.” His exasperation was also matched by his disdain for his Afghan assistants: “I never had so many difficulties to contend against as were afforded to me by my Afghan collectors. Every thing they did out of my sight was careless and worthless in the extreme. And high pay did not secure their services, they deserted me

²⁵³ Ibid., pg. 54.

frequently on the whim of a moment.”²⁵⁴ Griffith found himself unmoored both from the familiar landscape of British India and from the loyalty he anticipated in exchange for a wage. The Afghans who he relied on to collect specimens, and who helped him amass an archive, were unmotivated by scientific zeal or monetary compensation.

The distinction between his detailed labors (and the labor of writing about his observations and experiences) and the careless and “worthless” labor of the Afghan collectors unsettled Griffith in his adventure, and also inspired him to see an opening for imperial pedagogy. He was suddenly not only absorbed by the perennial harshness of the barren tracts, but also in dreams of cultivating and interspersing them with vegetation in order to find relief from the stony terrain and glacial slopes that outnumbered tillable soil by “enormous proportions.”²⁵⁵

Of all the features of the Afghan terrain and herbaria, Griffith was fixated on its soil. He wrote about its barrenness insistently, imploring officials of the East India Company to consider the enormous advantages of tillage while also emphasizing its peculiar aridity:

“I, whose journey had been confined to the North Eastern or Eastern portions of British India was particularly struck with the small numbers of natural springs--On this depends ...many of the peculiarities of Afghan vegetation. But few as springs are and few as streams are the effect is heightened by the quantities of water expended in irrigation. To this and in a greater degree to great absorbent powers of soil is to be attributed the not

²⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 38.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 55.

unfrequent occurrence of the actual disappearance of streams in Afghanistan at various distances from their sources.”²⁵⁶

He drew on the history of British imperial conquest elsewhere as an instructive lesson on the relationship between agriculture and conquest, as if it were an exhortation of the soil itself:

“I was of course anxious to ascertain to what causes the general barrenness of the Afghan Mountains was to be attributed independently of considerations of climate a primary cause appears to me to exist in the want of soil. Tillable soil exists on the mountains around Olipore which are consequently inhabited and partly cleared. That soil is rich and of considerable depth the bare rock being only exposed where the inclination of the strata approaches so near the perpendicular that no lodgement of soil can take place.”²⁵⁷

And again:

“It appears to me that there are three natural defects of more or less general occurrence throughout Afghanistan as that Kingdom is now limited by small proportion of tillable soil, want of forests and water carriage. Afghanistan is, I think, decidedly a barren and poor country, and I fear that generally it is an irreclaimable one. For it is not barren because it has been badly ruled, or from the poverty of the inhabitants or their bad qualities but it is barren and will probably remain poor, because the tillable part of the soil bears no proportion to that which is untillable. The untillable majority is composed of either bare rock the mountainous ranges for instance or of the inclined planes of boulders and shingle which I fear must be considered almost as irreclaimable as rock itself.”²⁵⁸

And again:

“It was a common remark throughout the army how wealthy the country would be if stones were a source of richness and prosperity. The stony nature of the country is almost inconceivable by a person habituated to the extensive alluvial soils of British India. It is

²⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 65.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 72.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., pg. 99.

still more striking because owing to the value of the tillable soil all the roads with but very few exceptions are carried over the edge of the glacis slopes.”²⁵⁹

Roads and soil come together at the point that one (roads) carries over where the other should have been more present (the inner edge of slopes, where a scarcity of tillable soil made land all the more valuable): “These stone and shingle are not merely strewed over the surface of these glacis slopes but they constitute them entirely.” Except that shingle and stone could not have constituted the slopes entirely, for there *were* roads, built along the edges of slopes where there was no extended cultivation. Something about this fact, the glacis slope roads, is “striking,” for Griffith and shifts the focus of his attention to the relationship between military advantage and agriculture. In the absence of adequate roads to enable transport and commerce, tilling the land was the next best thing:

“But although these portions of the country do not appear adapted for any strictly agricultural purpose there are still considerable portions of some of the finer vallies still uncultivated, and it is to these that we must look for extension of cultivation. I shall merely mention I met places as presented themselves to my observation it would be useful to make any suggestion *for let the admirers of Asiatic rulers say what they will a great increase in cultivation has always and rapidly succeeded the accession of British supremacy* (emphasis mine).”²⁶⁰

The preoccupation with agriculture changes the representational and aesthetic nature of Griffith’s writing. If one set of writings, on botanical variety, express his ability to read the landscape (and hence an imperial optic that equates the function of seeing with that of apprehending) and convey that reading through poetic prose, then the more he writes of agriculture the more he begins to explicitly translate those representations in efficient language

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 100.

for the East India Company. His concern, when writing about agriculture, is not so much with the radical alterity of the landscape (in comparison to India) which infuses his writing about its mountainous nature, but with translating a lack in the Afghanistan landscape as analogous to the sources of economic value the British already realized (and enabled) in India. His representations of the landscape become a guide for the realization of economic value, and for the overcoming of absence with pure productivity. In this context, Griffith's obsession with soil, its absorbency and the rates of cultivation culminated both in a discourse on Asiatic rule (in the "irreclaimable kingdom of Shah Shoja ool Molk") and a concern with imperial cultivation, bringing together the possibility of tillage with that of political ascendancy and agricultural reproduction. In this extended fantasy, the distribution of natural form or barrenness on its surface is sutured in a moment of imperial sense-making:

"Of the vallies I would beg particularly to direct attention to that of Pisheen in which, on the line of route of the army I was surprised at seeing so little cultivation. The valley is also worthy of examination as to the point of its applicability for a cantonment instead of that of Quettah, which has I hear been found to be decidedly unhealthy its extent and openness are greatly in its favor."²⁶¹

Griffith's sentences are direct and to the point. For him, the productive capacities of the ground are determined by the visible signs of cultivation, the inimitable evidence of ownership in an imperial optic that equates possession with labor. But signs that have *not yet appeared* on the landscape are doubly recuperated: they mark a tension between seeing and conquering, a moment of sheer possibility. They reveal a "structure of expectation" linked to a world of

²⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 100.

perception to come, or as Greenblatt describes: “a truth already possessed” elsewhere.²⁶² Griffith imagines this truth coming to life again:

“Around each of the main places in the country small plantations might advantageously be made, particularly of such timber trees as are best adapted for the purposes of military arsenals. Thus at Julalabad and Candehar the Sisoo might be planted with reasonable prospect of success for the supply of Cabul and Ghuzni we must look to Europe and the Himalayas.”²⁶³

Far from being sublime, the natural features of the Afghan terrain— its marshes, sparse pockets of vegetation, aridity, “aromatic specifics,” “stony nature,” disappearing streams, unused timber, glacial slopes, and sometimes even those “choicest fruit trees”— became the basis for an aesthetic judgement that heralded a moral and political future to come under the auspices of native labor and imperial governance. What was “decidedly peculiar flora” and a “general poverty in variety of form,” were now an open military horizon. Alongside this, the Afghan

²⁶² Greenblatt reads Columbus’s logbook in order to discern an obsession with physical signs and landscape. Columbus was not so much an observer as a compiler of “significant markers” (1991, 86). Greenblatt contends that these signs “serve as confirmation and promise: confirmation of a theory, promise of the fulfillment of a desire,” and that the pauses or moments of doubt between them, much like we see in Griffith’s journal entries (doubts between the freedom of movement and his restriction, between the barrenness of the landscape and its possibilities) “marks a tension between the visual and the verbal, seeing and reading” (1991, 87). The difference between observation and writing is not one of specificity and generalization, but the marker of a “structure of expectation and perception in which the world is at least as fully implicated as the eye” (1991,88). The space between seeing and writing, for Greenblatt, marks the space of discovery. Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions : The Wonder of the New World*. The University of Chicago Press: 1991.

While a compelling reading of Columbus’s writings, this is different from what is occurring with William Griffith, who is not so much experiencing the Afghan landscape as a space of discovery opened by the gap between his observations and his writings (though of course the temporal lag in writing one’s observations, much like the ethnographic journal, requires a distancing from and reflection on what has been observed), but this doesn’t culminate in a sense of discovery for Griffith so much as it does in his ability, through the act of writing, to recast the landscape as an open horizon of future profit hitherto unrealized by the Afghans themselves.

²⁶³ Reports By Doctor Griffith On The Productions Of Afghanistan. 1842. Report and Diary, pp. 106. European Manuscripts. London.

nation-state (rather than the “irreclaimable kingdom of Shah Shuja”²⁶⁴) would enable a verdurous surround with topographic gradation. It would be lush and cultivated. But just like for the supply of military arsenals in Kabul and Ghazni the British would have to “look to Europe and the Himalayas,” so too would this “imperial pastoral,” as it did in Southeast Asia, look to Europe while recuperating: “the remotest regions of empire...as places in which to recover what Europe had lost.”²⁶⁵

In the end, for Griffith, it was Afghanistan’s geological composition that would enable this forward glance, particularly its coal deposits underground. By the time of his writing coal production in Europe had reached some 50 million tonnes (by 1900 it would reach 250 million tonnes), a vast increase in quantity in response to the demands of industry and the nearly exhaustive deforestation of Western Europe. In the fullness of time, and with the scientific expertise of men like himself, something less wooden was also imagined for Afghanistan, freeing her from the confines of nature: “Geology...is perhaps the only branch of scientific knowledge that promises in Afghanistan to be attended with practical and beneficial results. The discovery of coal for instance is of the highest importance, not mere lignite or a useful deposit of coal, but one which may be made available to the improvement of the country!”²⁶⁶

As we saw, coal prospecting was one of strategies offered by Sir Fraser-Tytler, the British minister in Kabul, as a type propaganda method suitable to Afghans *because* of their

²⁶⁴ Shah Shuja was king from 1839-1842.

²⁶⁵ Morris, Rosalind. “Imperial Pastoral: The Politics and Aesthetics of Translation in British Malaya.” *REPRESENTATIONS* 99, no. 1 (Summer 2007): pg. 183.

²⁶⁶ Reports By Doctor Griffith On The Productions Of Afghanistan. 1842. Report and Diary, pg. 38. European Manuscripts. London.

illiteracy and need for “concrete benefit.” Earlier, in the 1830’s, European travelers wrote about the occurrence of coal and lignite, and later much more fulsomely during the prospecting missions of mining engineers for the East Indian Railway colliers and Geological Survey of India. As early as 1872 Dr. W.T. Blandford of the Geological Survey of India travelled with the Persian Boundary Commission and visited coal mines near Hir and Elburz (in present day Iran) and noted their excellent quality. Already the anxieties and interests of the British Empire were inscribed in those observations, taking on the secondary form of scientific inquiry as part of a more general effort to quell borderland disturbances. Blandford’s writings owe themselves to heightened alarm over political revolutions “in the lands of immediate neighbors on the West; an interest naturally heightened by progressive encroachment from without, affecting all faith in those frontiers which, next to our own, it is of the greatest importance to us to keep inviolate.”²⁶⁷

The earlier accounts of European travelers also mention attempts at opening coal seams and developing colliers in order to provide fuel in a land “in which wood is not abundant and where the winter is severe.”²⁶⁸ The lack of timber, as we’ve seen, was a crucial component of the British botanical discourse on Afghanistan. It inspired fantasies about the role of imperial pedagogy in liberating Afghans from the grip of a barren landscape by teaching them how to enhance agricultural output through scientific methods. Writing in 1936, the geologist Cyril S. Fox identified plant fossils that established “beyond all doubt their floral identity” and proved

²⁶⁷ Eastern Persia: an account of the journeys of the Persian Boundary Commission, 1870, 71-72. Macmillan and Co, London: 1876, ix.

²⁶⁸ Fox, Cyril. *The Coalfields of Afghanistan for Geological Survey of India*. The British Library, 1936, pg. 2.

that the coal bearing formation of Afghanistan, laid down north of Hindu Kush Mountains in an expansive basin which also includes the coalfields of Russian Turkestan and Northern Persia, could turn Afghanistan into a potential gateway to greater wealth. Then, as now, the tendency for “internal disturbance” was cited for why colliers, modern agriculture and roads did not already exist.



(Top left) Men working for W.D. West on drilling a coal lens and (Top right) the surveyor Mohammed Sadiq. Bottom (L) This is also Mohammed Sadiq. (R) Transporting the coal to Kabul with lorries. Source: British Library.

High Yield Crops

But before there could be mining there had to be agriculture, and also roads and railways to transport not only coal or iron, but persons and basic needs like water. Agriculture was as much the purview of the state as it was earlier of empire. Writing about the Indian experience of the British East India Company (Griffith's patrons), Marx remarks on the twin rise of British ascendancy and India's agricultural demise; a deterioration he ascribes to the East India Company's neglect of agricultural public work, and which becomes especially devastating to Indian society in conjunction with the demise of domestic manufacture (namely textiles). For Marx, the vast and varied lands from "the Sahara, through Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary,"²⁶⁹ have suffered from "immemorial times" from something similar to India under British rule; the alternating cycles of agricultural destruction and improvement owing to political circumstance and the scarcity of water: "This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association...necessitated, in the Orient where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments the function of providing public works. This artificial fertilization of the soil, dependent on a Central Government, and immediately decaying

²⁶⁹ Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. 2nd Revised & enlarged edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978, pg. 655. Originally published in *New York Daily Tribune*, "The British Rule in India," June 10, 1853.

with the neglect of irrigation and drainage, explains *the otherwise strange fact that we now find whole territories barren and desert* (emphasis mine).²⁷⁰

Marx's essay on water and agriculture is equally a discourse on the nature of Asian sovereignty, which he ascribes to the barrenness of whole territories.²⁷¹ In this respect his thoughts converge with Griffith's frustration with Asiatic rule in Afghanistan: agricultural degradation was a double sign, of the arid quality of soil and of a crisis in governance, the latter abetting not only deprivation and hunger, but generally desolate and unproductive ground.

Griffith and Marx were not alone in their fixation on cultivation, nor capitalism's need to create new markets. In 1838 and 1839, the same year that Griffith marched through Afghanistan and during the period that Marx notes the stunning increase in muslin exports from Great Britain to India, the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies* and the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* published the accounts of Lieutenant Conolly's and Alexander Burnes's journeys in Afghanistan.²⁷² Their accounts feature a dual fixation on the ground, both as an access point to the markets of Central Asia (Conolly's concern)²⁷³ and as a

²⁷⁰ Ibid.,

²⁷¹ There is a vast literature critiquing Marx's concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) and the conflation of a mode of production with a geographic space, which I cannot address in this chapter. For an overview of the main debates and a comprehensive bibliography see: Currie, Kate. *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Problems of Conceptualizing State and Economy in Dialectical Anthropology* 8 (1984) 251-268.

²⁷² In his discussion of British imperialism in India Marx notes: "In 1824 the export of British muslins to India hardly amounted to 1,000,000 yards while in 1837 it surpassed 64,000,000 yards." See: Tucker, Robert C., Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978, pg. 656.

²⁷³ *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies*. "Conolly's Journey to the North of India," in Volume 28. January 1, 1839.

source of natural phenomena ranging from earthquakes to the underground reduplication of sound and echo (Burnes's wonderment).²⁷⁴ The concern with the opening of Central Asian markets to British goods was concomitant with the anxiety about political order and price: order not only precedes "mercantile intercourse" but also determines price:

"English goods...sell generally at Bokhara at the rate of 150 per cent profit upon prime cost at Bombay; that is, profits of this extent are absolutely necessary to cover the exactions, and losses, and perils by the way. If the transit were free from the vexations and hazards to which it is now exposed, there can be no doubt that Central Asia would become a valuable mart for British goods—for its cotton, woolens, metals, and manufacture; the returns are not so obvious, but they would be provided."²⁷⁵

The perils on the way to the market were the traces of Afghan despotism and political disorder as much as they were a function of the capitalist need to regenerate increasing profit, extending into new territory. But insofar as Afghanistan was considered a byway to Central Asian markets it necessitated high prices as an indemnity, understood not as profit but as a function of the Afghan overland. Like the underground duplication of sound at *Reg Rawan* (the Moving Sands), where natural forces converged to emit a bellowing drum-like sound, on the surface, value was also remarkably redoubled despite and because of the perils of natural and political forces.

Like Griffith, it is through the possibility of economic value, that the natural landscape shifts for Conolly from an inhospitable one to something more favorable and receptive, offering a hopeful glimpse into its great depths: "The country is not altogether a desert of deep sand, but

²⁷⁴ Burnes, Alexander. 'The Reg Rawan, Or Moving Sand, Of Cabul'. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* VII January-December 1838.

²⁷⁵ Conolly, 1839. Bukhara is a city in modern day Uzbekistan but was an independent emirate in the 19th century.

interspersed with much good ground, covered with low jungles and grass, in which many thousand camels and oxen are pastured. Water is generally scarce, being obtainable only from the wells of great depth—250 or 300 feet below the surface; but for this circumstance, much of the soil might be cultivated.”²⁷⁶ The Afghans themselves also seemed friendlier, becoming more amenable and harboring the possibility of alliance: “A powerful ally in Afghanistan would, however, be more than a compensation for this advantage... The chief obstacle to the creation of such impediments lies in the fickle character of people, and in the distracted state of the government. It is probable that the restoration of the exiled king, Shah Shujah, would be acceptable to the people, and might be effected with little difficulty.”²⁷⁷

For Marx, Indian sovereignty and cultivation diverged in a dramatic way, with entire swathes of land left untilled for want of resources amidst the onslaught of British industry. But in the narratives of Conolly and Griffith, the possibility of British ascendancy not only depends on agricultural reproduction but also on the Afghan State at its helm. In the burgeoning imperial fantasy of conquest in Afghanistan, tillage became both a sign of order and political centralization. It was a pastoral singularity that could enable value production:

When he (Lieutenant Conolly) travelled through Afghanistan, none of the native merchants seemed to think that wool could be profitably exported. The opening of the Indus has, however, proved that they were mistaken. A decided trade in the wool of sheep pastured on those parts of India bordering on the Indus commenced at Bombay, in 1833,

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

when 69,944 lbs. were exported. It has since increased at an extraordinary rate, no less than 2,444,091 lbs. having been exported from Bombay in the official year 1837.”²⁷⁸

Much earlier, during the high tide of primitive accumulation in the English countryside, the price of wool played a decisive factor in the dissolution of feudal bonds and the annexing of common lands, which were converted to “sheep-walks.”²⁷⁹ But the Afghan pastoral was not quite so disenchanted. Writing in 1838, just 3 years before his murder on the bank of the Kabul River at the hands of local *Kabulis*, Alexander Burnes (the British chief agent in Kabul) was enamored by the *reg rawan*, or “moving sands” some forty miles north of Kabul. Like *Jabal Nakous* (the Sounding Mountain) near the Red Sea, the *reg rawan* was a small sandy hill near the base of the Hindu Kush Mountains that emitted a sound, like a drum beat. The echoing underground: “a reduplication of impulse setting air in vibrations in a focus of echo,” as Burnes explains, was for him and his readership the site of a fetishistic misrecognition of natural phenomena occurring as a result of the sand’s peculiar consistency for saintly aura:

“When this sand is set in motion by a body of people, who slide down it, a sound is emitted... there is an echo in the place, and the inhabitants have a belief that the sounds are only heard on Friday when the saint of Reg Rawan, who is interred near by, permits!”²⁸⁰

Moving ground was not in itself a striking phenomenon for Burnes. He recounted the frequent “convulsions of nature” that regularly devastated the city of Kabul, forcing inhabitants to rebuild as often as two to three times per month. He also cited the Emperor Babur (the founder

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Marx, Karl. *Capital — A Critique of Political Economy: Volume I—The Process of Capitalist Production*. New York, New York: International Publishers Company, Incorporated, 1979 pg. 434.

²⁸⁰ Burnes, 1838.

of the Mughal Empire) who commented much earlier on the severity of earthquakes: “In some places the ground was elevated to the height of an elephant above its old level, and in others as much depressed.”²⁸¹ The sand at *reg rawan* moved through time as immutably as it did on the hillside slope, as a surface phenomenon that evinced the geomorphology of a much more tumultuous and forbidding underground that Afghans themselves did not understand.

But insofar as the ground was misunderstood, it was not the dune at *reg rawan* but the entire Afghan countryside that was misperceived as a space in which differences ranging from perceptions of economic value to natural and political disjunctures would be subsumed, neatly corralled within its earthy edges. Just as the imperial conquering of botanical distribution was largely effected through scientific and classificatory practices, and a keen training of the senses; in a similar vein, the political domain was imagined as the corollary of a more ordered and cultivated ground, one based as much on principles of exclusion (“Of the vallies I would beg particularly to direct attention to that of Pisheen in which, on the line of route of the army I was surprised at seeing so little cultivation”)²⁸² and depth (“wells of great depth—250 or 300 feet below the surface”)²⁸³ as on an idealized aesthetic of rural life and labor. Well-tilled soil would enable not only the flourish of agricultural re-production, nudging the population out of their subsistence livelihoods, but also usher in an era of modern statecraft, with the trappings of political order and administrative control growing like so many crops in the rain.

²⁸¹ Cited in Burnes, 1838.

²⁸² Reports By Doctor Griffith On The Productions Of Afghanistan. 1842. Report and Diary, pg. 100. European Manuscripts. London.

²⁸³ Conolly, 1839.

But agriculture did not always assume the role of such an exceptional causal force. In fact, as far as various Afghan empires and states were concerned it was an aleatory phenomenon, occurring despite sovereign intervention in areas considered at times central, and at other times marginal to the empire's holdings and revenue base. Like other Turko-Persian empires the Afghan empire's organizational structure consisted of "large stretches of sparsely populated territory separating the main centers of agriculture and urban life. Rulers here sought direct control of these centers and the lines of communication among them while largely ignoring the rest."²⁸⁴ The inability to assert political control and traverse steppes, mountains and expansive deserts aggrandized the importance of symbolic sovereignty (for example the minting of coins or mentioning the king's name during the Friday communal prayer) in marginal areas whereas the populations of irrigated valleys and plains (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharif) were ruled directly. Even then, the domain of immediate political control over agricultural land amounted to less than five percent of the country's total land area.²⁸⁵

Let us return to Griffith's agrarian and mineral fantasies. In the imperial-botanical imagination, coal mining would herald Afghanistan's transition from subsistence agriculture to industry (despite its perilous overlands and tumultuous underground). Through his writings the singularity of the landscape, ranging from botanical to spiritual, converged around what was already known in Europe, an industrial truth that was both an imminent event and the fulfillment of desire for conquest and synthetic combustibles. But the story of contested sovereignty and

²⁸⁴ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010, pg. 68.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 70.

decentralized agriculture, imagined as Afghanistan's bane, was already the story of metal and especially the silver coins that flooded the Afghan economy during the British occupation of Kabul in 1839, when as part of the war effort they saturated the Afghan economy with silver rupees, turning Kabul into a boom town and undermining the state's legitimacy through fiscal reforms that increased state revenue from 225,000 to 900,000 rupees amidst five hundred percent inflation rates.²⁸⁶

Surface Traces

Writing for the Linnean Society in 1884, the botanist and surgeon J.E.T Aitchison bemoans the mark of the plough on the Afghan topsoil as the trace of an absence.²⁸⁷ The plow streaks the land where there were "no traces of a road,"²⁸⁸ prefiguring a lack that would perdure for much of the twentieth century as roads, and later the railway became the fulcrum of heated political debate and social unrest, and more devastatingly, as the ground itself became an extended battlefield.

Along with the other Afghan nationalists of the 1920's, especially the "Young Afghans," King Amanullah sought refuge in the dense solidity of roads (and later the rush of trains) as much as he did in the steely telegraph stations that enabled communication with cosmopolitan capitals like London, Berlin, Rome, Tokyo and Moscow. But in 1884, before these roads or

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 120-121.

²⁸⁷ Aitchison. J.E.T. "The Botany of the Afghan Delimitation Commission," in *The Transactions of the Linnean Society of London*. 1888. Manuscript. India Office Records. London.

²⁸⁸ Aitchison. J.E.T. "The Botany of the Afghan Delimitation Commission," in *The Transactions of the Linnean Society of London*. 1888. Manuscript. India Office Records. London, pg. 2.

trains were imagined in earnest, Aitchinson marched westwards from Northern Baluchistan (sometimes at night in order to avoid the heat) towards the Helmand River, guided by large fires instead of beacons and plow marks during the day instead of roads. He imagines the grooves in the soil as having been made for that: “special purpose,” helping him move forward and eventually amass a collection of botanical specimens that he worked on in the Kew Herbarium. Like Griffith, for Aitchison the problem of sparse cultivation was a problem of water. He comments repeatedly, almost obsessively, about water as a surface phenomenon that is unavailable at greater depth, sometimes even ten feet beneath the surface:

“In traversing this desert we were informed that water was only to be procured at certain localities; this was no doubt true in the sense that water was only exposed at those localities; but it was evident that with a little trouble it was procurable close to the surface in many more places; for on no occasion was the water found at a greater depth than ten feet, often much less.”²⁸⁹

He pays attention to the presence of water, and to its want. He notes how sluggishly river water flowed into channels, where attempts at well-digging had been made, how irrigated land had been protectively terraced, where the ruins of villages accorded with a lack of water, the underground *karez* (channel) irrigation system and even how far the roots of plants had thrust themselves into the ground in order to stay hydrated: “when sand is heaped upon them they have to learn to keep themselves alive under the superimposed weight and at the same time to fight their way through it.”²⁹⁰ In areas where there was water at the surface, he noted that homes were in “good repair” and villages more numerous. But the fundamental problem remained a matter of

²⁸⁹ Ibid., pg. 2.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., pg. 4.

cultivation and governance, the latter imagined as a catalyst for both agriculture and artificial irrigation:

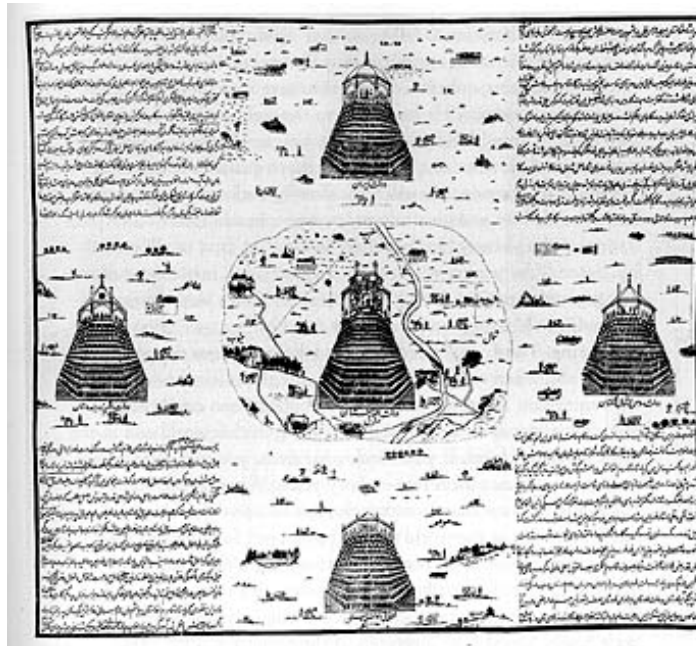
“The cultivation, as it at present exists, is very poor and second rate, compared with what it might be under a strong and vigorous government, favourably disposed to the agricultural development of the country. The people look and are miserably poor and badly clad; the houses are all more or less in ruins, the walls unrepaired, many orchards running to waste, and fields laying fallow. Everywhere signs of decay and poverty are apparent, a great contrast to the state of things found at Lash-jowain. Yet the valley looked capable of maintaining 100,000 inhabitants, were only labor and capital forthcoming to extend cultivated area by developing and improving the present system of irrigation works, for without a liberal artificial supply of water at this altitude nothing will grow.”²⁹¹

The furrows Aitchison noted on the ground outlined not only his route but a general pathway that could constitute a transportation and communication system, carrying persons and goods across an otherwise untraversable landscape separated by mountains (where snowpacks melt and replenish the valleys below) and desert plains, as well as ethno-linguistic diversity. Suturing this gap was equally the concern of the Afghan State. The controlled, and often violent centralization of political authority, a logic that remains anathema to a long history and ethos of tribal egalitarianism, began in earnest with the establishment of Afghanistan as a nation-state during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901), the “Iron Amir.” In an effort to buttress his absolutism and emphasize imminent external threats Abdur Rahman Khan drew a map and posted it in major cities and villages. Afghanistan is in the center with Iran, Russian Turkestan, China and India on its peripheries:

“I have now prepared for you a kind of map, which shows the condition of Afghanistan as compared with that of its surrounding countries. This I have done in order to enable you to study the matter attentively and to make out a path for yourselves in such a way that good may accrue both to your country and to your religion. I am hopeful that a

²⁹¹ Ibid., pg. 14.

careful study of this map will suffice for your prosperity and happiness both in this world and the next.”²⁹²



The centered map of the “government of Afghanistan” (*dowlat e Afghanistan*) has, like the others, images of men tending to land and draft animals. But unlike its peripheries, it also has the outlines of roads, foreshadowing—like the furrow marks on the topsoil for Aitchison—the concerns of the following century. The last decade of the nineteenth century was a period of massive socio-political change. It entailed the centralization of the Afghan central state, earlier a decentralized and fluid administrative structure, through the breaking of anti-state tribal resistance, the transformation of the clergy into salaried functionaries of the state, the exiling of intellectuals, the adoption of Persian as the national language, the beginning of industrial

²⁹² Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880–1946*, Stanford University Press: 1969, pg. 131 and first page of photos.

development (the manufacture of arms in Kabul) and the forcible conversion of *Kafiristan* (land of pagans) to Islam under the Iron Amir.

The Amir's internal campaigns of conquest involved the subsequent distribution of agricultural land (especially the Shia region of *Hazarajat*) as well as grazing pastures for tribesmen who fought on his behalf, turning cultivable land into the corollary of state-sponsored violence. These molar efforts were sustained by a more general period of cultural isolation and defensive underdevelopment, especially when it pertained to infrastructural development. In response to continued British demands for an extension of the British Indian railway system Amir Abdur Rahman likened it to "pushing a knife into my vitals."²⁹³ But rails are also the lifeblood of industrial development and capital accumulation; and for the Afghan modernists of the twentieth century, the "Young Afghans," a new century of cars, railways and electricity rendered the time for traditionalism bygone. Abdur Rahman Khan's successor and son, Habibullah, presided over the early twentieth century. His reign was abuzz with social change and conflicts that enabled the emergence of political and cultural movements ranging from conservative Islamist to Soviet-inspired socialist. In this context, the railway (rather than roads) became a kind of supplement for state building and an electric metaphor for both the frustrations of nineteenth century imperialism and twentieth century Afghan modernism.

In the Afghan modernist discourse, the turbulence of the nineteenth century and the Anglo-Afghan wars necessitated infrastructural development as well as aesthetic purposiveness and literary commitment to the twin causes of modernism and Pan-Islamic solidarity. Before

²⁹³ Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*. Volume II. Edited by Mir Munshi and Sultan Khan Mahomed. London: John Murray, 1900: pg. 159.

being assassinated on a hunting trip in the Laghman Valley on Feb 20, 1919, King Habibullah, whose reign is called *serajiya* (lightness) had regenerated the idea of a sovereign Afghan State, and forged new social forms of recognition. The anniversary of his crowning (and his birthday) became national holidays. He converted the largest mosque esplanade in Kabul (the *Eid Gah* mosque) into a secular space for festivities (*chaman e hozuri*). On the last night of annual national *jeshns* (festivals) a large fireworks display would be held, illuminating the sky before the introduction of electricity on the ground. Habibullah drove his car around Kabul, played golf, and set up Kabul's first *akkas-khana* (photography studios), also holding photographic competitions on the royal lawn.²⁹⁴ In 1911 he erected a *borj-e-sa'at* (clock tower) to synchronize the passing of secular time, otherwise marked by the five *athaans* (calls to prayer). After a trip to India, he hastily returned to establish wool-weaving mills (he was complimented in India on the superior quality of Afghan *pashm* (wool), and the Kabul *mashin-khana* (industrial workshops) which provided arms and military equipment under the auspices of state-led industrialization.²⁹⁵ Internationally, he made gestures of benevolence to cement his reputation as the Afghan sovereign, even donating money to earthquake victims in Japan, Turkey and Sicily.²⁹⁶ At home, he was an avid photographer and golf player, often finding petitions from his subjects stuffed into the holes of his golf course.

²⁹⁴ Schinasi, May. *Afghanistan at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: Nationalism and Journalism in Afghanistan a Study of Seraj Ul-akhbar* (1911-1918). Naples, Italy: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1979, pg. 108.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 134.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 107.

Exiles such as the influential Tarzi family returned from Istanbul where Mahmud Tarzī (1866-1935) (the editor of the modernist newspaper *Siraj al Akhbar-The Torch of News*) was exposed to the constitutional movement of the Young Turks and the Pan-Islamist thoughts of Jamal u din al-Afghani. *Siraj al Akhbar* emphasizes the undesirable consequences of political isolation and proclaims the press as crucial to any modern culture. For Tarzi, the existence of the press differentiates between a nation and a federation of unmediated tribes. To this effect, *Siraj al Akhbar* published foreign and domestic news, poetry, short stories and translated various publications and novels from English, Turkish, Urdu, and Arabic into Persian: “The lasting legacy of this pioneering journal was that it charted the intellectual frame-work of the subject of modernity and the modern subject throughout the course of twentieth-century Afghanistan.”²⁹⁷ As a framework for understanding the modern, print media and literacy assumed new importance just as Islam became both an impasse and a catalyst, crucial to “sow the seed”²⁹⁸ of patriotic unity both within Afghanistan and the Muslim world: “Those who see the Afghan national homeland merely as ‘an imaginary line drawn by some cartographers upon a piece of paper’ have an ‘abject and desolate conscience.’ ”²⁹⁹

It was an alternative modernity crafted in and through a sustained regional dialogue with the intellectual currents of socialism, secularism and constitutionalism and a political context that encompassed the Russo-Japanese War, the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, Italo-Turkish

²⁹⁷ Ahmadi, Wali. *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan*. Routledge Press, 2008, pg. 20.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., pg. 42.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., pg. 43.

War (1911), and the rise of Pan-Islamism.³⁰⁰ The Young Afghan writers were shaped in a world of multiple and cross cutting determinations that profoundly influenced their relationship to literary-aesthetic production and the ambivalence with which they regarded first poetry, and later technology. For Tarzī modern knowledge (*ilm*) was always universal and borrowed. He urges his readers, the intellectual avant-guard, to travel abroad and learn foreign languages. He considered Japan the ultimate Asiatic nation, one that both adopted modern technology and retained the cultural grandeur of its imperial past. Tarzī translated a five volume history of the Russo-Japanese war (*Tarikh-i-muharabah-i Rus va Zhapan*), several of Jules Vernes works, and manuals on modern military drilling and the relationship between Islam and Science (*Ilm va Islamiyat*).³⁰¹ His prolific publishing and translations catapulted *Siraj al Akhbar* as an interpretive bridge between national traditions otherwise foreign in the aftermath of intensive cultural isolation during the long reign of Amir Abdul Rahman. In order to understand this bridge, Tarzi exhorts Afghans to study Persian, Japanese and Ottoman history in order to discern the importance of grafting “Western” technological advances onto diverse national trajectories.

Through the journal's pages, rough and hard new words found their way into a budding lexicon that grappled with the rapid transformations seizing Europe, exemplifying not just the

³⁰⁰ Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880–1946*, Stanford University Press: 1969, pg. 165.

The question of an alternative modernity, about which there is a vast literature, is about the political experience of modernity outside of the West, and the ways in which it inflects particular ways of being and relating to time and space, literary production, as well as the constitutive displacement of the category of the modern. See: 1) Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory" " *Social Text*, no. 17 (1987): 3-25; 2) Amin. Samir. Eurocentrism. Monthly Review Press: 2010; and for a collection of essays: 3) Mitchell, Timothy. (ed). *Questions of Modernity*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 2000.

³⁰¹ "*Ilm va Islamiyat*" in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 161.

might of industry but a deeper epistemic truth, the nature of *ilm-e-beh-intihâ*: or limitless knowledge. That *ilm* knowledge, always and already a reflection of divine grace had now enamored the sky and grounds of Europe, the “*fiancée* of the world,” with a *sâr-e-madani*, or civilizational achievements. *Tra'm reil ha* (tramways), *motarha* (cars), *telefunha* (telephones), *telegrafha-e-beh-seem* (wireless telegraphy), *machine-ha-e-parandeh roi* (bird-resembling machines, or airplanes), *dar roi-zameen* (on the ground), *dar zer-e-zameen* (underground), *dar roi-e-bahr* (on the sea), *dar zer-e-bahr* (under the sea) had filled the cultural and physical landscape of Europe with a certain *fa'aliyat* (action), *soorat* (speed), *harakat* (movement) and most importantly: *rooshanî*: light!³⁰²

To Read

That light and knowledge are for Tarzi the same thing. In Islam, he continues, knowledge is light (*noor*), and it not only illuminates everything around us but enables categorical distinctions: relation and connectivity, cause and effect, subject and object, knowing and acting.³⁰³ To act in the world, or to labor, is also to be able to see. It is as much an optic as an ethic, as much a gaze as an act of reason. To know is to be able to discern *for the sake of* reason, that singular “sunlight cast on the eyes”.³⁰⁴ Seeing clearly, he continues, is *rahbar-e-amal* (the

³⁰² Tarzi discusses these infrastructural and technological achievements in an article entitled “Beh intihâ-bodan-e ilm,” or “On the limitless nature of knowledge” in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 169. See also: “*Ilm chîst?*” “What is knowledge?” (1977, 164) and “*Ayâ beh rastî Islamiyat doshman ilm wa man'eh taraqî wa madanyat ast?*” (1977, 210).

³⁰³ “*Ilm chîst?*” “What is knowledge?” in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 164.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*,

overlord of action), and something like *sarmâye* (capital), without which increase is impossible.³⁰⁵ And without reason, duty cannot be realized *ba hich soorat* (under any condition). For Tarzi, actions must necessarily enable *munfa'ât* (beneficence), thus merging the duties of *iman* (faith) with those of sociality and nation-building, understood in the twin idioms of capital and light, proliferation and illumination. But his discourse on both practical and esoteric knowledge is also a claim on the status of language, and especially on literacy which conveys the duties of reason to the world, beginning with the heterogeneity of divine command.³⁰⁶

The first word is “Read!” This command, revealed to Mohammad while he was in the cave of Hira: *Iqra! Ba ism-e rabbika alladhi khalaqa*, or “Read! In the name of your lord and cherisher who createth,” is for Tarzi a profound distillation of the inherent heterogeneity of divine command. Prophet Mohammad’s well-known illiteracy (which he bemoaned when responding to the archangel Gabriel), forges out of the act of literal reading, and in this singular instance its impossibility, a privileging of *khouandand-e-tabî’i*, or spiritual reading. This natural reading of signs, rather than just words, brings the unknown to light through a sublime *ta’lim e rohani* (spiritual study) which is the duty and pleasure of prophets, and which teaches us to read everything around us. But for everyone else, reading must necessarily begin as a literal act so that the duty of bequeathing collective knowledge to posterity (which Tarzî claims is transmitted primarily through the written word) responds to the higher duty of reading as an act of faith,

³⁰⁵ “*Ilm chîst?*” “What is knowledge?” in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 165.

³⁰⁶ “*Niwishtan wa khouandan*” (Reading and Writing) in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 166.

despite oneself and in order to know what one does not, and to give the gift of reason to those who come later.

Ignorance, for example of the kind that leaves one uninspired by the divisions within the ocean, or to the strata and forms of life in the ground, or the value of possibility (*qadr-e-imkan*), is also illiteracy, and more importantly renders futile: “looking upon sky and ground,” for everywhere, “between the underground and surface,” are signs to be read, and then written about.

One such sign and gift is iron, special enough to be sent from the heavens to earth and the basis of modern industry and warfare. Tarzī discusses iron (*âhan*) as a quilting point between the fruits of Islamic reasoning and the splendors of modernity, turning ironwork into proof of fideism as much as he considers it central to those great civilizational achievements: *telegrafha*, *telefunha*, *tram railha*, *tufangha* (guns), *pul-ha-e ahan jaseema* (suspension bridges), etc. “We have sent iron, in which there lies great might (in matters of war) and uses for mankind.”³⁰⁷ Tarzī considers this Quranic verse, which proclaims iron's extraterrestrial origin and its force, as an example of a sign (*'ibar*) that can only be understood through reason, and the forms of knowledge it enables (he cites geography, history, and chemistry among others). But more, once cognized, its strengths which have “overtaken the world with iron fortifications, warships, bullets, cannons, needles, towers like *borj-e-eiffel* (eiffel tower) etc.,” and other *ikhtirat-e-ajeeb'eh* (wondrous inventions) that enable *qatl* (killing) become universally available, enabling Muslims to arm themselves with the armaments of Europe and to turn “iron into wax in our

³⁰⁷ “*Musilmanan kodam ilm ra beyamuzand?*” (“Which science should Muslims Learn?”) in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 183.

hands.”³⁰⁸ Reason and knowledge, Tarzī emphasizes is that which bequeaths “iron clad fortifications on borders, to neutralize the rounds of bullets unleashed by “our enemies,” to enable railway lines to transport our troops, and telegraph lines to convey our enemy's movements...a kind of reason that will strengthen and protect Islam.”

Thus while *Siraj al Akbhar* and Tarzī's essays witness the flush and heyday of modernism it also became the site of cautious refrain, containing its own agenda for subversion. For example, Tarzī also published manuals that provide detailed instructions for the successful destruction of railway lines.³⁰⁹ He understands technology as a series of material and ideological entanglements, and literature, rather than minerals, as a universally available groundwork for understanding the modern era. In a similar spirit, he problematizes the art of storytelling and orality by distinguishing its imaginative failure in comparison to the novel (*navul*) and national poetry (*shir-i-milli*). Tarzī maintains that stories lack discursive interruption because of the narrative voice of the story teller who controls sequence and moves arbitrarily, not sequentially

³⁰⁸ Tarzī cites the following Quranic verse on arms in order to emphasize the exigent nature of acquiring the technologies of Europe: "Arm yourselves with the armaments of your enemies," in "*Musulmanan kodam ilm ra beyamuzand?*" ("Which science should Muslims Learn?") in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 183.

³⁰⁹ These manuals were published before the construction of the actual lines and in anticipation of their inevitable destruction, illustrating his fear of economic capitulation and foreign intervention: "The Afghans, he said, valuing freedom more than material well-being, could simply destroy the rail lines, if their country were subject to interventionism. This was no light threat on his part; he went so far as to publish a manual for the Afghan army on the effective destruction of rail lines. Because of a deep-seated fear of capitulations and foreign intervention, Tarzi and some of his associates were unrealistic in suggesting that plans of modernization such as railway construction could be achieved without sorely needed foreign capital. Some of their proposals for indigenous financing of new programs were equally unrealistic." These included nationwide mandatory savings and contributing the skins of all animals sacrificed for religious purposes , a million rupees was estimated to accrue. See: Barfield, Thomas J. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 174-175.

between tense and narrative space. The controlled sequence of linearity and grammatical tense displaces the purview of affective wonder and uncontrolled narration.

Unlike Walter Benjamin, for whom storytelling enables collective remembrance through self-forgetting and the fashioning of the “raw material of experience,”³¹⁰ for Tarzī it is the bared art of “low” culture. Stories draw in content not from changes in social structure or consciousnesses but from the fantastic and “grotesque” elements of a culture disproportionately invested with affect and vulnerable to the narrator's voice.³¹¹ Having a voice entails an arbitrary sequence that masks the socio-ideological consciousness of the narrator with the superficial play of simultaneity, “forming and transforming the sequence of events, not by developing a steady temporal *progression of cause and effect* (emphasis mine) but rather by constantly, and arbitrarily, moving between narrative spaces and tenses.”³¹² Under the auspices of an omniscient teller, stories are alienated from the material forces of production and therefore becomes the provenance of individual narrators, subject to their personal fancy.³¹³

³¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. First Schocken paperback edition. Schocken, 1968, 2007, pg. 108.

³¹¹ Ahmadi, Wali. *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan*. Routledge Press, 2008, pg. 55.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ For Tarzī there is a crucial relationship between orality, storytelling and national stagnation. But for Walter Benjamin there are two crucial relationships between storytelling and death. The authority of the storyteller is sanctioned by his or her death (“Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back,”) but the art of storytelling, which is experiential “is continuing to fall into bottomlessness,” as World War One forged a new relationship between the profundity of experience and silence: “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?...For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than

By displacing the “winged fairies”³¹⁴ of traditional storytelling and the cumbersome poetry of traditional form with narrative fiction and a poetics of spontaneity, Tarzi hoped to communicate the exigencies of a modern world.³¹⁵ Tarzi extends this aesthetic prerogative to his nationalist ambitions and wrote “rough” poetry that attends to industrial underdevelopment rather than the quotidian tropes of “love” and “madness”. But discourse, like love and madness, is a moving target. Thus, his national poetry (*shir-i-milli*) was also natural poetry (*shir-i-tabī’ī*).³¹⁶ It sprang forth from language without the excessive mediation of form and metrics and its authenticity is illustrated by its capacity to convey the “necessities of the times” (*zarurat-i-zaman*), “acting as a wonderful reservoir for preserving national memory and history.”³¹⁷ This aesthetics of exigency and “national truth content,” as Ahmadi describes, were demonstrated in his *Mahmud-nāmah*, a collection of poetry filled, like his essays and articles, with rifles, coal, electricity, rails, telegraphs, and boycotts. Its technological and political coarseness was illustrative of national poetry’s didactic responsibility³¹⁸:

strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare...”(Benjamin, 2007, 84).

³¹⁴ Tarzī cites the story *Kuh-i-Qaf*, in which a prince is in love with a winged fairy, as an example of a classical work of “disproportionate nonsense” (Ahmadi, 2008, 55).

³¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 56.

³¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 50.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 51.

“Should writing about the wonders of wine, then, be considered more commendable than describing the 'extraordinary, miraculous,' invention of the telegraph? Should lauding the beauty of the beloved be more praiseworthy than acclaiming electricity--'this newly born child that has already conquered the rest of the world but has yet to shine its presence upon us?' Can a poet not rejoice in seeing how dark coal (*zughal-i-sang*) produces 'immaculate light' that transforms 'the darkness of night into daylight?' Do not railways--'one of the many wonders of our epoch'--look like 'life-giving veins' to a poet, emanating from the 'capital' (central station) like 'a heart that sends messengers to all directions' and generating 'comfort, riches, and fortune' for the nation as a whole?”³¹⁹

States of Wonder

*Chist? Chera?*³²⁰ What is it? Why? Concomitant with the idea of an Afghan nation-state, a reified culture--grounded in a national history and literary tradition-- emerged as the basis for modern subjectivity and socio-economic development. As an enchanted historical era the early twentieth century is unrivaled in inciting wonderment among Afghans, and especially the elite who introduced a profound set of questions about the nature of modernity and selfhood; also eliciting new interest in abstract and rough things: human nature, modernity, poetry, imperialism, geography, cars, roads, trains, telecommunication, the printing press, industrial workshops (*mashin-khana*), aviation and the marvel of photographic capture (*akasi*), which disseminated these changes like the winged fairies that had been cast off from traditional poetry.

³¹⁹ Ibid. pg. 52.

³²⁰ “*Chist? Chera?*” (“*What is it? Why?*”) is the title of one of Tarzi's articles on the nature of philosophy in *Siraj-al-Akhbar* cited in Schinasi, 1979, pg. 153.



To this end, *Siraj-al-Akhbar* apostrophizes the nation as a source of existential conflict and linguistic disarray, beholden to the force of traditional poetry and fantastical predilections.³²¹ More than anything, Tarzī sought to understand and express the nature of contemporaneity and *Siraj al-Akhbar* was a medium for the transmission of a modernist sensibility and also the voice of a common national identity, as Tarzī put it: “devoted solely to the awakening and enlightening of the Afghan nation” and to “expose and defame enemies.”³²² Culture, as much as it was a cultivating of ethical capacities characterized by “disinterested reflection and universally valid judgments,” is also a particular response to linguistic and material circumstance.

³²¹ Photo One: A royal party, with King Amanullah in the middle wearing black top hat. Mahmud Tarzi is to his right. Accessed online: http://contentdm.williams.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/wamp&CISOPTR=4315&CISOBOX=1&REC=9

Photo Two: A group of King Habibullah’s consorts. Accessed online: http://contentdm.williams.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/wamp&CISOPTR=1914&CISOBOX=1&REC=5

³²² Ahmadi, Wali. *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan*. Routledge Press, 2008, pg. 41.

The vision and project of Afghan modernism had already reduced linguistic plurality (and especially a rich oral tradition of poetic and epic narration) into a binary between literacy and illiteracy. The task of enhanced media technologies (telegraphy, telephony and eventually radio and cinema) was to suture the gap between the Afghan State and its largely illiterate population. As the Afghan government sought to also enhance its relationships with European states and to cement the authority of the central government in the Afghan countryside, communication technology abetted the belief that media could effect immediacy and access, a connective power that might enable political suasion during the ongoing consolidation of the Afghan State. In that context, technological interruption (the breakdown of Afghan wireless stations and later the prohibition on cinema screenings) became indissoluble from technological excess (the unconfined voices of radio broadcasts and cinema, and also the dangerous heterogeneity of telegraphic transmissions that came not only from London, but also from Rome, Berlin and Tokyo during World War Two). Through a complex process of technological disavowal and capture, a recursive British discourse retrojected orality and illiteracy as the prior that technology could help mitigate. The abiding fantasy that communication technology could breach the gap, between literate and illiterate cultures and between political ideologies, became the imagined site of both linguistic failure and promise.

During this time, Tarzī wrote about the importance of mass education and natural poetry (*shir i tabi'i*) but also about Pashtu as the language of the frontier, spoken at the outer edge of national belonging, with marginal aesthetic value. He describes Pashto as a: “language of warriors and the military arts, and a language restricted to a much smaller territory,”³²³ allowing

³²³ Schinasi, 1979, pg. 97.

him to aggrandize Persian as the sole language of literacy (of books, scribes, and bureaucracy). Tarzī understood Pashtu as the language of Afghanistan's historical inhabitants but Persian as the language of the state, arguing that the Afghan State only had the capacity to impose a single language of bureaucratic state-craft on its multi-lingual and largely illiterate population, and encouraged the government to raise literacy levels in Persian rather than in several languages.³²⁴ Similarly, poetry had to forsake excessive structure in order to be suited to nationalist goals, shedding the stricture of form and even becoming technological in content, full of telegraphs and trains, the “life-giving veins” of the twentieth century. Thus, state-sponsored education and literacy efforts were premised on both the belief that literacy could enable political suasion and on an understanding that bi-lingual literacy would undermine state sovereignty, re-casting linguistic diversity as a destabilizing political force.

If in post-industrial contexts the nation becomes the site of imagined vectors of communitarian identity, anchored by infrastructure or the simultaneity of rituals enabled by new forms of media and print technology³²⁵; in Afghanistan this task fell within the purview of aesthetic form and linguistic prerogative. It was Persian *shir-i-tabi'i* (natural poetry) that would “awaken” the nation, emanating from material realities just as state-sponsored literacy became the site of linguistic revivalism, reflecting what Tarzī believes to be a majoritarian language, and more: “a means of communication between the various ethnic groups in the capital and in the

³²⁴ Ibid. pg. 47.

³²⁵ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso Press, 1991.

cities, and even beyond the Afghan borders.”³²⁶ In his memoir *Reminiscences: a Short History of an Era*, Tarzī reflects on the regality of Persian poetry:

“Father had an attractive and rich library full of beautiful hand-written books, decorated in gold, some old, some new. He would employ & supervise talented scribes to copy from original books. I was allowed to browse & focused mainly on the classics such as Jami’s “Yusef & Zoleikha” and Ferdowsi’s “History of Kings.”³²⁷

³²⁶ Schinasi, 1979, pg. 97.

The notion of a lingua franca is crucial not only a nationalist imperative, such as Tarzī’s, which is predicated on the possibility of enhanced international contact, but also in imperial contexts of Christian conversion and Dutch colonialism. For Rafael the translation of Christian doctrine (especially words like *Dios*, *Espíritu Santo*, and *Jesucristo*) changed the local language and were incorporated in Spanish. The necessity of using native vernacular, however, also circumscribed the universalizing impulses of Christian colonial rule (1993, 20-21). Thus, Rafael contends, that through translation between Tagalog and Spanish the “limits and possibilities of conversion” became powerful factors in the encounters between two sets of linguistic meaning and between colonizer and colonized. See: See Rafael, Vicente. *Contracting Colonialism Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

James Siegel argues that in colonial Indonesia the fear of being overheard was also the function of inhabiting the pronoun “I” in the lingua franca, Melayu. Lingua francas are fluid. They are the language of exchange and substitutability neither bound to a particular culture nor its national history. But they contain a political force: anybody can take on its pronouns. In the case of Melayu, this ambiguity made it possible to both bind Indonesians to colonial hierarchies and introduce the possibility of surpassing them, also making it possible for the Dutch to send unintended messages, to risk being caught in the act of speaking. See: Siegel, James. *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1997. As we read, in the context of Afghanistan, where the British neither secured a colony for themselves nor relinquished that abiding dream, the absence of a shared language made technologies of communication the closest thing to the exchange of untranslated speech, a kind of alternative and upgraded lingua franca made foreign to both sets of users by its shared status as technology in two different cultural terrains, united by the persistence of imperial dreams.

³²⁷ Tarzī, Mahmud. *Reminiscences a Short History of an Era (1869-1881)*. Edited by Wahid Tarzi. Occasional Paper #36. The Afghanistan Forum East Hampton, New York, 1998, pg. 3.

Much later, at the palace of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, Tarzi and his father are suspected of treason and accused of penning a letter on behalf of the king's archenemy, Ghazi Ayub Khan:

"The Amir asked my father to sit in front of him. Showing him a piece of paper (no doubt favoring Ayub), he asked, "Is this your writing?"

Father read the paper and replied, "No, it is not mine!"

"How can you deny it? Who else writes this way?"

"I don't know who else writes this way but I do know that it is not mine. And that's it!"

At this point, a khan from Kohistan (mountainous lands) took out of his pocket a letter father had sent him a few days ago. "Let's see if these two are similar." A couple of other friends also presented recent letters from my father. I, too, had a couple of poems written by him which I produced for all to see. They were not the same.

The Amir was the first to speak. "Look here! These writings do not resemble each other. Evidently he can write any way he wants!"

"This is an excuse," said my father, "actually you have certain reforms in mind which you have discussed with me in the past. Now, in implementing them, you are starting with me.

"I have nothing in mind other than to have you go on the pilgrimage to Mecca."

"This is a great kindness & favor which you bestow upon me." The interrogation came to an end. The Amir ordered his chamberlain, Bai Mohammad, to keep us in custody until our banishment. From that moment on our endless good fortune changed to dire adversity."³²⁸

Tarzi and his father were imprisoned after the discovery of the letter, ushered away from the king by "an ugly, clumsy, illiterate, hangman-looking" Uzbek chamberlain.³²⁹ The literal and linguistic ground became the site of heated political contestation, as families deemed

³²⁸ Ibid., pg. 25.

³²⁹ Ibid.

disloyal to the Afghan monarch were banished from the nation, cast off the land as the written word became the litmus test of political loyalty or subversion. Later, during the height of modernist effort and Pan- Islamist aspiration these older debates on language and ethnicity, and the role of technology assumes new epistemic significance, casting a long shadow over the aspirations of the Afghan nationalists when a twin discourse on the relationship between literacy and nationalism, and between cultural awakening and aesthetic form, would become important to how any kind of distance was conceptualized.

Just as the Pashto speaking populations were imagined at the illiterate ends of the nation, Tarzī also cast Pashto to the margins of his publication. He admitted to knowing nothing about Pashto literature and *Siraj al Akhbar* published its first Pashto poetry three years after being established, those poems constituting among the first to ever be published for the Afghan public.³³⁰ Classical Persian poetry (*shir-i-sani'i*) discloses an excessive gap between form and content, and the effort to suture that gap between the content of poetry and the socio-political realities of the times, was also echoed by Tarzī's attempts to bring written and spoken Persian closer together. Tarzī encourages the use of colloquial words in written texts, lest the disjuncture between literacy and orality become a hindrance to philosophical and scientific achievement.³³¹

The pages of *Siraj al Akhbar* evince a sense of wonderment, divulging the machinations and marvels of modernity, from the history of science, to mineralogy to the translation of

³³⁰ Schinasi, 1979, pg. 101.

³³¹ Ibid., pg. 157.

European authors, a veritable “eulogy on the civilization of progress,” as Schinasi describes.³³² But they did more than this. *Siraj al Akbhar* disseminated a discourse on the nature of philosophical and historical reflection, emphasizing the importance of seeking causal forces and concealed grounds, or motives. Aside from examining the content (*mawzu*) of a subject matter, attention should be paid to its form and logic, and also the difference between mere repetition and intensification.³³³ In the broader philosophical and cultural imaginary, especially as it was purveyed by *Siraj al Akbhar*, difference was increasingly cathected onto the notion of distance (a gap between poetic form and content, geographically isolated communities, linguistic difference, especially Persian and Pashto). And, in the aftermath of World War One, the notion of distance increasingly pertained to a modern elsewhere, and harbored the possibility of intensified violence. Afghans were not modern, and better for it.

At first, like agriculture and media communication (especially the telegraph and telephone) a connective power was earnestly imagined for trains, endowing them with heightened appeal and an uncanny aura: they were the purveyors of difference, of new forms of dialogue, and would secure Afghanistan’s position in a modern world of connective exchange. But this synergistic connectivity, aggrandized both in the imperial imagination and for the Afghan State, also belongs to the discourse on linguistic centralization and the promulgation of *only* Persian as the language of state-sponsored literacy. Thus, these two linguistic and infrastructural series converge on the surface of the literal and figurative ground; a concordance

³³² Ibid., pg. 154.

³³³ For example, Schinasi discusses Tarzī’s differentiation between traditional Islamic historiography such as the 13th century *Ajâyeḅ-e-makhlūqat* (The Marvels of Creation) which is “devoid of historic value” and the necessity for “*hekmat-e-ta’rikhiya*” (“a philosophy of history”), see pages 154-155.

that turns the fantasy of synergy into an affirmation of difference as the effect of distance, linguistic *and* geographic.

The specter of civilized barbarism was the source of Tarzī's profound ambivalence, not as an existential crisis but as an event that enables him to reflect on the purpose of history. But Tarzi's discourse is also a reflection on a mode of cultural and historical reproduction. Where Freud saw the trauma of disillusionment, Tarzī saw an *illusion*, allowing him to reflect on how historical events disclose the logic of intensification. The horrors of that war closed the chasm between the nature of the event and the inner meaning of history, enabling him to discern the logic of causality that exceeds mere repetition. On the ground, modernist ambitions became increasingly ambivalent, suspended somewhere between the predations of under-development and eventfulness, a receding horizon extending beyond the reaches of a modernism that could, at the same time, remain loyal to national and Pan-Islamic causes. As the war raged, and drew to a close, it also created the material conditions of possibility both for what would become state-led agricultural initiatives and the demise of the great Afghan railway dream. In this context, Tarzī betrays profound uncertainty about trains, the quintessential bearers of modern accidents and movement.

At an interview with the British Minister in Kabul in May of 1922, Tarzī admits that there is “grave anxiety” among members of the Afghan government about the subject of a railway,³³⁴ despite earlier suggestions that some Afghan officials were “mad” about railways

³³⁴ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. 1922. Copy of Telegram from his Britannic Majesty's Minister at Kabul to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, India Office. Secret Political Department. London.

(like Sardar Ghulam Muhammad--the Minister of Commerce). As early as 1920 British communiques suggest a disillusionment, and Tarzī is reported to have: “hinted darkly that..there was a very strong party in Afghanistan who have not yet reached this stage of commercial enlightenment and were bitterly opposed to any idea of a railway to the Afghan border.”³³⁵

In the wake of World War One, trains suddenly became more threatening. Rather than channeling a life-force like veins, slowly banking into view on the civilizational horizon, they could rapidly approach the Afghan border and penetrate her like “a knife to the vitals,” as Amir Abdur Rahman describes.³³⁶ That image is in keeping with the modernist outlook. For Tarzī and the “Young Afghans,” capitalist modernity was a paradox. Its force emerges from the relationship between events and their underlying logic: the former is the result of an intensification of violence inherent to capitalist reproduction. Capitalism thrives on and needs geographic extension, new sources of plunder where it goes under the auspices of modernization. It requires an extension of itself, the possibility of latitude. The coordinated boons of the railway, imagined earlier as entirely synergistic became insidious. Trains became moving bearers of menacing difference, potentially extending across the ideological and geographic ground as a source of exploitation. The Afghan overground, previously the site of botanical poverty and

³³⁵ North West Frontier: The Khyber Railway, Increases Of Allowances To Afridis.. 1920. Note from Sir Hamilton Grant, Chief Commissioner and Agent to Governor General in North West Frontier Province to Foreign Secretary to Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department in Simla. India Office Records Political Secrets. London.

³³⁶ The Amir’s refusal to allow telegraph or railway lines, that knife to the vitals, was also a refusal to exploit Afghanistan’s natural resources, which could not be transported: “When the tunnel was made thought the Chaman Range, in order to facilitate, if need be, the laying of rails to Kandahar, the Amir... was very angry at what he regarded as a violation of his territory. The Viceroy invited him to the opening ceremony but he wrote back asking whether it was the custom of the English people when they bored a hole in a man’s stomach to invite him to come and see the opening made?” (Gregorian, 1969, 154).

peril, even to the crops that *did* manage to grow on it, became the scene for protracted contestation and anticipation: the modern was a specter on the horizon--an impending source of doom, just as it was in Europe: at one time “the fiancée of the world.”³³⁷

Gauge Unbroken

In the aftermath of the third Anglo-Afghan war (after a peace treaty had been signed) the intent to construct the Khyber Railway was announced on the morning of July 14, 1920, but not yet to the Afridi tribesmen who inhabited the borderlands between Afghanistan and British India, and who would be immediately impacted by rails. The British government feared that the Afghan government would use those tribes, “stirring” them into revolt and an “Afridi war”. On August 12, 1920 the executive engineer, Mr. Fraser, wrote to Humphrys (the minister in Kabul) that he had started surveying the land, laying a *daghbhel* (a guiding mark on the ground) and even blasting a footpath. Not wanting to be conspicuous in his reconfiguration of the landscape, Frasier engaged in a series of ocular games and signs.³³⁸ On account of Humphrey’s advice, Frasier’s work became “non-committal and unobtrusive,” consisting of things like road diversions, laying down water pipes and erecting huts for railway staff. For Humphrys: “In the eyes of the Afridi the railway is no longer a military necessary if peace has been made with

³³⁷ The Afghan railway question is as old as the Eastern Question, when Russian military plans for a Trans-Caspian railway extended into Herat and Kandahar. That ambition instigated the British government’s “forward” and “scientific frontier” policies amidst dramatic fears of a Russian attack on India, encouraging counter-railway efforts in the Khyber Pass and eventually to Kandahar, in order to move closer to “the earthen vessel between two iron ones.” Col. C.E. Stewart submitted one such plan to link the Indian railway to the Russian lines in Central Asia via the city of Herat, arguing that Baluchistan “certainly as savage as any part of Afghanistan over which this railway would run,...is now perfectly safe.”(cited in Gregorian, 1969, 152).

³³⁸ North West Frontier: The Khyber Railway, Increases of Allowances To Afridis, August 12, 1920. Note from Major Humphreys. India Office Records Political Secrets. London.

Afghanistan. It is a scheme designed to curtail his freedom, impoverish his country, and undermine his political importance, and finally to set the seal on the permanent military occupation of his cherished highway.”

Frasier’s new furrows on the ground, the “unostentatious preliminaries,” opened a space of deniability while also marking the point of a double expectation: the potential laying of lines, and the simultaneous loss of highway tolls and plunder. The issue, first control over revenue (profits from railway trade vs. highway tolls) and later a debate over narrow or broad gauge lines (broad gauges would connect to the Indian railway)³³⁹ was not a discourse on technological efficiency but a displacement of money accrued through highway tolls with capital accumulated through trade.³⁴⁰ That displacement was held in abeyance through a series of physical signs, produced as counterfeits, on the actual ground: “Sir Roose Keppel believes that the negotiations with the Afridis about the Khyber railway have not begun and that the Afridi think that the work in progress is merely another road; consequently, the fact that they are quiet is delusive, and that when the actual laying of rails begins there will be trouble.”³⁴¹ There were also problems pertaining to the terrain itself:

“Through the gradient is for the most part easy, the engineering problems connected with the railway penetration of his historic defile are by no means inconsiderable, and the 26 miles will cost some Rs. 175 lakhs to construct. The Khyber Mountains form the last spurs of the Safed Koh, as that mighty range sinks down into the valley of the Kabul

³³⁹ North West Frontier: The Khyber Railway, Increases Of Allowances To Afridis..August 12, 1920. Priority telegram from General Officer Commanding NWF, Peshawar to the War Section, Simla. India Office Records Political Secrets. London.

³⁴⁰ At the same time, Amir Amanullah feared a loss of control over the frontier lands and revenue, and threatened to burn down the houses of anyone laboring on the line.

³⁴¹ North West Frontier: The Khyber Railway, Increases of Allowances To Afridis, October, 5, 1921. Letter from India Office Whitehall SWI. India Office Records Political Secrets. London.

River. The elevation of the connecting ridge is 3,400 feet., but rises to 6,800 ft... On either side of it are the sources of two small streams, one flowing north-west to the Kabul river, the other south-east towards Jamrud. The beds of these streams form the Khyber defile, covered with a slate rock. The pass is therefore subject to sudden floods, especially in July, August, December and January.”³⁴²

The ambivalence of the project at hand entailed “unostentatious” signs, both of something to come and already fulfilled. The ground signified a *fait accompli* (only more roads were being built) and an imminent event of singular importance (the extension of the rail lines into Afghanistan, a “knife to the vitals”), a duality that invited the local population to surveil the topology of surface traces as evidence of the Afghan state’s capacities.

Imaginary Internal

But appearances cannot be maintained forever. By 1921, work on the railway was in “full swing,” and embankments and tunneling enabled the Afridis to: “recognize that new work is a railway.”³⁴³ Becoming more vehement, members of the Afghan elite (ranging from Tarzī to journalists) bemoaned the construction of the railway as a “great anxiety,”³⁴⁴ and “contrary to the good intentions of both governments for the strengthening of the bonds of future friendship.”³⁴⁵

The Afghan Delegation in London claimed that earlier statements, which were in fact

³⁴² North West Frontier: The Khyber Railway, Increases of Allowances to Afridis, May 1921. Times Engineering Supplement: “The Khyber Pass Railway: Through the Historic Gateway.” India Office Records Political Secrets. London.

³⁴³ North West Frontier: The Khyber Railway, Increases of Allowances to Afridis, May 16, 1921. Copy of Telegram from Viceroy Foreign and Political Department to Secretary of State for India in Simla. India Office Records Political Secrets. London.

³⁴⁴ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. May 20, 1922. Copy of Telegram from his Britannic Majesty’s Minister at Kabul to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, India office in Simla. India Office Records Secret Political Department. London.

³⁴⁵ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. December 11, 1922. Letter from Afghan Legation. India Office Records Secret Political Department. London.

“complaints” had been taken too literally by the British government as assurances of good will.

³⁴⁶ British finances were questioned by the Afghan minister in London (1922) as already “under manifold pressure,” unable to take on the “exuberant expenses” the railway would demand.³⁴⁷ In 1926, an article in the Afghan newspaper *Tuli-i-Afghan* likened the railway to a “pistol pointed at the head of Afghanistan.”³⁴⁸ “Long discussions”³⁴⁹ were held in Kabul, concessions were seen as the “extinction of the independence of these tribes,”³⁵⁰ who were being bombarded by the British military after having been deprived of arms. The technological details of the plan became the markers of perfidy: an unbroken gauge (which would be more profitable for British India) between the two railways: “would mark down the railway as essentially Indian...stimulating counter-activities by Russia and fanatical nationalism.” Confusions arose over referents, and the Afghan concerns were dismissed as mistaking the “imaginary internal railway” of Afghanistan for the extension of the Indian Railway:

³⁴⁶ Ibid. This misunderstanding refers to two letters, sent by the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1899 and Amir Habibullah in 1905, in which they stated “You can of course do what you like within your own territory (British India).” This statement was, rather than an expression of approval for the Khyber Railway: “a sort of complaint and displeasure, and does not imply any approval.” The Afghan government conceded that the British Government had a right do what it pleased in India, but that: “such an attitude is naturally against the rights of neighbors and makes present relations between the two Governments rather doubtful.”

³⁴⁷ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. August 26, 1922. Letter from Afghan Legation in London. India Office Records Secret Political Department. London.

³⁴⁸ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. February 26, 1926 memorandum from Humphrys his Majesty’s Minister in Kabul to the Secretary to the Government of India in Foreign and Political Department, Delhi referencing article published in *Tuli-i-Afghan* (The Afghan Dawn) on January 30th, 1926. India Office Records. British Library. London.

³⁴⁹ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. August 26, 1922. Letter from Afghan Legation in London. India Office Records Secret Political Department. London.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

“I have not made any mention about the necessary connection of the Khyber Railway with the imaginary internal Afghan railway, but because the reference to this railway was made by the British Delegation exactly at the same time when the reference to the imaginary internal railway of Afghanistan was being made, it unavoidably produced this wrong impression on the part of the Afghan Delegation to think that these two different questions were being regarded interrelated; and now even the commercial significance of this railway has disappeared, which is a stronger reason to disprove its necessity.”³⁵¹

But it was not the imaginary internal railway that perplexed or deluded Afghans so much as it was the shocking eruption of violence in Europe, a violence now extending to Afghanistan and threatening a general uprising that would assume the form of a religious struggle:

“We are very much surprised and astonished at the civilization, breeding and humanity of these ‘claimants of humanity’ and these dastardly British who should not be relied upon in any thing because we always see them strewing the grains of fraud and spreading the snare of treachery... All bickerings that are the outcome of hypocrisy they regard as real sincerity and term fighting against the weak and the helpless as deeds of civilization and morality. Selfish and unjust encroachment, they think, are in accordance with the law of humanity and considering brutality and barbarity synonymous with strength and dignity sing their praises in meetings and in newspapers... Of course we have not forgotten that during the great war when German aeroplanes had disturbed the peace and comfort of the inhabitants of London and Paris, when men, women and children were crying with injustice and had taken their residence in under ground cells, caves and at last in rat holes, not only the territories of the treacherous British but the whole of the Allied world called this act of Germany “savage” and “barbarous” and denounced this more of the Germans.

....

The warriors of France and Britain at that time looked down upon such operations and called Germany coward and timid. Today we find that the unthinking Government of India is continuously sending her aeroplanes for perplexing, disturbing and torturing our Islamic Frontier brothers, the poor and helpless inhabitants of Waziristan and the Mahsud country in this extremely cold season... the enemy writes every in newspapers with pride that today heavy bombs (4 tons) were thrown on that village so that it has been altogether ruined, yesterday this village was bombarded.

....

³⁵¹ North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway. Letter in reply to Sir Henry Dobb’s letter of July 24, 1920. India Office Records Secret Political Department. London. (the initials at the end of the letter are not legible but likely those of a high ranking Afghan official).

We enquire from the British Government if this is the same breeding and civilization with which Germany was blamed and the Bolsheviks were reproached? Never never a free nation who is naturally desirous of leading a free life deserves to be bombarded...these evil operations which you have been continuously conducting on the Afghan frontiers ... it increases our anger and fury more and more so that we are afraid lest the effects of the cruelties you perpetuate on our frontier tribes should kindle the fire of revenge...should rise in tumult...*should assume of the form of a religious struggle and a national war*" (emphasis mine).³⁵²

Despite these sentiments, trains were aggrandized by British officials as “fostering civilization in Afghanistan as perhaps nothing else could,”³⁵³ and became the purveyors of profit and accumulation, imagined to run as freely as capital itself. The British Railway Department predicted increased profits, trebling in volume with some 90 lakhs waiting on the horizon like a passenger at a station.³⁵⁴ From 1924-1925 total imports from Afghanistan to India were valued at Rs. 8,40,404 and Rs. 2,05,876, figures that could “treble” with the establishment of railways: “with a corresponding increase in their purchasing power for exports from India to Afghanistan.”³⁵⁵ Charts were drawn up summarizing the anticipated economic gains of the project, and especially the importance of wool, cotton, sugar and fruits: “Assuming that the principal commodities double in volume, the net railway earnings would increase by 4 lakhs while the total increase in value of imports would be 80 lakhs and in export 65 lakhs.”³⁵⁶ Any

³⁵² An article from “*Ittihad-i-Mashriqi*” (Unity of the East) dated January 24, 1923 issue #91 cited in North West Frontier Afghanistan and Khyber Railway file. India Office Records. London.

³⁵³ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. October 7, 1926 Letter from Government of India Foreign and Political Department to his Majesty’s Secretary of State for India. India Office Records. London.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., enclosure #1.

³⁵⁵ Ibid. Aside from fruit, raw wool was considered the next most important commodity, imports of which increased from 56,646 maunds in 1922-1923 to 91,476 maunds in 1924-1925 with Rs 94, 637 earned in freight, a figure expected to increase by up to 50 percent.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

available information regarding internal conditions in Afghanistan which may have a bearing on these assumptions would be useful as a test.” Just as internal conditions and “fanatical nationalism” would have a bearing on the accumulation of capital, so too did the ground itself delineate a fresh challenge to a unitary broad gauge.

“It might be considered that even a narrow gauge line would provide better transport and a greater stimulus to trade than the present means of transport by pack animals. A narrow gauge line, however, of such a length as 76 miles is uneconomical, as regards, working expenses compared with a broad gauge railway once the traffic begins... with a different gauge the Kandahar-Chaman line would have to have its own locomotives and rolling stock and its own repair facilities... further a break of gauge would accentuate difficulties in regard to through booking. Through booking from a station in India to a station in Afghanistan would only be permitted by Indian railways if they were satisfied that the arrangements made for care and custody and safe transit beyond the frontier were the same standard as those on Indian railways... these risks are much increased by a break of gauge and intensified where the break of gauge coincides with the change from British to Afghan territory.”³⁵⁷

Commercial and physical grounds became more important than ever. And the terrain became an indicator of profit: “In the North the Hindu Kush barrier is likely permanently to prevent railway construction on commercial grounds. In the South the plain country, with its fertile areas and few obstacles, offers an obvious alignment for linking India with Asia with Europe via North Persia.”³⁵⁸ As many as twenty trains were imagined per day, surging across the frontier in a dazzling bolt of civilizational progress. Rival German engineering schemes would be outwitted. Two percent of sea borne trade between Europe and India would be captured. Afghan rivers would be bridged. Hydroelectric power would be seized. Kandahar would become a “railway center” (with workshops and accommodations). Feeder and subsidiary lines, as much

³⁵⁷ Ibid., enclosure #1. Kandahar was imagined as the railway center in Afghanistan, with workshops, accommodation and a single line to Herat, which would then connect to Persia.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., enclosure #2.

as the main arteries, would become appurtenant to this marvelous web, each of its lines channeling goods and “rolling stock,” unhampered by the four thousand miles of distance between India and Europe on one amazing and unbroken gauge:

“Generally with regard to these extensions practical working would be enormously facilitated by having no break in gauge. There would then be no physical obstacles to Indian rolling stock running over these lines with consequent benefits both to through passengers and through goods. Whether such interchange would in fact be possible depends largely on the arrangement made for working and administration of the Afghan lines, the general conditions as regards security and safety in transit and the extent to which those responsible for administration would undertake the recognized obligation of a railway such as they are known and understood in India. But a break of gauge would rule out all possibility of such interchange and deprive Afghanistan of the resulting advantages and facilities.”³⁵⁹

But in the end, the Afghan-Khyber and “imaginary internal railway,” persisted not as material realities (serious plans came to an end with the outbreak of World War One), but as a new way of conceiving the ground as a site of anticipated events, and the site on which ideological differences and alternative modernities would be expressed. A technological reality elsewhere (in Europe and India), and a political fantasy and economic wish in Afghanistan, trains moved in two series— simultaneously toward a modernist future, and gesturing towards a disenchanted past, as the Afghan minister describes: “and now even the commercial significance of this railway has disappeared, which is a stronger reason to disprove its necessity.” Capitalist modernity entailed a peculiar fate, like the kind of horror that the Afghan nationalists had witnessed in Europe, a reversible continuity that destroyed as much as it engendered, both there and elsewhere:

“We Afghans are unmoved by the slaughter, the losses, the untold sufferings, the wholesale destruction... The losses of Europe are the gains of Asia. Each killed European is a killed potential enemy. We hate the Europeans because we consider him

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

an intolerable barbarian, who bullies where his wheedling is unsuccessful. We hate him because, according to us, he is tortuous and cannot speak the truth; because he prates about his newfound hygiene...we despise him as a hypocrite who ships whiskey, rifles, diseases, and missionaries in the same mixed cargoes. We dislike him because he is a recent parvenue. We are convinced that in spite of his present leadership in mundane affairs, he is our inferior physically, morally and mentally...We are glad of this war. Whatever the outcome, it will weaken Europe in treasure and blood. It will kill the flower of their fighting men. It will reduce their birth rate. Europe will not get over the effects of this conflict in fifty years...The Europeans have taught us with the sword. Presently we shall teach them with the sword. And if the sword be *simitar*, *yataghan*, *kurkree*, or *kris*³⁶⁰, it will not dull the sharpness nor weaken the swish of steel.”³⁶¹

The *zameen* (ground) that was to bring “civilization in Afghanistan as perhaps nothing else could” became the site of a more uncanny anticipation. In the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War and World War One (the former established for the Afghan modernists the precedent of Asiatic dominance and the latter illustrated the decline of European civilization), Afghan discourse on the nature of capitalist modernity transitioned from enamor to repulsion, and from wonderment to a dual epistemic concern both with the nature of modernity (*chist? chera?* as Tarzī implores), and futurity. To this end, Tarzī emphasized the self-interest behind rival factions, asserting that in Europe: “countries which acted out of self-interest and united for mutual security inevitably fed the germs of their own destruction”³⁶². He likened Europe to a butterfly breaking through its cocoon, initiating its own demise.³⁶³ Once “the fiancée of the world,” it was now a *faramush-khana* (“house of oblivion,”) as cramped as a “silkworm’s

³⁶⁰ These are different types of swords.

³⁶¹ *Harpers Weekly* Dec 11, 1915 article by Amir Habibullah’s nephew, Sheikh Ahmed Abdullah cited in Gregorian, 1969, 216.

³⁶² *Siraj al Akhbar* I, 19 pg. 10-12 “On the Necessity of a World War” cited in Schinasi, 1979, 164.

³⁶³ *Siraj al Akhbar* I, 21 pg. 3-4 and II, 16 pg. 4 cited in Schinasi, 1979, 165.

cocoon” and forced to launch “themselves outside their frontiers in order to conquer distant regions.”³⁶⁴

Just as Asia and Africa were thrown “into a confusion of fire and smoke” so too were they dependent on Europe for all their material needs, ranging from “iron pillars” to “sewing thread.”³⁶⁵ Modernity was a bitter struggle, and the Great War its inevitable conflagration. For Tarzi: “World War was its necessary and inevitable outcome: the cupidity of men and nations to derive benefit from everything and everybody in order to dominate and survive, is a source of rivalry, nevertheless it engenders alliances; but naturally these alliances prove factitious and provoke discord which in turn leads to conflict and to conflagration. The horror of the blows which are dealt is in proportion to the strength of the opposing forces and the weapons used. So-called civilization becomes barbaric, the weak are trampled underfoot and wiped off the face of the earth.”³⁶⁶ He cites the use of techno-scientific inventions (bombs, artillery, battleships, etc) for self-destruction, abetting a state of “morbid hunger,”³⁶⁷ in Europe and a barbarism like that of the uncivilized (*wahshat*) world Europe constructed as a reflection in its own self-image.

In addition to introducing the idea of an Afghan Railway, the third Anglo-Afghan War (April 1919-August 1919) also initiated the first British aerial bombing campaigns of Afghan

³⁶⁴ Ibid. *Faramush-khana* was a term derived from a mistaken translation of Freemason to the Persian *Framasun*, which eventually became *Faramush* (oblivion).

³⁶⁵ *Siraj al Akhbar*, I, 19 pg. 10 cited in Schinasi, 1979, 165.

³⁶⁶ Schinasi, 1979, 166.

³⁶⁷ *Siraj al Akhbar*, II, 17 pg. 10 cited in Schinasi, 1979, pg. 166.

cities, including Kabul. Those salvos, understood in the Afghan imaginary as extensions of the barbarism Europe unleashed everywhere, emblazoned King Amanullah's call for *jihad* (holy war), culminating in numerous battles and the threat of a general uprising on the Indian frontier.³⁶⁸ As we've read, King Amanullah was emboldened by the acquisition of telegraphic technology, and engaged in pan-Islamist causes, supporting both Indian independence movements and the Central Asian *basmachi* resistance movement against the Soviet Union³⁶⁹. Amanullah's mother, Ulya Hazrat, personally wrote a letter to the Emir of Bukhara and encouraged Muslim solidarity between the peoples of Afghanistan and Bukhara. On the anniversary of his father's assassination, Amanullah declared Europe as "the shadow of a great and terrible calamity," a looming cloud that threatened the Islamic caliphate³⁷⁰. Alongside support of the *Basmachi* movement, he pledged material and moral assistance to the *Khilafat* movement and welcomed some 18,000 Indian Muslims who had fled British-India and sought refuge in Afghanistan.³⁷¹

Etc.

In his essay, "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions," Lenin admonishes Pan-Islamism as a phenomenon of "the more backward states and nations, in which feudal or

³⁶⁸ Afghanistan's unconditional sovereignty the emergence of a modern Afghan nation-state that was recognized as such in the international sphere (from which she sought both recognition and cultural exchange), invigorated Amanullah's Pan-Islamist efforts.

³⁶⁹ See Barfield, 2010, 182 and Gregorian, 1969, 234-235.

³⁷⁰ Gregorian, 1969, 235.

³⁷¹ Gregorian, 1969, 236.

patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate.” He characterizes it as a reactionary force that co-opts liberation movements against European and American imperialism: “with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, *etc.*, (emphasis mine).”³⁷² Lenin postulates the menace of Pan-Islamism alongside that of bourgeois nationalism and the necessity for a “federation,” understood as a “transitional form to the complete unity of the working people of the various nations.”³⁷³ But his disdain for Pan-Islamism (understood as generative of generic social types: “khans, landlords, mullahs *etc.*,”) is markedly absent in his support of Amanullah. Confident that Afghan Pan-Islamism would have repercussions primarily in India; Lenin hoped to buttress those sentiments as a synchronizing force in the greater revolt against British imperialism.³⁷⁴

Both Tarzī and Amanullah wrote letters to Lenin (“the Great President of the Russian Republic”), proclaiming Afghan sovereignty and a desire to establish friendly relations. In response, Lenin praised Amanullah for his heroism, even proclaiming Afghanistan as: “the only independent Muslim State in the world,” and ascribing as the fate of the Afghan people: “the great historic task of uniting about itself all enslaved Mohammedan peoples and leading them on

³⁷² Lenin, Vladimir. “Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions,” presented June 5, 1920 for the Second Congress of the Communist International, paragraph 11 in *Lenin on The National and Colonial Questions*. Foreign Language Press, Peking 1967 (re-printed by Red Star Publishers).

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 7 and 8.

³⁷⁴ For a discussion of the difference between Lenin and Trotsky’s discourses on Pan-Islamism, and Trotsky’s more overt support see: Morris, Rosalind. “Theses on the Questions of War: History, Media, Terror.” *Social Text* 20, no. 72. Duke University Press 2002, pg. 154-156.

the road to freedom and independence.”³⁷⁵ Like the Russian federation (R.S.F.S.R), Pan-Islamism could similarly merge disparate tensions into a greater international conflict:

“Welcome! In the name of the Soviet Authority and the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, I greet, in the person of Your Excellency, Afghanistan, and its first Embassy to the capital of the Russian Workers' and Peasants' Government. This historic fact proves that Russian Imperialism, striving to enslave and degrade small nationalities, has gone, never to return. In the name of my Government, I purposely greet you in the Turkish language in the Red Russian capital, in order to prove that the Workers and Peasants' Government treats all peoples and languages with sincere respect. Such a Government knows how to value sincere friendship. I welcome you.”

“Your small but heroic country is fighting for its emancipation from the age-long oppressors of the East--British Imperialism. We know that you need help and support, and that you expect this support from Soviet Russia. In the name of Revolutionary Council, and in the name of revolutionary organizations of the many million labouring Mahommedan masses of Soviet Russia, I declare to you that Soviet Russia will give you that assistance, as she herself is fighting against International Imperialism.”³⁷⁶

The Soviet discourse on transitional orders at the international and federal level is inextricable from a much longer fascination with its various Eastern frontier populations, in which they were characterized as a vast and alternative space of spiritual and cultural difference, variously cast as a romantic site of origin and frontier barbarism. The ambivalence with which they were regarded, as proof of Oriental heritage during the Silver Age of Russian literature and later as a threat to her civilizational efforts; also suffuses the fraught discourse on anti-colonialism and nationalism that was born of an earlier ambivalence: “The ‘final artistic

³⁷⁵ Cited in Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan; Politics of Reform and Modernization*, 1880-1946. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, pg. 232.

The *Times of London* reported on the Soviet-Union's/Russia intention to establish a radio station in Kabul, and to improve road and telegraphic connection between the two countries. It went so far as to speculate that a Soviet-trained Afghan air force would be established (1969, 233).

³⁷⁶ Speeches delivered by Narimanov, Director of the “Masulman Near East Department” and Sultan Galiev on the arrival of the Afghan Embassy at a rail station in Moscow quoted in *The Times*. October 15th, 1919. A184.2. India Office Records. London

flowering' of Tsarist Russia, the so-called Silver Age, was distinguished by a fascination with Asia and the Oriental roots of Russia... Here was a menacing vision of the East and the West that threatened Russia with annihilation. The rising military power of Japan, culminating in Russia's disastrous defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1907 would take this vision of 'Russia under threat' much further and in a different direction."³⁷⁷

Like Tarzī, for Lenin, World War One and the "whole post-war policy of Entente,"³⁷⁸ reveal the inevitable demise of nationalism, and the delusion that capitalism could ensure equality among nations. In this hastening merger of worker and anti-colonial struggle, Lenin imagined that the protective (and provisional) Russian federation would enable a "transitional form to the complete unity of the working people."³⁷⁹ Even more, it would serve as a defensive territorial expanse ("without the closest alliance between the Soviet republics it will be impossible to preserve their existence, surrounded as they are by the imperialist powers of the world")³⁸⁰ and a source of economic regeneration in the aftermath of imperial violence.

Lenin envisaged two transitional orders at the international and regional levels, empowered by the Russian Federation as a political unit and the efforts of Pan-Islamism as an

³⁷⁷ Chaudhry, Kiren. Draft Chapter: "Economy and Memory," in *Trauma and Memory in Istanbul*. Cornell University Press, forthcoming, pg. 31.

³⁷⁸ Lenin, Vladimir. "Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions," presented June 5, 1920 for the Second Congress of the Communist International, paragraph 3 in *Lenin on The National and Colonial Questions*. Foreign Language Press, Peking 1967 (re-printed by Red Star Publishers).

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, paragraph 8.

ideological supplement in those places where a certain “degree of development,”³⁸¹ was lacking. But in reality it was Afghanistan and the Central Asian states of Khiva and Bukhara (annexed by the Soviet Union in 1920 despite Amanullah’s ardent support of the *Basmachis*) that were literally surrounded by the imperial powers of the world, acknowledged as an “earthen vessel” between two iron ones, and revealed in the frenzied telegraphic exchange between Kabul and India a burgeoning danger, yet again:

30th May. Recognition by Bolshevik Government in Moscow of independence of Afghanistan and self-determination of natives of Central Asia. Everything points to alliance between pan-Islam and Bolsheviks.

27th July. Bolsheviks' anti-British propaganda; British tyranny in India, intolerance of Mohammedans, desecration of Holy Places of Islam. Bolsheviks, in alliance with all existing Mohammedan States and strong support of Germany and Austria, are out to procure freedom and justice for Islam and the final defeat of British, the oppressors of the world.

18th December. Bolsheviks have announced that *Panjdeh* area is to be given to Afghanistan in commemoration of second anniversary of revolution and as evidence of Afghan-Bolshevik alliance.

25th December. On the occasion of a solemn reception at Tashkent, the Afghan Extraordinary Ambassador made a speech to the effect that he had become familiar with the Communist programme and Lenin's ideas, and had a clear appreciation of the righteousness of Soviet policy as to the enfranchisement of the oppressed masses. The Afghan people had decided, in order to obtain this result, to march hand in hand with the Soviet power.³⁸²

Lenin also turns to iron, that extraterrestrial miracle, to lay bare the fraught contradictions of finance capitalism, illustrating how an ever-increasing concentration of production and capital enables contradictory forces to exist “over” and “alongside” each other, also projecting them onto territorial colonies writ large. Refusing a nationalist understanding of territorial expansion,

³⁸¹ Ibid., paragraph 6.

³⁸² These telegrams, along with numerous others communicating the same alarm were sent in 1919. A184.2 IOR.

Lenin theorizes not only the relationship between *finance* capital and colonial expansion but also the tensions (he argues that finance capital rather than lessening, intensifies the contradictions of a global economy) this precarious enlargement (as opposed to the notion of a smooth “ultra-imperialism”) entails. To exemplify his point, he turns to iron and the railways of the world; the quintessential bearers of modern accidents, and for him of unequal developments and imperial rivalry.³⁸³

World War One marked in Europe a state of political disintegration, amidst the “division and redivision of the world.” In this context, finance capital intensified disparate development on a global scale, of which the world’s railway networks offer a stunning example.³⁸⁴ The rapid development of railways in Europe’s colonies represents the product of concentrated capital in the “four or five biggest capitalist states,” representing 40,000,000,000 marks in capital: “with special guarantees of good return and with profitable orders for steel workers, *etc.*, *etc.*”(emphasis mine) If Pan-Islamism produced generic social types and masculinities that threatened to contaminate anti-colonial movements (“the khan, the landowner, the mullah, *etc.*,”) finance capital generated ad infinitum the conditions for, on one hand the disparate development of productive forces, and on other its own concentration.

³⁸³ Lenin, V.I. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. International Publishers, 1969.

³⁸⁴ Between 1890 and 1913 the total increase in railway kilometers (in thousands) in Europe was 122 while in the colonies it was 222. See chart: (1969, 97). Lenin explains: “...About 80 per cent of the total existing railways are concentrated in the hands of the five Great Powers. But the concentration of the *ownership* of these railways, of finance capital, is much greater still: French and English millionaires, for example, own an enormous amount of stocks and bonds in American, Russian and other railways.” Thus, despite Germany outproducing Great Britain in pig iron by 8,600,000 tons, Great Britain saw a 100,000 kilometer increase in railway lines (four times that of Germany.) (1969, 98).

This disjuncture and its reproduction lay at the heart of Afghan disenchantment with the ingress of foreign capital. It was the envisaged hallmark of European modernity, exported to its Asiatic and African peripheries in mixed cargoes and train cars, advancing on the horizon. The inquiry into the nature of capitalist modernity (*chist? chera?*) was simultaneously a lateral preoccupation with events and surfaces: “*Chī bodeim? Chī shodeim?*” “What Were We? What Have We Become?” to which Tarzī replies: “What we were, we *were!*”³⁸⁵ What would modernity bring? What next? How would it arrive? In this way, as an object of dual epistemic interest capitalist modernity persists in Afghan discourse in a twinned fashion: both as a specter of something to come and as having already exhausted itself elsewhere as the Amir’s nephew predicts: “Whatever the outcome, it will weaken Europe in treasure and blood... Europe will not get over the effects of this conflict in fifty years.” The notion of the modern stretched as horizontal imminence, proceeding in a reversible continuity of destruction and creativity, as civilized barbarism both elsewhere and on the Afghan ground.

In a series of letters between Lord Birkenhead and Lord Irwin, in which a projected 6,000 kilometer increase in British railways was discussed as well as increasing air force power in the North West Frontier Province; the forbidding and petrous ground again became an inexorable feature of how modernity might finally arrive. But if for Griffith and Aitchison the rocky and parched terrain inhibited the flourish of crops, delimiting the coveted “Afghan herbaria,” and the levels of agricultural production necessary for the emergence of a nation-state; in the early twentieth century the ground necessitated something far worse: gas warfare. The Afghan ground, with those inimitable features and now the *mise en scène* of Bolshevik expansionism was a place

³⁸⁵ “*Chi bodeim, chi shodeim*” in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 119.

where the forces of industrial warfare proved ineffective for climatic (the inside of tanks might get too hot) and geological reasons—the stony ground would make repairs too frequent and expensive:

As regards Tanks, my military advisers, after full consideration, are of opinion that the time has not yet arrived for adding Tank units to the Army in India. The reason they give are these:

The theaters of their employment in present circumstances would be:

In the confined valleys of the North, where artillery fire should be adequate protection against the number of enemy tanks which can be brought forward. In the south, where the enemy has to traverse long distances, implying great wastage and also inability to repair or replace; and provided our forces reach the Helmand first, as they ought to be able to, it should be possible to deal with anything which can be brought against us there. Other reasons which make for hesitation before undertaking the addition of Tank units to the Army in India are:

Climatic conditions are much against their use. No device has yet been found to reduce temperature inside the tank during hot weather below a point which is not most exhausting to the personnel.

The ground (rocks and gravel in most parts of the probable theater of operations) is very hard on the present type of tanks and would add very heavily to the cost of upkeep.

Before we go in for Tanks we must consider very carefully the extra cost in such matters as road upkeep, the strengthening of bridges, and kindred matters inseparable from their introduction.”³⁸⁶

The hysterical fantasy of Soviet permeation, overrunning and overtaking the Afghan ground, left only the air for British forces who would ideally fill it with gas, the offspring of the Haber-Bosch fertilization method, and by this time a tried and deadly weapon of mass destruction. Tarzi’s exhortation: “for what use is it to look upon the sky and ground if one cannot read signs,” became an uncanny premonition as the violence of World War One moved closer to his most cherished landscape. The horror of World War One, for the Afghan nationalists, lies in

³⁸⁶ Private letters from Lord Irwin to Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India. September 30, 1926. India Office Records.

the fact that the splendors of technological innovation (*telegrafha, telefonha, machinha*) and industrial military strength were used *even* on Europe's own civilians, ignobly forcing them into: "underground cells, caves and at last in rat holes." As twin sites for the transformation of the real, the notion of the modern and the earthen ground, and also the sky above where gas pervades and bombs descend, became dimensions of the same surface. Like "a butterfly still in its cocoon," one subsisted in the other, belonging to past and future, history and aspirational fancy and unleashing a deadly self-destruction. This subsistence, like the butterfly that finally pierces through the cocoon, became a point of articulation for the Afghan modernists: the regressive nature of capitalist modernity was inextricable from an intensification of violence and a re-appearing of events, like World War One, in peripheral places.

The subsequent decade of Amanullah's rule was a turn towards the ground, but this time as a site of nativist regeneration in economic isolation from Europe. Free transit on all goods through Russian territory was secured. European luxury imports were taxed at one hundred percent (including photographs), import substitution was enforced in order to protect domestic industrial output (the government *mashin-khanas* established by his father). A national budget and public treasury (*bait-ul-mâl*) was distinguished from the king's funds (*'ain ul-mâl*), the *Afghani* was established as the national currency, comprehensive fiscal reform abolishing in-kind tax payments were undertaken, the universal Conscription and Identity Card Act of 1923 was passed to enable fiscal and military reforms, and a range of communication efforts that included road building agendas and the introduction of telegraphy and telephone were initiated. Among his aspirations, a major road linking the South and North of the country, and a modern "scientific" suburb with personal hygiene codes and clean water outside of Kabul (known as *Darulaman*—the house of Aman) were particularly special, though neither was fully realized

(*Darulaman* would have cost one-third of the national budget). For the first time, private property was institutionalized (transferred from sovereign land holdings), and protected from bribes and extortion.³⁸⁷ Amanullah paid renewed attention to agricultural development, stressing, “new methods of cultivation, increased productivity, and building model farms and agricultural exhibitions.”³⁸⁸ With regard to railways, by now a pressing anxiety, he followed the example of his predecessors, only considering the possibility of an internal system (with Kabul as its hub) and with no lines built to the borderlands, no trains going to the frontiers. A small station was built in Kabul and rails were imagined to extend no further than the neighboring city of Jalalabad, only 80 miles away.

Gold, Woman, Ground

The turn to the ground also became the new site for a discourse on the emancipation of women, recasting gender as a metaphor for greater cultural changes, taken on by Afghans, for Afghans. The issue of gender difference became the gravamen of Amanullah’s discourse on secular modernity, understood now not so much as a truth possessed elsewhere, but as a syncretic regional effort with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Reza Shah Pahlavi at its fore in the Muslim world. The emancipation of women was fantasized to illustrate to Europe a modernist

³⁸⁷ Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan; Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, pg. 249.

³⁸⁸ Saikal, Amin. *Modern Afghanistan: a History of Struggle and Survival*. London: I.B Tauris, 2004.

During the *serajiya* years of his father, the non-existence of private property had inhibited capitalist forms of tenancy and agricultural cultivation. In fact, by the early 1920’s the rural population was no longer supported by prevailing standards of cultivation (Saikal, 2004, 74). Thus: “Beginning in 1920, Amanullah issued a number of edicts which institutionalized transferable private property in land, provided for a comprehensive cadastral survey of all lands and rationalized and monetised land taxes. Most importantly, he tried to alleviate the plight of landless peasants by selling large chunks of crown lands for extremely low prices.” (2004, 74-75).

capacity, turning women into the instruments of mediation between perceived centers of European and Asiatic internationalism. Public schooling was initiated for women in Kabul in 1921 (the *Malalai* school) under the auspices of Queen Soraya and Mrs. Tarzī and at the opening ceremony Queen Soraya hailed the prominence of women in Islam. By 1928 some 800 girls attended the school, encouraging Amanullah to continue his school building efforts. More generally, Amanullah resorted to a discourse of the “true tenets of Islam,” in order to buttress his wide-ranging reforms, beginning with the Family Code of 1921 which regulated engagement and marriage practices for the first time. Child marriages and close-kin marriages were outlawed, widows were given legal rights, exuberant wedding expenses were prohibited, women could even take their husbands to court on the grounds of Quranic non-compliance. *Irshad-i-Niswan* (A Guide for Women), the first womens’ publication was founded in 1921 by Mahmud Tarzī, and the veil which: “hid half the Afghan nation,” was increasingly abandoned on the streets of Kabul and other major cities and eventually outlawed.³⁸⁹ In 1927, the first group of women took an airplane ride over Kabul, peering down at a new social landscape.

In this emerging context, railways suddenly became attractive again, promising to turn the long hours of the day into the possibility of unprecedented movement and wonder. Amanullah opened the ground for bidding, inviting French, British and German firms to proposition a grand railway that would, as one newspaper envisaged, enable a trip from Berlin to Kabul by rail, or as yet another feared: enable the Soviet Union to procure direct access to the India Ocean. The British government hoped: “Afghan vanity would be tickled at the prospect of

³⁸⁹ Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan; Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, pg. 244.

commencing a long railway journey from an Afghan station, and in the imagination of the semi-educated and credulous Afghan official classes, the railway would quickly traverse the country as far as the Oxus.”³⁹⁰ These fears and dreams of oceanic frontiers and Euro-Asian voyages would become the hallmark of an international media discourse that reveled in the belated introduction of the railway to a “warlike community.”³⁹¹ Its slow and steady ingress was once again fantasized not only as conveying persons but commodities (like surplus agricultural products) and capital, laying the ground even for mineral exploration and the securing of exploration rights two-hundred kilometers on either side of the iron rails.³⁹² Oil, silver, more iron, magnetic ore, salt, marble and coal (lignite) were imagined to lie in wait, covered only by virgin ground.³⁹³ Berlin to Kabul by rail might potentially be a week-long journey.³⁹⁴ Unskilled “coolie labor” was definitely preferred, and foreign laborers were suspected of “lining their pockets.”³⁹⁵ Cement would come from India. Teak wood from Burma, and Deodar logs would

³⁹⁰ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. March 28, 1925. Confidential Letter from Humphrys, the British Minister in Kabul to Austin Chamberlain. India Office Records, London.

³⁹¹ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. March 26, 1932. “Railway for Afghanistan?” in *Modern Transport*. India Office Records, London.

³⁹² Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. May 22, 1928. Confidential letter from the British Embassy in Paris to the War Office in London. India Office Records, London.

³⁹³ *Ibid.* Reconnaissance parties were particularly concerned with finding coal and oil.

³⁹⁴ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. March 13, 1930. Cutting of an article from *Daily Express* “Berlin-Kabul by Rail.” India Office Records, London. Lenz & Co., a Berlin based firm, was one of the bidders for the project.

³⁹⁵ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. 1923. Minute Paper 2782/28 Political Department. India Office Records, London.

be procured to build, among other things, the train's sleepers³⁹⁶—where passengers could nap as they bolt across this newly opened terrain. Arms were covertly sold by the chief French engineer, Monsieur Clemenceau who describes Amanullah as: *le roi, que cette ligne donnera des bénéfices étant donné qu'elle sera la seule ligne de ravitaillement de Kaboul.*³⁹⁷

Other, more sinister rumors, were also circulating: a Russian attack on Northern Afghanistan, violating its “unessential” but “advantageous” territorial integrity was feared;³⁹⁸ a railway race between the British and Soviet governments seemed imminent; a clandestine Russo-Afghan plot against India was afoot; Japanese capital to the tune of 50 million yen was suspected to be folded into the railway project; Railway gauges were characterized as “European” or “Russian”.³⁹⁹ A “secret treaty” between the Soviet Government and Japan over the construction of a railway that would link the Turkestan-Siberia route with the Persian Gulf via Afghanistan was suspected.⁴⁰⁰ Military maps of Afghanistan were shared between the French and British War

³⁹⁶ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. August 28, 1928. Copy of a letter from the agent, North Western railway to the Secretary of the Railway Board. India Office Records. London.

³⁹⁷ (“The king, that this line will offer benefits given that it will be the only line of re-supplying Kabul.”) Afghanistan: Policy in Regard to Extension of Indian Railway into Afghanistan. July 31, 1928. Personal letter in French from Makcheef to unknown. India Office Records. London.

After Amanullah's visit to Paris, the Afghan government awarded reconnaissance and construction contract to Monsieur Clemenceau's firm. The Afghan government agreed to take on all the expenses of housing, feeding and transporting reconnaissance party members.

³⁹⁸ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. September 30, 1926. Extract from a private letter from Lord Irwin to Lord Birkenhead. India Office Records, London.

³⁹⁹ Afghanistan: Policy in Regard to Extension of Indian Railway into Afghanistan. September 15, 1931. Decypher of Telegram from Government of India, Foreign and Political Department to the British Minister in Kabul. India Office Records. London.

⁴⁰⁰ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. February 23, 1932. Extract from the *Daily Mail*: “Japanese Aid in Big Rail Plan.” India Office Records. London.

Ministries. Amanullah was even accused of “spoliation,” using the entire plan to procure for himself 40,000 GBP before abdicating.⁴⁰¹ The international geopolitical landscape was imagined to manifest itself in the iron-work of the railway project, arising from its hard materiality as secret agenda, hidden capital, and the perennial possibility of unwanted movements. Like concurrent developments in media technology, which were increasingly suspected of harboring Russian, Japanese and German subversion through wireless telegraphy and clandestine radio broadcasts, so too did trains become moving signs of disruption, belying a cultural incapacity in their wake.

Despite this mediatic clamor, Amanullah displayed a level of unprecedented enthusiasm, unmoored by a cacophony of heightened international doubts. Indeed, transportation networks and the building of *Darulaman* on the outskirts of Kabul were a major impetus behind Amanullah’s institutionalization of private property and far-reaching fiscal reforms. Water and irrigated soil, fantasized by imperial naturalists as a lack and the detrimental *sine qua non* of the Afghan landscape, were celebrated and subject to increased taxes.⁴⁰² The ground was transformed into the site of a double investiture: its agricultural depths and its traversable surface, one enabling the other through a redoubling of imagined sources of value; this intensification was mirrored in an epistemic concern with the nature of capitalist modernity, which was both conceived of in terms of causal depths and the surface forces it unleashed in its peripheries, though that latter concern was now displaced by renewed wonderment.

⁴⁰¹ Afghanistan: Policy In Regard To Extension Of Indian Railway Into Afghanistan. February 16, 1929. Memo from the British Minister in Kabul to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, India Office. India Office Records. London.

⁴⁰² Barfield, Thomas J. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, pg. 183.

But outside of Kabul, and especially in the Afghan countryside that simultaneity of concern and expectation would become the basis of sense making in more general and consequential ways. Amanullah's extensive tax reforms in the countryside, levied to pay for his infrastructural projects, was achieved through the deployment of powerful civil servants. Newly bearing the stamp of the state, they demanded that taxes only be paid in cash (not crops as they were before), abetting an ever-increasing set of demands and corruption practices that impoverished peasants and eroded the state's tenuous legitimacy. Burdened with a variety of taxes (on land, horses, donkeys, cattle, long-horned cattle, weddings, funerals, village ceremonies, etc.), the Afghan countryside came to account for approximately thirty percent of Amanullah's revenue, levied on lands that were confiscated in the event of non-payment.⁴⁰³ In 1927 the finance minister was attacked by a group of thirty peasants, and by 1928 a series of revolts culminated in a full-fledged rebellion (despite its initial suppression through a campaign of aerial bombardment) and eventually in Amanullah's abdication—when he was rumored to have fled the country (“*du pai dasht, dota e degar qarz kard!*”) in a blue burqa for fear of being recognized.⁴⁰⁴

The legal and cultural reforms he undertook were swiftly reversed, and women once again became the signs and tokens of a transformed socio-political order. The actual ground became the purview of cautious state-led developmentalism, opening it up in the coming decades for agricultural rehabilitation and the dissemination of synthetic fertilizers. More crucially, it

⁴⁰³ Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan; Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, pg. 271.

⁴⁰⁴ “He had two legs and borrowed another pair!” is a common expression, used to illustrate fright or the exigency of an escape. It was humorously said to me by an elderly woman recounting this historical period, and Amanullah's failures. The irony of his wearing a burqa is of course not lost on anyone, given his prohibition of the veil a year earlier.

became indissociable from a perceived relationship between its transformation and that of a double-loss: both of land and patriarchal authority over gender relations, a twin possibility that imbued the Pashto saying and threat: “*zan, zar, zameen*,” (woman, gold, ground) with a note of force that would become palpable during the land and gender reforms of the communist Peoples Democratic Party in the 1970’s. *Tajrobeyeh talkh*, (bitter experiences) became the basis for understanding the imagined alterity of the future and the machinations of state-craft, now conceived as taking place almost exclusively *pusht-e-parda*, (behind the curtain).

The import of historical encounters with the central state became increasingly charged, taking on an explosive valency that would manifest in literal explosions when the ground became the site of intensified harvest, not of crops, but of the land mines and improvised explosive devices that synthetic fertilizers enabled with uncanny horror. The failures of Pan-Islamism and secularism encouraged an apocalyptic discourse of expectation, where signs testify not to the experience at hand, whatever that may be, but with increasing force to its opposites— extending from the underground to bodies on its surface, from nation to a world beyond.

6 On Suicide Bombers

“It is being written after us,
they write behind us.”
Salar, a failed suicide bomber.

“Sister I am sorry to speak to you like this,
but you must know that in prison they forced
me to sit on glass bottles!” —
Sami, also a failed suicide bomber.

Explosion (Infijâr)

In the first flash, if you are close enough, you’ll feel it like you might the surge of an electric shock or the sudden rise of a gasp produced by a painful act of memory. Usually a window is blown out of its frame. Crystalline rocks of glass spray across a room. Walls tremble and entire buildings shift as if an earthquake is occurring. Outside, children dart into shops for cover. Parents are on a frantic prowl running in and out of alleyways and forming nebulous clusters at major thoroughfares only to dissolve into fraying strands, pulled in different directions by the force of information (*malumât*). At the perimeter of the USAID playground, a large sign reads: “This is a gift from the people of the United States of America.” It empties in seconds. Jaws clench, teeth grind, bodies jolt and then stiffen, expressions of horror take shape and well worn phrases cohere into high pitched utterances, marking the shrill pitch of fright: “*Chî bûd?!?*” —“What was that?!” Somewhere on the horizon a large black cloud begins to form, rising up as a long toxic plume and hovering for hours above the city as a dark reminder. Elsewhere: walls, street-signs, and shops are obliterated, random objects careen down alleys and roads and fall into unexpected piles that someone later has to climb over. Cars and bodies lie mangled on the street. Guns are fired, bullets exchanged. Those at the scene urinate out of fright, others collapse, others

are covered in blood, but they do not know whose. Stories of proximity and conspiracy begin to take shape: “I was only two minutes away from that!” “It was an inside job. The Americans do this to destabilize the government.” Voices are deliriously sought as affirmations of life. Phone calls are frantically made, different SIM cards become little diminishing portals of hope, each a slight opening onto the possibility of a human voice on the other end. But *Etisalat*, *Afghan Beseem* (Afghan wireless), *Roshan* (Enlightened), and Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) go down: “It’s down! It’s all down, nothing works— fuck!” Calls fail and the automated voice of a woman speaks instead: “*Shomareh-eh ke zang zadeid beh dast rast namibashad.*” “The phone number you are trying to reach is unavailable.” Somewhere in Kabul a bomb has gone off.

Between 2006-2015 approximately 1,052 suicide attacks occurred in Afghanistan, killing 4,845 and wounding 12,079 people. These numbers are not only the highest of any country in the world, but also represent a twelve fold increase over suicide attacks carried out within Afghanistan between 1982-2006, a span that includes the Afghan-Soviet War of (1979-1989), the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996) and the first six years of the Afghan-American War.⁴⁰⁵ This stunning increase has also entailed a dramatic surge in attacks with civilians as primary targets. While 820 attacks against foreign military and security personnel resulted in 3,214 deaths a mere 67 attacks against civilians accounts for 632 deaths—a lethality rate of almost ten percent. Equally telling, and perhaps shocking, is the weapon of choice. Car and belt bombs account for 893 of these attacks, killing 4, 227 people, wounding 10,497.

⁴⁰⁵ For a comprehensive database of suicide attacks from 1982-2015 see the University of Chicago’s Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (CPOST): http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu/search_new.php.

In the Spring of 2013, during my fieldwork in Kabul, the Taliban (the main opposition group fighting the Afghan government and US/NATO forces) initiated one of their deadliest “spring uprisings.” News of an American military withdrawal was circulating in the media—winnowing from television sets and filling the world of talk in markets, mosques and street corners. A vicious cycle erupted as the Afghan military became increasingly keen on demonstrating to a doubtful public that it had the man and fire-power to defeat the insurgency despite the announcement of an American withdrawal by December 2016.

Dozens of suicide vests and car bombs exploded, often in the busiest quarters of the city at sites ranging from the British Cultural Center to the Afghan Supreme Court, to markets and bazaars, restaurants, the Kabul International Airport, congested traffic circles, the headquarters of Kabul’s traffic police, compounds in the “Green Zone,” foreign guesthouses, the National Directorate of Security, and many other sites that were emblazoned on my mind at the time, but that are now a haze. Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of these targets were government and Afghan military buildings. By the end of my fieldwork, all my research sites or itineraries had been attacked. They include the courthouse bus used to transport judges between the civil courthouse and the high security *Amniyat* courthouse, the Kabul headquarters of Millenium Mining Services where a gunman walked in and opened fire on the security guards who I remember so vividly for their humor and curiosity, restaurants in the neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan, like Taverna, where expats congregate and where I conducted some of my interviews, and the French Cultural Center at the *Lyceum Istiqlal* where a suicide bomber detonated in the middle of a theatrical play on suicide bombing. It was that kind of year when even the realm of simulacra and appearance gave way to violence, when the gap between the

symbolic and the real was vividly closed, when everyone was always warning someone else: “You should really leave this place. Things will only become worse.”

This chapter is on failed suicide bombings, and also on fetishized photographic images, dangerous guests, the failures of oral expression, the power of literacy, and the Afghan State. It is based on extensive participant observation in the *Amniyat* (literally: security) courthouse located deep within the recesses of a heavily cordoned Green Zone where I attended the hearings of failed suicide bombers (men who literally could not detonate because of technological error or because they were tackled by police) on a weekly basis for a period of several months. I was the only observer, a privilege and discomfort that situated me at the interstice of authority and despair, the Afghan State and terrorism. Through a close reading of my transcripts, which include the narratives of the presiding judges and the failed bombers themselves, I consider how the idea of the Afghan State functions as a political force at the intersection of symbolic failure *and* a fetishistic attachment to photo and videographic images as purveyors of evidentiary truth and the intensification of violence. The images in question include cell phone images, videos, and CDs of various activities deemed terroristic or seditious. Their incredible powers lie in indexing spectacular violence that did *not* actually happen and in granting the Afghan state an aura of legitimacy.

Case file photographs are culled by the state prosecutors for their evidential powers. They have tremendous effects. They hypothetically contain and convey what would otherwise be expressed through oral testimony or confession—they hold within their frames the irresistible fetish that obviates the bombers’ stories and subjects them to ridicule and misunderstanding. They enable the judges to think of the Afghan State as a democratic state that depends on and recognizes self-representation despite the palpable failures of linguistic and inter-personal

mediation. In this context, spartan references to context and factual detail, nostalgic rumination on political order, poignant stories of desire and love, and above all an obsession with repetition and self-destruction are all affirmed or denied by photographic reference.

The *Amniyat* courthouse is located deep within the recesses of a heavily cordoned Green Zone (where US military and NATO bases are headquartered) and where I attended these hearings on a weekly basis for a period of several months. I was the only observer, a privilege and discomfort that situated me at the interstice of judicial authority and the despair of the defendants, the Afghan State and terrorism. The transcripts include the narratives of the presiding judges and the failed bombers. They require that we consider how the functionaries of the Afghan state understand their authority at the intersection of symbolic failure (the failure of linguistic expression, names, economic exchange, sexual desire, and paternity) and a fetishistic attachment to case file images (which are predominantly photographic). These complex moments of failure and fissure cannot be encapsulated in a single chapter, but we will see how they determine the failure of the bomber's oral expression, and also his resignation. The failures surge out of their oral narratives to forge an increasing space for the power of photographic images. In moments of oral incapacity, images speak as a triumphant chorus.

In Afghanistan, suicide terror is not necessarily cathected onto a discourse of martyrdom (not a single failed bomber or defense attorney referred to them as would-be martyrs). Moreover, the defendants do not explicitly distinguish the presence of foreign troops as cause, though they are by far the most common targets (93% of all attacks are waged on foreign security or political targets). Intent cannot be reduced to political insurgency. It ranges from peer pressure to blackmail—one defendant did it to save his sister—who he thought was kidnapped by members of the Taliban residing in his town but she had actually eloped with her boyfriend. In this context

the presiding judges recognize in imagistic content the presence of what is lacking or unvoiced in oral testimony, and what is not obvious from the written notes of the case file. Images play a necessary role in enabling the judges, and on lesser occasion the defendants, to think of and believe in the political legitimacy of the Afghan State.

But images illustrate more than the disintegration of language. They condense a profound anxiety and aim. Images not only double as testimony and evoke truth-value, they stage a repetition on two crucial levels: 1) the spectacular crimes they depict (which did not occur) will also happen again since they were attempted by compulsive and self-destructive persons and 2) there is no other outcome possible. The obvious scenarios which could happen (the bombers might repent, cooperate with authorities, completely reform themselves, die for other reasons) are reduced to the belief that the bombers will repeat their crime, that bombings will keep on happening.

This has enormous implications for how the Afghan State is understood and encountered. Because the attacks are foiled or thwarted by Afghan security forces the first time, an endless circularity of crimes against the Afghan State also anchors the state's political legitimacy in the ability to capture and arrest terrorists. Foucault's distinction between discipline and security is helpful in illuminating that this logic is not only circular but also quintessentially modern. If suicide terrorism indiscriminately takes the population as its target (since 2006 4,845 people have died and 12,079 have been wounded) so too does the Afghan State consider the risk of terrorism as the possibility of a trend or distribution across the population, surging and ebbing according to zones of risk, emerging in Kabul as a crisis and perduring in the countryside as a brute fact of life.

Whereas discipline begins with a normative ideal and proceeds through techniques and technologies (it breaks down individuals, time, places and subjects them to modification), security incorporates the logic of the phenomenon at hand (scarcity, smallpox, or terrorism) in an attempt to understand its structure, its cycles, the processes that might also offer a support in cancelling it out (the logic of a vaccine). Above all, the overarching logic is the rationalization of chance through an interplay of differential normalities (or trends)—bringing them in line with one another—neutralizing the unfavorable aspects of one with the favorable aspects of the other.⁴⁰⁶

Suicide bombings can be described as one such process. The relation between suicide bombers and the Afghan State emerges in and through the population as a target. Moreover, like other forms of terrorism it is understood as a process with a logic that can be used to augment the efforts of counter-terrorism by the Afghan State's National Directorate of Security (NDS). Thus, there is hardly any disciplinary discourse in these proceedings. The bombers with the exception of one case, are not reprimanded, instructed, or analyzed. They are simply the individual figurations of a larger and recurrent cycle that the Afghan State must endlessly pre-empt.

Case file photographs and cell-phone videos are crucial to this story. They illustrate the force of the fetish and its necessary role in enabling the judges, and perhaps also the defendants, to think of and believe in the political legitimacy of the Afghan State. As already discussed, imagistic reception and linguistic expression in Afghanistan has a complex history. Perceptions of Afghan orality, particularly in the British and German imagination, go back to the early

⁴⁰⁶ Foucault, Michel, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Arnold I. Davidson. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977--1978*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. 1 edition. New York: Picador, 2009, pg. 59.

twentieth century when the twin rise of linguistic and technological suspicion subtended the modernizing aims of the Afghan government. The era of state centralization was the time when communication technology was incorporated into the world of everyday talk. That new era—of national politics and technological connectivity— also introduced visual propaganda through pictures and films that confronted the Afghan Government (especially the military officers and civil servants who viewed these films in European embassies) as purveyors of violence.

This transformed photographic images into powerful objects that enable what they represent, and effectuate what they depict in content by closing the gap between reality and representation. In essence, they make violence the promise and function of a repetitive logic of self-disclosure. Thus, to the extent that we can now periodize a cultural relationship with images, the era of modernist ambition coincided with the political recognition of Afghanistan as a nation-state and a time when images were bared of symbolic aura, when they were most privileged as the outcroppings of a violent reality to come. The suicide trial transcripts will show us that this logic has again assumed incredible political force.

In the contemporary moment (particularly since 2006), imagery stitches over the gaps produced by symbolic failure across a range of sites (illustrated by the fluid transitions in the transcripts between talk of law, fathers, marriage, economy and money), and enables the presiding judges to understand a democratic horizon (or its constitutive impossibilities) as national political ideology. The images constantly convey the specter of repetition, imagined as a self-destructive volition summoned by illiteracy. The proliferation of mass media in major Afghan cities is, in the aftermath of the Taliban imposed prohibition, a (re)vitalized phenomena. More importantly, as a newly signified “good” of the modern era, new media have become a central tenet in the US military’s “hearts and minds campaign.” That policy endows television

and radio, and by extension the status of the mass mediated image and voice, with unprecedented importance. Their incredible powers signal a depth of symbolic dislocation that is more generally exemplified in the co-emergence of those media campaigns (which take the form of pedagogical videos aired on Afghan television) and the phenomena of suicide bombings, which began in 2006.

Parallel to this rigorous “hearts and minds” campaign the much more explicit commodification of translation as “linguistic expertise” forged a new linguistic imaginary among Afghan translators and their local counterparts. In those wartime encounters the ideological persuasion of local (and typically rural) Afghans presumed to be indistinguishable from insurgent populations (or even harboring and aiding them) is predicated on establishing connectivity through literal and direct speech. Through the medium of the military translator, Afghans must demonstrate that they express their intention when they speak. As the experiences and desires of Matin and Zia illustrate in chapter two, the insistence on literalism, and saying: “what you really mean” is also the mis-recognition of colloquialism for physical nomadism. For the predominantly *Kabuli* translators who go on missions in the South and East of the country (where the Taliban have a military stronghold), the dialects they encounter become evidence of a desire for physical movement: rural Afghans not only refuse to settle on pronouns and direct objects in speech, but also intend to move and evade military surveillance, further confusing the distinction between insurgents and civilians.

Historical perceptions of Afghan orality, particularly in the imperial imagination, have a complex genealogy going back to the early twentieth century. At that time the twin rise of linguistic and technological suspicion in Afghanistan subtended the modernizing aims of the Afghan government, which included importing communication technology. That acquisition

encouraged a concomitant culture of political propaganda by European states (including the UK, Soviet Union, and Germany) who feared that such technologies would be used to either instigate violent rebellions on the Indian frontier or disseminate wartime secrets during World War One. They agreed that the Afghan Government could only possess these technologies under the auspices of European control over content and dissemination. The incredible ambivalence that the Afghan modernists communicate in their writings on the modern as the outward appearance of violent capitalist reproduction signals not only a crucial transition from wonderment to an intense fixation with capitalist violence (and its traces on the actual ground—a proposed railway, telegraph stations, roads, telegraph poles, or the arrival of tanks, etc.), but also situate that ambivalence in a complex crisis of orality conflated with a general rousing of propagandist ambition. This logic of technological possibility culminated in cinema initiatives in various European ministries, incorporating images into a powerful vortex of political suspicion and geopolitical maneuver.

This history helps us understand how images became not only powerful but assumed the logic of self-disclosure, moving the object of representation from the realm of the concealed to the obvious, baring it of symbolic aura and privileging it as the excrescence of reality. The difference is that in the contemporary moment, that excrescence includes a reality yet to come. This is possible because the future, especially the future of compulsive and illiterate persons, is perceived as a repetition.

Trial by Fire

“She’s just an observer. Take her with you.” To go with them, and to get to the *Amniyat* courthouse I first had to go to the civil courthouse and then join the presiding judges in the

official car that transported everyone there. I became inured to the bleak constraints of security, the ubiquitous concrete walls, the signs: “NO jammers” “NO photography,”— reminders that even frequency and photographic capture are caught in a dense landscape where various modes of war are both waged and forestalled. Inside the walled *Amniyat* complex a white caged prison bus would pull up to the courtroom, a three-room structure painted a light mauve on the outside, almost pink. Imagine the inside of that room—a bleak and cold scene of all encompassing fragments, where bodies that were almost blown apart by the force of bombs strapped around waists now stand before you whole and alive, where words linger, where sentences drift, where names are mistaken even though they are obsessively sought, where paternity is established, but fathers are missing.

The room itself is drab, contained by walls of peeling plaster, thin windows and beholden to a cold draft. The defendants would emerge into this dank *mise en scène* wearing faded grey pin striped prison uniforms and plastic sandals, chained together at the waist or individually shackled at the ankles and wrists depending on the severity of the case. Their heavy chains pulled down their uniforms, giving them that droopy “physically misshapen” look that John Berger discerns in a photograph of peasants as the mark of labor, a trace of physicality that exceeds the seams of clothing and that sags here across a subjective terrain of young and old, bold and confused.⁴⁰⁷ The defendants would watch me write, and associated my writing from left to right with authority. From time to time, their eyes fixated on me as a desperate appeal for

⁴⁰⁷ Berger, John. *About Looking*. Vintage Press, New York: 1992, pg. 31.

mercy: “Sister I am sorry to speak to you like this, but you must know that in prison they forced me to sit on glass bottles!”

“These are no ordinary men, you must sit here it is better for you—here at the head of the room, dear, ” the presiding judge, Judge Sahil, said to me.⁴⁰⁸ The defendants would stand before the judges: “Poor kid look at him, he’s a half-wit,” Judge Raheem once remarked. These scenes and my transcripts are intersected with moments of surfacing, where reason and intention are solicited from the defendants and others of senselessness—where the narratives become mired in the failures of representation and where mishearing, misspeaking, mis-remembering, unfinished sentences, missing fathers, and the force of images cohere into a vertiginous maelstrom that turns a quest for meaning into an expression of *guilt as the intent to repeat*.

Outside, alongside the far perimeter of the complex, an unpaved road stretches ahead to the old Soviet built neighborhood of *Mikrorayan*. One afternoon, as I waited for my driver next to heavily armed National Directorate of Security (NDS) agents flanked by concrete blast walls, a woman emerged on the road. The sound of her singing voice reached us: “Get behind the wall and stay down!” the NDS agent yelled at me. She kept singing and did not reply to any of their questions: “What are you doing here?” “Who are you? Lady?” They suspected her of being a potential suicide bomber, no more than twenty feet away from us still singing in Persian and unresponsive to their demands. I crouched behind the first wall and wondered if I was not better off behind the second one. I also wondered how much force concrete can bear, what point there was in hiding. She did not answer them: “Lady?!” “Lady?!” and they did not engage her. She

⁴⁰⁸ There were two presiding judges, Judge Sahil and Judge Raheem.

kept singing, and walking down the road. “You were really scared there weren’t you?” one of the agents said to me afterwards. “It’s ok, there are a lot of mad people in this city. She was just a crazy woman. She wasn’t going to blow herself up. You should go home.”

Faqad Keh (As if)

Let me start with the opening lines of one of the initial hearings I attended. The exchange of words is between Judge Sahil (the chief justice who presided over the suicide trials occasionally, but who always presided over the civil court hearings) and four co-conspirators, accused of planning a bomb attack on the Bagram airport, the epicenter of the American occupation and one of the most securitized places in Afghanistan if not in the world:

Judge Sahil: “Abdul Sabur?”

Said Abdul Sabur: “*Said* Abdul Sabur.”

Judge Sahil: “*Waladi?*” (Whose son? or What is your fathers name?)

Said Abdul Sabur: “Said Abdul Ali.”

Judge Sahil: “They neglected your *Said* title in this—*khatâ dadan* (they let it slip).”

Said Abdul Sabur: “I wonder what else of mine slipped in *there?*” (there: a bulging manilla folder smudged with ink stains from his fingerprints).

Judge Sahil: “Well, it looks like they started by cutting your name.”

A nominal question and the image of an incision cut across these opening remarks, as the affirmation and impossibility of Said Abdul Sabur’s proper name. *Said*, a title which signifies prophetic lineage, is affixed to paternity and suggests not only the patriarchal transmission of spiritual charisma but turns one nominal signifier into a mirror for the other: the defendant can be Abdul Sabur only if he is someone’s son, and because his father is a *Said* he can only be his son

if he is also a *Said*. The image of a slip, or the inability to grip hold of a semantic surface, has dramatic manifestations in contexts of translation as we saw in chapter two, when for example, *rak'at* was misheard as rocket or when skipped vowels became the linguistic basis for an attribution of nomadism, a spatial slipping, onto rural Afghans who are deemed dangerously on the move by the Afghan translators they encounter during combat missions. In Abdul Sabur's case, the semantic lapse and the necessity and impossibility of his name become reflections of each other, mediated by a regime of bureaucratic writing which has the power to hold or omit that relation: "*Khatâ dadan*—they let it slip." Judge Sahil closes the space produced by the slipped name, restoring Said Abdul Sabur's subjectivity and incorporating the force of patriarchal transmission as the force of writing, and as the remedial intervention of the Afghan State he embodies.

In the general context of the *Amniyat* trials, slipping delineates two different spaces: there is the order of illiteracy, beholden to the force of elision and the world of conventional writing, the purview of the state and its juridical authority, and order that has the power to restore meaning. That distinction is made inside the secret life of the dossier and through the machinations of legality alongside the incorporation of individual representation as the *sine qua non* of testimonial due process: "I wonder what else of *mine* (emphasis mine) slipped *in there*?" Thus, the second question, always asked as *Waladi?* or *Nam-e-Padar?* (What is your father's name?) concerns the problem of authenticity in a context where patrimonial lineage is susceptible to the effects of a legal system tasked with incorporating Western codes of penal and evidentiary conduct, including an individualized culture of representation that supplants the traditional *jirgas* (councils) based on patrimonial and tribal affiliation.

The performance of that structural overhaul, one component of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), is embodied in Nasim, the young prosecutor who reads summaries of the charges from the files in Persian. He sometimes flips through the papers beforehand, thumbing through them, and then again before he finishes and closes the file in a final moment of officious triumph. He speaks with a voice not entirely his own, as the site of state-sanctioned authority and with full knowledge of the dossier's written contents, an inside inaccessible to the illiterate defendants:

Nasim: "In the case regarding Saif and Barlas. Saif is known to have been involved with the Taliban and with an active group consisting of fifteen individuals. He reported on the movements of military personnel to the Taliban. He was working on behalf of Sardar Wali, a well-known Taliban commander. That collaboration is in and of itself proof of terroristic activity. In regard to Ismail and Hamid, the aforementioned's kalashnikov was found in their possession. The aim of the mission was to attack military forces in Maidan Wardak, and to also attack military convoys. He was involved in seditious activity, and in accordance with the Afghan penal code and the constitution's anti-terrorist clauses, his *cheshm-geer* (eye grabbing) activities must be punished to the full extent of the law."⁴⁰⁹

And consider this, between Judge Raheem and Khalil, a young man accused of cooperating with Taliban forces and coordinating an attack on American military forces in the city of Laghman:

Khalil (the sound of his chains slightly jingling): "*Assallam al aikom*"

Judge Raheem: "What is your name?"

Khalil: "Khalil."

Judge Raheem: "Khalillullah or Khalil ul-Rahman?"

Khalil: "Khalil ul-Rahman."

⁴⁰⁹ *Cheshm-geer* (eye grabbing) can be used as a metaphor both for "obvious" and "profound." Both valences are invoked by Nasim.

Judge Raheem: “They wrote Khalilullah here on your papers.”

Khalil: “*Khairo, parwa nesti* —that’s ok, it doesn’t matter.”

It doesn’t matter. But when does it matter to be named, “aforenamed,” or even to ascertain a father’s name in a context of redoubled failure, both of suicide attempts and of identity? In the hearings, the inefficacy of the state is figured in the image of the successful suicide attack, *faqad keh* (as if) they had exploded, and will again in an axiomatic future-time in relation to which they speak *now*. Speaking and asserting identity becomes repetitive. Names, titles, and answers to questions are repeated by defendants throughout these trials and transcripts. But nominal questions can only be bridging moments, disclosing both a process and a traversal. The process is that of illuminating cause and attempting to locate another explosive force between what I refer to as the slipping (*khatâ-dadan*) and stilling (*gereftan*) of meaning: the power of signification, testament to a future explosion and a lost grip on communication. The question: “What is your father’s name?” is not only indexical of testimonial transitions in cases with multiple defendants but also indicative of the judge’s fantasized origin of cause: “who is your progenitor?” he was asking.

The iterative nature of questioning suffuses these hearings and enables a doubled space of expectation: the aura of patrimonial purity as a prior that is both testament to a logic of justice outside the state’s judicial sphere and communicates that its very possibility is now overcome by the logic of individualistic representation. As we saw in the case of Zaid’s family, this displacement has catastrophic effects. But the greater move that shapes these hearings is the oscillation between soliciting singular moments where language and signification is meaningful (and illustrates to the judges that one attempted suicide is sufficient to derive the expectation of another); and moments when those repeated names, stories, facts and testimonial exhortations are

meaningless, not only failing to signify but also indicating the radical incommensurability between experience and future expectation for the bombers themselves. Or as one defendant blurted out: “What's the damn point of all this talk? Nobody knows what will happen anyway!” The point of talk, it seems, is two-fold. It suggests both a force (which must be stilled: *gereftan*) and its failures (described as slippage: *khatâ-khordan* or *khatâ-dadan*). The force emerges when talk is understood as a corollary of cause and future action, in this case uttering something that indicates the intent to turn a body into a bomb, again. The sterility of words ensures a parallel possibility: that things remain as they are, and that the failed bombers’ narratives cannot gesture towards the alterity of the future. In fact, they are radically incommensurate to the task of even imagining it. They do not know it.

The narratives of the judges demonstrate an attempt to assume and assert legitimacy in a context of general social failure: the failures of economic exchange, kinship and language that will become more obvious to us through these transcripts. They speak through narratives of displacement (for example, they seamlessly transition from speaking about inflation to family relations) in order to illustrate a generalized failure of value across symbolic domains. However, these intersected failures stop at the power of media and cell-phone images, which are endowed with a fabulous truth-value and become indissociable from the judges’ ability to think of and believe in the Afghan State as a perduring reality. The narratives of the bombers unfold opaquely at the quilting point of contingent forces: they mumble their words, pause to lick chapped lips, leave sentences unfinished, are uncertain, unaware, unprepared, unrepresented, dismissed, tortured, heard, sentenced, acquitted, laughed at, asked to repeat, told to be quiet and generally beholden to the failures of linguistic expression.

This failure is a double failure: either their narratives do not disclose anything meaningful (and so the defendants are cut off, interrupted, asked to repeat, dismissed and so on) or their words are stilled as spectacular precursors of what they will do, indicative of a compulsion and a perfect isomorphism between meaning and repetition. By closely reading how these encounters and narratives unfold, and by analyzing the relationship between oral testimony and photographic evidence, we will see that for the Afghan State a single horizon of expectation emerges: the bombers speak as they do *because they will repeat what they (almost) did*.

The question of translation across symbolic registers is crucial to how these hearings unfold and to how the judges imagine the Afghan State they represent. As we will read, their narratives evince a structural homology between language, kinship and money and they shift fluidly from discussions of family, sexuality, economy to urban reconstruction and law and order. The Afghan State emerges out of these substitutions as a general force that mitigates the failure of traditional structures for grounding meaning. The question of translation across symbolic registers, and the interchange of related metaphors (signifier, father, phallus, gold) illustrate a singular structural process, a “mode of substitution” writ large).⁴¹⁰ Crucially, the possibility of general equivalence necessitates a phantasmic space—a necessary exclusion from the relative form of value (for example the father as arbiter, or the sovereign as the abstracted body of a people) in order to ground value.

The outside is also an image, an ideal and imagined form through which value emerges. It anchors value and enables relations of equivalence, even in a context where representation

⁴¹⁰ Goux, Jean-Joseph. *Symbolic Economies After Marx and Freud*. Cornell University Press, 1990.

generally fails. In the *Amniyat* trials, this outside is recuperated as the literal image, and not only as the ground of value but also the determinant of guilt as the intent to repeat. Both guilt and repetition are attached to images as purveyors of truth. In these trials, and across the transcripts I illustrate, the image functions as a direct mode of transmission: it proves both past guilt and communicates imminent violence, the sure fact that the bombers will commit a suicide-bombing again, that they will compulsively engage in the most violent manifestation of self-destruction as a crime against the state.

While the judges' narratives evince a preoccupation with a failure to recognize value across the registers of language, economy and kinship; they also illustrate a residual surplus-value in the realm of the mediatic, where everything signifies with unprecedented power, confronting them as an ideal and transcendental force. Images double as testimony and evoke a truth-content that for the judges, is interwoven with their presumption that the bombers would try to repeat their crimes. As a corollary, the understanding of testimony becomes either senseless (incapable of representing anything about why they attempted a first bombing) or precursory (testimony to the surety of another one).

In the scholarly literature, images, and particularly photographs, have been variously understood as having fixating powers and fetishistic appeal. These range from melancholy fixation in Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* to hyperreal confusion in Baudrillard's analysis of the Gulf War, to Berger's and Sontag's meditations on nostalgia and the difference between film and photography that Siegfried Kracauer and Christian Metz elucidate. Photographs ghost and figure a kind of death. Thus, if for Roland Barthes photographs shock us by inducing the recognition of a phantasmic place to which we have been before and also to which we will go—containing the

“imperious sign” of our future death;⁴¹¹ for others photographs fixate our belief onto a circumscribed referent, onto one thing (as opposed to the dissemination of moving images in a film) and produce the fetishistic appeal of turning a referential lack (because each photograph is necessarily circumscribed by its frame) into irresistible belief: the “off-frame effect in photography results from the singular and definitive cutting off which figures castration and is figured by the “click” of the shutter. It marks the place of an irreversible absence, a place from which the look has been averted forever.”⁴¹²

This idea of an image as a “cut inside the referent” can help us understand not only the dissemination or fixation of belief and its implications for a Freudian understanding of fetish as the pure productivity of lack, but also the linguistic imaginary that emerges from a referential outside. The passage between the content and frame, not only of images, but also its imagined and excised surround involves the kind of active slipping and stilling of meaning that the judges speak of. They seek to strike a balance between the violence of a repetition and the literal capture and stilling of the perpetrators through the use of the case file photographs, turning images into an active shuttling between time and tense that Deleuze describes as a pure event, or the “simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic it is to elude the present.”⁴¹³ This becoming, or “wild discourse” which evades its referents eludes both Idea and representation, but it also grants

⁴¹¹ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1982, pg. 97.

⁴¹² Metz, Christian. “Photography and Fetish” in *October*, Vol. 34. (Autumn, 1985), pg. 87.

⁴¹³ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pg. 1-2.

the images in question a speaking power in relation to the force of repetition, a fixation that saturates these hearings.

Let us return to that scene and consider the rest of the first exchange, now between Judge Sahil, Salar and Zeb, two collaborators of Said Abdul Sabur's⁴¹⁴:

Salar: "Well, we want a lawyer, but from the day they grabbed us from the university, we *never saw anyone again*. I was in Kabul University. I am a second year engineering major. We have not seen our family. I have not communicated with anyone nor been able to request a lawyer, which I want. I want one. On top of that, I missed all my exams just as I was starting the term."

Judge Sahil: "Why do you engage in *khârab-karî* (mischief)? In a school of thousands of students they only arrested you four. Why is that? Students, the elderly, mullahs, women. These are among the most respected populations in our society, they always have been. Even when they err, we forgive them. These populations are very respected in Afghanistan. So, unless you have done something they will not simply arrest you without cause, they had a reason, some cause, and you have guilt."

Salar: "Yes! You're right, I remember even the shop-keepers in the *mandavi* market would give me discounts on things, because we were students...it was a time..."

Judge Sahil: "Yes, because everyone loves students. 'Don't charge him, he's a student.' That's what they would say in my days and that's what it was like here: 'Oh please! You're a student how can I take money from you?', 'Don't you dare pay!' and so on. Now? Today? People are *cheshm-safeed* ("white-eyed," shameless). *They'll charge anyone* (emphasis mine) including students, the elderly, women."

Salar: "It could be..."

Judge Sahil's and Salar's narratives both shift to a rumination on exchange value. The judge locates the possibility of forgiveness in the persistence of value, exemplified by a culture of respect for certain populations, populations that now personify the breakdown of social relations. But Salar situates it in the recalled image of a marketplace and amidst the interactions of exchange. He remembers a shopkeeper (or perhaps several) who gave him discounts on prices,

⁴¹⁴ The four collaborators (Said Abdul Sabur, Salar, Zeb, Zohak) were brought in together and took turns speaking with the judge.

giving him the unexpected value of the difference between what he expected to and actually paid. Despite being the object of shared nostalgia between him and the judge, the circulation of value may not have vanished into the past. Salar wants to continue (“it could be...”) but the judge cuts him off:

Judge Sahil: “But the point still is that you are involved with dangerous people, you involved yourself with them. You relinquished your *lives*, your *families*. You should spend your time on school, and then enter politics. Become a minister, a deputy, a lawyer. There are many things one can do in life. You are an engineer, look at the amount of re-construction happening in this country. Look at the quality of that construction. Buildings just being stacked floor upon floor with no regard for structure, safety, protocol, they just stuff five hundred families inside without considering heating, electricity, the ground, the basement. You could help with these concerns. Or look at the pollution in Kabul, look at the sewage problems in this city after it rains. You could work on that. You could get foreign grants, and make real change. And instead you went and joined some group that wants to topple the government? Why do you do what you do? You know it’s wrong. And I’ll tell you this, nothing will happen. I swear nothing will come of it. *You won’t topple the government. It won’t go away* (emphasis mine). The other day, six suicide bombers, strapped bombs across their waists and with guns in their hands, exploded inside cars. It was an explosion unlike any we have seen before. We were stunned by it. And look, *the government still stands. We are still here* (emphasis mine).”

Salar: “We would like a lawyer to defend us—to speak on our behalf.”

Judge Sahil: “There are pictures. What are these pictures of money in the file? This is the money you wanted to buy arms with. It’s \$5,000.00. Look at this picture! How did you get this?”

Salar: “A guy..a young guy. From Zeb.”

Judge Sahil: “Who is that?”

Zeb: “Me.”

Judge Sahil: “You wanted to buy weapons?”

Zeb: “Well, sir, it was like this...well they got it from me. I went to buy something, and ... look the things we’ve seen, I’d accept five years in any prison but not one night of what I have seen.”

Judge Sahil: “Who was the *sarafi* (money lender/dealer)?”

Zeb: “Omar. They have a carpet store and we touched base with Omar. My brother was in Herat and ... the benefit of that was ... look, look ... I don't have a lawyer. The situation is very bad, but prison ... I accept prison, that is so much better for me. My brother was tortured. I am liberated from that *hâlat* (state of being). One month here is nothing compared to the prosecutor's office ... imagine that mother who after thirty years of looking for her son ... or imagine that young man forced to sit on glass bottle after bottle, or who has *raqam raqam dandehâ e barqi* (electric battons) lashed on his body. So we think to ourselves, this is not bad. We accept three years in prison rather than to have our youth spent like that. [He raises his voice at the judge]: *I touched base with my father about getting a lawyer and he said the roads on the way from Salang were bad...* (emphasis mine) so he could not come to visit. But I will get one.”

Judge Sahil: “Ok. Get their thumb prints and let them get lawyers. Bring whatever student identification you have. You won't get away for free. Keep that in mind. You'll be punished.”

Zeb: “We've been punished a lot, *raqam raqam...*(different ways...)”

Judge Sahil: “Look, if we let you go you'll do it again. *You'll go buy weapons* (emphasis mine) and go to the Bagram airport to carry out the same attack. A car will honk and then it will blow up, explode! And innocent people will die.”

Salar: “Your honor, you must believe me I don't know about these things. I have no knowledge of any of this. *Da posht-e-mâ neshteh shoda rafta*” (It is being written after us).

Judge Sahil: “You put your thumb. You gave your thumb.”

Salar: “Of course, they force us to give our thumbs!”

This testimony is located at the intersection of different frames of value, each valence invoked as a measure of a parallel failure, as a reflection of demise. Salar is accused of being in the grip of a destructive compulsion. The judge asks: “Why do you do what you do?” with the intonation of a father asking his son, and berates Salar for destroying his familial and social relations. The judge suggests an alternative future of entering politics or working as an engineer. Zeb in turn, cites the material failures of reconstruction as a cause for the absence of his father: “I touched base with my dad about getting a lawyer and he said the roads on the way from

Salang were bad... so he could not come to visit,” echoing Salar’s opening refrain: “...from the day they (the Afghan National Police) grabbed us from the university, we *never saw anyone again.*”

More generally, the remarks, memories, traversals, confusions and interruptions illustrate a profound sense of loss at the center of a fraying symbolic universe. *Said*, a holy lineage, was a source of unexpected value in Khalil’s testimony, restored by Judge Raheem after having slipped and necessitating the repetition of his name, a recognition of his presence that was nonetheless mistaken in every iteration (he states his name as Khalil, only to be asked again if it was Khalillullah or Khalil ul-Rahman and then to be told a third time that his name was noted incorrectly in the dossier and that the *Said* title was omitted. His name was out of control). Similarly, a discount in the marketplace doubles as an unexpected moment of authenticity, but that is now lost and can only become a misunderstanding, though shared nostalgia between Salar and Judge Sahil. This has an analog in Zeb’s account of his father, who becomes an example of unestablished paternity—a man shorn of rights and responsibilities who unknowingly condemns his son to appear in court without any form of representation, who literally cannot arrive to be by his side. The photographic image of money in the file (\$5,000.00) surges out of these interlaced failures like an untethered signifier. The picture rouses the judge out his narrative and centers his thoughts on guilt and repetition.

Judge Sahil: “There are pictures. What are these pictures of money in the file? This is the money they had to buy arms. It’s \$5,000.00. How did you get this?”

...

Judge Sahil: “Look, if we let you go you’ll do it again. *You’ll go buy weapons* (emphasis mine) and go to the Bagram airport to carry out the same attack. A car will honk and then it will blow up, explode! And innocent people will die.”

Mediating the transition, from the affirmation of material proof to the determination of the suspects' guilt and intent to repeat is not only the photograph of the money, which hovers like an alternative reality continuously available to the bombers (who will presumably use the same amount to buy the same weapons), but also Zeb's description of the torture he endures, sitting on glass bottles and being beaten with electric prods. In response to this account, and after it becomes apparent that the judge is no longer interested in their collective narrative, an account he seals with the request for their "thumbs" (fingerprints), Salar injects a note of exasperation as his final statement: "*It is being written after us.*" What Salar understands is the radical impossibility of his own speech in a context where formal representation is missing and where linguistic expression takes either the form of written testimony or oral nonsense. Writing, as illustrated by Said Abdul Sabur's name, occurs literally in the file but here it is invoked as the mark of fate or the delimitation of a world of possibilities, and the radical circumscription of meaningful expression in the face of repetitive certainty.

Judge Sahil, on the other hand, elevates that symbolic failure as the truth of the image, turning the simulacra into a surrogate for grounding the real and turning the case's evidentiary basis into a visual artifact. The photograph of the money is, for him, evidence that if released the young men will have access to that same amount of money and will use it to attempt another bombing. His reasoning is indissociable from a reading of a lack (here the impossibility of meaningful oral expression) as the surplus truth-content of the image (which literally speaks for the defendants, and seals their fate). This confusion lies at the heart of why the judge proceeds *as if* the defendants will repeat their crime like a recurring nightmare the state finds itself encountering.

The dialogue between Judge Sahil, and the defendants demand an analysis of the surplus that eludes symbolic failure as truth and becomes the very lack that grounds the value of the testimonies, and establishes a relation to the future. What was understood by Judge Sahil as the grip of compulsion, manifesting itself through repetitive self-destruction and abetted by the failure of social relations (and the availability of unanchored money), is understood by Zeb (who prefers his prison sentence to his experiences at the hands of police and intelligence agents) and Salar as a tragic fate, trailing after them like the force of writing. The terrible irony of silence on the issue of torture is of course that they are, as almost already dead men that the state saves from dying, not capable of being tortured in so far as torture is the precarious maintenance of life at the threshold of death. Their purported willingness and desire to blow apart their own bodies makes them a site of a pain that cannot be registered, that leaves no markings or signs that can be read as evidence. Hence, the judge did not ask for proof or photographs of torture but only for their “thumbs,” the indexical extension of their illiteracy and incapacity. This double split, between symbolic failure and the remarkable influence of a photograph, and between the body as a compulsive instrument of destruction and as the site of possibly invisible (and then un-photographable) markings, are the written fate Salar alludes to.⁴¹⁵ Like the photograph of the money in the case file, he culls the image of writing as the reflection of a reality the defendants have no access to and which assumes a transcendental power, shaping their continuous present.

The origin of the symptom always escapes us. Ideological distortion is not simply an illusion, but the very essence of reality. The symptom is an element which subverts its own

⁴¹⁵ As we saw in the case of Abdul Wali’s torture and death, not all torture leaves visible marks or scars.

universal foundation.⁴¹⁶ In the following transcript, expressions such as “*mastom*,” (that’s me) or “I was beaten,” illustrate an interpellation (as the victim of torture) and the senselessness that becomes both its condition of repetition and the basis for an appeal to inscription (annotations in the file), where hand written or typed notes displace what would otherwise be photographs of tortured bodies.

On that same day there were several other hearings, one of them the case of a man named Zarak. He was brought in, chained like the other defendants, with six accomplices. They had all requested to be heard by the judges in order communicate that they had been tortured by Afghan security forces while in prison and forced to confess. Like the previous hearing, their bodies became legible at the intersection of writing and torture, and a senseless repetition that, in the end, fails to actually affirm that Afghan Security forces obtain confessions under torture:

Judge Sahil: Zarak?

Zarak: *Baleh* (yes).

Judge Sahil: “It’s written here (in the dossier) that you have been beaten. Gogal—it says you have not been beaten and that you are between 18 and 19 years old. If you were under 18 it would be different...Zalan?”

Zalan: *Mastom* (that’s me).

Judge Sahil: “Where were you burned?”

Zalan: “My legs.”

⁴¹⁶ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Second Edition edition. Verso, 2009, pg. 16.

Judge Sahil: “How?”

Zalan: “Boiling water.”

Judge Sahil: “Someone spilled water on your legs?”

Zalan: “Yes.”

Judge Sahil: “Gran?”

Gran: “*Mastom* (that’s me).”

Judge Sahil: “You’ve also been beaten.” “Selab?”

Selab: “*Mastom*.”

Judge Sahil: “You’ve also been beaten. They put you down between nineteen and twenty.”

“Rostam, they say you were beaten slightly.”

Rostam: “No they beat me a lot. By God a lot!”

Judge Sahil: “Arsalan?”

Arsalan: “Yes I was beaten a lot!”

The judges chuckle at Arsalan’s immediate response...

Judge Sahil: “We’ve already held three hearings for all of you.”

Arsalan: “Yes, but we did not have a lawyer. If you’ll allow it, we will get one and come back.”

Judge Sahil: “You have the right to be heard. *If you want, you can keep coming back, you can come here ten times to make your case* (emphasis mine). We will try to help you. You should know that. But you should also know that despite your opposition to the

government, this is still your justice system. *This is where you can represent yourself, where you will be heard* (emphasis mine).”

Arsalan: “Yes, but if you allow us to get a lawyer....”

Judge Sahil: “The problem here was determining if you were beaten. You claimed to have been beaten and now we know you were indeed beaten. If you go to any court they will show mercy on you. The money you would have to spend on a lawyer you should keep for yourself, they will do nothing for you and nobody can help you more than we are trying to. Don’t waste your time and money on lawyers. We will help you, and some of you will be released, that includes you.”

The relationship between writing and what can be known is even more explicit here as a corollary of the failures of orality and representation. For the prisoners, it is the idea of a representative, a lawyer, that is most fetishized. They want language. But they are trapped by photographs. From the perspective of the judges and prosecution legal representation is unnecessary because the legibility of torture emanates from within the dossier, and not the victims’ bodies. They were not asked, even a single time, to show their scars or burn marks or to elaborate on the duration and specificity of the torture, to talk about how long they were forced to endure it before they actually confessed.

If for Salar writing is the abstract force underwriting his destiny, sealing his fate; for Zarak, Gogal, Zalan, Gran, Selab, Rostam and Arsalan it enables an evidentiary world that rises to the level of the visual through the form of an annotation in their files. “He has been beaten,” is sufficient for the judge’s authoritative judgment—it not only obviates additional oral testimony but also turns that rupture of orality (which in the case of Arsalan is greeted with derisive laughter) into an obvious lack that requires the supplementation of written explication. This substitution of a formal note for what can otherwise be expressed much more fulsomely through the medium of speech turns the mark of writing and the dossier into two things: the site of what can be known and a place where no secrets survive. This acquires its most convincing force

through the dossier's images. The power of writing is transmitted to the photographs. For the prisoners, they constitute an additional source of information they do not have access to. But for the judges, photographs reveal the truth of what (almost) happened. It enables them to be certain of their judgments.

Judge Raheem: "What is your name?"

Zia Rahman: "Zia Rahman."

Judge Raheem: "How long have you been imprisoned?"

Zia Rahman: "Fifteen months."

Judge Raheem: "Read the synopsis, prosecutor."

Nasim the Deputy Public Prosecutor: "He was engaged in anti-state activity, in his file there is a report that notes all the details but it is important to mention that he belongs to a *salafi tanzeem* (radical party) in Kunar, where he worked and incited people against the government and to engage in jihad... This is in violation of the constitution and the details of his activities are noted in section 53 of his file, which must be read so that he can be sentenced for terroristic activity."

....

Judge Raheem: "Did you ever attend an official government *madrassa* (religious school)?"

Zia Rahman (speaking calmly to the judge): "No I did not attend an official *madrassa*. It was a private one."

Judge Raheem: "Did you ever work for the government?"

Zia Rahman: "No."

Judge Raheem: "Is that because you do not consider government salaries to be *halal* (kosher)? Do you think government officials, such as us, Afghan soldiers and Afghan police officers, make *haram* (forbidden) money? That we are illegitimate?"

The other judges laugh...

Zia Rahman: “No, no I don’t think that at all.”

Judge Raheem: “Really? These days anyone who works for the government in any capacity is considered to be making and living off of *haram* money. Everyone thinks that about us. Is that why you want to abolish the state?”

Zia Rahman: “No, that’s not what I want.”

....

Zia Rahman’s attorney: “All the evidence demonstrates his innocence. He must be freed. All the research material in the file illustrates that he is innocent and that he is being treated badly and unjustly imprisoned. In response to the prosecution’s first point, it is true and it is also true that the Americans can apprehend anyone they want, guilty or innocent, legally or illegally. But you, the prosecution and as a representative of the Islamic Government of Afghanistan are beholden to a higher moral code and to the dictates of divine law, the teachings of Islam. The prosecution knows that the National Directorate of Security (NDS) is not transparent; it operates in a secretive atmosphere. But we do know that torture is prohibited by the civil code, the constitution and international law. Is it a crime to have a *salafi* father? *Have you found some phone, tape, cassette or CD to incriminate him* (emphasis mine)? The NDS has no actual evidence against him. He is from Kunar but he moved to Jalalabad so that his family could live in safety. He has no connection to or membership affiliation with any Taliban group and you cannot prove that he belongs to the Taliban, *nor have you found any sort of CD or tape to prove this*. He is a hardworking man, busy providing for his family. He is not involved in any anti-government violence or activity.”

The conflation of innocence with the lack of evidential images situates the suicide as a peculiar kind of event.⁴¹⁷ The image becomes the condition for its existence and indefinite proliferation, and the force that immobilizes it long enough to extract sense and surmount various binary oppositions: it has not happened in the past, and will repeat as an event in the future, it is real and pure potentiality, it is a failure and a threatening force. The image sutures the

⁴¹⁷ The other kinds of evidence include cell phone video, tapes and CDs.

relationship between events and repetition as a *becoming*, as a force that outlives the failures of symbolism in order to reappear in two series: the real of the past, and the violence of the future.

These two dimensions reappear alongside an understanding of the Afghan State, as the judges continue to assert its legitimacy, despite the range of symbolic and social failures they encounter, despite being accused of reproducing an American military obsession with criminalization, despite the *haram* money it is associated with, and as the lawyer's statement suggests undeterred by the kinds of violence made visible through communication technology. Those images become a scene as much as a logic, a theater of proliferation that culminates in the compulsive categorization of Afghan criminals as "repeat offenders," eradicating both the singularity of crime and death:

Nasim, the Deputy Public Prosecutor: "In the name of God, the most merciful the most beneficial. This synopsis pertains to the case of Sparlay, accused of involvement in terroristic activity with Commander Kabeer Shah's contingent, widely known for its pro-Taliban activity in the city of Laghman. Sparlay participated in planning an attack on the Nangarhar airport. In this respect, *he planned to repeat a suicide bombing using a sports car to amplify the destruction* (emphasis mine). At the time of his arrest, he had images and videos of various Taliban activities in his phone. These included videos of battles as well as "anti-state" songs, which he saved on his phone as recordings. *This in and of itself demonstrates that he was active in seditionist efforts and that he will continue to participate in such activities* (emphasis mine). Moreover, in the past he was caught entering Afghanistan from Pakistan with remote control devices in his possession and for that he was imprisoned for one and half years. After his release from prison, he attempted to *repeat a full blown suicide bombing* (emphasis mine), but was caught, this time with his cellphone."

....

Defense attorney for Sparlay: "The defendant whom the prosecution has charged with conspiracy and membership in a Taliban affiliated organization engaged in anti-state activities is innocent. I urge you and the prosecution to interrogate why he has actually been imprisoned when there is no evidence that he was actively involved in any Taliban inspired organization. It is true that he was imprisoned in the past, but it is also true that every year some eight thousand Afghans are arrested on suspicion of treasonous activity, especially by the Afghan National Directorate of Security, which criminalizes Afghans with great zeal. *If we consider all of them repeat offenders, as you suggest we do,*

consider the enormity of the injustice this entails for the Afghan population (emphasis mine). More specifically, there are other police reports that contradict the evidence of the prosecution and that must also be considered.”

After this summary, I asked Judge Raheem what the fate of Sparlay would be and he explained: “This man has been caught entering Afghanistan from Pakistan with remote control *cheezhâ* (apparatuses).” His intonation changed when he said *cheezhâ*, as if it was immediately obvious to me what any remote control or technological device would mean for ascertaining guilt: “Anyway he got one and half years, which he served but he was freed and again wanted to blow himself up, *but this time he didn’t reach his goal* (emphasis mine).” I asked: “How long will he be imprisoned?” “Now, that is up to Judge Sahil. Whatever he wants to write in his file.”

Again, the force of writing, the value of the image and repetition converge but this time as a national phenomenon that exemplifies the vulnerability of the Afghan State to ingress across its unsecured border with Pakistan, permeable not only to men but also dangerous apparatuses and “repeat offenses” committed by a potentially large population of people who inhabit the borderlands—the ethnic interstices that Afghan translators also fantasize as harboring seditious persons. This generalization of criminality, through the intelligence gathering and arrest practices of the NDS, and through the categorical distinction of “repeat offense” does not represent the crime of a suicide bombing, but makes it available as an empty form, enhanced by photographic capture. The repetition of a suicide is, of course, impossible, and the irony of this repetition is its failure, which is perceived as a movement towards success. Suicide bombing becomes a peculiar kind of singularity, one that can be repeatedly deployed in a proliferation of violence that cements the role of state security forces as agents of capture. Thus, when Judge Raheem responds to my query, he speaks about Sparlay’s crime as follows: “He was freed and *again*

(emphasis mine) wanted to blow himself up, *but this time* (emphasis mine) he didn't reach his goal.”

Of course, Sparlay didn't reach his goal the first time either, but his possible death arrives before the fact of failure as a success against which the powers of state security services are measured in a spectral moment, when a fictionalized secondary death is prevented. Judge Raheem's language, taken literally, evokes an apparitional logic that relies on the fantasy of Sparlay's successful death, and his coming to life to repeat his own suicide in the second aborted attempt when the state prevails. The violence of his death is doubled, though he is alive and standing before the judge. It becomes the threshold of sovereignty for the judges, the horizon at which the capacity of the state and its security forces become palpable in relation to a death-function. Sovereign power, condensed in these hearings as juridical authority, also realizes itself through a misunderstanding of repetition as the capacity to kill. This capacity constitutes an “original political structure,” as Giorgio Agamben describes, and makes bare life the first content of sovereign power.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁸ Agamben, Giorgio. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis: 1996, pg. 31-32. For Agamben the distinction of a people into bare or naked life and People (political existence) is a split that cannot be included in the whole, in which it is inscribed.

Inscription, and writing, are crucial for Agamben. In *Homo Sacer* he argues that the point at which bare life becomes a claim on the nature of the political as opposed to the social is the experience of “being in force without signification” (1998, 54). This consists of the “pure form” of law, a law that is pervasive, and has extreme consequences but lacks content, and which becomes indistinguishable from life (1998,53). That law which is indistinguishable from life, is also confronted by life that is “entirely transformed by law” (which is to say subject to its violence): “The absolute intelligibility of a life wholly resolved into writing corresponds to the impenetrability of a writing that, having become indecipherable, now appears as life” (1998, 55). See: Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

The suicide bomber assumes the double form of exception from the sacred and profane and hence the double capture of two deaths: belonging to God in the form of *unsacrificability* (a failed martyr) and to humans not as killable but as someone who must be endlessly tortured, excluded from both life and death. This double exclusion defines his status and the kind of violence he is subjected to, one exclusively in the realm of human action: “anything is better than this,” Zeb remarked about his encounter with the Afghan police.

But there is more at stake in this doubling than the structural isomorphism between sovereignty and *homo sacer* as extensions of “the original political relation,” or even as a figure excepted from both human and divine law. The ambiguity of the suicide bomber is also directly related to the status of the images he carries with him. For the judges those images are the indexical extensions of a future time when violence is united with compulsive self-destruction. This not only requires a displacement of speech with image, but portends a legitimizing role for the Afghan State, imagined by Judge Raheem as a force that is also repeatedly deployed in real and spectral circumstances to capture terrorists at the endlessly receding threshold of sovereignty.

The images and videos of battles and attacks on foreign military personnel, and the “anti-state” songs in Sparlay’s phone belong to two temporalities, that of causes (they make their referents come to life, which is to say they cause the crimes already depicted to happen again in an endless circularity) and that of effects, they establish incontrovertible guilt by signifying *past* involvement in subversive activity. They shuttle between the real of the past, and the violence of a future to come but do so by evacuating the present of any symbolic value: neither death nor crime actually signifies in these hearings. This logic of the simulacrum is also the logic of an absolute event. It is the “terroristic reversal” and double of ideological and military hegemony.

The vast majority of the bombers try to attack U.S., NATO, or Afghan security forces, convoys, or bases, but do so in order to exceed a symbolic circuit. They did not, for example, shoot back at security forces, throw grenades, etc. Rather, they introduce a “singularity in a generalized exchange system,” in this case inextricable from the status of the image.⁴¹⁹

Describing the attacks of September 11th, 2001 as the restoration of a real event, Baudrillard argues that a breakdown in the exchange of communication and recognition due to a total concentration of power incites an insistence on the real, on something unanswerable and outside of symbolic exchange (or modern military engagement). The spirit of terrorism is that it is an absolute event that shifts the domain of battle into the symbolic, where the rule (not unlike the gift) is a rule of escalation. Thus, symbolic power transfigures real power because modern warfare is predicated on the fantasy of zero death for oneself, a clean war that kills only those it deems killable. Given this understanding, terrorism is everywhere. It emerges as the complex and viral double of radical power, an antibody that reproduces what it is meant to protect from by necessitating the illusion of a visible conflict: “It is a conflict so unfathomable that from time to time, one must preserve the idea of war through spectacular productions such as the Gulf (production) and today Afghanistan.”⁴²⁰

But an insistence on a singularity or simulacrum that: “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary,’” while helpful in understanding wars such as the Gulf War as real-time media production, is insufficient to understanding suicide bombings.

⁴¹⁹ Baudrillard, Jean. “The Spirit of Terrorism,” in *Le Monde*. November 2, 2001.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

Suicide terror is not reducible to the genetic power of images as signs that precede imminent violence, nor can it be understood as a sovereign speaking—an address that exceeds any response and forecloses exchange. The images and videos that double as cause in the *amniyat* hearings exist in a temporality of connections, explosions, and repetitions, but also have effects in an empty or more ambiguous form of time. The actions of the suicide bomber are both in the past and yet to come.

That future is split, into that of the failed bomber who may yet detonate himself, and that of the successful suicide, whose imagistic reproduction will also generate terror. The present, the instant at which defendants like Sparlay can be declared guilty or dead, is displaced in this logic as suicide brings its referent (a fictional death) into existence, or into a visual form (the videos and images on his phone), so that it can establish a basis for future repetition—if released, the bomber will try again. This is not only the genetic power of the image, though it is certainly an outcome of its fetishization, but an insistence on the repetition of a primary event (self-destruction) as that which will remain self-same in subsequent iterations—and demonstrable in the realm of images. It is not the event that is the same, but the effect of terror. The images in question are as much surrogates of prior realities, as they are harbingers of doom.

The Afghan State's authority and juridical sovereignty emerges at this point, as the liminal point between isomorphic repetitions. But what is missing in the transcripts, and from the images, is the idea of difference and what else the defendants might desire from the future. A few weeks after this hearing, I returned for another series of hearings, but did not know that the first defendant was Nasim's (the prosecutor) uncle until Judge Raheem interrupted the session to clarify: "Fatima, do you realize that he is the prosecutor's uncle?" I was shocked. "His real uncle," I asked the judge?

“Yes, yes, his *saka* (real-biological) uncle. An interesting case isn’t? And they say there is no justice in Afghanistan. Justice is when a nephew reads the charges against his own *saka* uncle. *That is democracy* (emphasis mine). He could have covered up this entire case, but he didn’t. His own nephew taking on his case. And he refused a lawyer. I asked him if he was sane and he said he was sane. But the real insanity is on a different scale. Every year some 3,700 students (law students) are processed like a machine processes products. *The problem is with public institutions* (emphasis mine). They do what they do without logic (*beh mantiq*). No private school would churn out thousands of students per year ... we used to have *nizâm* (law and order). Someone once told me a story about Mullah Omar, who said that even when we (members of the Taliban movement) could barely afford to buy wheat, in those days one *qiran* (approximately one pence) could get you three *seers* (approximately twenty-four kilos) of wheat, but even when they could not afford it they kept households together, communities safe, they kept this nation. They maintained political sovereignty. Mullah Omar had warned that if we do not pay careful attention, especially during times when one cannot guarantee even the price of wheat, if we are not careful this nation will slip from our hands.”

The Guest (Mehmân)

These remarks, and those attributed to Mullah Omar, who was the widely recognized leader of the Taliban movement from 1994 until his mysterious death in 2013 (which was officially confirmed by the Taliban in 2015), recast national sovereignty as meaningful relations of exchange, and the expectation and possibility of value in the familial and economic realms. The origin of the Taliban movement, which began in Kandahar in 1994, and quickly extended into major Afghan cities after the fall of Kabul in 1996, is located in popular discourse as a response to the kidnapping and rape of two young sisters who were kept prisoners on a local commander’s private military compound in the city of Kandahar. Mullah Omar is rumored to have galvanized his young students, and hence the name the Taliban (the Students), into confronting and killing the commander and freeing the young girls.

The movement’s rapid consolidation and rise to power is beyond the purview of this chapter, and has been considered in depth alongside the Pakistani’s Inter Services Intelligence agency’s pivotal role in facilitating access for Western oil companies to Central Asia via oil and

gas pipelines in Southern Afghanistan.⁴²¹ But despite the complexities of these proxy interests and the manifestation of global capital in the sudden popularity and military success of the movement, the insistence on the liberation of two young women as the condition that enabled the rise of the movement as a national phenomenon speaks to an unconscious fascination with the restoration of the symbolic as both the order of meaningful exchange (of women and commodities) and as the ground of political authority.

Mullah Omar became infamous after the September 11th attacks, which emblazoned him in popular and military discourse as the protector of Osama Bin Laden, whom he refused to extradite to the United States on account of Bin Laden being his *mehmân*, his guest.⁴²² That refusal was cited as the immediate cause for the U.S. and NATO invasion of Afghanistan in October of 2001, and as a reckless privileging of honor over the movement's self-preservation. It was deemed, in the same media sphere that would put a ten-million-dollar price on Mullah Omar's head as one of the world's most wanted terrorists, as self-destructive.⁴²³ Thus, when Judge Raheem's thoughts drift from Sparlay's trial (Nasim's uncle) to the price of wheat, the *nizâm* of the Taliban and the relationship between exchange and political sovereignty, the kinds

⁴²¹ Rashid, Ahmed. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. 5th ed. Yale Nota Bene Books, 2001.

⁴²² Osama Bin Laden had been living in Afghanistan since the 1980's, when he fought the Soviet army alongside the Mujahideen.

⁴²³ Anderson, Jon Lee. "The Ballad of Mullah Omar," in *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2015

Burns, John F. and Wren, Christopher. "Without Evidence, the Taliban Refuses to Turn Over bin Laden," in *The New York Times*, September 21, 2001

The State Department's "Rewards for Justice" program lists Mullah Omar as a wanted terrorist and offered \$10 million for information leading to his capture or death. See: https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/mullah_omar.html

of symbolic relations that have destructive iterations (like when the honor of saving two young women transforms into the disaster of trying to save Osama Bin Laden) also become the content of a discourse on the sovereignty of the Afghan State, which must re-ground its legitimacy despite the failures of kinship and divine intervention. Mullah Omar warned his followers that their Islamic Government might “slip” from their hands despite their perception that they had created *the* Islamic caliphate of the Muslim world.

The protection of Osama Bin Laden as a “guest,” transforms an orientation towards what cannot be known or understood as a function of law (the Taliban did not cite refuge as Osama Bin Laden’s human or political right) into the interruption of the “self,” (or host) and more importantly, a total dissolution of sovereignty. This association, and unconscious fear, orients the judges’ thinking in trials where a “guest” arrives as one marked by a conflation of criminality with self-destruction.⁴²⁴ If it is true, as Derrida suggests, that we do not know what hospitality is because it directs us towards strangers we await, and because it exceeds itself in order to become possible; in these cases, the turn towards unconditional hospitality can also be understood as an expectation of excessive violence.⁴²⁵ This has tremendous implications for how the Afghan State is imagined.

To think the arrival of a *mehmân* (guest) is to think an unforeseeable future or event marked by a radical openness as opposed to the conservation of the present, or the master’s

⁴²⁴ While conditional hospitality (one based on rights and laws) sustains the threshold of the patron or host (who remains the master of his home), unconditional hospitality does not have this paradoxical (or parasitical) condition.

⁴²⁵ Derrida, Jacques. “Hospitality.” *Angelika* 5, no. 3 (2000).

home. Guests arrive in the space between alterity and presence. They are like pure events: “irruptive, unmotivated” obeying “nothing, except perhaps principles of disorder” and they must “perturb the order of causalities...they must, in an instant, at a single blow, bring into relation luck, chance, the aleatory, *tukhē*, with the freedom of the dice throw, with the donors gift throw.”⁴²⁶ These two understandings of time correspond to *différance* as a bounded engagement with difference, and the unconditional deferment of *any* presence. Thus, as Pheng Cheah reminds us: “The movement of deconstruction *takes place in and is* the transaction between absolute alterity and the order of presence.”⁴²⁷ Deconstruction and the event, such as the arrival of a *mehmn* ground themselves in this aporia of time—a time that cannot be derived from the sovereign time of the state because the political is a form of presence and capacity, it is an ontology of presence that positive forms of political organization put into practice.⁴²⁸ In its democratic manifestations, this entails another paradoxical effect. Because we not only live in time as presence but also encounter it as a radical alterity that *gives* time, that enables endless deferment— democracy mirrors this displacement in the form of the representation it enables and forecloses. Liberal electoral democracy suspends the freedom of representation it pursues through a privileging of majoritarian rule. It involves a turning, an alternation and slipping that enables *ipseity* (freedom, or sovereignty of the subject) only through circulation and exchange: “The absolute freedom of a finite being can be equitably shared only in the space-time of a “by

⁴²⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. University Of Chicago Press, 1994, pg 122-123.

⁴²⁷ Cheah, Pheng, and Suzanne Guerlac, eds. *Derrida and the Time of the Political*. First edition, paperback issue edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009, pg. 76.

⁴²⁸ Derrida, 1994, 122-123.

turns,” and thus only a double *circulation*: on the one hand, the circulation of the circle provisionally transfers power from one to the other...on the other hand, the circulation of the circle, through the return of this “by turns,” makes the final and supreme power come back *to itself, to the itself of self, to the same, as itself.*”⁴²⁹

Democracy unfolds in this turning, this “untimely” place that is out of joint and entails an exposure to something “wholly other” that enables time and life, ruptures and suspensions that suggest a democracy to come, that is not “self-same” and yet to be realized. In this sense, democracy cannot be known in advance (like the pure gift and guest)—it requires a “transcendent exteriority that is the ground of appearance but cannot itself be known because it is unconditioned and cannot appear.”⁴³⁰ This exteriority cannot be imagined by the judges, for they continuously assert a collapse between the alterity of the future (*ayendeh*) and the surety of self-destructive compulsion, a narrative drive that compels not only a fictive repetition but also endows the state with the anticipatory power to forestall absolute futurity, to insist on presencing (stilling, naming, capturing, interrogating, and visualizing through images) the radical persons that enable an encounter with the incalculable, or as Judge Raheem put it, that precipitate a time when: “this nation will *slip* from our hands.”

⁴²⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. 1 edition. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005, pg. 24, 45-47.

⁴³⁰ For Cheah this distinction between Derrida’s *à-venir* from the Kantian idea is the attempt to invoke an unconditionality beyond presence and beyond self-present mastery but not reducible to the insufficiency of cognitive faculties. In that understanding, we use regulative ideals because our cognitive faculties are limited, and so we proceed as if ideals are actualizable: “with regard to their practical use, regulative ideas outline an ideal horizon that is infinitely deferred precisely because they are not actualizable but can only be asymptotically approximated by our rational endeavors.” (Cheah, 2009, 81-82).

This tension between the inconceivable and the grounding of political legitimacy in an ability to forestall self-destruction is also significant because it depends on the loss of a previous symbolic order, one that instituted the political as a manifestation of patriarchal authority, and hence as the kinds of self-destruction that animate sexual and symbolic economies of desire. Thus, when Judge Raheem says to me: “True justice is when a nephew prosecutes his own biological uncle,” he describes for us not only the centrality of familial angst (and it is painfully common) in constituting ideological fantasy—“and they say there is no justice in Afghanistan; justice is when a nephew reads the charges against his own uncle. That is democracy,” but also the point at which the failure of representation becomes meaningful alongside a violent horizon from which the appearance of a guest, of radical difference is as much a harbinger of doom as it is the condition for political legitimacy. The judge shows that the conditional unconditionality of loyalty to family does not apply.

Ham-bistar (bed mate)

They give a weak and feeble man, not old just weak, a chair to sit on.

Judge Raheem: “What is your name? Do you speak Persian or Pashto?”

U: “Kandahar. I speak Pashto.”⁴³¹

Judge Raheem: “Were you in Wazir Akbar Khan? In the Wazir Akbar Khan hospital itself?”

U. “Yes I was in the hospital.”

⁴³¹ Kandahar is the city he is from, not his first name. Since he does not give his name, I will call him U (though Judge Raheem later calls him Aziz Rahman).

Judge Raheem: “In the hospital you say?”

U: “Yes.”

Judge Raheem: “Are you ill?”

U: “I was sick.”

Judge Raheem: “Where did you go afterwards?”

U: “I went home.”

Judge Raheem: “Do you know Qari Abdullah? Or Ehsân the engineer?”

Judge Sahil arrives, late interrupting the questioning...

Judge Raheem: “His name is Aziz Rahman...”

Judge Sahil: “Does he have a lawyer?”

Judge Raheem: “Yes he does. His lawyer is present. To summarize for you, while he was in the Wazir Akbar Khan hospital a Taliban commander met him and the two of them left together. They were both guests (*mehmân*) somewhere. They spent the night together, in that house, as guests together, and for this they have been given the death sentence (*hokm-e-idâm*) by the Taliban.”

These notes are not an abridged account of the proceedings; they constitute them in their entirety. I have listened to the audio file repeatedly thinking that I missed something that could elucidate the proximity between being a patient in the *Wazir Akbar Khan* hospital in Kabul, a *mehmân* (guest) and given the death sentence (*hokm-e-idâm*). U was a guest, both in the hospital which is the best in Kabul for providing emergency care particularly for bomb associated trauma like the loss of limb or dismemberment (“orthopedic” care) , and constitutes one of the only public institutions where any form of care can be sought, and at an unnamed host’s house, where

he went with a Taliban commander who picked him up from the hospital.⁴³² The immediate collapse of being “guests together” and punished so abominably, this time by a parallel state that has the sovereign authority to take life in places like Kandahar, is mediated in this instance by a self-evident destructive drive. That is described by Judge Raheem as “being guests together,” signifying prohibited sexual relations between men, though they occur widely in Kandahar and are the object of humor as much as they are of violent reprisal: What does a bird do when it flies over Kandahar? It uses one wing to cover its ass.

To be guests for the night is to have engaged in self-destructive behavior, interrupting not just the stability of identity, but undertaking a radical dissolution of life that obviates narrativization and displaces any causal basis. For the judge’s summary did not refer to any cause (*dalâil* or *sabab shodan*) and displaced its significance through the sufficiency of desire. To want the other is evidence enough. It is to have precipitated an event that is excised from causal relations, from the context of time and social relations. It is to substitute the bonds of language with the violence of an eruptive force that has the capacity not only to be future and past but also cause and effect. This extends from sexual to social relations in general. Consider the example of a group of men, who visited their friend to congratulate him on the birth of his daughter, and who were subsequently attacked by the Afghan National Army and foreign military personnel in a gun battle:

⁴³² In 2012, the year of these hearings, the International Red Cross and Ministry of Public Health finished extensive repairs on the hospital. I was struck by how it was always mentioned in local news coverage after a bombing as the hospital where victims were taken. According to some estimates, during the Afghan Civil War of the 1990’s one-third of Kabul’s wounded were treated there. Between 1996 and 2004, Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital admitted 71,500 patients and performed 50,000 operations. See: <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/693cev.htm>.

X's lawyer:⁴³³ "In the name of God the most merciful, the most beneficial. I am the defendant's attorney ... Your honor we are talking about a (*manzil*) a home, and the *sahib* (master/patron) of that home is saying that there was in fact no firefight on that day, that no such *wâkiyat* (calamity) transpired and he was forced into confessing a crime he did not commit and which never took place. I urge you to consider the prosecution's case in detail, because it does not hold. It is full of errors. The mistakes in the research of the prosecutor are obvious in the *dossiyeh* (file), it is apparent in the pages of the file. It is not necessary for me to even speak further on this issue. Just look at the papers (*waraq*) in the *dossiyeh* (file). For example, it says that the 20th is the date of this *kharab-karî terroristî* (literally: terroristic mischief) but nothing happened on that date and then again it says it was the 24th. Is it the 20th or 24th? If they are not even sure when this transpired how can we be sure it did at all?"

The judges speak over each other and laugh at the attorney's reasoning...

Judge Raheem: "Ok ok so there was admittedly some confusion on the part of the National Directorate of Security in recording the right date, and whether this was on the 20th or 24th. It's just an honest mistake."

The prosecutor: "*Bas* (stop) trying to hoodwink us."

More laughing...

The prosecutor: "What are you trying to pull here? The 20th or the 24th, what does it matter that the NDS made a mistake? The point, and there is a point, is that there was a massive firefight at your client's home and it was directed against the Afghan National Army (ANA) and foreign military personnel. That happened. What is the point of all this talk? Dates and details ... a bunch of *beh manâ* (inane) excuses. It's prattle."

The defense attorney is now also laughing with the judges. He leaves his thick manilla folder and walks out in good spirits—"Alright, alright ... I'll be back next week. You know I will be."

Judge Raheem: "Give him 6 years. Get him from anywhere you can. If an *ignorant, illiterate, primitive farmer type* (emphasis mine) does something like this that's one thing. We assume he does not know better; he was under the influence of the Taliban or some mullah, or the influence of propaganda. But when someone literate who has a college education, four years of an education for God's sake, does something like this, the kind of person this society awaits eagerly so he can contribute something to it, when

⁴³³ This defendant was also not named by either the judge or his attorney. I will call him X.

he does something like this what can we expect from the others? From the future? *Begirish* (literally: get him, hold him still). Get him for *ozviyat* (membership in the Taliban), *tabligh* (incitement) and *kharab-karī* (mischief).”

A second defendant, Said Mavaz Pasha is called in and for the first time the case summary is read aloud by the prosecutor.

“The State vs. Said Mavaz Pasha. Said Mavaz Pasha, famously known in *guru-ha-e-terroristi* (terroristic circles) as Baran was arrested by National Directorate of Security (NDS) forces. Nūr Agha and Dilawar who are known Taliban commanders went to the house of the *nambordehgan* (aforenamed) at 9pm to congratulate him on the birth of his daughter. Three hours later, at approximately midnight, state security and foreign military personnel were sent to the *manzil* (residence) where the aforementioned were all heavily armed. They fought security forces in a heavy round of engagement, and resisted them and eventually managed to escape. I escaped with them and this is in and of itself proof that I am an affiliate of and actively involved with the Taliban.”

The prosecutor shifts back to third person and describes the contents of a fax #295 dispatched from the NDS, which details Said Mavaz Pasha as the leader of a fifteen person Taliban group based in Kunar (a province approximately one hundred miles east of Kabul where Abdul Wali the victim of CIA torture was also from), and the photos and contents of his mobile phone which was obtained and subject to “technical analysis,” and proved contact with Taliban commanders and other “anti-state” groups who were in communication with him. Just at that moment Judge Raheem’s cell phone rang out, and a classic ringtone common on Samsung flip-phones fills the room. He answers it ... the prosecutor continues:

“The aforementioned is very loyal to the Taliban and actively involved in their criminal activities, he even plays a leadership role and on that night with Taliban commanders he engaged in a firefight from the residence against foreign and state forces. Phone records illustrate his contact with Taliban commanders and his notebook had the numbers and names of other Taliban commanders written in it and illustrates his opposition to the state. His guilt is obvious. He must be punished according to code 19 of anti-terrorist laws and for being armed and fighting foreign military personnel, all of this is proven by the images and photos on his Nokia cellphone.”

Judge Raheem translates this in Pashto for Said Mavaz Pasha, but adds the words “sim *kart*” and “Afghan *beseem kart*” (Afghan wireless card), as an evidentiary emphasis in a case already so overdetermined by the force of communication technology. Judge Raheem’s phone rings again, he answers and hangs up ...

Judge Raheem: “Do you have anything to add Pasha Sahib?”

Said Mavaz Pasha: “No.”

How do we begin to understand these different guests, who arrived as lovers and friends and left as criminals in a context where the democratic possibility of individual representation and equality grounds the sovereignty of the Afghan State, but where its restructured judicial system is the striking scene of linguistic failure and technological (particularly imagistic) fetish? The images and contents of the X’s and Said Mavaz Pasha’s Nokia acquire tremendous truth value when oral expression and the intermediation of their attorneys fail. They disclose what cannot be communicated through language alone, a futile endeavor that enervates the judges and prosecutor with excess: “What are you trying to pull here ... That happened. What is the point of all this talk...?”

The important point is that this is not a simple fetishizing of the visible as truth, despite the general fascination with appearance that infuses these cases and the U.S. military’s larger counterinsurgency campaign. In that imaginary, of which the judges’ fascination with images is a reflection, a premium on conquering invisibility is cathected onto defeating terrorism and nation-building. The possibility of unseen military value (and spectacular surplus economic value underground) orients an optical world where Afghans (usually men) are to be made visible as targets of war by technologies of visual and aural capture (biometric technology, aerial

surveillance, intercepted phone calls). Thus, if for military forces, valuable targets are captured after they are rendered visible (while sitting anxiously in their car, walking idly on the street, crouched by a roadside, in other words taking cover under the everyday of urban life); for Afghans (including those targeted by these technologies) economic value (the promise of the war) is presumed to lie in wait behind various structures of obfuscation and control: a cordoned Green Zone, a prohibitive and corrupt bureaucracy, the formal & scientific processes of mineral assaying, and most importantly the earthen ground and its mineral treasures.

But if communication and surveillance technologies of war are subordinate to a logic of making things appear as targets and sources of value, the contents of X's and Said Mavaz Pasha's phones (like those of Sparlay and Salar) become the site of a particular speaking: they communicate a putative desire to abolish the current state. They speak of excess. This bond between the imagistic and political subversion is also the story of media technology and state centralization in Afghanistan. During the early and mid 20th century, media technology was imagined to neutralize the effects of linguistic (and ethnic) diversity on the Afghan State's attempt to consolidate its authority and monopoly on the means of violence.

Moreover, photographic and cinematic images (ranging from pictures of gunships and tanks to screenings of *Night Train to Munich* and *Conquest of Poland* in the British Embassy) were disseminated by British authorities out of a fear of a violent tribal rebellion on the Afghan frontier. In both cases, images eschewed the need for linguistic mediation and became the fabulous guarantee of a discourse that presumed an isomorphism between the excesses of violent illiteracy and the powers of mass media propaganda. These semiotic and experiential ruptures were experienced as direct threats, not just to orality, but eventually to the Afghan State itself. As we read, on April 11, 1941 the Afghan government banned all its subjects from attending cinema

shows in foreign embassies when a film on the Red Army intimidated Afghan military officers, threatening them with the notion of the end to Afghan modernism and the Afghan State through the incursions of industrial military violence.⁴³⁴

The danger of the unknown unfolds both as the destructive force of modernity and, in X's, Said Mavaz Pasha's, and U's cases as literal hospitality. The nature of this transgression, which solicits no further explanation from the judges, can be grasped in its complexity alongside this history and the profound ambivalence with which Afghan modernists and government officials (ranging from King Amanullah to the poet and journalist Mahmud Tarzī) received the ingress of European modernity; a modernity that was perceived as the outward form or appearance of a more devastating capitalist and colonial violence that threatened to cast Africa and Asia into “a confusion of fire and smoke,” as Tarzī warned. In the contemporary moment, the power of images to communicate the violence of dissolution is understood as already emerging from within, burgeoning out of Afghan society as terroristic mischief and expressing itself as *kharab-karī*—a mischief that includes social relations and homosexuality.

This violence also assumes a desire to not know. The judges did not ask what else transpired during those visits. We do not know what happened to the other family members, or even the newborn child, where the men obtained their weapons, where they were later found hiding—the horrors everyone involved endured. We do not know how the male lovers met, if they had other lovers, who their host was, what the circumstance surrounding their invitation and U's being in the Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital were. In the space between hospitality and total

⁴³⁴ See Extract from Intelligence Summary No. 13 for week ending the 28th March, 1941 and extract from intelligence summary no. 15 for week ending 11th April, 1941, IOR: L/PS/12/460, in India Office Records and Private Papers, The British Library.

dissolution, “anti-state” violence becomes the same thing as unmitigated and inexplicable self-destruction. This unconscious association, is generalizable for the judges to the Afghan population, and expressed as paternalistic wrath by Judge Raheem especially when he sentences X, the formally educated and literate perpetrator, whom he otherwise fantasizes as becoming a civic minded citizen, a son of the nation-state. Judge Raheem said: “If an *ignorant, illiterate, primitive farmer type* (emphasis mine) does something like this that’s one thing... But when someone literate who has a college education... does something like this...when *he* does something like this what can we expect from the others?” He instructed the other judges to *bigeerish* (get him, hold him still by way of leveraging new criminal laws) in order to pad his sentence.

The attempt to hold down a figure, in this case perceived to use his literacy to undermine the sovereignty of the state, is an attempt to capture the prospect of dissolution—typified as the guests and terrorists who threaten the Afghan State by forcing it to encounter what it cannot know in advance. These figurations are isomorphic with the rural Afghans that Afghan translators, such as Matin and Zia lament. They imagine that literacy humanizes them in a war that does not distinguish between civilians and insurgents and provides them with economic opportunity by attaching exchange-value to “linguistic expertise,” or fluency. The enhanced biometric technologies and intelligence gathering practices of the U.S. military, which include restricting the physical movements of Afghan translators, are inextricable from this commodification and anxiety, and posit a pernicious relationship between physical movement and seditious intention. Although this is not reducible to the mis-recognition of a lack (their own inability to move freely, visit family members in other provinces etc) as excessive freedom in the other (the rural Afghans they encounter on missions), in combat and interrogation encounters,

translators conflate linguistic colloquialism or contracted speech, such as unpronounced or “skipped” vowels, or pronouns such as “I” and “we,” as the surface manifestation of an underlying refusal to not only settle on direct objects in speech, but in the landscape more generally—threatening major cities like Kabul (home of some of the most expensive real estate in the world) with a deluge of potential settlers and would-be squatters, but also with the kind of insurgency imagined to descend on Kabul from its Southern and Eastern provinces.

These linguistic practices are also indexical of the history of political suspicion, especially during World War One when British intelligence officers suspected Afghans of engaging in oral propaganda (a “whispering campaign”) along the British-Afghan frontier and in response to which a new culture of communication technology was ambivalently introduced, tethering political speech to the forms of expression enabled by telegraphic, print and eventually cinematic media. In the contemporary moment, the receding power of linguistic representation has enabled new forms of resisting signs (for example the appropriation of televisual and radio voices as “real,” resulting in retaliatory vengeance against film actors). But the effect of literacy is a paradoxical undermining of the state’s political authority, a literacy imagined to contain more force than the actual willingness to engage in a firefight against state and foreign military personnel, a violence that exhausts itself in the face of superior weaponry. Let us recall that for Afghan translators and civilians the use of superior weapons (including the atomic bomb) was maniacally heralded as the only way to defeat an opposition that mimetically incorporates other weapon and technology platforms into its insurgency (rockets, improvised explosive devices, the old weapons stocks from the Soviet-Afghan war). Judge Raheem's emphasis displaces the violence of military engagement with the violence-to-come of literacy, a parasitical force that must be contained before it undermines the state and its bureaucratic regime.

The violence of writing and the indeterminacy of a future in which *even* literate Afghans like X fight the Afghan State also harbors the dangerous unknown of hospitality, of moving to places and into homes where one does not originate. The narrative of X's attorney, the prosecution and Judge Raheem all displace the violence of a U.S. led counterinsurgency, which associates social gatherings with terroristic subversion, with the radical internalizing of the other as a figure who is capable of engaging in violence. This is different from the story of an amorous night between two men in which sexual desire is criminalized and dislodges the imagistic form of evidence so obvious in the other cases. If in the former case the governing fictions of military protocol and its culture of suspicion enable a conflation between guests and insurgents and an anxiety about the future as a horizon of repetition—"What can we expect from others? From the future?"— in the story of the lovers it was a criminal desire already disassociated from the realm of what can be seen, or spoken about. It was recognizable but unspeakable. Hence, despite the necessity in Sharia (Islamic law) of having seven eye witnesses in order to prosecute for adultery or fornication (the witnesses must see the actual moment of penetrative sex in order for it be prosecutable), no witnesses were present in court nor referenced. What is more, no images or cell phone data, no "technical analysis" was culled. We do not know if the lovers called each other, texted, or shared pictures? We do not know what, if anything, was seen?

But most significantly, there was no anxiety about a repetition of the crime, as there was with X. The judge did not ask if U had other male lovers, if he planned on marrying a woman if he was pardoned, why he did it, who initiated the sex, the history of his sexuality and so on. It was an almost silent proceeding, save for the summary exchanged between Judges Raheem and Sahil. Thus, if U's sexual desires are an explosive force as dangerous as an actual bomb (and hence why he appears in *amniyat* and not Kabul's civil courthouse) it is also true that the

collective desire of the judges and prosecution, as representatives of the state, was to not know. That unknowing is different from the kind of indeterminacy that follows the arrival of a guest (and which manifests as a night of passion). For the judges, it grounds the case as an obvious manifestation of immediately self-destructive behavior, unmediated by someone else's literacy or hospitality. In fact, the host who let the two men spend the night was never mentioned.

This desire, which cannot be reduced to the kind of "mischief" that describes seditious activity, obviates the recourse to imagery or technological evidence that is so over-determining in the other cases I've cited, all of which were categorized as crimes against the state. Through this crime of passion, a desire to not know orients the judges toward thinking the accidental, or the customary relations that arise from the ordinary convergences of urban life and the connective powers of language (being in Wazir Akbar Khan, meeting the commander, being invited to someone's house, having a conversation, forging an interpersonal connection, deciding to spend the night together, in short: social relations) as the unmitigated danger of forces we cannot understand until their arrival manifests as self-destructive violence, but not necessarily a violence that threatens the state.

This disinterest in the details of the case also cannot be reduced to a reticence about speaking about homosexual acts, though that presumption encrusts contemporary media discourse on the nature of Afghan (and Muslim) masculinity and honor as particularly vulnerable to shame, a presumption that then determines the forms of torture that are enacted on the bodies of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Bagram or for example when the dead bodies of Taliban fighters

were urinated on by four U.S. Marines.⁴³⁵ Sexual violence occurs not only in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, but also in Afghan detention centers, and the extended battlefields of the War on Terror and it is important to highlight that in the *amniyat* hearings, especially of suicide bombers who had been tortured by Afghan authorities, the defendants spoke, when given the chance, candidly about the forms of sexual violence they experienced, including anal sodomy. This was expressed not only in my presence but *directly* to me: “Sister I am sorry to speak to you like this, but you must know that in prison they forced me to sit on glass bottles!” one unforgettable defendant exclaimed. The matter is more complicated than the question of sexual or suicidal desire, which are nonetheless brought into a literal relation. The real *mort* is at the hands of the state, a state that is equally in the grip of a drive it does not understand:

“But the *real* (emphasis mine) insanity is on a different scale. Every year some 3,700 students (law students) are processed like a machine processing products. The problem is with public institutions. They do what they do without logic (*beh mantiq*). No private school would churn out thousands of students per year....we used to have *nizâm* (law and order).” Someone once told me a story about Mullah Omar, who said that even when we (members of the Taliban movement) could barely afford to buy wheat, in those days one *qiran* (approximately one pence) could get you three *seers* (approximately twenty-four kilos) of wheat, but even they could not afford it they kept households together, communities safe, they kept this nation...if we are not careful this nation will slip from our hands.”

For Judge Raheem, an exchange relation is conjured as a pedagogical example of how to fasten the state’s own uncontrollable urges, which will otherwise abet the monstrous breakdown of *nizâm* (law and order). *Nizâm* is a redoubling of exchange relations, such as the realizing of value in one pence for wheat. But along that grain, he imagines the state’s negation in the wake of repetitive violence, a violence that its functionaries do not recognize and which constitutes an

⁴³⁵ Bowley, Graham, and Matthew Rosenberg. “U.S. Deplores Video of Marines Urinating on Taliban.” *The New York Times*, January 12, 2012.

exposure to radical dissolution. In Judge Raheem's questions to X, the gay lover, he repeatedly asks about the Wazir Akbar Khan hospital—"Were you in the Wazir Akbar Khan hospital itself? At the hospital you say? Where did you go afterwards?" The Wazir Akbar Khan hospital, famous for its treatment of double amputees and hence a literal site of groundlessness for those who seek care there, is culled here as an extension of a state without *nizâm*, untethered to the synthesis of value and the resultant site of uncontrollable desires, whence two men emerged as lovers.

The uncontrollable infects both the state itself and the forms of social recognition and exchange it sanctions. This is powerfully illustrated by the story of Soraya and Sohrab, a married couple, or not:

Sohrab's story:

Sohrab, a soft-spoken young man and a former police officer with the Afghan National Police (ANP) has jet-black hair and large green eyes. He recounts meeting Soraya innocently enough as he stands before Judge Raheem:

"Soraya worked at the *televizun* (an unspecified television station) where my nephew also works. It was my nephew who eventually arranged for us to speak on the telephone. We established contact through the phone. I was in touch with her directly everyday. Soraya told me about her abusive mother who prohibited her from going to college and kept her at home for domestic duties. Your honor she told me she was like a slave in that household. That she was mistreated, and suicidal and that she had tried to commit suicide several times before."

Judge Raheem: "So you'll help anyone who is a suicidal run away? Don't you know better as a member of the Afghan National Police (ANP)?"

Sohrab: "I was devastated by her story and I loved her. I helped her. I helped her run away from her mother's house and we eloped. I had a car and waited patiently outside her house as she devised a way to distract her sister."

Judge Raheem: “Was it a *saracha* (hatchback)?”⁴³⁶

Sohrab: “Yes, yes a *saracha*, a rental *saracha*. She told me she was in love with me, that she wanted to be with me and I wanted to send my family to her house to formally ask for her hand, but she said she would be beaten by her family because I am Sunni. ‘Where did you find this Sunni man?’ she said they would ask her, so she promised she would elope with me, and marry me. On the phone that afternoon she said: ‘I am dressed but my sister is in the front yard doing laundry when she goes inside, I will run out!’ We had her cousin call and divert her sister and she finally came out. We ran away. She spent one night in my house, the first night and then the following day we went to the mosque to get married. She did not accept the officiation of a Sunni cleric, she got up and performed ablutions, came back and recited verses and that’s it we were married.”

Judge Raheem: “That was your entire marriage ceremony? No dowry, no parental consent, nothing?”

Sohrab: “That was it. We were married, and a few days later my sister had a dinner party for us—we were all there, my parents, my siblings laughing having a good time and all of a sudden members of the ANP and the NDS stormed the house armed and arrested me for kidnapping.”

Soraya’s story (in absentia):

“I live in the Red Bridge neighborhood of Kabul, and was very busy with my studies at *Khatm ul-Nabi’in* (a very prestigious and private Shia University in Kabul).⁴³⁷ My father died when I was young, and I have only my mother and one uncle, and my siblings. Some man, *mard-i-nashinâs* (an unknown, strange man) somehow obtained my phone number and got in touch with me. He would stalk me on my way to school, and he threatened me explicitly and said if I uttered a word to anyone he would disseminate (*paksh kardan*) my photos all over town, plaster them everywhere or that he would kill me. One month later, I was on my way to my aunt’s house. En route, I was confronted by Sohrab. He kidnapped me. He forcibly threw me into a car and held me down. He held a poisonous handkerchief against my mouth and I lost consciousness. He took me to a house, and when I regained consciousness he told me we were in the *Karteh Nau* (new district) of Kabul.⁴³⁸ Sometimes he would tell me I was in *pol-i-charkhi* (Afghanistan’s most infamous prison, located an hour outside of Kabul). I tried to escape but I could not. Sohrab always caught me in the act. A mullah (cleric) arrived one day and told me to sign this line. I said: ‘How can I sign when my mother and uncle are not present?’ So they took my thumbs, they made it happen and that night Sohrab

⁴³⁶ White hatchback Toyotas are typically used during a car-suicide bombing, and are perceived by U.S. military convoys as especially threatening. We will discuss the white corolla in chapter six when we consider how the militarization of Kabul is spatially organized.

⁴³⁷ *Khatm ul-Nabi’in* means: The Seal of Prophets.

⁴³⁸ This is the name of a neighborhood.

forced himself on me. I tried to resist him but I could not free myself from his *chang* (literally: animalistic grip). The police eventually freed me.”

Earlier that day, before we headed out for the trials, I was speaking with Judge Raheem in his office along with a couple other court officials. He said I was in store for a special day, that one of the cases would blow me away and demonstrate the depth of social dislocation in the city. He had a large envelope on his desk with CD ROMS inside. The CDs were of Sohrab and Soraya’s wedding party—I did not see them, but one of the court officials described, in the presence of Judge Raheem who confirmed the contents, that the videos were of a party, eating, dancing, and that Soraya herself was in them and partaking in the celebrations, looking inebriated and dancing with Sohrab.

Given the explicit content of the CDs, and the brevity of some of the other hearings, I expected Sohrab to be pardoned that very day. But Judge Raheem was not convinced by his story, and postponed his decision.⁴³⁹ Moreover, he asks Sohrab if his rental car was a *saracha*, a hatchback like the cars so readily used in car-suicide bombings. This issue became one of the only legible moments for Judge Raheem in Sohrab’s story. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sohrab was pardoned and soon after released from prison. Given that he was a former police officer, the judges had tremendous sympathy for him, even though they berated him for not knowing better than to elope with a woman without her family’s consent.

In the other cases, the damning images in question were contained primarily in cellphones, and occasionally in the form of tapes, CDs and videos. These diverse images were

⁴³⁹ I asked about Sohrab several weeks later, and Judge Raheem said he was pardoned.

welded to the event of a failed suicide attack and also to the specter of repetition. In the transaction between a series of grisly blunders and foretold disasters, images acquire the peculiar dynamism of becoming.

They outlive temporal disjunctures and the symbolic failures that enable their ascension to truth-production. Above all, varied images assume an intimate, strangely vigilant relationship to the Afghan State itself, a fetishistic attachment that is imagined by the judges as a warning of more violence to come, of intensifying subversion. In one case, an elderly man in his late eighties, Mirzal, was caught as he attempted to detonate his vest and kill the governor of Ghazni, a major city eighty miles south of Kabul. In his file there were two 8 by 10 photographs in vivid color. The first was an image of him lying face-up on the floor, his tunic raised to reveal a large explosive vest strapped to his chest and the second an image of him standing with Afghan soldiers around a desk. His vest and other explosives were arranged on the desk, and he was explaining their contents to the officers who looked transfixed, taking notes. He was very frail, and walked into the courtroom wearing orange gloves and using a cane. He spoke about this pedagogical encounter in court:

“I am nearing the end of my days so I went to my local mosque and asked the imam what I could do, to help, to give back. They told me I needed to take some courses first, but that I could help by, you know, getting rid of the governor of Ghazni. I said OK, I want to do something. I took courses, very difficult courses and I learned many things...they lasted over a year and finally I was ready for the mission but I was caught. Shame! But, you can see in the photo you have that I taught the soldiers and police officers everything I know. I explained to them what these devices are, how they are made, how they are used...they learned a lot from me.”

Later that day, in the midst of deliberations Judge Raheem said to his fellow judges: “We are stuck. We find ourselves caught between the state and *jihad* (holy struggle or war). We do not know where to turn.” But they do know where to turn, for turning is already not only a move

but a circular one that rotates around images and a narrative of scenes that closes temporal and structural gaps. In the context of radical uncertainty and an ongoing insurgency, images are culled, and believed in, to bridge this gap and situate the relation between the state and its insurgent citizens within the realm of what can be seen. This relation is already burdened by a culture of visuality that has taken the country's mediasphere by storm through an amped up televisual public sphere exemplified by dozens of call-in political TV shows, as well as the cultural doppelgängers of popular American shows like "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" and "Afghan Idol." Political and cultural talk shows, televised debates, and popular TV series and soap operas redouble as a space where language is unencumbered by the actual lived reality and violence of linguistic relations that ordinary Afghans face, or the impossibility of expression so palpable in these suicide transcripts.

Unburdened by language's status as an immediate wartime technology or as a medium for expressing irreducible ideological difference, the talk show becomes the *sine qua non* of self-expression, a sphere of liberality and exchange. The suicide bomber's use of modern technology, especially the smartphone and laptop, which many Afghans use to listen to the news and their favorite shows, is in part an attempt to make these media signify the capacity for the dissemination of death. This takes us some way in understanding other incidents, such as the bombing of the coalition convoy Matin rode with in 2010 after American soldiers videotaped local Afghan men fumbling to play football—the soldiers took those videos without their consent on their smartphones. Another incident includes a film of the funeral of a suicide bomber. The film, part of a U.S. State Department propaganda campaign, depicts an imam refusing to perform the bomber's funerary rights (referred to by others in the film as a "martyr") and resulted in a

local uproar as viewers sought revenge on the imam for sacrilegious behavior, forcing the actor into months of hiding in another province.

Attending to the complex metaphoricity of these instances, and the conflation between reality and simulation requires a historical analysis of media technology in earlier contexts of technologized difference. This includes the heyday of European propaganda in Afghanistan during and after World War One, but also the more recent circulation of spectacular images such as those of President Najibullah's hanging, the Danish cartoons that lampoon Prophet Mohammad, or even the dissemination of Mullah Omar's image on the FBI's most wanted terrorist list. The refusal of representation (such as the funeral movie) becomes a catalyst behind the sheer productivity of images and its ability to make things happen in the world, to force a man into hiding or to inspire the planting of a roadside mine. Images are both accorded a literality and monovocal meaning, and they proliferate significations that inform expressions of political violence. Thus, to seek in the image what photographic ideology promised it to be, the mere excrescence of the real is also to demand not only absolute truthfulness, but political responsibility and evidentiary value.⁴⁴⁰ The demand for the punishment of the actor for the actions in the video, the refusal to admit a boundary between the world and the 'fictive' is the hallmark of the lateral, and also of a kind of magical thinking that terrorizes people with images, but also demands that the images be made real, in a repetitive sequence of events that defy representation.

⁴⁴⁰ Siegfried, Kracauer. *Theory of Film*. Princeton University Press, 1997, pg.3-9.

The magical possibilities of the image suture a structural impossibility, enabling the judges to think the Afghan State as a democratic state where self-representation is redoubled in the legal sphere despite the receding importance of linguistic representation. The power of the image is not only its ability to animate a scene of potentially spectacular violence, such as the images that circulate in the Afghan media-sphere, but its ability to communicate the specter of repetition as the impendence of a crime against the state. The anxiety about the appearance of a suicide-bombing failure, and the hypothesized reality of unremitting violence against the state and its institutions endows images with fetishistic and tutelary powers. The potential ephemerality of the state, and for the judges, the challenge of thinking the Afghan State as a perduring reality requires them to think both fetishistically and laterally: not only does photographic content diminish the meaning of linguistic exchange (ranging from the narratives of the bombers to the futile interventions of their attorneys), but it flanks the state along a horizontal surface of appearances, where future events proliferate as an endless chain of “repeat offenses,” or under the guise of guests, sexual affairs, literacy, and even marriage. This eliminates the singularity of death (which never occurred in these cases but will keep occurring nonetheless, like in the case of X) and subjects Afghan men to a maelstrom of suspicion powerful enough, for example, to turn a congratulatory visit into a gun battle.

The larger problem of repetition occurs as a corollary of the fact of mechanical reproducibility that stages for the judges a compulsive death drive. But the question of photographic fetish is not reducible to the dissemination versus fixation of belief, as Metz would maintain, nor nostalgia. It is a recognition of lack as the genetic form that also enables thinking the US backed Afghan state, here a combination of dynamic elements culled from the absence of traditional symbolic structures for grounding the real (i.e kin based social relations and exchange

systems, language, biological heredity, traditional gender relations, a recognizable legal code based on Islamic law (*sharia*)).

The Afghan State emerges from these failures. This grounds its legitimacy in the ability to forestall encounters with what it cannot know in advance—in capturing and immobilizing the kinds of difference that threaten it with not only the prospect of dissolution but with absolute futurity. Judge Raheem’s statement that they are “caught between jihad and the state,” and hence the forces of sovereignty and violent resistance, illustrates not only the existential pulls of an ongoing insurgency but also the context in which persons, like suicide bombers, embed themselves in the social landscape and cultural unconscious as guests, as persons we cannot know in advance and who invite destruction. There is, perhaps, also a perceivable fear of strangers that forms the new backdrop to this resignification and revalorization of the guest. If there is one final fetish imparted by these hearings it is the thought of national political ideology as democratic representation, where the interruption of time, guests, language, bombs, insurgents, names, missing fathers and compulsive forces aggrandize the idea of a democratic state rather than exemplify its structural contamination.

7 Prosthetics

“Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times... we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.” Sigmund Freud

“There are many who don't know themselves, or God, who don't know language or who don't have the language to tell someone else what they've been through. They are the mute bystanders in this tragedy.” Timūr

Unexploded Ordnances

The city of Bagrām (a name that means “the city”) was founded as Paropamisus, or Alexandria on the Caucasus in the third century BC by *Sikander e Kabeer* (Alexander the Great). It was a double city, sharing its elephant-god (Grecized as Zeus) and wealth with Kapisa, the native city on the East side of the river. Bagram was the capital of Paropamisadae, one of the great satrapys of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom and the Hellenic world. It was a gateway to India and Bactria (modern day Balkh) with vast plains that extended from the Hindu Kush to the Paropamisus Mountains (*Safed Koh*) in the West. Numismatic and literary evidence depict a rich center of economic and political activity. Bilingual coins were minted on behalf of Eucratides and Pantaleon, others depict the myth of Pollox and Castor—an emblem still used by the Afghan Central Bank. To the East, the silver mines of the Panjshir Valley provided the mint at Bagram with metal, and made it as desirable a city to conquer as Bactria had been for its gold.⁴⁴¹

The ancient ground in modern Bagram, a city whose material and mythological history has been reduced to a metonym for the U.S. military's largest base in Afghanistan, behooves

Tarn, William Woodthrope. *The Greeks in Bactria and India*. Cambridge University Press. 1938 pg. 104.

vigilance. Local Afghans living in and around Bagrâm are constantly looking at the ground, both for treasured scraps of metal and for the unexploded ordinances that are littered across its extended plains and especially in a grassy unmarked area the U.S. military calls “the East River Range.” More so than anywhere else in Afghanistan, the ground in Bagram is perilous. Rockets ranging from Hellfire missiles to 2.75 inch mortars and 40 mm grenades are the strewn remainders of battle simulation and war practice sessions— simulated battles that entail thunderous Apache helicopters flying overhead and indiscriminately firing explosives onto the sandy terrain. The ground, by virtue of its soft consistency, extends the deadly capacities of explosives by absorbing the force that would otherwise make them explode on impact. When these unexploded ordinances do detonate, it is usually because they are accidentally stepped on by civilians and children who unknowingly traipse into minefields and lose their legs.

Silver mines (*ma'adan*) were at the origin of Bagram’s illustrious past as much as explosive land mines (*mein*) are part of its modern pathos. The military sense of the word mine is born of the fourteenth century practice of tunneling underground in order to explode enemy positions—a successful tactic used during the Battle of Ghazni by British forces in 1839. It signifies a form of underground and overground warfare as much as it does arduous labor and a source of coveted value. Like the city of Bagram, the word mine is a double. It always gestures towards the shared history of warfare and mining, empire and metal. But in Bagram, that historical and etymological duality, and the relationship to dispossession, is literally inhabited in a dangerous simultaneity when Afghans go to minefields (and the surrounding grasslands) to feed their livestock or to search for the scrap metals they sell in local bazaars for one dollar per

fifteen pounds.⁴⁴² To scavenge on a precarious surface (for scrap metal, second-hand goods, firewood, plastics, etc.) rather than mine the metallic underground, is to risk the very ground that one walks on. Mining heavily mined ground is risking the loss of one's limbs, the very capacity to walk on, touch and feel the ground. The undetonated mines are a trace not only of the violence to come, but also of the myriad natural and political forces that combined in the ancient alluvial river valley of Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan to saturate its ground with deposits of clay, and gravel but also with treasure and metal. It is the surface, rather than the underground that is the site of a double displacement: value is displaced by loss, ground is displaced by groundlessness.

This chapter is about the earthen and causal ground. It is as much about the predations of war on the earthen ground as it is about ascendent notions of causality and kismet among those *Kabulis* most beholden to the volatilities of counterinsurgency and wartime collaboration. It commences by considering groundlessness as a literal manifestation of the loss of limbs associated with decades of land mine and improvised explosive violence. Over the course of three decades land mines have devastated agricultural production and Afghan bodies, as well as the capacity of the Afghan State to control vast swathes of territory. The rise of this spectacular violence owes itself both to a discourse of agricultural rehabilitation, which increasingly came to supplement the general aims of Afghan modernism, as well as the chemical properties of calcium ammonium nitrate (the synthetic fertilizer used to make home-made bombs)—at once a remedy and poison introduced to make the Afghan ground fertile. If the force of chemical explosives is sometimes contained by the failures of suicide bombing, it is also the case that large military-

⁴⁴² Sieff, Kevin. "Next to U.S firing range in Afghanistan, a village of victims" in *The Washington Post*. May 26, 2012.

grade land mines and small improvised bombs are strewn across the landscape and readily activated, not by a suicide bomber, but by the force of a footstep.

What emerges from this history of precarious walking is an intense relationship not only to the severed bodies that become the objects of a prosthetic discourse of rehabilitation, but also to the governing fiction of mobility—the promise of the Afghan State to millions of Afghan refugees who returned from Pakistan and Iran to cities like Kabul where, like so many impoverished *Kabulis*, they were incorporated into the dragnet of a war economy predicated on *prosthetic bodies*—the availability of Afghans as human armor for their expatriate and military counterparts. Prosthetic bodies are crucial to contemporary war-making and especially the doctrine of counterinsurgency, which is predicated on cultural pedagogy and Afghan collaboration. I suggest that this ambivalent incorporation, of Afghan bodies as protective shields and war-time collaborators, relies on the concomitant production of a *sense* of interiority. This construction of the *darūn* (the inside) defines the militarization of Kabul and the allure of its Green Zone, a vast network of US and NATO military bases and residential compounds. The notion of an inviolable interior within Kabul also confers a sinister invisibility onto Afghan bodily injury while aggrandizing local Afghans (referred to as “local nationals”) as particularly agile and mobile. Achieved through the language of written State Department warnings (which are disseminated throughout Kabul’s expatriate community through emails) this perceptual inversion makes foreign bodies the anticipatory locus of war-time injury and Afghan bodies the scene of danger or accidental injury—injuries that seemingly arise out of nowhere as chance mistakes.

The second half of this chapter moves to the inside, to the Green Zone and its discursive environs in order to understand the force of this governing logic on the words and lives of the

Afghans who work there—Afghans who work in the *darūn* (the inside) and on its dangerous margins where they constitute the first line of defense. I argue that the logic of the inside is a pharmacological one that requires the prior production of interiority—the spatial segregation of militarization—that also reconfigures what it means for misfortune to occur and *make sense* for Afghans. Between the interstices of sense and violent events that sever Afghan bodies, I argue that a notion of necessity and fate increasingly takes wing. Building on a logic of prosthetic extension and the personal experiences of Afghans, like a young man named Timūr, I illustrate how those Afghans most in danger of losing their limbs and life understand the violence of being prosthetic bodies as an opening for asking why they experience misfortune. Thus, by tracing a complex history of supplemental discourses pertaining to the earthen ground, and by considering the forms of segregation and inclusion that structure Kabul’s war economy, I illustrate how notions of sense-making and causality are reimagined alongside an incapacity to accommodate linguistic or social difference.⁴⁴³

A Chorus of Footsteps

The Afghan landscape is saturated with explosives.⁴⁴⁴ An estimated twenty-million anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were laid during the Soviet occupation. Additional mines were

⁴⁴³ I use pharmacological in the sense that Jacques Derrida uses, to convey a fundamental ambivalence expressed in the figuration of a *pharmakon*. Crucially, the *pharmakon* is not just a site of ambivalence but also the locus of the production of difference (especially the difference between inside and outside). Derrida says: “If the *pharmakon* is “ambivalent” it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside...speech/writing.)” (1981, 127).

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1981, pg. 127-133.

⁴⁴⁴ “Afghanistan acceded to the Ottawa Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty in September 2002, making a commitment to clear all emplaced Anti-personnel (AP) mines within ten years. The magnitude of the

laid by Najibullah Government troops during the civil war of the 1990s, and again during the Afghan Civil War between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance from 1994-2001. There are approximately 4,300 minefields and “hazardous areas” with a total area of 569 square kilometers and 82 separate firing ranges belonging to NATO and ISAF troops, covering a span of 951 square kilometers. At least 640,000 land mines have been laid since 1979 although the total tonnes of ordnances dropped in Afghanistan since October of 2001 is still classified— scattered in unknown numbers across the country by the U.S. military and NATO forces in both combat and war simulation games.⁴⁴⁵ But we do know that a total area of 1,486 sq. km, almost twenty-five times the size of Manhattan, is explosive ground that threatens farmers and civilians in 1,900 communities across the country.⁴⁴⁶ Of the strewn land mines, ten percent detonate belatedly. Between October to December of 2014 alone, this killed 82 civilians. An average of 65 civilians per month are killed by pressure-plate improvised explosive devices.⁴⁴⁷ From January to June

mine problem in Afghanistan, tied with the ongoing conflict, discovery of new hazardous areas, and under funding, however, has meant that the initial deadline of 2013 was untenable. In March 2012, the Government of Afghanistan submitted a request for a ten-year extension of the deadline to remove all AP mines by 2023,” in the United Nations Mine Action Center for Afghanistan Report. See: <http://www.macca.org.af/macca/macca/>

⁴⁴⁵ In addition to this there are millions of explosive items (heavy and light weapons), small arms rounds, ammunition stocks and hidden weapons caches. For a better sense of the magnitude of the problem see: <http://www.halotrust.org/where-we-work/afghanistan>

⁴⁴⁶ The United Nations Mine Action Center “fast facts” report for March 2015: <http://www.macca.org.af/macca/blog/mapa-fast-facts-march-2015/> and a NATO/ISAF press release entitled “International soldiers, Afghan firm help lead the way out of minefields for Afghan citizens” on October 22, 2008. See: <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/pressreleases/2008/10-october/pr081020-550.html>.

See Brown, Hey Matthew. “Unexploded Ordnance in Afghanistan Poses a Hidden Threat,” in *The Baltimore Sun*. July 28, 2012.

⁴⁴⁷ A pressure-plate improvised explosive device (PPIED) is one of the most common IEDs used by the Taliban and other resistance factions. Unlike a remote-controlled IED, it is set off by the intended victim (or a civilian) who activates the bomb by stepping on a pressure plate, pressure release switch, or tripping on a wire.

2014 the Emergency's Center for War Trauma Victims in Lashkar Gah (the capital of the Helmand province) performed 69 amputations. Between April and June the ICRC admitted 351 amputee patients across Afghanistan.⁴⁴⁸ Thousands of civilians have been maimed.⁴⁴⁹ Up to two civilians are injured or maimed per week in Bagram alone.⁴⁵⁰ The landscape is explosive ground.

If, as Michel De Certeau claims, the ability to read a landscape is the conceit of a vertical perspective, the Afghan ground is always disrupted from below by imminent eruption and from on high by the accelerating force of aerial bombardment. The problem is a problem of the surface. To seek it out, to assimilate it to the canvas of a whole is to forget to look at immediate and lateral dangers. It is to lose sight of the intertwining forces that become menacing the moment one tries to imagine something beyond, to cull some kind of image or seek a horizon. Thus, if the “panorama-city” is a picture enabled by oblivion and the misunderstanding of local practice, in Afghanistan it would entail not only blindness but also maiming. To walk on ground fantasized as the consolidated terrain of a city, seen from on high, is to risk becoming a double amputee—the fate of thousands of Afghans who will never stand on ground again without the aid of prosthesis.

Every ‘chorus of idle footsteps,’ as Michel De Certeau describes, leaves behind a palimpsest of traces. Steps may be hurried, or halting. They may not compose a colorful throng

⁴⁴⁸ Cunningham, Erin. “War Amputees in Afghanistan Face Harsh Lives of Discrimination and Poverty” in *The Washington Post*. October 26, 2014.

⁴⁴⁹ Rasmussen, Engle Sune. “Afghans live in peril among unexploded Nato bombs that litter countryside” in *The Guardian*. January 29, 2015.

⁴⁵⁰ NATO/ISAF press release entitled “International soldiers, Afghan firm help lead the way out of minefields for Afghan citizens” on October 22, 2008. See: <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/pressreleases/2008/10-october/pr081020-550.html>.

of singularities but a nearly homogenous and strenuous shuffle, an awkward gait that seems to be hovering above rather than stepping on the ground. Najiba would often warn me when I left the house about the potholes on the streets. She hated them and said one couldn't properly walk in Kabul: "Oh sweets! We don't have streets it's just one big sieve. Watch your step or you'll fall through!" Their tenuous pathways intersect in dense places rather than diverse *topoi*, along tightly buttoned series in central neighborhoods like *Shr e Nau* (the new city) and *Wazir Akbar Khan*, the quilting points that double as refrain— "I wouldn't give up *Shar e Nau* for all of America. Not even the whole damn thing!" At other times footsteps encounter interdiction and come to a standstill—arriving at impasses and militarized zones, the cold constraint of the Afghan National Police's "Ring of Steel," the inaccessible secret worlds that turn the fissures of conjuncture into mysterious contrails: "What is it? What's beyond that road further down in that camp? That place...cutting us all off like that!" But to be cut off is not only to move against an absence, forging out of that originary relation a spatial rhetoric, but to be situated within the redoubled urban trauma of war. One *Kabuli* man said to me: "Tell me this ... how can these people, the Americans I mean, accuse Taliban insurgents of hiding in the civilian population when they have planted their military bases *right in the middle* of *Shar-e-Kabul* (Kabul City)?"

Improvisatory movement can entail incalculable horror and unspeakable dispossession—of legs and ground. People step along well-worn pathways and trust time and experience, careful not to disperse into places that lack the citation of someone else's presence, condemning them to elision—the yawning gap that precedes a spatial dream: "Don't go to Paghman, nobody goes to Paghman anymore—out there in the middle of nothing and nowhere. It isn't under direct government control anymore, maybe one day *inshallah* (God willing)!"

Even in their occasional clamor: “Have mercy on me miss or get out of my way so someone else might!” they mistrust the surface of the ground. To walk on the ground is not only to inject a landscape with possibility but to move against a lack, the absence of what was once there: “Do you see that corner, my parents used to live there. I remember there was a living room facing that street there, and we would sit and recite poetry for hours,” a woman said one day as we drove through Kabul. Stories, conspiracies, rumors, and poems begin with these absences, sprouting out of “used to” like reeds from a reed-bed. The woman recited a poem, which used to be recited in the family home that was no longer on the street corner: “Listen to the reed (flute or *nai*), while it's complaining. The story of separation it's explaining. Ever since they plucked me from my original ground, men and women cry upon my painful sound.”⁴⁵¹ Walking is never far from the work of memory or the cadence of poetry. It constitutes “a symbolic order of the unconscious,”⁴⁵² one that entwines subjectivity with all the absences, the “countless tiny deportations” that structure an endless move from “here” to “there,” that: “silent joyful experience”⁴⁵³ of childhood: “What? This little toy here? It’s only iron! Watch as I throw it far away!”⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵¹ “Listen to the reed” is one of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī’s most famous poems, and frequently recited (and sung) by Afghans. It has been translated into English numerous times.

⁴⁵² de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Randall. The University of California Press: Berkeley. pg. 103.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg 109.

⁴⁵⁴ A young boy of about five years said this to me as he threw his toy car across the courtyard of a shrine belonging to one of Prophet Mohammad’s companions. It was a weekday and I first asked him why he was at the shrine and not in school and I then asked about his toy car, which he described as “only iron” and threw over a large central fountain and across the courtyard with unusual gusto.

Tokh'm (Prills)

Walking leaves behind the maimed traces of groundlessness across cities and communities, as well as the ill-fitting prosthetic supplements that signify a lack. The sixteenth-century word and concept of prosthesis has as its root *prostithenai*, “to put or place.” The origin of the word is a gesture of emplacement, a literal “setting something down” that presumes a ground and the possibility of an extension—one that makes a “prosthetic God” of persons as Freud describes one outcome of modern civilization. The word carries within itself a reciprocity: a ground as much supplemented by something that is set upon it, as an extension that requires a place to be put down. Perhaps this is the paradox that also bothered Freud when he wrote that: “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times...we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.”⁴⁵⁵

Freud’s ambivalence is not reducible to his own prosthetic, a mouth palate replacement that enabled him to eat and speak, but that also painfully caused the space between his nasal cavity and mouth to deteriorate if discarded for more than two hours.⁴⁵⁶ For Freud, the prosthetic enhancement of human capacities and the concomitant subjugation of nature entail a much more fundamental ambivalence that speaks not only to those achievements that distinguish us by the repressive hold of civilization, but a more perduring dissatisfaction: just as “writing was in its

⁴⁵⁵ Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey and Peter Gay. *Civilization and its Discontents* (The Standard Edition). W.W. Norton and Company, 1962. pg. 39.

⁴⁵⁶ Jain, Sarah S. “The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope” in *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 24 No. 1, Winter 1999. pg 39.

origin the voice of an absent person” so too do other tools place “gigantic forces” at our disposal through the materialization of powers we possess to some degree.⁴⁵⁷

Supplementary extensions also reflect peculiar satisfactions, such as the kind given: “by putting a bare leg from under the bedclothes on a cold winter night and drawing it in again.”⁴⁵⁸ They signal, even in their technological and practical diversity, a fundamental lack. Even as they extoll an achievement, they are the inimitable signs of the atrophy of the body or the haunting absence of human voices. But for Freud prosthetics are not only dissatisfying. They are also uncontrollable. Prosthetics are the “auxiliary organs” that still trouble us, that have not grown on us despite the amazing capabilities they bequeath.

The idea of a prosthetic as both an enabling and troubling extension also helps us understand the relationship between political goals and the extensions (ranging from techno-infrastructural to print media) that are necessary to achieve them. The question of prosthetic enhancement is central to media theory, and to illuminating a supplementary logic. The supplement both completes something and signals a lack, since the possibility of supplementing

⁴⁵⁷ Freud says: “With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motory or sensory, or is removing the limits of their functioning. Motor power places gigantic forces at his disposal, which, like his muscles, he can employ in any direction; thanks to ships and aircraft neither water nor air can hinder his movements; by means of spectacles he corrects defects in the lens of his own eye; by means of the telescope he sees into the far distance; and by means of the microscope he overcomes the limits of visibility set by the structure of his retina. In the photographic camera he has created an instrument which retains the fleeting visual impressions, just as a gramophone disc retains the equally fleeting auditory ones; both are at bottom materializations of the power he possesses of recollection, his memory. With the help of the telephone he can hear at distances which would be respected as unattainable even in a fairy tale. Writing was in its origin the voice of an absent persons” (1999, 38).

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., pg 35.

in the first place indicates a lack.⁴⁵⁹ The ambivalence of Freud toward technological enhancements of the human body is also crucial to Marshall McLuhan's analysis of media as extension, with the understanding that "any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex."⁴⁶⁰ Prosthetic enhancement, however, is also a process of amputation, something which occurs through the blocking of senses and perceptions. Enhancement is auto-amputation and its amplification "is bearable by the nervous system only through numbness or block of perception."⁴⁶¹ This auto-amputation is not only a psychic or nervous numbing but also takes the literal form of multiple amputations when the prosthetic extension is a leg, and when the body's organic growth functions penetrate the fantasy of an assemblage.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁹ See: Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pg. 144-145 For a careful demonstration of how the non-intuitive logic of supplementarity works see: Johnson, Barbara. "Writing" in Lentricchia, Frank, and Thomas McLaughlin. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 45.

⁴⁶⁰ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*. Signet Books, New York: 1964, pg. 19.

⁴⁶¹ McLuhan elaborates on this numb blocking: "With the arrival of electrical technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs..." (1964, 52-53).

⁴⁶² For Deleuze and Guattari the body becomes knowable, in part, through the assemblages it forms with other bodies "either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body" (1987, 257). Crucially, what can be done (the actions, movements and affects that can occur) occur through this assemblage or through this "becoming" that is not a blockage or amputation but an opening, through which Deleuze is able to argue that any productive symbiosis changes the nature of all the components of an assemblage. This change is for him primarily an empowering one through which a new set of affects and actions become possible. See: Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pg. 257-261.

For Donna Haraway the mixture of confusion of boundaries between the inorganic and organic is a pleasurable transgression of binaries, including that of gender and the distinction between public and private through a new “technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household.”⁴⁶³ Haraway argues that the breakdown of binaries (between animal and human) and in late twentieth century scientific culture, between organism and machine, transforms the experience of haunted machines (the ghosts in non-autonomous machines) by not only destabilizing oppressive boundaries but also unleashing “potent forces.”⁴⁶⁴

Alternatively, Klaus Theweleit argues that a “structure of domination” is created through the unity, or fusion, of man and country. This enables, through the organization of “molar organizations to form larger unities,” the violently affective formation of a nation.⁴⁶⁵ The fear of fragmentation, experienced most radically by the soldier, and the goal of avoiding a split at the cost of “fusing himself into a unity in which he remains on top” is what comprises the will to

For a discussion of the translation of *agencement* into assemblage, and the former’s more open connotation of a mixture of bodies also meaning a “common notion” and a state of becoming see: Phillips, J. "Agencement/Assemblage." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006).

⁴⁶³ Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century” in Bell, David, and Barbara M. Kennedy. *The Cybercultures Reader*. London: New York, 2000, pg. 291-324, 293.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 295, 313.

⁴⁶⁵ Theweleit, Klaus. *Male Fantasies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pg. 86.

For an analysis of group and ego formation, particularly in the military and church, see: Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Norton, 1990.

power, and domination.⁴⁶⁶ That fear of a split is always a fear of the feminine, Theweleit argues, and the formation of a whole or assemblage is above all the formation of a hierarchy.⁴⁶⁷

Assemblages and fusions, especially in contexts of warfare, are forms of death dealing: “The body-ego is contained in a number of external social or organizational egos; they include various of the formations discussed above: the nation, the troop, the party. The soldier males’ ego-functions are disseminated across the whole range of totality-machines within which they function, they are performed in part by the mechanical machineries to which the men “bind” themselves—by guns, for example, in military action.”⁴⁶⁸

As we saw, communication technology as supplement to the political aims of the Afghan government, and later the intellectual goals of the Afghan modernists were both haunted, by European powers, by ghosts in the machine and inextricable from the misbegotten effort on the part of the Afghan State to extend itself outside of major cities in the twentieth century. That story, as we know, is largely the story of the earthen ground. In the imperial and botanical imaginary, the Afghan ground was the perennial site of agricultural failure and aridity, presenting for British naturalists and military officers an opportunity for imperial pedagogy and, later, for the Afghan modernists the extended grounds of modernist aspiration. But it is also true that the ground, like so many other landscapes, was peculiar not so much for the specificity of its vegetation, arid soil, ‘aromatic specifics,’ or glacial slopes but because of the universal problem

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 98.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 103.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., pg. 223.

of nitrogen absorption in crops—a much larger and global question of atmospheric nitrogen (which does not enable photosynthesis) and agricultural reproduction that would spawn not only a very powerful chemical supplement (inorganic fertilizer) but also new modes of resisting the state through the incorporation of fertilizer as a bomb-making technology.

At the dawn of World War One, when the discourse and project of Afghan modernism had achieved a feverish pitch, the limits of organic fertilization (owing to the quick dissipation of nitrogen during crop growth) presented what appeared to be an insurmountable chemical problem and, on a global scale, the consequent possibility of famine as the world's population and agricultural demand continued to surge on untenable ground.⁴⁶⁹ In this context, the labors of the German chemist Fritz Haber culminated in his famous Haber-Bosch method. Haber would go on to receive a Nobel Prize for this work in 1918, and his method for synthesizing ammonia from nitrogen turned nitrogen from a diatomic element in the atmosphere to an instrument of agricultural reproduction, into the literal possibility of “food from air,” a possibility that became a violent spectacle of humanitarian relief during the early months of the Afghan-American War when food packages were dropped from military aircraft alongside bombs.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Prior to the discovery of ammonia synthesis, manure and sodium nitrate (Chile saltpeter, which was mined in vast quantities in Chile and shipped to Europe) were the main sources of soil fertilization.

⁴⁷⁰ During the first month of aerial bombardment in October of 2001 the U.S. military dropped 37,500 pounds of food in packages consisting of 2,200 calories per day. The total stockpile was approximately 2 million packages, enough to feed the entire city of Kabul for one day. See: “Agencies Question Afghan Aid Drops,” in *CNN's War Against Terror*, October 9, 2001: <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/10/09/gen.aid.agencies/>.

The Supplement

Worldwide the possibilities of synthesizing ammonia were enormous.⁴⁷¹ Nitrogenous fertilizer quickly became the chief mode of fertilizing soil, adding necessary nutrients to crops and enhancing the limits of mechanized farming with the supplemental discourse of chemical and scientific expertise. Tilling the land for crops was not only a matter of draft power, but also of soil absorption rates, salinity levels, enhanced photosynthesis, and the delivery of macro and micro-nutrients to crops. But even in those early days, when ammonia was heralded as an answer to the possibility of famine, its effects quickly extended from the sphere of food production to methods of warfare. As a supplement to organic manure, ammonium nitrate is introduced directly to the ground as a fertilizing agent for soil and forage crops. Its derivative form, calcium ammonium nitrate (CAN), is popular because it both delivers nitrogen and calcium and has a neutral effect on the PH of soil (neutralizing acid and making it suitable for use on any soil), an important point of consideration for Afghan farmers given the adverse effects that salinity and water logging had already had on the Afghan ground.

⁴⁷¹ Nitrogen contains within its name one of its most important properties: *gène*, to produce or give birth. Its chemical base (“nitro,” or sodium carbonite) is grounded in the expectation of reproduction, of additional chemical possibilities born of this primal compound. This possibility was realized within six years of the discovery when Fritz Haber was commissioned by the German military to deploy his method for weapon-making purposes. Soon after, Haber transformed his discovery of ammonia synthesis into the world’s first weapon of mass destruction: paint canisters of chlorine gas that were released into German trenches in Ypres, Belgium on April 22, 1915. Opening in the direction of the wind, these rudimentary canisters introduced the possibility of chemical warfare to the world. Eight years after the end of World War One, when those weapons had been further developed and tested on Europe’s counterposed armies, gas warfare became a distinct possibility in the British discourse on containing Soviet Bolshevism in Afghanistan. The Afghan ground, which was considered too stony to enable tank warfare, presented an opportunity to consider the effects of gas warfare, a military suggestion explicitly outlined in a letter from Lord Irwin to Lord Birkenhead, then Secretary of State in India in Private letters from Lord Irwin to Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India. September 30, 1926. India Office Records. The British Library.

In 2010, in response to accusations by the US Government that the Afghan insurgency was relying on synthetic fertilizer (smuggled from Pakistan) to make improvised explosive devices and suicide bomber vests (synthetic fertilizer is highly combustible, and readily used as such), the Afghan Government banned CAN and other nitrogenous fertilizers, eliciting widespread condemnation from farmers who contend that their livelihoods and crops fell into ruination.⁴⁷² But before nitrogenous fertilizer became the chemical gravamen of a counter-insurgency or worse, an explosive weapon, it was disseminated across the Afghan countryside in the hope that it would sow political change, legitimizing the Afghan State as the vanguard of socio-economic development.

Much earlier, as we saw, the British imperial fixation with Afghan agriculture (and the quality of the soil) informed the accounts of naturalists and explorers and their recommendations to the East India Company. In the context of Afghan modernism, the earthen ground was crucial to how Afghan reformers in the 1920s understood the project of cultural modernization, especially after the importing of western media (telegraphy, telephony, cinema) and transportation technology (plans for a great Afghan railway—each an extension that would cement the authority of the Afghan State by enabling the generation of capital and new forms of propaganda and mobility. The preoccupation with infrastructural development and Afghan modernism in the press influenced a larger Pan-Islamist movement that entailed the promulgation of Persian as the *official* language of the nation, and railways as the quintessential technology of the modern.

⁴⁷² Cullison, Alan and Trofimov, Yaroslav. “Karzai Bans Ingredient of Taliban’s Roadside Bombs” in *The Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2010. See also: “Afghanistan bans chemical used to make bombs”. *The Guardian*. AP Foreign. 22 January 2010. Retrieved 3 March 2013 and see: Dexter Filkins. “Bomb Material Cache Uncovered in Afghanistan”. *The New York Times*. November 11, 2009.

The ground was identified with an intensification of modernization and capitalist reproduction at the same time that governance became associated with Persian. It was an apparently enchanted historical era, one that incited wonderment among Afghans, and introduced a profound set of questions on the nature of modernity and selfhood—questions that invited new answers and new vocabularies. Through the writings of Mahmud Tarzī, words like *Tra'm reil hâ* (tramways), *môtarha* (cars), *telefunhâ* (telephones), *telegrafhâ-e-beh-seem* (wireless telegraphy), *machine-ha-e-parandeh roi* (bird-resembling machines, or airplanes), *dar roi-zameen* (on the ground), *dar zer-e-zameen* (underground), *dar roi-e-bahr* (on the sea), *dar zer-e-bahr* (under the sea) filled the discursive landscape with renewed optimism and cemented the notion of modern statecraft with developmentalism.⁴⁷³

This preoccupation with imminent change, expressed through new technologies and words, turned the earthen ground in later years into the site of cautious state-led agricultural development and, with the dissemination of synthetic fertilizers, into a minefield when ammonia nitrate became the chief ingredient for improvised explosive bombs. The Afghan State's preoccupation with agriculture, and in the mid-twentieth century with coal mining and infrastructural development identified the ground with modern splendor. The effect of this twin insistence was to turn the ground into a site of a generalized anticipation: of new words and discourses, oral and written propaganda, of technology (the installation of telegraph poles and stations), of invasion (on its British-Indian frontier), of the ingress of the central state (through new fiscal and land tenure policies in the countryside), and eventually the liberation of women from patriarchal gender relations when proceeds from land tax were used to construct schools for

⁴⁷³ Tarzī, Mahmud. “*Beh intihâ-bodan-e ilm*,” or “On the limitless nature of knowledge” in: Farhadi, Ravan. *Muqalat-e-Mahmud Tarzi. Intisharat-e-Behaqi*. Kabul: 1977, pg. 169.

women in Kabul. By the 1960's and 1970's the promise of agrochemical development was itself a kind of supplement, introduced to the Afghan countryside in a state-led effort to enhance agricultural cooperation and production under the auspices of state-led development, and later the more aggressive socialist land reforms of the Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan (the PDPA).

Between 1973-1976 USAID spearheaded an extensive agricultural project to help supply farmers with fertilizer by establishing the Afghan Fertilizer Company to assist with the government's agricultural aims. In the contemporary moment, agricultural rehabilitation is aggrandized by USAID as key to economic growth and competitive exports. It comprises an alternative developmental strategy that is imagined to inhibit a vast and parallel drug economy. Under the auspices of Chemonics, a private international development company, the "Accelerating Sustainable Agriculture Program," was spearheaded across the country in order to improve agricultural yields, dissuade farmers from planting poppy and enhance Afghan exports through the work and distribution of agricultural goods in 20 provincial and regional "AgDepot" associations.⁴⁷⁴ The final report foregrounds agricultural revitalization, which diminished after years of war to a "fraction of its potential," and argues that it is "fundamental to sustaining Afghanistan's recovery and development." This narrative of agro-development as a source of competitive global exports and as a counter measure to a drug economy that accounts for up to 90% of the global supply of heroin, was interrupted by the discourse of military crisis.

⁴⁷⁴ See Chemonics statement on "Improving Agribusiness Competitiveness in Afghanistan": <http://www.chemonics.com/OurWork/OurProjects/Pages/Accelerating-Sustainable-Agriculture-Program.aspx>

By 2011, calcium ammonium nitrate was the main ingredient of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), accounting for a surge in U.S. and NATO death rates. Almost twice as explosive as TNT, the fertilizer (which is smuggled across the Afghan-Pakistani border)⁴⁷⁵ was used by the Afghan insurgency to make IEDs and was dubbed the “leading killer” of troops, accounting for a stunning 95% of all improvised bombs.⁴⁷⁶ These improvised bombs are planted along roads and pathways usually in plastic jugs filled with the residual white powder that separates after the calcium carbonate is removed with boiling water (the insoluble calcium separates from the rest of the compound). After being dried, the final explosive product looks like laundry detergent, making it easy to camouflage and transport under the cover of domestic goods. Moreover, these “low to no metal person victim-operated IEDs” are impossible to locate with metal detectors: “We are sweeping more and more of this stuff of the battlefield...but it keeps coming, and it keeps growing,” said General Barbero, who heads a military command center created to prevent U.S. casualties from IEDs.

If historically mining served as a leverage and aid for agriculture, supplying it with instruments and metal, land mines devastate both the ground and the possibility of agricultural production for decades after they are laid. By 1995, after the Afghan-Civil War and a year after the Taliban consolidated their rule in major Afghan cities, the global land mine problem reached

⁴⁷⁵ It is widely believed that the nitrogenous fertilizer in Afghanistan is supplied by two fertilizer plants owned by the Fatima Group. The CEO, Fawad Mukhtar, has been the subject of much media and military controversy. A *Washington Post* article, “To stop Afghan bombs, a focus on Pakistani fertilizer”, details requests made by the Lt. General Michael D. Barbero that the Fatima Group begin distinguishing its fertilizer by adding coated urea fertilizer granules, pink dye, or radio tags in order to enhance detection and make it harder to convert into explosive material.

⁴⁷⁶ Associated Press. “Afghanistan bans fertilizer chemical used to make bombs,” in *The New York Daily News*. January 22, 2010.

crisis proportions, resulting in the U.S. Government's call for a "ban on its manufacture akin to the ban on chemical warfare."⁴⁷⁷ The early twentieth century union between agriculture and chemical warfare, expressed in the discourse of chemical expertise that enabled both nitrogenous fertilizer and chemical weapons, was deployed in this ban as a relationship of similitude, expressed as a purposeful exaggeration despite the shared history of techno-scientific development. Land mines are devastating. Relatively cheap to produce, they cost upwards of \$1,000 to remove and obliterate a range of livelihoods, turning the most ordinary of activities, like herding and walking, into deadly encounters. By 1995 seventy-eight percent of Afghans reported that their daily activities were affected by land mines, especially those pertaining to farming.⁴⁷⁸ Nomads, the dangerous figurations that now animate the imagination of Afghan translators as itinerant criminals they encounter during combat situations, suffered an average loss of twenty-four animals per household, an average of 35,000 animals during the course of a year.⁴⁷⁹

Like rockets and *kalashnikovs*, two of the most readily used weapons in Afghanistan, military grade land mines (excluding improvised explosive devices) have never been produced within Afghanistan, but were extensively laid in the last thirty-seven years by all parties. Land mines can be found not only in agricultural fields but in water canals, grazing lands (leading to

⁴⁷⁷ Anderson, Neil. Cesar Palha de Sousa and Sergio Paredes. "Social Cost of land mines in four countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Mozambique," in *BMJ*. Volume 311, September 16, 1995 pg. 718.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*,

loss of stock and protein), along dams and power lines, in defecation fields, and along roads, preventing the transport of food.⁴⁸⁰ Moving with rainwater to previously de-mined lands, they account for over 400,000 deaths between 1991-2000 alone and diminished agricultural production by two-hundred percent. There is a myriad of land mines, with at least fifty-two types designed to attack anyone within thirty meters, including the Soviet produced PFM-1 (air dropped “butterfly” mines) widely used and attractive to children who mistake them for toys. Other anti-personnel mines are trip-wire or pressure plate activated, shooting hundreds of metal fragments when detonated by a footstep. Victims not only become dependent on prosthetic limbs, but they (especially children) are also subject to the traumatic horror of additional amputations, as ongoing bone growth pierces through the original prosthetic, necessitating the traumatic redoubling of one amputation followed by another.⁴⁸¹

The question of land mines and improvised explosive devices is also one of territorialization. As the civil war between the Afghan State and Taliban forces continues to rage, new territories are repeatedly subject to the dissemination of land mines (up to 4,360 minefields are still active) as control shifts rapidly between state security and insurgent forces. During my time in Kabul these dramatic shifts were the subject of anxiety in popular and media discourse, and increasingly used to justify the intelligence gathering practices of the National Directorate of Security (the agency that is also responsible for apprehending and forcibly extracting confessions from the failed suicide bombers) in the name of securing Kabul from the threat of surrounding

⁴⁸⁰ Fraser, Marnie. “Landmines: an ongoing environmental health problem for the children of Afghanistan,” in the *Journal of Rural and Remote Environmental Health* 2(2): 2003. pg. 79.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 78.

provinces. For example, by January 2013 the city of Logar (approximately a forty-minute drive from Kabul) was partially under Taliban control as Kunduz was last year before a massive security operation in November 2015.⁴⁸² The anxiety over territorial control is also one of adaptive borrowing. The seizing of nitrogenous fertilizers by government forces began in 2010, as battles over territory increased in severity and frequency. This resulted in a shift in bomb making strategies to the use of potassium chlorate, which now accounts for sixty percent of IEDs and is both easier and cheaper to make. A 110 bag of ammonium nitrate costs \$160 whereas a bag of potassium chlorate costs \$48. In 2012, the average IED bomb weighed fifty-six pounds (averaging \$416 in cost). This is an important consideration not only because of the ban on ammonium nitrate fertilizer (the Karzai administration gave U.S. forces permission to search and seize fertilizer) but because vehicle-borne improvised bombs (VBIEDs—which involve a person driving a car full of explosives into a compound or target) can cost upwards of \$20,000 per attack if using ammonium nitrate rather than potassium chlorate. The shift to potassium chlorate made bomb making a cheaper and easier process.

If it is true, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, that war marks an exteriority and a place of articulation and flow—of knowledge, tools, and customary paths drawn out of smooth and traversable spaces, the improvised explosive device is how that space is destructively held as Taliban forces move between provinces and leave behind inhabitants who are later interrogated by soldiers for information and worse, who are maimed simply because they dared to walk. The proliferation of land mines and improvised explosive devices and the procedures for making them are directly related to the multiplication of security and insurgent forces across the country

⁴⁸² Kunduz was again the scene of intensified fighting between the Afghan national army and various Taliban forces, nearly succumbing to the latter. See: Amiry, Sharif. “Taliban Face Setback in Dasht-e-Archi in Kunduz.” *Tolo News*. October 11, 2016.

as armed groups are increasingly buttressed by the Afghan National Army to help fight the Taliban—a group that is also divided into competing factions including the Pakistani Taliban. The Afghan Government and NATO forces have a history of recruiting armed militias (numbering in the hundreds), a strategy that has scattered weapons and bomb making techniques across the country as readily available forms of knowledge that are cited by U.S. military officials as flexible and relatively impervious to modern technologies of detection. This multiplication of armed groups and numbers of “weapon-wounded patients” is directly cited by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as the chief reason for their seven limb-fitting and orthopedic clinics in the country.

The structure and perpetuation of war is inextricable from this constant disowning. The immediacy of damage and trauma inflicted on human bodies is eclipsed, both literally through the initial media “white out” that characterized the first salvos of the Afghan-American War and also by the discourse of rehabilitation that posits the body’s wound or dismemberment as the object of intervention and medical care.⁴⁸³ The ICRC, for example operates prosthetic and orthotic centers in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Gulbahar, Faizabad, Jalalabad and Lashkar Gah. They also run a home-care service offering medical and financial support for patients with spinal

⁴⁸³ The media “white-out” refers to the Pentagon’s exclusive purchase of all satellite images (especially those from the satellite Ikonos owned by Spacing Imaging Inc.) in order to prevent any media coverage of the aerial bombings of Kabul. This was the topic of an art installation entitled *Lament of the Images* by Alfredo Jaar displayed at the Modern Museum of Art in New York in May 2015. The exhibition, still on display, is in the Painting and Sculpture Department, object number 390.2010. Jaar writes: “The agreement (between the Pentagon and Space Imaging Inc) produced an effective white-out of the operation, preventing western media from seeing the effects of the bombing and eliminating the possibility of independent verification or refutation of government claims. News organizations in the U.S. and Europe were reduced to using archive images to accompany their reports.”

cord injuries. The ICRC has registered 90,000 people with a yearly increase of 6,000.⁴⁸⁴ By 2010, they conducted over 26,000 physio-therapy sessions.⁴⁸⁵ The Wazir Akbar Khan hospital in Kabul—where X (the unnamed insurgent who had sexual relations with another man) is the primary orthopedic center in Kabul. Just as the aerial salvos and military violence of war occurred with equal frequency in both major cities and rural provinces, so too are prosthetic limbs a feature of urban and rural life—enabling the victims of bodily trauma as much as they subject them to additional pain.

Revised Limb Stumps

Multiple amputations lay bare the insufficiency of a prosthetic perhaps like nothing else can. The fantasy of a whole body that impels these amputations emerges against a force that is unstoppable—like ongoing bone growth. The prosthetic limb becomes a point of difference. It illuminates a lack at the very same time that it assumes the form of an excess that has to be removed in order to allow, especially in children, for the bone to grow—a process that accounts for twenty-five amputations in a child’s lifetime and fifteen to twenty for an adult. Through a series of awful repetitions that defy the preservation of any single limb, the prosthetic becomes both poison and remedy.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ The ICRC 2009 Fact Sheet for the Orthopedic Programme.

⁴⁸⁵ See the ICRC Resource Center Operational update for December 10, 2010 entitled “ICRC opens new prosthetic/orthotic center in Helmand province” : <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/update/2010/afghanistan-update-121010.htm>

⁴⁸⁶ The form that a prosthetic limb takes, is of course indissociable from the cause of amputation. While in the United States, the most common cause of amputation is vascular disease in Afghanistan (as in Cambodia and Iran) eighty-five percent of amputations are the direct result of land mines, accounting for 300,000 amputees worldwide (3). To be “limb deficient” is to be familiar with a series of painful

In Afghanistan, the reality and metaphor of prosthetics helps us think about several ironies that emerge around the notions of mobility and self-extension, and also the body and injury. The first is the paradox of social and urban life in major cities like Kabul and its American enclaves: the deadly forms of segregation and exclusion (even severance) that constitute the Afghan experience of physical mobility at a time of unprecedented transnational activity and convergence, a time when approximately six million persons live and move around the city of Kabul with varying degrees of freedom. The influx of an unprecedented number of persons into Kabul is as much the consequence of war as it is a hallmark of the discourse on Afghan liberation. Since 2001, Kabul has become the world's fourth fastest growing city, a growth rate sustained by the return of repatriated refugees from Iran and Pakistan and an influx of people fleeing the effects of military violence in the southern and eastern provinces.

Mobility was also a hallmark of the U.S. Government and military's discourse on the "Afghan liberation." The initial defeat of the Taliban by 2002, and the installation of American and NATO military bases across the country (with major ones in Kabul, Herat, Ghazni, Helmand and Kandahar) had made the prospect of return for millions of Afghan refugees in Iran and

sequences: a bone socket becomes the divide between body and mechanism, the pylon (the actual extension that replaces the length of the missing leg) mediates between ground and literal groundlessness, and finally the end point (or artificial foot) becomes a medium for mobility and difference, accounting for prosthetic improvisations that are "culturally" appropriate. These range from hand-held poles with a simple padding at the knee (which exerts pressure and causes muscle contracture and even more rigidity in the joints), to the basic use of rubber tires opened up and wrapped around knee stumps (often "bilaterally"), PVC plastic pipes, bicycle seats, the Trans-Tibial Plastic Modular Component (with a "modern endoskeletal design in which accurate alignment and adjustment are possible"), high-density polyethylene water pipes, to the rubberized "Jaipur foot" —made out of a spongy rubber and purported to mimic the experience of walking barefoot and holding up to the challenges of rural life. This array, which excludes the more sophisticated digitally designed prosthetics available in the West, reflects not only the breadth of devastation that amputation entails, but also the radical incapacity of any one prosthetic to remedy those losses. See: Strait, Erin. *Prosthetics in Developing Countries*. Prosthetic Resident. January 2006.

Pakistan a desirable possibility. The UNHCR estimates that since 2002 more than 5.8 million Afghan refugees have returned, with 4.7 million of them dependent on UNHRC aid. Comprising twenty percent of the Afghan population, Afghan returnees are not only a key population for international aid agencies but also a constitutive component of the Afghan State's discourse on its own institutional capacities. As late as 2012, even when the Afghan insurgency was at its peak and despite the infrastructural and institutional failures of addressing the needs of Afghan refugees who had arrived earlier, President Karzai called on Afghans residing in Pakistan to return to their homeland and participate in its reconstruction.⁴⁸⁷ This call for a return (which was repeated numerous times by Karzai and other government officials) is important not only because it illustrates the extent to which repatriation was crucial to legitimizing the newly established Islamic Republic of Afghanistan but also because it is the dramatic counterpoint to the forms of immobility that afflict people once they are inside Afghanistan, and especially in Kabul—its most segregated and populated city.

The Green Zone

On any given evening, a dusking sky is accompanied by bold streaks of violet that spread out like long brush strokes between varying clouds. On ground level small plumes of dust are kicked up by speeding taxis that bolt in and out of the side streets that disclose local knowledge: “I’ll get you there quicker than any fancy driver. I know all the alleys.” On other evenings much larger clouds sweep across entire blocks as strong gusts of wind blow loose sand and dirt off the ground, and up into dreaded dust storms—“dirt and dust everywhere! Hey, here’s a joke: In the

⁴⁸⁷ Ahmadzai, Mohammad Asif. “Karzai calls for voluntary return of Afghan refugees” for *Pajhwok Afghan News*. December 3, 2012.

Kabul River there was a frog performing *tayammum*.⁴⁸⁸ People walk on the street, eager to either go home—“dinner tastes best at home”— or to a mosque for the evening prayer—“quick, quick, they’ll be on the final *rakat* by the time we get there.” Domestic servants are out procuring the choicest produce: “A new servant can catch a running deer they say!” The vegetable and fruit sellers that symmetrically line the sides of streets make their triumphant sales of the day: “I knew you wouldn’t let these tomatoes go to waste, red like rubies.” Children begin to pack up their trolleys from the market: “Hey miss! I am in love with you! Ok, maybe not *you*. But I’d die for those green boots.” The impenetrable clusters of beggars that stand along the usual drab streets during the day begin to fray and retreat into unknown places: “they’re a gang, they all live and work together. They even have cell phones.” Shops close, children vanish from streets. “Don’t be fooled miss! He’s not having a seizure these kids mix calcium pills and soda in order to foam at the mouth like that!” The enervating cacophony of sounds that relentlessly fills space during the day quiets down—producing a false sense of calm in a city as vulnerable to the eruption of violence at night as during the day— “Don’t go out so much dear, you run around all day and now you want to run around at night. Don’t use your teeth when you can untie the knot with your fingers. Just wait until tomorrow.”

In the neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan, where the military Green Zone is located, the transition between night and day has a different rhythm. The Green Zone itself halts the flow of persons and traffic, environed by a series of fortifications. Situated behind a large traffic circle it

⁴⁸⁸ *Tayammum* is the ritual Islamic act of performing ablutions with sand or dust if water is unavailable. It’s a common joke in Kabul intended to contextualize a pivotal water source (now desiccated and filled with refuse for most of the year) within a rapidly transforming city and to communicate a degree of experiential displacement and deep anxiety about the scarcity of water amidst rapid population growth.

is separated by large red and white drop arms, guard dogs, and armed security. If you can move beyond this first layer (with the aid of a foreign passport and authorized chaperone), a road stretches ahead with high concrete and hesco lined walls on both sides. On the other side are U.S. and coalition military bases, security compounds like Empire Security⁴⁸⁹, residential compounds like Qalla House (where the U.S. Army corps of engineers resides—a sign in its interior courtyard reads: “We are the U.S. military, we will annihilate the U.S.’s enemies”)—and several foreign embassies. In a city where aspiration, combat, risk and economic value bind and separate various populations, and those they sometimes seek to engage and at other times to kill, the Green Zone assumes a nearly mythical status. Local *Kabulis* refer to it as “the camp,” assimilating the entire area with a military camp and with combat operation. Others associate it with unlimited wealth, a place where the availability of commodities and medical care solicits the exasperated sigh of want: “If only I could tell one of their doctors my pain...” Others turn it into fodder for humor: “There was an Afghan man, a KGB agent, a CIA agent and a Pakistani ISI agent at the bottom of a hill. They were bragging about carrying buckets of water up. The Pakistani man said he could carry two buckets—one in each hand, the KGB agent said three—one in each hand and on his head and the CIA agent said five, one in each hand and the KGB agent on his back. The Afghan said eight. One in each hand, one on his head and the CIA agent on his cock!”

Outside the immediate perimeter traffic remains steady, large supermarkets like “Finest” are open well into the night, as are the smaller “Bagram shops” that sell second-hand goods from military bases (combat boots, ID card badges, old fatigues). They line the sides of smaller streets and alleyways with pockets of pink light—a popular light bulb color that gives the city a festive

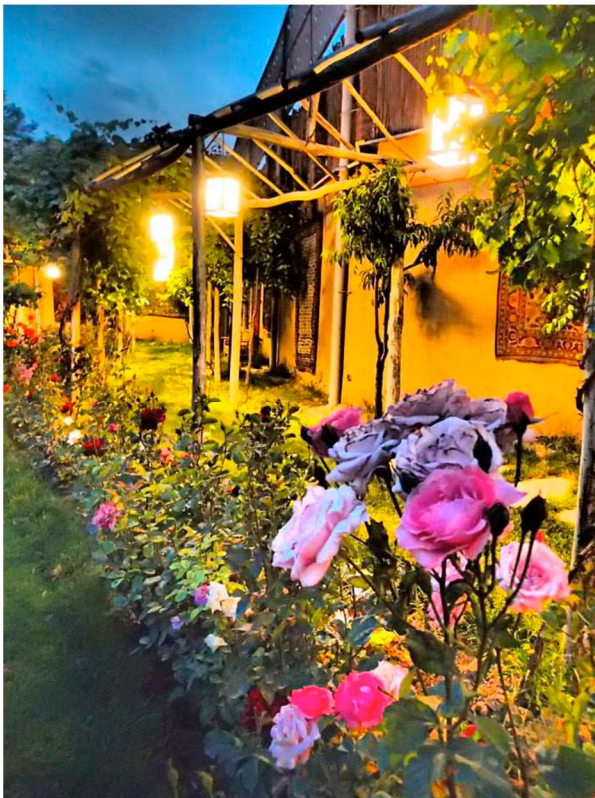
⁴⁸⁹ This is pseudonymous company name.

glow. Restaurants—“We can’t go to the Golden Key restaurant everyone will think we’re cheap women!”—begin to fill with beleaguered expats who endlessly proclaim how miserable they are in Kabul, but whose population only seems to swell. Inside a range of foreign cuisine can be had—from steak frites, to kung pao shrimp. Well-paid patrons want a night out, a relief from their surroundings and Kabul’s foreign restaurants become fertile ground for dangerous speculation: “Golden Key is the restaurant where the prostitutes are. Inside there is a stairway, if you go up on the second floor that is where they are.”

An unremitting sense of dangerous interiority persists in the neighborhood. There are signs that mark the beginning of inaccessible areas. There is always talk of secret rooms and persons, of gaining access and “getting in,” of hidden garden courtyards where couples can kiss. I climbed up that stairway in the Golden Key one night, curious to find any evidence of sex-workers—a suspicion that fuels rumor among the local Afghan population who are not allowed to enter these establishments and who wonder about the forms of sociality they are prohibited from. The dining room was on the ground floor and had one bathroom, which my friend Lucetta occupied on purpose so that I could ask the guard if there was another. I waited a few minutes and asked the waiter—“No miss just the one here”—and then the security guard who became increasingly uncomfortable with my insistence—“There’s one upstairs, try not to take too long. You’re not supposed to be up there.” I climbed up an uneven stairway, half excited and afraid. The staircase was not stable enough to bound up and down, and I thought about how any person, whether client or sex worker, would have to walk up it gingerly. There was a small, dank bathroom (in a cup by the sink there were small toothbrushes—red and blue ones that looked more like they belonged to children) and across from the cold bathroom a small, bare bedroom with two metal frame twin size beds. I had stepped inside but only about a foot. The beds were

unmade, the mattresses thin, and the room itself was drenched in a pathos that stopped me from going in further. I stared at the room and bed, transfixed although I saw no physical evidence (no condoms, etc.) When I came back down, Lucetta marveled at my ability to go up there: “You went in, even in this place you managed to get in to some other part!”

The Green Zone and all its associated precincts and passages exude the exact sense of mystery that Lucetta’s surprise candidly reflects. Even on the inside, there is the lingering perception of an interior that lies further ahead behind another heavy metal door, an inside and that contains within its walls a secret sociality, maybe even sex. This fixation with interiors and hidden spaces is at once a reflection of the importance of secrecy to military life and war-making practices, which include among other things the production of sensitive information, but also a displacement of liminality with interiority.



[Images: the inner garden and courtyard of Le Jardin, a French restaurant available only to foreign passport holders and which was attacked in a suicide car bomb attack in January 2016. Photos by author.]

That night, before we finally found the Golden Key, Lucetta and I chatted openly in her car about the reputation of the place. She had an appointed driver who picked me up from my apartment in a large complex inhabited almost entirely by local Afghans. We were driving around Wazir Akbar Khan in circles. Lucetta is an Italian woman from Milan, and worked for an NGO that helped provide shelter and assistance for homeless children. She and I became good friends. She was one of the few people I trusted to have over for dinner and we regularly went out, exploring as much of the expatriate social scene together as possible. That night, her driver quickly lost his way: “I don’t know this neighborhood, it all looks the same, look at it just one maze of alleyways!” He became increasingly irritated and Lucetta was visibly nervous, her anxiety swelling into regret: “Maybe this is a bad idea, we shouldn’t be driving around like this. And the fact that we’re going to the Golden Key only makes it look worse.” She was right. We were incredibly vulnerable driving in a black SUV in a neighborhood prone to attacks on foreign cars and bodies. Neither of us had our passport with us, I usually did not carry mine with me and relied on my linguistic fluency to pass for either American or Afghan and she had forgotten hers and was afraid we might be asked to produce them at any security roadblock along the Afghan National Police’s “ring of steel.” I was often an intermediary presence in those situations, and always managed to get through the roadblocks: “Let them through damnit. What harm can she do? Go! Go!”

Already on edge we circled the outer edges of the Green Zone for what seemed like long hours, passing by block after block of high concrete walls with barbed wire, covered in thick green tarps that gave entire streets an ominous and eerie glow. I was surprised at my own

disorientation given that I came to this neighborhood at least five times a week in order to go the Empire Security residential compound or to go the U.S. military base (Camp Eggers) where I was volunteering at a Pizza Hut with migrant laborers. When we finally found it—Lucetta’s eye fell on the small tattered red sign on the front gate. We encountered a young boy of about 7 years, a *chowkidaar* (front guardsman) guarding an entry which led to a courtyard. Sitting under a small red street light he immediately asked if I spoke Farsi, and then asked: “Please. Please. You understand me and I know you care about us. You seem really nice. Can you check this food? It came from the *inside* (*darūn*). I don’t know what happens there. I don’t want to eat it because I don’t know what it is—we hear that they sneak pork into our food. But I don’t have any other food. But I’m afraid I’ll get sick or poisoned if I eat this. But they don’t care if we die.” Speaking through conjunctions and contrasting propositions, he opened the white styrofoam take-out container and showed me a side of glazed shrimp next to white rice: “This stuff here, what is it?” he asked pointing to the shrimp. I assured him it was not pork, and that it was ok for him to eat it: “Thanks! I’m happy it’s not pork or poison. What are you doing here anyway, what happens inside of this place? I’m happy I can speak to you. You’re sure I’ll be ok right?”

The young boy was in effect a prosthetic body and the first line of defense in the event of a suicide bombing or if a gunman attacked the Golden Key, as has happened in so many other foreign restaurants in Wazir Akbar Khan. He was so small, especially when perched on his chair, that a suicide bomber inside a car would not have seen him. In the event of any kind of attack, he would undoubtedly die an awful death. But the young boy's body is co-extensive with more than just the front line, it is also the point of an insistence on a duality—a divide between an inside and its outermost edge—a critical edge beyond which insulation is displaced by danger, a danger from persons *like* the boy but not quite him. That presumption of recognizable similitude,

more specifically the young boy's ability to recognize and parse the danger posed by Afghans like himself (he immediately spoke to me in Persian without prompting) belies a more sinister inversion. From the boy's perspective there is a different displacement: a shift from a concern with his physical safety to that of a more insidious toxic infiltration. Thus, while he is still anxious about the sanctity of his body he expresses that concern as a preoccupation with transgression, with a movement of substances across the divide and into his body. The possibility of harm swells, from the prospect of pork being mixed in with his food to one of poison and toxicity but it never touches the obvious harm that awaits him, the explosive harm of enormous proportion unleashed by the bombs that account for the leading cause of death among Afghan security personnel in the Green Zone.

There is a crucial distinction between interiority and liminality, one that will become more clear when we consider the account of Afghan security guards from *within* Green Zone compounds, accounts that emphatically state the Afghan body's function as that of protective armor—a human mass meant to take the first blows of gun fire or bomb explosions. That is a different sensibility. It is a different psychic posture from the young boy's. His concern with a radical force brings together the interiority of body with the exteriority not of a weapon but a *space of encounter*, the front entrance which he guards but which he is not allowed to breach and yet through which he has contact with the inside of the restaurant: “Can you check this food? It came from the *inside* (*darūn*).” The site of contradiction, the boundary that he institutes, is still a site of desire. His language is suspicious, but curious: “I don't know what happens there...” and the prohibition that governs his position is still susceptible to porosity, to substances and food items that enable contact.

These liminal figures—the guards at check points, the front gate *chowkidaars* like the boy, the guards that stand along the corridors leading into compounds and restaurants, the guards at the end of that corridor with AK 47s and metal detectors: “I’m sorry please open up your purse,” are all the bodies—literally the human tissue and bone, that stand between the protected populations on the inside and the specter of external infiltration. They guard expatriates against an abominable momentum that is always threatening to make its way into the inviolable sanctity of militarized space. The function of that boundary is also repeatedly deployed through written warnings. Consider the language of this *abridged* warning, issued as an email to all registered Americans in Afghanistan by the Department of State on August 23, 2013:

“The Department of State warns U.S. citizens against travel to Afghanistan. The security threat to all U.S. citizens in Afghanistan remains critical.

No province in Afghanistan should be considered immune from violence, and the potential exists throughout the country for hostile acts, either targeted or random, against U.S. and other Western nationals at any time. Remnants of the former Taliban regime and the al-Qaida terrorist network, as well as other groups hostile to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, remain active. Although Afghan authorities have a limited ability to maintain order and ensure the security of Afghan citizens and foreign visitors, the Afghan security apparatus in most major cities is robust and capable of responding to insurgent attacks. However, travel in all areas of Afghanistan remains unsafe due to military combat operations, landmines, banditry, armed rivalry between political and tribal groups, and the possibility of insurgent attacks, including attacks using vehicle-borne or other improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The security situation remains volatile and unpredictable throughout the country.

There is an ongoing and significant risk of kidnapping and assassination of U.S. citizens and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) employees throughout the country. In May 2012, a British and a Kenyan aid worker, along with two Afghan counterparts, were kidnapped in Badakhshan Province while riding on horseback to deliver medical supplies to a remote village; they were freed 11 days later in a NATO rescue operation. In December 2012, a U.S. citizen working with an NGO was kidnapped in Kabul Province. Similarly, in January 2013, a French citizen working for an NGO was kidnapped in western Kabul by suspected criminal elements and held captive until April 2013.

Riots and incidents of civil disturbance can and do occur, often without warning. U.S. citizens should avoid rallies and demonstrations; even demonstrations

intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence. Approximately 20 demonstrations occurred in Kabul City during the first six months of 2013, one of which turned violent. The size of the demonstrations has ranged from as small as 50 individuals to as large as 2,500.

Despite numerous interdiction operations by Afghan and coalition forces, Kabul City and its suburbs are also considered at high risk for militant attacks, including rocket attacks, vehicle-borne IEDs, direct-fire attacks, and suicide bombings. A number of such attacks were reported in Kabul City from January to June 2013, and many additional attacks were thwarted by Afghan and coalition forces. Since the beginning of 2013, insurgents have conducted 13 high profile attacks in Kabul City; these attacks have consisted of complex assaults, IED detonations, and suicide bombings. Insurgents continue to target various U.S. and Afghan government facilities in Kabul City, including the June 25, 2013 attack against a U.S. government facility adjacent to the Afghan Presidential Palace and U.S. Embassy.

Buildings or compounds that lack robust security measures in comparison to neighboring facilities may be viewed as targets of opportunity by insurgents. On May 24, 2013, insurgents conducted a complex attack against the International Organization of Migration (IOM) headquarters. During this attack insurgents occupied an adjacent building, and from an elevated position, fired small arms and rocket-propelled grenades on nearby buildings. This attack resulted in several deaths and wounded a number of security personnel, IOM staff, and Afghan civilians.

The U.S. Embassy's ability to provide emergency consular services to U.S. citizens in Afghanistan is limited, particularly for those persons outside the capital. U.S. citizens who choose to visit or remain in Afghanistan despite this Travel Warning are encouraged to enroll with the U.S. Embassy in Kabul through the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) to obtain updated information on travel and security within Afghanistan. U.S. citizens without Internet access may enroll directly with the U.S. Embassy. Enrollment makes it easier for the Embassy to contact U.S. citizens in case of an emergency.

For US citizens registered for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) notifications through the US Embassy in Kabul, these were often the first emails of the day, and became the topic of speculation, text messages, additional emails, cancelled interviews, and postponed plans. “Hey Fatima just texting to cancel our interview. We are on total lock-down over here. Stay safe on the outside!” It’s unsurprising that: “over there” the content of the warnings always assumes a greater force, that it results in prohibition and foreclosure, the additional cordoning of populations through the widely known practice of a “lock down”—

nobody allowed in, nobody allowed out of the residential compounds dispersed through the Green Zone. Consider some of the texts I received from the inside:

“There’s no way we can go out. That’s Kabul for you! Lol”

“You’re out in the city? Now that’s just fucking dumb Fatima!”

Or some opening, the ability or fantasy of getting out:

“Called to see if you wanna have dinner. I can sneak out of here tonight ...?”

“I’m fucking going stir fry on the inside. I have to escape.”

The language of a warning is always connected to the production of interiority, here as a literal sanctum under threat and as the inviolable spaces of expatriate life. More generally, the language of a warning presumes a division that is inseparable from an impending danger or event. Warnings are the language of events as such, the linguistic form that turns the possible into a function of imminence and proximity, that gathers our attention and directs it toward the eruption of an occurrence or happening. That proximity between *what* will happen and *where* it will happen (in an unspecified province, Kabul City, the Green Zone, “buildings or compounds that lack robust security measures,” or even a “U.S. government facility adjacent to the Afghan Presidential Palace”) are brought together by the language of a warning and produced as corollaries—dangerously trailing each other in space and time.

What is more, the division between interior and exterior is one that is conveyed as perpetually vulnerable to breaching, or as Kabulis describe it *darū-shodan* (“getting in”). “*Ba tokhme az inâ nalat, ain da Intercontinental darū shodan!*” (“Sons of bitches, they even got into the Intercontinental Hotel!”) or more commonly: “*Afghan da char pai ravân ast, darū mishan!*”

(“Afghans run on four legs, they’ll get in!”) Consider this exchange outside of the Civil courthouse in Kabul one afternoon:

“Hey you four-legged bastard! You try to get past us again and I’ll knock your buck-teeth right out of your mouth, you’ll be running around searching for them. You thought you could sneak past security! Get that cigarette out of your mouth when I’m talking to you!” (the guard grabs the cigarette out of a young man’s mouth and tosses it). I’m very sorry sister (he’s now speaking to me). Would you mind standing behind that blast wall? Yes, right there.... I am not done with him and yet and I’d like to curse freely without worrying about offending you. Really I hate to talk like this in front of a lady. It’ll be just a minute. Thanks so much. You’re too kind, and if you ever need anything you just call on me. Consider me a brother.”

If the US STEP warnings produce this distinction in order to emphasize a vulnerability to ingress—variously characterized as a susceptibility to the chaos of the country, the breaching of compounds in Kabul, the kidnapping and assassinating of foreign nationals, the swelling of a group into a dangerous crowd (“as large as 2,500”), or attacks planned from adjacent buildings (“from an elevated position”); a seemingly endless violation of the very indestructible spaces that are the promise of urban militarization is exemplified. The temporal lag, or the anticipatory nature of a warning does more than produce a sense of general crisis. It also turns injury into the outcome of transgression occurring *only* in those militarized spaces that are meant to be immune. Bodily injury becomes the provenance and bad fortune of the interior, the fate of those persons who encounter the violence of a breach, who face the people who manage to “get in.” This perceptual shift not only confers visibility onto the vulnerability of those “on the inside” (depicted as the victims of imminent wounding) but also depicts local *Kabulis* as invaders, as a momentous force that transgress the spaces that should otherwise remain inviolable to and free from their presence. Through the discourse and dissemination of warnings *Kabulis*, either through individual stealth or collective vigor, become a mob.

The temporality of warning is that of waiting. In the moment that one is forewarned, the imminence of an event is both postulated and potentially forestalled. Warnings occupy a ductile divide, straddling the fleeting difference between prediction and occasion. In the case of the STEP warnings this divide heightens a broad sense of anticipation, and attaches it to a presumptive invisibility. In the most basic sense, local Afghans are the invisible bodies that suddenly surprise the foreign community. *They* jump out at *them*. Much like the early discourse of the Bush administration, which characterized Taliban insurgents as emanating from caves and underground holes, the STEP warning similarly portrays a scene of extended surprise—from the next door building that has been secretly breached, to the rooftop that becomes the unanticipated ground for a gun battle, suicide attacks on the Green Village (a residential security compound) and the Spozmai Hotel, and a surprise attack on aid workers delivering medical supplies in a remote village in Badakhshan. This dangerous element of surprise is not only evident in the language of all the STEP warnings but also in the subsequent talk that ensues after they have been read and re-circulated among expatriates, forwarded among friends on laptops or phones as text messages: “I bet another attack is just around the corner!” What quickly recedes from view in this anticipatory drama are the forms of injury and bodily trauma that occur outside of the Green Zone or inside of the Green Zone but to Afghan bodies.

In wartime encounters the conferral of invisibility onto injured bodies is typically achieved by the work of real-time media and digital information. For Jean Baudrillard, the unreality of war is the result of the logic of deterrence. That logic encrusts real-time images with information. The violent exchange of war becomes unlocalizable through the operations of media. The combination of velocity and appearances endlessly displace the real of war-time violence with virtual signifiers, especially the images that melt into one another and bestow on

the event of war a certain fraudulence, a “white-out” so to speak. Thus Baudrillard contends that events are contaminated by the “structural unreality of images” and that this produces a new entity—an occasion that is neither real nor imaginary but a virtual media event that is perpetually open to speculation and constitutively indecipherable.⁴⁹⁰

The US State Department communiqués abet a similar deceit. In this particular warning, which is reflective of all the others I received, the only explicit example of persons injured, the only example that did not partake in the language of generalized victimhood, was that of the British and Kenyan aid workers, “along with two Afghan counterparts,” who were kidnapped and held hostage until they were freed by a NATO rescue operation; and the French citizen who was kidnapped in Western Kabul and held captive from January until April of 2013. If the unspecified Afghan is depicted as the transgressive figure who penetrates space, the expatriate hostage is one who has been violently expunged from where he or she belongs, the one who is forced to inhabit a dangerous exteriority. The binary of hostage and transgressor, imagined in the warning as the inversion of what would otherwise be a local sense of belonging and an expatriate sense of exteriority, serves another function. What diminishes alongside the hostage and the Afghan “on the outside” are the manifold injuries inflicted on Afghan bodies. Those injuries, which are often fatal or involve maiming, become a function of invisible forces, the extension of accidental or unknown sources of harm.

The State Department warnings, and the discourse on the Afghan insurgency more generally, bestows on Afghans two distinct attributes: momentum and invisibility. They are the

⁴⁹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Indiana University Press, 1995, pg. 46-47.

stealth and surreptitious figures that destabilize the government in Kabul (“The Afghan communists have worked their way into the government! They are in all the ministries.”), that attack the highly securitized zones of American military control (“Look I hate to say this but sometimes I just think these people are completely primitive. They only want to get in here to kill us and I ain’t going to let that happen”), that kidnap expatriates and turn them into sex slaves: “I am going to the mining camp in Qara Zaghan, if I am not back in a week send me some hemorrhoid cream!” The notion of anticipatory injury is invoked in various ways, as the impending specter of bodily injury or the prospect of sexual slavery. Whereas for Baudrillard anticipation culminates in a game of interminable virtual deterrence, for Elaine Scarry duration is the necessary temporal lag to the infliction of injury, a constitutive feature of injury as such and the awareness that is enhanced by the duration of anticipation. Like pain, which in the context of torture partakes of absolute reality and deniability (a horrifying dissonance that enables the torturer to continue), so too is the experience of injury in war structured by unmitigated certainty and doubt.⁴⁹¹ This doubt, and the refusal to grant recognition to the injuries of Afghans, is enhanced by the spatial logic of urban militarization, which literally makes the city’s population invisible from the inside of cordoned military bases.

Some bodies are in the middle, between visibility and invisibility. One body in the Green Zone is that of the *chowkidaar*— the young boy outside of the Golden Key. His paranoia about the glazed shrimp and anxiety about pernicious toxic forces powerfully demonstrate for us this greater perceptual shift, a shift that is the work of the general discourse on a roving insurgency as much as it is reproduced through the iterations of STEP and televised warnings, memos, and

⁴⁹¹ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985. Pg. 5.

safety measures such as “lock downs.” These procedures, which fill the everyday of life and work in the Green Zone with a false banality (“Oh you know, it was just another fucking lock down”) are also the forms of securitization that deny the reality of Afghan injury, that go on to depict it as the inevitable corollary of war-time encounter and miscalculation, an illusory paranoia even: “Afghans are always so fucking worried about their safety. You’d think they all lived in luxury before this or something.” But what the boy's anxiety communicates is nothing less than the degree to which the real violence of war, which readily injures and maims Afghan bodies, is falsified by the distorted fiction of inclusion and collaboration.

The presumption of mobility, captured best by the Afghan metaphor of *châr-pai* (four-legged) collapses two profound misunderstandings. It signifies a form of bestiality that can quickly become a mob. This is largely what the State department emails communicate, and warn US citizens about. The second inversion it enables is a perceptual shift that takes local Afghans (readily referred to by expatriate and defense contracts as “local nationals” or “LNs”) as the site of physical excess rather than the victims of literal lack, of maiming and dismemberment. That reality diminishes alongside the unusual investment in the gained momentum of the Afghan, at once a locus of physical excess and stealth invisibility. This culminates in a profound ambivalence that structures the experiences of Afghans working in the Green Zone. That experience, as we will see, is nothing less than the incorporation of Afghans as prosthetic bodies, as the literal human extensions and tissue that are posited between weaponry (ranging from bombs to suicide bombers to bullets) and the bodies of foreigners. But this inversion is not just important for the kind of unresolved inclusion it results in, though collaboration is its most dramatic political effect. It is also indicative of an interaction occurring not only between two bodies but two modes of life, two diametrically opposed notions of being and self-extension.

What is converted and expressed in the misleading language of distinction is in fact none other than the brutal collapse of two bodily orders—that of organic foreign life, which must be protected and extended, encouraged to perdure despite the unmitigated hazards of one of the most dangerous places on earth and prosthetic bodies —the *form* that affirms foreign life by acting as a remedial supplement.

Darūn (Inside)

When you first arrive at the Empire Security Compound, in the Green Zone but on the outer fringe of the heavily cordoned area where US/ISAF military bases are located, you pass by the “Bagram” shops located along a muddy side road. When you turn in to the large unmarked ground in front of the compound deep muddy grooves hold onto your car tires, or pull your feet in. There is a long forbidding wall, behind which are several “poppy palaces,” the tawdry colorful mansions ostensibly built using proceeds from the heroin drug trade and are rented for an average of 20-30,000 USD per month. You’ll feel the eyes of the front gate Afghan security guards immediately on you:

“Who’s this?” “Ah it’s her.” “Back again already? Aren’t you tired of this place? You’re not with American intelligence are you? You know what happens to people like that around here, right? Listen to this, I heard there was some missionary type running around trying to convert Afghans to Christianity. It never ends well for those types!”

“No of course not. I am not affiliated with any religious, political or governmental group. I am just here because I want to collect stories—any story... about your job, your life, your family, your hopes. You know what I mean right?”

“Yeah Yeah, I get it. Some school thing. Look you wouldn’t understand even if I told you. Go ahead and go inside. Don’t forget your visitor pass. Let her in! She’s all clear.”

When you step inside, after you see a small throng of armed security personnel on the front porch—“Hey I remember you, come on in”—you enter the medium size dining room. A large painted mural covers the main wall with an uncanny depiction of serenity. The image is of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, near the village Panajachel where the Mayan God Maximóm is thought to have lived. It was in this room that I met Timūr. Timūr is a young Afghan security guard and the manager of the older guards who I would encounter at the front gate. He is an affable, curly haired young man no more than 21 or 22 years old, though he couldn't be too sure about that. He speaks Persian and refuses to identify with any particular ethnicity. He married twice, once on account of an arranged marriage with his cousin and the second time out of love: “What can I say? It was love, the kind of love that makes you crazy. I had to be with her.” He lives with both wives, and has two young children.

Timūr recounts a life of more “bitter memories than joyous ones.” As a child, he wove carpets with his kid brother in Pakistan for years—even going into debt in order to learn the craft, “a tree doesn't move unless there is wind, right?” He did not make enough money from weaving, and suspects that the senior weavers, fearing competition, did not teach him how to do the job well. Timūr has a cheerful demeanor with an appreciation for humor. He has sharp blue eyes. He winks a lot—as if to say: “You get it, right?” Like so many other young Afghans in the employ of the US military or private security firms, he lives a life that is always on the line.

Life or Limb

“Give me that voice recorder. I want to speak right into it so you can later hear everything, and hopefully so everyone can hear me. I have many foibles but cowardice is not one of them. I work for Empire Security, and before that I worked for Compass, Ranko, USPI and UNAMA. What I say is true for all of them, it is how they all treat Afghans. That's just to set the record straight, it's not where I want to start. By the time we realized what it meant to be self-aware and what it is to have consciousness, by the

time we understood God, we had to flee to Pakistan. I wove carpets in Pakistan with my bare hands for five years during the Taliban rule. We were harassed, but had no choice. We just took it. We even used plastic to make tents to live in. That's how we lived. All this talk of international aid money for Afghan refugees. It's bullshit. It was money everyone fought over and we never managed to get much of the food or supplies. It's a strange thing you know...to work enough to eat and not die. Just to live, but not to have life. Even just to live comes with obstacles. People don't just teach you carpet weaving like that, for nothing...a tree doesn't move unless there's wind right?"

Fatima: "What do you mean? What does it mean to just live?"

Timūr: "We had to pay to learn carpet weaving, and sometimes they would teach us incorrectly and it got to the point where we had to sell everything, including our house in Kabul just to get by in Pakistan. And when we returned to Kabul, from 2001-2004, we didn't know anything. I didn't even know what the basic *shahada* meant.⁴⁹² Again, we did what we had to do to survive. Sold fruit and vegetables, anything that came our way. We are happy that we were born Muslim, but I'll be the first to say we are not happy to live only so that we do not die.

You know what makes me laugh, a sardonic laugh because I realize it isn't funny? There are forty-three countries with foreign citizens in Afghanistan. All of them came to help us build a nation. Hundreds of thousands of troops, and look at the way we still live. We're worse off. We're poorer. How can anybody have hope after forty-three countries can't help you. Look at the city, its roads, the poverty, the inflation. I am at least capable of telling you this, but there are many who don't know themselves, or God, who don't know language or who don't have the language to tell someone else what they've been through. They are the mute bystanders in this tragedy. What hope is there? Why are they alive? There is nothing human about what we see, and no human could wish this on another. And you know what? No television station, no reporter, no TV show can hear you. Only God can understand this."

Timūr talks about traveling to twenty-three different provinces with various security companies, he describes being ambushed by Taliban forces who he claims are supported and killed by the same "foreign groups." He talks about having caught Taliban fighters with foreign ID cards:

⁴⁹² Islam has five pillars of belief: a declaration of faith, daily prayer, fasting, alms giving and making the Hajj pilgrimage once in a lifetime. The *shahada* is the declaration of faith and the most pivotal of these pillars. A muslim must declare that: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is the prophet of Allah."

Timūr:

“The tragedy is that at the time I didn't speak English and I couldn't read their names. Had I been able to read I would have followed up and gotten to the bottom of it. I was a convoy escort and going from Kandahar to Helmand where we were given oil tankers that needed to be transported to military bases. Anyway I was shot, so were my brothers, all three of us were on the same team and shot if you can believe it. All three of us were in serious danger. There is a place, you've probably never heard of it, it is past Kandahar...called *Hauz e Madat*. In the middle of nowhere.

One small road and houses on both sides. Those houses have holes in the walls, connecting them all from the inside and fighters would use the holes to move quickly from house to house without us knowing or seeing. So there you are and some soldier tosses off a rocket or uses a PK or whatever, and if you get out of the car: you're dead. You have to fight back from the street. It was so chaotic once we didn't know who was attacking who. Everyone was dressed in normal local Afghan clothes. You couldn't distinguish them. We were trying to be careful with the tankers so we wouldn't get into trouble or fired. Damn tankers matter more than us. And how much would we make? \$250 or \$300 per month. That was with a company called Compass in Kandahar. Take note of that.

It was like this. This was the value of our lives. If they gave us a damn dog in a shipping container and said transport this dog securely, and if sixty Afghan guards were with that dog, a good twenty of them were considered a cost liability because of the blood money they would give to the families. We are not expected to survive these trips. These people (Timūr means foreign security contractors) knew that twenty of us would die for that one dog. Or for a bottle of water. Whatever you want to put on the other side of that equation, at least twenty of us would die for it. And get this: if you lived your wage was \$300 per month, but if you *died*...if you died your family would get \$12,000 which would be transported along with your limp little body to Kabul, and by the time it reaches your family it was less than half of that. These are all the things I have seen and been though. It's a miracle I am not a heroin addict!

I'll tell you more stories. You're listening. There was another place...these are places you can never go to but it's called Paktia and there is a village named *Waza Khwa* were we worked.⁴⁹³ Oh this is a great story! There was an American base we worked on, I have proof, I have a card, my card with Ranco, the company I worked for.”

Fatima: “What does Ronco do?”

Timūr: “Security. Transport. Logistics.”

⁴⁹³ I have in fact driven through Paktia, despite Timūr's prediction.

He pulls out his wallet and shows me an old ID card from his time with Ronco.

Timūr: “Anyway, we were in charge of base security. And this country, with forty-three other countries in it all of them here to help ostensibly, this country that has its own president, ha ha! It turns out this country has entire provinces where Afghan currency is not recognized let alone accepted. And I saw all sorts of horrors. *Desperately injured Afghans who would come to the base, missing arms and legs and some people would treat their own children because they had no choice. And kids would die. You would see them and not recognize that they were human bodies. That's how bad off they were* (emphasis mine).

The foreign bases, British or American mainly, if someone comes to their door and is sick or injured but it isn't imminently fatal they will not help you. You have to be dying or losing a leg to be helped. They call it something like: “Life or Limb.” And we didn't know what to do. And the Afghans that are capable of helping, refuse to do so. I've worked with Compass, Ronco, in Shahrān by Jalalabad, in Spin Boldak, in Trin Kot, Panjsher, Mazaar, I've worked with 15-20 security companies and it's all the same. We were never expected to live.

We would get into a car, the first one was a *mine loader* and we were always in the second car. And you wouldn't believe it, the fucking bad luck. The way kismet works. The land mine, and trust me there are lots of those, would explode and nothing would happen to the first car, but our car would be blown—sometimes to bits. Every time. As if I needed more bad luck, I was always the second car. I still have head and leg injuries to prove how badly I was injured. If it was appropriate I'd show you. This one-time half of the car was blown off and we somehow managed to survive.

I come here to Empire for work and I take a look around at my colleagues. It's so depressing. They only live to not die. I've tolerated a lot of this, but now I am fed up. I want to leave this place—legally or via smuggling. I don't care. I should be able to get a visa all the work I've done for the American military!”

He pulls out his old identification cards again.

“If the cards are not enough proof I have bullet wounds! I receive death threats. My brother was kidnapped by the Taliban near Salar Village in Wardak. We'd been ambushed there so many times. There are weapons about which you have no knowledge, things the average person has not laid eyes on but I know all about them. I know which weapon is used in which instance, but I have no knowledge that is of use to me and I cannot afford to go to school. What choice do I have? People die all the time. They struggle, they work like dogs for \$120 per month. And look at the cost of living. My rent alone is \$150 and my wife's medication costs me \$70, on top of all that I have two wives!

I know I know...the first was arranged and what can I say the second one was crazy love. I have no regrets, our prophet had multiple wives and I am not ashamed of it,

certainly not the one I am in love with. But it's hard. I can barely afford it. The problem isn't a problem with wives. The Afghan problem is disunity. All this worship of different languages, ethnicities, sects, traditions. We can't expect foreigners to care more about us than we do ourselves. And what do we have? Not a paved road to show for all this. Anyway, things pass. What matters is to have faith strong enough to believe in something greater than this life, greater than a life that may become even worse just because of 2014, this thing they speak of like it's a thing and not a year. When our half-wit president gets on television and says that if all foreign troops leave and all foreign aid stops we will only have rice to eat. What do you expect from others? *I wish you were from a TV station so everyone could hear what I'm saying, so you can broadcast this frustration to the whole world* (emphasis mine).

Look at the situation in this villa. A bunch of foreigners and we drive them around and serve them. Isn't that a dangerous shame? And if you make a mistake, if you misspeak, drink milk, you're done. You're fucking fired. And everything is blamed on us, the poorest of them all, the security guards. I'm 23 and the manager, my subordinates have grey beards and make mistakes but I let it go. God commanded us to forgive, to seek mercy, but that doesn't fly in this place. Other Afghans tell the foreigners. They will rat each other out. Regardless of his grey beard, or what he stole. Say someone steals milk. Let's say they steal 10 boxes of milk, at 60 *Afghanis* each that is 600 *Afghanis* or \$12. What is so important about \$12? Why sell your pride and humanity for \$12? If I see it, I never say anything. I will tell him don't take it, and if he does not have a need he will stop. But if he keeps taking it, then there must be a need for it. In the world there are 21,000 species, and one of them is the human species which has the rational and irrational powers, but the rational understands through language. But there are some who do not understand with language. Americans are not gods, and they certainly aren't God's sons. So why should we treat them like they are?

I was operating a PKG, it's stronger than a Kalashnikov.⁴⁹⁴ It has a stand, and boxes of bullets. That's what I was. A PKG. I hope you never become one. It doesn't seem like you ever will. Anyway, we had to pay the Taliban \$30,000 which we begged for for 21 days from everyone we knew. We didn't eat. We gave everything we had. Imagine what that is like? Your child taken like that from you. He was lucky he was not dead and eventually we got him from a place close to Shahrard, he was blind-folded. They took the cash, our car, everything. He has never been the same. He is afraid to live in a single place. He lives all over the country. I haven't seen him in over a year. Poor guy is just about mad. The company, Compass, didn't care, didn't ask about him. Didn't help us. They simply said you might die, and if you do you'll get \$12,000, if not your pay is \$400 but we are not responsible for what happens to you. If you want the job: good. If not: there are thousands of others just like you who'll take it. It was called Compass and they did nothing. It was me, my father, and brother who found and saved him.”

⁴⁹⁴ A PKG, or PK machine gun is a Russian made general purpose machine gun.

He pulls out all his ID cards again, most of them have his blood type on it.

“Nobody should be allowed to print your blood type but they do it because they expect the Afghans to die. That uncle of mine, whose legs have dried up. He can’t do anything. He will not leave the house because he says God damned him and his punishment is to not see the world, to not live his life outside of that room. He does not have a world. You should talk to him. You should interview him. It is your duty as a human being to talk to people like him. I’ll take you to his house. You’ll be a little scared of how remote it is but I’ll protect you. You’re like my sister. And I know Kabul is no picnic either. The American Minister of Defense shows up and we have no clue until some suicide bomber blows himself up and people die, and others are left to mourn.⁴⁹⁵ Death is a human right, nobody denies that. But there are deaths that are just too senseless, that are not justified regardless of how you look at it. You’re doing this now. Collecting our stories, and experiences. Listening to us. And you are a great listener! I feel good talking to you. And I think it’s noble of you. But you won’t last in this town. You can’t keep listening. You keep doing what you’re doing and you’ll go crazy. You’ll go silent and then you’ll stop.”

For Timūr muteness is the condition for bare life and language is the pharmacological cure, at least in the beginning. His narrative commences with that hope, even though he immediately cites the incapacity of bare orality: “Give me that voice recorder. I want to speak right into it so you can later hear *everything*, and hopefully so *everyone* can hear me. He demands and imagines the digital archiving of his voice as a supplement to my own memory—one which will fail me when I attempt to recall the many stories he shared with me as I write about them. His voice becomes a supplement to my writing as much as my writing is imagined as a supplement to voice: “Take note of that,” he instructed me on several occasions, watching to make sure I noted his words in my notebook.

At the start of this particular conversation, I vividly remember him picking up the small sony digital recorder off the table, lifting it to his mouth and speaking into it with an almost heroic panache, leaving those few seconds of audio file as loud and clear remainders. But Timūr

⁴⁹⁵ At the time the defense minister was Chuck Hegel, who arrived on a secret trip and stayed in Camp Eggers.

takes it further. He immediately adduces transmission from clarity. If his voice is loud and clear, everyone will hear it, his words will reverberate in an imagined (and of course also real) audience that is international in scope and consequence—a scope that necessitates his temerity: “I have many foibles but cowardice is not one of them.” He posits the narration of his experiences, storytelling in particular, not only as a medium of expression but an almost salvific horizon that evades his reach the precise moment he begins to speak. Nonetheless Timūr insists on it. But the paradox of his speech and indeed his desire to speak at all are continuously ruptured by the realization that any form of enhancement will only fail him, and in failing , render him at least somewhat mute, at least somewhat only living not to die.⁴⁹⁶

The prosthetic extensions he reaches for vary in scope—from the digital recorder to his own body, to televisual media and even to me, a human conduit for the transnational dissemination of his words. None of these have any definable virtue, they betray their promise the moment he articulates a desire to capture it, to enhance the contents of his speech. Yet they bear a distinct weight, each one coming up repeatedly and even after he dismisses their incapacity. His repetitive reaching, and the substitution of one prosthetic (a kind of “homeopathic labor of mourning”)⁴⁹⁷ for another functions (even if only momentarily) to allay his grief by making it recognizable to me (his “empathetic witness”), as an urgent matter which must be communicated to the outside world. Through this repetitive displacement, Timūr refuses

⁴⁹⁶ This particular conversation with him lasted several hours and it is typical of his volubility. We often spoke for very long periods of time, and I was always nervous that his co-workers might tell his managers, and that he would get in trouble. Luckily, it never happened. He would also call my cell phone on occasion to ask how I was, if I was safe and if I needed help getting groceries.

⁴⁹⁷ Santner, Eric L. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press., 1993, pg. 24.

the grip of what Eric Santner describes as the “purely mechanical procedure” that is mourning in the absence of any recognition. Timūr’s insistence on the possible social function of the prosthetic is also a refusal to inhabit the literal logic of a mechanical compulsion, which would be madness.⁴⁹⁸

Timūr is completely seduced by the thought of a remedy, one that grants its own urgency. That exigency, which is barely obvious in the transcript (betrayed, perhaps, by the typographic word) was unforgettably apparent in his demeanor, his gesticulation, the hurried (nearly frenzied) diction and tone of voice, his insistence that I *must listen*, and that *I keep on listening*, “Are you listening?” “Take note of that.” “You must listen. It is your duty as a human being.” And later: “You cannot keep listening you’ll go mad.”⁴⁹⁹

For Timūr bare life—“Afghans only live to not die”—is mute life—“I am at least capable of telling you this, but there are many who don’t know themselves, or God, who don’t know language or who don’t have the language to tell someone else what they’ve been through. They are the mute bystanders in this tragedy.” The violence of the war he speaks about and which has devastated not only his body (he was shot at on multiple occasions and survived at least one Taliban ambush on his car and one land mine explosion) but his brother (who was kidnapped and held for ransom by Taliban fighters), his family, his city and his understanding of

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., pg. 25.

⁴⁹⁹ The madness which might otherwise have descended on Timūr, but is mitigated by his ability to speak to me (to express his experiences through oral narrative), instead becomes my potential downfall as the listener, as one who goes mad through listening. The opposition here, between oral and aural, occurs in a textual context where access to writing transcends this dichotomy of madness and enables a world of pure expression (and dissemination) unburdened by listeners who will go mad if they keep listening.

consciousness and language. His language, on its own, could not be more explicit. And yet he continuously reaches for an aid through which he can speak.

If a mute Timūr is living “only to not die” he is in every other way living to die. It is almost a matter of fact that his life proceeds to realize that irony. He was shot at multiple times, his convoys were ambushed, he was in numerous firefights with Taliban fighters, he was nearly kidnapped, he survived land mine explosions. He understands his inclusion within the Green Zone and especially his employment with the various private security firms to be predicated precisely on this paradox: “It was like this, with all the security companies it was like this. If they gave us a fucking dog in a shipping container and said transport this fucking dog securely, and if sixty Afghan guards were with that dog, a good twenty of them would die. Twenty! From the get-go, they were considered a cost liability because of the blood money they would give to the families. We are not expected to survive these trips. These people knew that twenty of us would die for that one damn dog. Or for a bottle of fucking water. Whatever you want to put on the other side of that line, at least twenty of us would die for it.” He explicitly understands his body through a relationship of parity and homology, one that is structured as an equation with a secured object on one hand and his body as a remedial interjection, a shielding bulwark, on the perilous other.

What is clear is that Timūr has internalized the structuring ambivalence of a much larger and pernicious relationship: the paradox of Afghan inclusion in militarized enclaves or in U.S. military/security compounds. That paradox has as its core a profound expectation, a startling banality: Afghans must be willing to die for their expatriate colleagues, willing to lay their life on the line that Timūr conjures in the idiom of the generalized value form. Timūr’s life has no value he can discern. The quality or “use value” of his life is valorized as an insulating shield, it

is not an end unto itself but an explicit means to protect the object of transport: dogs, water, gasoline, foreign expatriates. He cites all of these as the persons and objects he was charged with safely transporting through the medium of the long military convoy, a convoy which often drove over land mines and improvised explosive devices:

“I’ve worked with Compass, Ronco, in Jalalabad, in Spin Boldak, in Trin Kot, Panjsher, Mazaar, I’ve worked with 15-20 security companies and it’s all the same. We were never expected to live. Get this: we all get into a car, the first one was a mine loader and we were always in the second car. And you wouldn’t believe it! The fucking bad luck. The way kismet works. The land mine, and trust me there are lots of those, would explode and nothing would happen to the first fucking car, but our car would be blown to bits. Every time. Who dies? The Afghans. As if I need more bad luck, and there I am... always in the second car. I still have head and leg injuries to prove how badly I was injured. If it was appropriate I’d show you. This one-time half of the car was blown off and we somehow managed to survived.”

Several things come together at this point, or rather this knot which he tries to understand as the surprising irony of bad fortune. To be sure, Timūr does analyze and express these as the effects of political and military factors. But his narrative and the mode of questioning his own survival (for example, “We somehow managed to survive”) also convey his belief in the sheer force of kismet unfurling through his life. It is ironic that the question or uncertainty of his survival, which assumes a fated quality, and which he is so anxious about (he repeatedly pulls out his identification cards, talks about being shot at, etc.) is a function of the prosthetic logic he inhabits, and through which he has gained access to the inside of American war making. It is the very logic that governs his personhood in Kabul, and his inclusion in the convoys and missions he survives as a matter of fortune.

The specter and visual feat of the military convoy was repeatedly brought up in the course of my interviews with Afghan security personnel or translators. It was a menacing sight. It was a source of juvenile pride: “let’s blast some Lady Gaga!” a contractor said during a ride. It

was a space of possible abandon. Of swelling envy from the outside, where other local Afghans look on, “Sons of bitches!” or swerve out of the way—“watch out!” What was also expressed to me repeatedly, and as a matter of fact, is the order of tanks and the relationship to land mines. Large land mines, I was told, do not immediately detonate when a tank rolls over them. Land mines bear the weight of the first car as an activating source, and then explode as soon as the second tank drives over. Afghans usually sit in the second tank, a position that in the long line of a convoy appears, perhaps even to Timūr, like a privilege, inclusion on the “inside” and the “frontline” though it often means for them a certain death. The United States Marine motorized convoy handout details what Timūr experiences as his own frequent bad luck:

“Convoys are task organized into a Lead Security Unit, Main Body, and Rear Security Unit. The **Lead Sec Unit** provides security to the front and flanks of roughly the first half of the convoy and is usually tasked to “*screen to the front.*” Similarly, the **Rear Sec Unit** provides security to the rear and flanks of roughly the second half of the convoy and is, therefore, tasked to “*screen to the rear.*” The **Main Body** consists of the vehicles that are actually transporting the personnel/cargo that make up the mission and is most often tasked to “*protect*” that cargo. The Main Body vehicles should be located within the middle of the convoy and will supplement flank security if they are also equipped with CSWs.”⁵⁰⁰

Let us return to the line, not the frontline but the *dividing* line that Timūr conjures in the image of a commensurate equation. Afghan life has the value of what is on the other side of that line.⁵⁰¹ What is more, Timūr conveys this awful dichotomy as taking on a life of its own and moving through a proliferating chain of generalized value, *anything* can be on the other side it seems. In fact, the move from the left to the right side of the scene of parity he conveys

⁵⁰⁰ United States Marine Corps. The Basic School Marine Corps, Training Command Camp Barrett, Virginia 22134-5019. Motorized Convoy Operations B4P44878 Student Handout, pg. 9.

⁵⁰¹ Earlier in the conversation, when he describes work relations among Afghans inside the X complex he relies on a similar logic of valuation to emphasize his disdain for those Afghans who inform their expatriate employers of instances of petty theft: “Say someone steals milk. Let’s say they steal 10 boxes of milk, at 60 AFS each that is 600 AFS or \$12. What is so important about \$12? Why sell your pride and humanity for \$12? If I see it, I never say anything.”

increasingly shows an unbounded zeal, not just an expatriate or a dog, but gasoline or even bottled water can inhabit the slot against which the value of Afghan life is measured. But what also stands out is not the relative measure of Afghan life but the porosity of the other side of the line, a heterogeneity of content that Timūr first explains as the range of things entrusted to his convoy (expatriates, dogs, gasoline, even water) and then more tellingly as *kismet*: “We were never expected to live... The fucking bad luck. The way *kismet* works.” Not only is there no virtue on the other side of the line, but it is also the space of radical possibility, of a sheer movement that defies his attempt to settle on one thing against which the value of his life is measured.

But there is another line for Timūr. One which he alludes to, a subtle allusion that nonetheless bears a striking resemblance to the discourse of Afghan translators like Matin and Zia. There is also uncontrollable movement outside the city of Kabul, where not only itinerant populations rove but where “there is no law, no order... there is no sense.” For Timūr, the vast expanse of life and territory outside of Kabul, is devoid of sense. He explicitly warns me about traveling outside of the Kabul, mentioned places not “fit” for human life, so bad off that I “wouldn’t believe it”:

“We went to a place called Tarin Kowt where no human would want to live, infested with Taliban that come out from nowhere before you even realize they’ve come out and surrounded you, we were there and the Americans told the ANA they had no right to fire first, only after the Americans said they could. Afghans are body armor (*zereh e jan e shân*) for the Americans that’s why they need them, that’s why all of this exists—these camps, these companies they just need Afghans as armor (*zereh*).”

Kabul is a place where one can know things, where understanding is matched by a depth of causal possibility at the precise moment when only the unremitting danger posed to Afghans seems inevitable. Timūr takes this further. He warned me that there is no law or logic (*mantiq*)

outside of Kabul. He makes this assertion at the same moment that he cites the most unforgiving manifestation of a law: The Toyota Corolla incident in which his uncle drove to close too a convoy and was shot at, losing ten centimeters of his arm. The white Toyota corolla (painted yellow for taxis) is the most ubiquitous car in Kabul. It even has a face-book page (“Corollas of Kabul”) dedicated to the humorous stickers and slogans that festoon back windshields (“King of the Earth—Don’t Follow Me,” “Jack Bauer 24 CT, No Time for Love,” “Don’t Tach Me” “Love is Blaine” “Things to Do Today: Get Up, Survive, Back to Bed.”) Because they are readily available, white corolla hatchbacks (“*sarachas*”) are also the most common car used in car bombings, or “vehicle borne improvised explosive devices.”

Since 2006 there has been a total of 500 car bomb attacks, resulting in 1,904 deaths and 5,870 wounded persons. Of these attacks, a staggering 434 (which killed 1,432 and wounded 4,319) were waged against security forces.⁵⁰² The Afghan Ministry of Interior’s General Department of Traffic, established in 1963 has issued approximately 128,201 driving licenses, 1,630 international driving licenses, and 76,905 vehicle permits.⁵⁰³ Aside from the sheer number of unlicensed drivers the Department of Traffic (which was targeted in a large-scale suicide-car bomb attack in 2012 when I was in Kabul) cites the use of left-handed vehicles, the lack of standardized traffic posts, bus stations (passengers often wait on the road), and a shortage of patrol vehicles, equipment, and personnel among its challenges. Moreover, the department

⁵⁰² These figures were obtained from The University of Chicago’s Project on Security and Terrorism Suicide Attack Database. The database is available at and includes detailed reports of each incident recorded: http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu/search_results_new.php

⁵⁰³ These figures are obtained from the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs website in an article entitled “The history of traffic in Afghanistan,” see: <http://moi.gov.af/en/page/9886>

admits that: “powerful individuals” often close roads “creating heavy traffic and traffic jams on the roads remaining open.”

As of 2006, Afghanistan had a total of 12,350 km of paved roads and 29,800 km of unpaved road. In this context, exacerbated by the demands of road closure and minimum distances between military convoys and cars, the mere sight of a white *saracha* can be unnerving. I was often warned of this by local *Kabulis* (my driver owned a white hatchback) that I must be extra vigilant about the distance (*fâsila*) between my car and any military convoy passing on the road, a frequent occurrence. The danger is one of proximity, of overextending one’s allotted space and breaching the minimum distance required between a military convoy and an ordinary car. This breach is sufficient cause for the convoy gunner (a gunner usually sits on top of a tank with a machine gun) to shoot at the car, a scene which I never witnessed but which several informants told me they had: “Just like that! With my own eyes I saw them shoot at the white *saracha* for no reason.” Sohaila, a middle-aged Afghan-American woman who worked for the Department of Justice and then later with ISAF troops as a cultural adviser recounted seeing such incidents and described them as her worst memories. When I asked Justice about this rule through an email communication he wrote back saying:

“I cannot remember the exact distance drivers were to keep away. We had a rule that if a vehicle approached at a fast rate or within X meters, we would first need to shine a non-lethal laser light, nicknamed a dazzler at the hood of their car. Once this took place, then use of force was authorized if there was a possibility for life to be threatened. The normal distance was usually 100 meters or about 300 feet. Sometimes local policy would be different, especially in dense areas.”

What Justice tries to recall as somewhere between 100 meters and 300 feet is also unclear in the following statement and policy, put out by ISAF in 2008:

“Military convoys of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and ISAF regularly use principal and secondary roads to conduct operations and to provide security to the

Afghan people. The support of the Afghan population is essential to avoid any civilian casualties. ANSF and ISAF wish to remind everyone to adhere to all signals and warnings to slow down and stop when convoys or patrols are approaching. These are standard procedures that ANSF and ISAF troops use throughout Afghanistan. Failing to follow the procedures when approaching convoys or patrols could be interpreted as a hostile act.”



The above sign (it simply reads in Persian and Pashto: Stay back) was to be posted on the back of vehicles in an ISAF convoy, making it clear to Afghan drivers (the vast majority of whom are illiterate) to keep an undefined distance from the convoy. In all the time I spent on the roads of Kabul and in taxis, occasionally behind military convoys or on the side of a road waiting as one passed I did not once see this sign. And in all the hours I spent in tailgate traffic, it is painfully obvious that the relativity of distance could quickly turn deadly for drivers who have no way of knowing, like Justice, whether it is 100 meters or 300 feet, or 328 feet (the actual conversion of 100 meters into feet).⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰⁴ The bright green lights used to warn drivers are known as laser dazzlers, non-lethal weapons once used only by the military. These 200 milliwatt glare enforcers are class 3b lasers (3b lasers cause eye

The Motorized Convoy Operations handbook dictates the following procedure in the event that an unknown vehicle (i.e. any non-military vehicle) approaches a convoy:

EOF for Vehicles

Unknown vehicle approaches the convoy (ROE will likely dictate).

While convoy is halted:

- +300m (before vehicle reaches your furthest cone that says “STOP” in the local language): Blast horns, flash headlights, wave arms/flags to stop vehicle
- 300-200m (vehicle passes the furthest cone): Fire pyro towards approaching vehicle
- 200-100m (vehicle passes the second cone): Shoot tires then engine of approaching vehicle
- -100m (*vehicle passes the final cone*): Shoot driver (emphasis mine)

When convoy is moving:

- Wave arms / Fire pyro / Gain PID of hostile act and hostile intent / Engage vehicle then driver (*whether or not there will be time for each step and the exact distances that trigger each action will be situationally dependent*). (emphasis mine).⁵⁰⁵

Like the image “white-out” responsible for the all encompassing darkness that eclipsed the first salvos of the Afghan-American War in October of 2001, forcing Afghans to rely on their

injury of medium to high degree, with class 4 lasers causing severe damage) that emit slow, fast or random pulses of light within a range of 500 meters or over 1km at night. The glare enforcer temporarily blinds the person it is directed at, and in some instances burns the retina. At a distance of 40 meters they can cause permanent eye damage. These lights are manufactured by B.E Meyers, a military “ advanced photonic” contractor: <http://bemeyers.com/about-us/brad-meyers-story/>

This youtube link contains video of the glare laser being used on various cars by a convoy in Afghanistan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=mD_ciCZJ7q0

⁵⁰⁵ The Motorized Convoy Operations B4P4878 Student Handbook, pg. 18.

senses in order to discern the targets and trajectories of bombs, so too do laser lights enforce a blinding distance. Every notion of extension, whether supplementary in nature or not, presumes a certain distance, or at least the possibility of maintaining a space, often violently. The addition to something in order to enlarge or protect it is thus both a continuation—as in the case of a prosthetic limb, and the point of difference: where a being or form encounters something inorganic to it, an unnatural prolongation. This foreignness, which Freud describes as having not quite grown on us, is a powerful ambivalence that is even more powerfully demonstrated by the two rules that govern the proximity of Afghan bodies to foreign bodies. Whereas Afghans are included in the military convoy as part of the supplementary and protective “main body” they are, on the street, expected to maintain a dead-serious distance from a passing convoy.

The sheer difficulty of this distance is perhaps obvious to anyone familiar with the lack of basic infrastructure in Afghanistan. Not only are a majority of Kabul's smaller roads unpaved, almost all roads are undivided into lanes and uninterrupted by traffic lights. Cars zoom and zig zag past one another in a seemingly endless swerve that defies all the norms and protocols of traffic, let alone the additional strictures of military protocol. A specific distance is exceedingly difficult to discern in the lived realities of uncontrolled traffic. Moreover, the physical presence of a military convoy causes panic among some drivers who, in their ill-fated attempts to drive around the jams, may steer too close to the convoy and cross the line.

What is played out on that line is the value of Afghan life. The limit point, between the main body of a convoy and its lead or rear units or the three hundred feet (or meter) distance required between an ordinary civilian car and a military convoy illustrates how a notion of excess comes into being, how the extraneous or supplemental is made to signify at a pernicious limit. Returning to the isomorphism Timūr conjures between the value of objects and Afghan

life, we now see that it is important not because Afghan local nationals are the modern day pharmakons of American war practices but because they illustrate how the body of the city is itself reconstituted by the bodies of local Afghans. Both are structured as sites of intense ambivalence, which nonetheless make *sense*, and only make sense at a *limit* point, at the boundary between inside and outside. It is at that boundary that the notion of Kabul City and that of the physical safety and well-being of expatriate bodies begins to emerge. In this way, and through the illusion of this boundary, there is for Timūr no sense outside of Kabul. Let us recall that there was also no order or sense on the other side of the cost-benefit valuation Timūr expresses. In fact, it is a pure disorder that transforms the value of Afghan life into something of an imponderability (measured against an array of shifting objects placed in the convoy's care).

Timūr lives with a growing sense of loss, like so many other people. Like the young boy guarding the Golden Key, he senses a predatory violence playing out at the boundary line between inside and outside, a violence that distinguishes between necessity and excess. But for him, the fickle uncertainty that governs the relations he laments also does something more profound: it calls the transparency of causality into question. It sends him searching for a ground. He ascribes the misfortune of physical trauma and, for some of his Afghan colleagues an untimely death, at times to military policy and at times to kismet. For Timūr the hand of fate determines a causal groundlessness: one that is deeply related to a sense of loss surrounding the Afghan body. This owes itself to an understanding of the Afghan body as one without definable traits or perceptible virtue, as inherently incomplete. But if maimed Afghan bodies are supplemented by a physical prosthetic, inside the Green Zone Afghan bodies exist to institute the limit and boundary between the inside and outside, and between what is sanctimonious and excessive. Moreover, Afghan life is reducible to the accident, to that which comes from

elsewhere. Consider the following example, of an Afghan life being literally hurled into its value:

One afternoon I was standing outside on the front steps of the Empire residential compound with Justice, my main interlocutor who first invited me to visit and introduced me to many others. He also helped me arrange my volunteer work at a Pizza Hut (inside a converted shipping container) on Camp Eggers, a US/NATO base in the Green Zone. Justice was uniformly liked by his Afghan colleagues—always cited to me as an example of “a good human.” I no longer remember how we got this particular conversation, but I vividly recall how startled I was to hear what he believed, and perhaps also what he experienced:

“Well... one thing that the local Afghans do, and it’s terrible, but it happens and we deal with it all the time because they show up to the compound demanding to see us, and to talk about blood money...what they do is throw their children in front of convoys, so that we run over them and then they can claim blood money. This one time we were just driving...in our humvee and all of sudden, out of nowhere a woman threw her daughter in front of the car. We didn’t see her and there was no way we could stop in time. She was very hurt, a young kid, we picked her up and tried to rush to a hospital, her life was on the line but she died from her injuries on the way.”

The discourse on the Afghan body is also one on what is unexpected. Justice’s convoy, according to his account, didn’t mean to run over the young girl. She was suddenly thrown in the way, becoming present at the very moment that she was fatally struck. What Timūr’s rumination has in common with Justice’s recollection is the distinct sense of accident and excess that emerges when boundaries, between convoy and civilian or between what is not anticipated and forms of purposeful injury are insisted upon. Let us recall that for Timūr this assumes the form of a logic, and in fact he states that there is “no law or sense” outside of Kabul. The very ambiguity and causal uncertainty he emphasizes also become a form of sense-making, the managed chaos that governs life in Kabul. It is precisely at that moment in the conversation, when he laments

how Afghan lives are lost as a matter of industrialized violence, that Timūr turns to the image of his uncle's atrophied legs, imploring me to speak with the man and to see for myself⁵⁰⁶:

“You know I know someone you should really meet. You must meet him and see it with your own two eyes. It's my uncle, he lives up in the mountains in the middle of nowhere, his legs are all dried up. Totally dried up and he has not left his room in eighteen years. There is nothing his family can do for him. He was injured in a rocket attack. He stepped out of his house one day during the civil war and a rocket hit him out of nowhere. And I have another uncle who was driving too close to an American tank so they fired at him and he lost 10 centimeters of bone in his arm. And then there is my brother who was kidnapped by Taliban and held for a high ransom. I was on a security team with two of my brothers but we later split into different teams so we wouldn't all die at once from a land mine or something. The convoy my brother was a part of...the Taliban killed everyone and when it came time to kill my brother the call to prayer rang out and they spared him. There is no law, no order outside of Kabul. There is no sense.”

Although he recognizes the reason for the injuries, Timūr attributes them to misfortune.

We've already encountered the Afghan body as the site of physical excess as opposed to an injured body. The attribution of momentum that undergirds the language of US State Department warnings, and the kinds of colloquial aspersions (like *char-pai*, or four-legged) that *Kabulis* readily use enable an important inversion. This metaphorical and perceptual reversal interrupts the incredible vulnerability of Afghan bodies to the ongoing violence of land mines, IEDs, military convoys and suicide bombings. Aside from denying this reality, and perhaps more importantly, this discourse converts that vulnerability into the consequence of accident—for example running over the Afghan body that suddenly appears in the way of the convoy, or Timūr's uncle hit by a rocket from “out of nowhere.” What remains after this illusory reversal, is no deliberate cause for Afghan injury. Afghans are only in the way.

⁵⁰⁶ I considered going with Timūr to his uncle's house, but in the end decided against it given how remote the location was. I was sure to lose cell phone connectivity and did not trust Timūr enough to be that beholden to him or his family for my safety.

This indistinction of cause and belonging is also a function of speaking English and being literate. For Timūr writing distinguishes between the inside and outside. While talking about traveling to twenty-three different provinces with various security companies, he describes being ambushed by Taliban forces he claims are supported by foreign entities. He specifically remembered having caught Taliban fighters with foreign ID cards:

“But at the time I didn't know English and I couldn't read his name. Had I been able to read the name I would have followed up on it. I would have determined who the foreign fighters are, and who supports them. At the time, I was a convoy escort and going from Kandahar to Helmand where we were given oil tankers that needed to be transported to military bases. Anyway I was shot, so were my brothers, all 3 of us were on the same team and shot at some point or another. Damn tankers matter more than our lives. And how much would we make? \$250 or \$300 per month. That was a company called Compass in Kandahar. Take note of that.”

Literacy—reading the writing of others—the name of others becomes the turning point for Timūr. It is the condition of possibility in general. It restores for Timūr the necessity of a charge made against the exterior, the supplemental fighters on his convoy route: the *beganehâ*, or foreigners that suddenly encounter him. If we think back to the preoccupations of Matin and Zia, the young translators from Kabul who encountered not only linguistic difference but also a *literally* unsettling relationship to pronominal usage in the Afghan badlands, Timūr's desire to place the fighter within the purview of his name, to make him the same as his name—the extension of a foreign origin, is also a manifestation of what it means to read.

To read is to distinguish not only between signifiers but also between the fantasy of shared origin and the mimesis of belonging, a mimesis that assumes the fiction of having a stake, a ground—and that galvanizes the “foreign fighters” to pretend they are fighting a holy war for Afghanistan, even as their actions devastate Afghan bodies and undermine the Afghan State. Timūr wants to distinguish himself from these people. He wants to read their names, to figure out

that they are not really Afghan, that they are clandestine agents of foreign countries, and then to restore them to the outside (presumably by alerting his superiors, who are of course also foreign mercenaries). Even en route from Kabul to Kandahar, perhaps the most contested route in all of Afghanistan, a powerful pharmacological sense perdures as if that stretch of territory—as beholden as it is to the force of exteriority and dangerous chance (and also to the awful realities of mercenary warfare), can be used by Timūr to assert his rightful position on the inside, as a subject of the Afghan State who wants to fight its foreign and domestic enemies.

Timūr expresses his understanding of the inside as a certain sense-making. It is what it is. It defies in a single blow the predations of collaborative wartime practice as much as the irony of a therapeutic gesture through the reaching for different prosthetics. But the logic that invigorates its self-sameness is the very one that requires the collapse of injury with accident—the kind of bad kismet that touches on Timūr and his brothers with devastating constancy and that suffuses a context of real and simulated fighting.⁵⁰⁷ Thus, if the inability to read a name is related to an impure interiority—one with foreign fighters and mercenaries, it is also true that a signature—the indexical extension of self that assumes such a powerful force in Afghan political and juridical life, is what forges the inside. We know already that the inside is inextricable from the urban and spatial practices of counter-insurgency: the cordoned military bases and perimeters, the

⁵⁰⁷ The company Compass Security came under scrutiny in 2010 and was banned that May from escorting NATO convoys between Kabul and Kandahar after a series of violent confrontations between Afghan civilians and Afghan convoy guards, who were suspected of bribing the Taliban for passage. Timūr never mentioned this incident, and it possible that in 2010—two years prior to our conversation, when he would have been approximately 19 years old, that he was working for one of the other companies he mentions. The allegation against Compass, and an Afghan company called Watan (Nation) Risk Management is that the companies “are using American money to bribe the Taliban. The officials suspect that the security companies may also engage in fake fighting to increase the sense of risk on the roads, and that they may sometimes stage attacks against competitors.” Filkins, Dexter. “Convoy Guards in Afghanistan Face an Inquiry” in *The New York Times*. June 6, 2010.

securitization of the city and the regularized halting of traffic, the dogs and metal detectors, the bomb squads. But it is also stunningly associated with the simple act of signing one's name, signing on and into it all. The signature on the work contract has unrelenting force. It suddenly corrals Timūr's thoughts and rumination—it imbues his recollection with a crystallized moment of sense, an obviousness. It doesn't require me to "take note." It literally goes without saying:

“Things happen here as if its all a rapid stream washing down and over you, you can't tell one force from another. But there are multiple forces, and all I know is that Afghans die, weapons are tested on them, they are shot at from various sides, these companies make money and profit from Afghan blood, companies like this very one (he taps his finger forcefully on the table). When we signed the contract—the moment we signed the contract we were told that Afghan security is the front line, we are the front line, and if we see someone with a gun pointing it at us, we still cannot shoot them until we are shot at. If we're still alive at that point. You know what I mean.”

The moment of the signature, an indexical extension of self, is the time of becoming the doomed “front line”—a human extension incorporated only for its protective function, for the armor it provides. One afternoon, maybe even the day I had this conversation with Timūr (I typically spent the entire day at Empire and went home in the evening), I was approached by Zaid, one of the cooks. We've already learned so much about Zaid's life—the trauma of unwittingly marrying his milk sister, his time as a day laborer in Iran, his brother's precarious position in a security convoy, his diabetic mother for whom he asked me to purchase a blood glucose monitor, the property disputes that devastated his family, his crazy uncle and the “garden meeting” that left almost everyone dead after a surge of breathtaking rage.

But on this day he was touched by a much more banal violence: his car windows were bashed in the courtyard right outside the front entrance, most likely with a bat. He was secretly taking taxis and walking to work (he lived far from the neighborhood) and he only suspected Timūr as the culprit: “I don't mean to slander anyone, but I know who it is. I am convinced it is

Timūr—do you know him? Young guy he’s head of security, curly brown hair. It’s him. How can anyone take a bat to a car in front of the security guards without him knowing? It’s him. He wants me out of here. I know it. They’ve never wanted me in here.” Zaid asked me to intervene by speaking with Justice, who was widely considered to be the fairest and sympathetic of the *khârijis*, or foreigners and who was one of the Empire senior managers. I agreed, but told Zaid that I could not accuse Timūr. I told Justice that Zaid’s car windows had been bashed in, and that he could not afford to fix them. Justice was shocked and proposed to give him a monthly raise, and to make him “employee of the month” in order to give him a \$500 cash prize. He also offered to pay for fixing his windows. Timūr, who may or may not have taken a bat to Zaid’s car, also had a problem with *my* car. It bothered him:

“What did you drive in today? A car worth 24k right? It’s a 2009 or 2010 Toyota corolla. Of course you drive in that because if you are driving in an old Toyota corolla you risk your life because all white corollas are automatically suspected of being car bombs.⁵⁰⁸ The difference is the value, and the value of your life in comparison to ours.”

If we believe Zaid’s accusation, Timūr appears to have found himself in the same situation as the perilous convoy route: facing an outsider, a person who made their way into the inside. The inner sanctum that was supposed to distinguish these persons, and perhaps even the

⁵⁰⁸ During my stay in Kabul I had two chauffeurs because the kidnapping of foreign nationals often occurs with the help of a taxi driver. Hamid and Nael both had white corollas. Hamid drove a very old white hatchback and Nael borrowed a family friend’s white 2010 corolla. I typically went to Empire with Nael, because Hamid always seemed suspicious of my movements, he was overly protective and I did not want him to know how much time I was spending “inside” the compound or the Green Zone military bases. It was a secret and a nerve wrecking balance I negotiated on a daily basis. Nael would typically drive to the Green Zone and from Empire I’d secretly take one their drivers and drive further into the Green Zone or to a military base with a security guard (often Justice) as my chaperone. I went to Empire with Nael because he was a lot younger than Hamid, he was unassuming and never asked questions about the Green Zone—he referred to Empire as a *muâssisa*, an NGO. I never corrected him. For that strategic reason, and out of an abundance of caution, Timūr only saw me in the 2010 Corolla, for him a measure of my life as opposed to Afghan life, a car instead of a car bomb—the most horrifying of accidents imaginable when all boundaries between inside and outside collapse in one deadly moment.

rapid stream of indistinct forces Timūr laments, actually resulted in excess. Let us return again to the line, the enabling space between a generalized value and that of Timūr's life. Timūr is haunted by the other side of the line. He speaks to me about it as if he is chasing a specter, some ghostly force that has set upon his life and structured it through an endless series of displacements. But the question of a ghostly series is also a question of a paradoxical incorporation, the point at which a supplementary series becomes a more immediate illusion, a palpable ghost—even one of blood and flesh. That ghost, for Marx, is the immediacy of the body and subject, the flesh that every ghost must return to after an earlier autonomization.

Derrida contends that for Marx the moment of corporeal literality is a dimension of a much more prosthetic reality, a cunning artificiality that is actually a “second incarnation conferred on an initial idealization.”⁵⁰⁹ One lesson of this “second” body is that the desire to reappropriate a body proper also entails a fetish, containing a double movement between a recognition (of self, of body) and the seduction of that immediacy, nothing more than another super-idealization. This logic is not far from Timūr's understanding of the city proper, Kabul City, as an immediacy that becomes palpable to him (especially as a place where the violence and density of social relations “makes sense”) at the same moment that he is incorporated as a prosthetic body, offering a supplementary service “on the inside.”

The violence being played out at the boundary between interior and exterior, and the concomitant inability to find a ground is true for the logic of *pharmakos* in general. For Derrida the issue of *pharmakon*, a remedy that is also a poison, gestures towards a problem of mixture.

⁵⁰⁹ Derrida, Jacques, and Peggy Kamuf. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 1994, pg. 158.

Every *pharmakon* is apprehended as a mixtural impurity—an aggressor that is most powerfully exemplified in the belief that writing has deleterious effects on living memory. The accusation is always against the exterior as supplement, as a surplus that harmfully touches upon an interior. In Afghanistan, the notion that an outside is at once regularly constituted and threatens the inside also structures the logic of modern Afghan history, its encounter with capitalist modernity and the tumultuous intellectual and infrastructural histories that comprise the aim of modernism. The vast canvas of the Afghan twentieth century, a long period when the blows of fate encountered the unbridled optimism of modernist hope was itself an aporetic opening, allowing for the passage of complex and irreducible contradictions. These experiences defy the easy gestures of conceptual certainty as much as they resist the affirmation of metaphysical presence. Self, being, language, representation, value, orality, literacy all came under a radical scrutiny that touched as much upon the earthen ground as it did the realm of causal relations, the wondrous connections that hold events and sense-making in unison, however fleeting. Timūr asks nothing less than this question—what does it mean to establish a basis for *why* while experiencing repetition as *naseeb-va-kismet*—destiny and fate. The specter, not of capital but of the sense that things could not be otherwise, haunts his words: “By the time we realized what it meant to be self-aware and what it is to have consciousness, by the time we understood God, we had to flee to Pakistan.”

Timūr fled the predations of the Afghan Civil War, first fleeing Kabul and later Pakistan where the hardship of his life as a refugee became too much to bear. That fleeing—between the inside of a motherland and the exteriority of a neighboring country, and then again between that outside and the inside of a preferable homeland make the ontology of self impossible for him. Timūr’s wartime shuttling disrupts a knowledge of self and cause. Thus, to ask what haunts Timūr is to understand how representation is insufficient to the tall order of necessity, the bare

whims of kismet. Representations are caught in the middle, between inside and outside, like Timūr's body and his perception of Zaid. This helps us understand why he reaches, first for that voice recorder and then to the language of prosthesis, to explain to me his lifeworld. His representations are never enough. His bare words require a digital enhancement, his sense of self requires a place and ground, his brother's life a ransom, his own the crude valuation of a war-time economy predicated on the fungibility of Afghan life. Self-presence is haunted, invaded by modern specters like his words, his job, the convoy, Zaid, the Green Zone, the young *chowkidaar*, but also the soil, photosynthesis, prills of calcium ammonium nitrate, the Afghan ground and its interior.

8 Terrestrial Things

“Lightning...distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail behind it, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground.”⁵¹⁰

Millenium Mining Services⁵¹¹

The first of the workers would arrive at dawn and skip over muddy puddles that accumulated on the ground from heavy rainfall throughout the night. Here to clean they were already fatigued. To their left, beyond two imposing iron gates, on which a thick layer of dust had settled on top of rust, there was the underground Millenium Mining Services (MMS) precious metal assay laboratory—one which few people know about and where a certain magic transpires. Maira is the basement janitor who works *sohb ta shâm* (from sunrise to sunset) and rarely sees daylight. She proclaimed to me that she has never seen gold before: “Is it even a real thing?” she asks. Nobody else in the lab—none of the South African or Zimbabwean technical staff, nor their British supervisors seem to see Maira. The lab is driven by an obsessive desire to see as much as it is by blindness. She didn’t know this but the *sherkat* (company) was in the process of obtaining its ISO 17025 accreditation, and every little spill or mistake in the lab mattered more than ever, threatening to sever it from a world of standardization.⁵¹² Inside, Maira

⁵¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pg. 28.

⁵¹¹ This is a pseudonymous company name.

⁵¹² ISO 17052 is an international standard established in 1999 by the International Organization for Standardization. It is the most important standard for calibration and testing for laboratories. If accredited, the managers at MMS and the laboratory hoped that the lower cost of labor in Kabul would bring them international business that would otherwise go to South African laboratories. In 2012-2013 the lab ordered most of its supplies from South Africa.

mops the long white-tiled hallway of the ground floor with assiduity, repeatedly looking over her shoulder to check if it glistens behind her heavy set gait. She walks by sometimes like a phantom, passing unnoticed from one end to the other: “You can’t trust your own shadow in this town,” she always quipped. Nobody knows her name. Everyone calls her “*tu*” (you): “What do you want with my name? You are the first person to ask me that!” Maira has a proclivity to joy. She exudes the rare buoyancy some manage to retain despite shouldering the burdens of fate and time. For her they are the same: “This has *always* been our kismet.” She winks at me periodically, suggesting a desire to hold a small space of communicative exchange—a secret in a setting unconcerned with any of her worries: “I do not read or write. I don’t know what will become of me.” Contrary to what she expected, the longer she worked there the less anyone seemed to care. Empathy was as rare as gold. For her, there was no alchemy of happiness there.

That spring, like all the ones before it, the hills encircling Kabul began to green as if in a trance. Clusters of flowers cropped up everywhere and studded the city with patches of color. The public gardens were abuzz. Above the lab and outside its gates bustles the lively neighborhood of Taimani where Maira lives and where wedding halls, hotels, numerous restaurants and an Eiffel tower replica give it more color than ever before. It was often those bold colors on edifice fronts that elicited deep aversion from the expatriates who work and eat out in Taimani, an irritation with the contrast against the naturally bleak surround disseminated in the countless images of Kabul that accompanied the drum beat to war. There was so much color that they couldn’t help but remark on its implacable excess: “I’m sorry but, really, tell me: why so much fucking color?”

The MMS lab is white all over. Like the property of processed gold everything is free from tarnish. The walls, the floors, the porcelain cups used during the assay process, the

cylinders, the lab coats. All of it is unblemished. Some of it glistens. The main hallway is partitioned by pristine glass doors that give the entire lab a sense of transparency despite all the uncertainty that thrives in it. In the back room soil samples sit in double zip-locked bags, sorted and catalogued. Together they represent the provincial grounds where the company has tethered its hopes. To the naked eye, of course, there is no difference between them. They blend into one another inside the metallic trunks they are stored in, situated around the perimeter of the back room like a shiny ring. In the back office, where Afghans (or “local nationals”) are not allowed, there is an array of complex machinery worth millions of dollars. All of it is subject to strict protocols of access and contamination. Some of the equipment heats up to one thousand degrees: “the temperature settings are very precise, you have to have the heat exactly right otherwise the whole process is corrupted,” Danisa the senior lab technician from Zimbabwe told me.

Fortune hangs in a delicate balance between geological luck and scientific truth. The ideology of value passes from darkness to light, revealed through the complex processes of mineral and chemical analysis, processes meant to enlighten everyone in the lab except Maira and her fellow custodians. An ambivalent sense of boundless opportunity and futility pervades the laboratory and the main corporate offices upstairs. For multi-national mining endeavors what is at stake on both levels is the ground—the earthen reality of land and soil, geological diversity, tectonic shifts dating back to the Jurassic age, mineral and precious metal occurrences (metallic minerals including gold, copper, cobalt, lithium and iron and non-metallic minerals including mica, halite, and talc), extraction, tunneling, scientific and hard labor.

Maria fervently believes in kismet: “*Telâ, telâ telâ!* (gold, gold, gold!) It’s always the same. But it isn’t meant to be. Is it a real thing? I have not seen *telâ* in the bazaar (market place)

and not even in here where it is supposed to be. I know it's some yellow thing but for me I don't know if it's meant to be." In the whiteness of the lab, she expects to see gold as a yellow thing, something she can only describe by relying on *rang* (color). Maira recalls various possibilities. None of which occurred. She has not seen gold in the marketplace, nor in the MMS lab. Not in her home, nor on her ring finger (she is married and has two sons, who are now eight and five). All that remains in that diversity of absence is color.

Goethe says color is never stationary. It moves us and aligns the eye with a state of mind, a simple joy or lofty nobility. He begins the *Theory of Colors* by considering color and light. Color is already an act of light, with various effects on the eye. To see color or hue is to be between darkness and light, two phenomena that almost touch each other: "The greatest brightness, short of dazzling, acts near the greatest darkness. In this state we at once perceive all the intermediate gradations...and all the varieties of hues."⁵¹³ Maira is somewhere between darkness and light. She believes she works in a place that has the potential to be revelatory, though she herself embodies an invisibility, a veritable blind spot. Her words situate us on a shifting terrain of ambivalence and aversion, of color and whiteness in the underground laboratory where the fantasy of a deeper underground is brought to careful life—a place that confounds Maira in its luminosity.

But Maira's expectations are also confounded by her illiteracy, which she cites as the basis for her uncertain future. She never expressed concern about what the openness of the future might bring, only saying that it was radically uncertain. For others, however, the question of

⁵¹³ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. Translated by Charles Lock Eastlake. *Theory of Colours*. Printed by William Clowes and Sons. London: 1840, pg. 5.

literacy and literary sensibility (or good reasoning) had much more direct and certain consequences, powerful enough to weave personal and national biographies. One person who is anxious about literacy as much as he is the future of Afghanistan is Aydin. When I first met Aydin, Bijan the office manager was showing me the beautiful figurines and lapis lazuli jewelry boxes Aydin had carved. I remarked on his talent, and offered to purchase some of his handiwork. He is so skilled that a mosque in Kabul asked him to do the geometric carvings on its *minarets*. Aydin responded in customary fashion: “You are like my sister. I cannot take money from you.” He proceeded to locate his artistic and aesthetic sensibilities in illiteracy, as a compensatory talent:

“Both of my parents were illiterate and so they did not know better. They never instilled in us a desire for an education, and they never paid attention to our schooling. I am barely educated as a result and had to make do being an artisan. I was trained by the best guild but it wasn’t enough to make a living. Have you seen the kind of marble-work on the market today? It’s deplorable. I have two daughters, both of them in college now studying engineering and economics, and it hurts me how uneducated I am in comparison. I looked down on my parents for being illiterate and wonder if my kids think of me the same way. People say the world has no taste for loyalty. I hope that’s not the case. Afghanistan needs the world now more than ever. Our entire history has been one of repetitive violence. Without a drastic change, and the grace of Allah, our future is mute.”

Aydin is a construction worker but prefers to be called *Engineer Sahib*. He is the first one to arrive at the MMS headquarters, and the last one to leave. I often wondered if he slept there. Aydin is responsible for an array of maintenance tasks on site, and also at the exploration mining camps that he helps construct. He lays the piping, erects the edifices, and takes care of the wiring and plumbing. When an exploratory camp closes he shuts off the water supply and deconstructs the camp. He speaks with a deliberate and exacting elegance, as if cultivating a poise he is unsure of. At times he has an almost regal bearing. When I got to know Aydin, and eventually become his friend he exuded deep ambivalence. He wanted to believe wealth could be endlessly produced in the underground but thought this was subject to a far reaching transformation, one

that would require others to learn to read and write and exercise their *aql* (reason). For him the ability to write enables not only purposeful self-expression, but also an ethical sensibility. That fantasy was shared by his expatriate employers, and there was a sense of general urgency in the MMS office, about the future of the mining company (*sherkat*) in Afghanistan and the economic and political future of Afghanistan in the aftermath of 2014, the year that American troops were slated to withdraw. Everyone was working hard but still they couldn't seem to shake off a sense of being on the rocks.

That year in Kabul the preoccupation with economic value burgeoned from a concern with the persistence of exchange value in the aftermath of an American withdrawal (the *Afghani* was quickly losing value against the dollar) into a preoccupation with the source of “real” value underground, an inviolable origin imagined to be safe from the volatility of currency markets. These twinned concerns were conveyed to me by merchants, taxi drivers, expatriates, janitors, cooks, clerics, translators, aid workers, my Pizza Hut colleagues, counterinsurgents, judges, Taliban sympathizers, government officials, children and beggars—and they readily expressed this as a belief in the nearing of economic and political crisis. It was a general perception of an Afghan end time and it injected a note of exigency into how they perceived the predations of the everyday. At once symptomatic of a concern for the future and a recollection of the violent years of the Afghan Civil War, this concern was exclaimed by Aydin on multiple occasions through his insistence on the concomitant exigency of literacy—conventional writing and one's ability to make it a means for self-improvement.

Aydin and I spoke regularly, and he became a source of support for me in the office where the British and South African managers were often suspicious of my intentions. They suspected me of secretly working for the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MOMP),

and of infiltrating their office in order to determine if anyone was colluding with government officials or otherwise engaged in fraudulent activity. It was Aydin who first invited me to eat in the small but sun-splashed cafeteria room where the Afghan workers had lunch together. It was there that I met Maira, Sabine and Rabia—the three female janitors and Hassan, the male janitor who frequently complained that nothing in Kabul was the same: “not even the meat is the same, I hear they mix it up now! Who knows where all this will take us?”

Aydin became an interpreter between Kabul, and the transformations occurring in the exploratory mining camp in Qara Zaghan, a remote village in Baghlan in the North. Qara Zaghan was a complex scene of transformation—where the local men had even prohibited their wives and daughters from going outside lest they have affairs with the South African men. “They think the black men have big dicks and that all the women will want to have sex with them,” Jacob, one of the geologists, told me. Qara Zaghan was in the grip of wonderment. Everyone was excited about the prospect of treasure being unearthed from land they had only worked on previously for its agricultural potential. Aydin described that scene to me:

“The Qara Zaghan gold mining camp is a huge operation. It was fascinating for the local people that such a large project, in such a remote place and with such potential and possibility had found us. They were amazed. ‘May we be good, so Allah will continue to bless us!’ The machinery arrived and they were captivated by it: ‘What amazing things they have.’ We were told there was huge potential. The locals were so happy to see the camp erected. I did most of that work, the construction work. Suddenly they had jobs available to them. They didn’t know what a “job” was. The concept of a “job” and *mahash* (wage) was as alien as the West itself to them. When they saw our engineers and geologists, they felt a new confidence. They walked with more gusto. Heads high. And we employed them as day laborers—explaining what that meant and that we could hire ten to fifteen men per day. Most of them were farmers and they would tend to their own land, and then come and work for us. They saved their wages as *sarmâya* (capital). They had it good.”

The village of Qara Zaghan



The village of Qara Zaghan has approximately 250 families and so the provision of day labor was a question of distribution. Only ten to fifteen men were employed by MMS at a time and the families would take turns providing labor. But they especially took heart in the arrival of large drilling rigs and special equipment—approximately two large shipping containers of machinery that would give their village an unprecedented air of importance. The influx quickly became a sign of a permanent operation and of endless value: “They are hopeful that this will solve all their problems for generations to come. Qara Zaghan is a fully mechanized site now. We can do the same amount of work in Qara Zaghan as we can in the lab downstairs,” Aydin said. The machinery, rigs, steel, and technical staff aggrandized local fantasies of limitless wealth. Soon after the camp’s establishment, many of the locals were incorporated into this “fully mechanized” world, and trained to become technicians. By 2012, approximately forty of

the men who worked as day laborers had been trained to operate the machinery, introducing the question of why the expatriate technicians were paid so much more: “Our men can operate all this machinery just as well as any foreigner they import,” Aydin also said.⁵¹⁴ The families earned between \$100-\$400 per month, a small income that Aydin describes as *sarmâya* (capital) accruing on top of their usual agricultural gains. Many of the workers had learned to become drill hands. He recounts the origin of the discovery of gold as a local occurrence, owing to chance rather than geological labor or scientific expertise: “When Allah gives He does not ask why.”

“They have known about the existence of gold for a long time, and even during the Taliban era there was some mining in that area. It was the local population who initially discovered the gold. They just stumbled upon it one day. Nothing to do with knowledge or understanding why these things occur, their causes and origins. Just chance. They are a nomadic and illiterate people who live in the mountains and one day someone found a beautiful rock and brought it back to Pul i Khumri (the capital city of the northern province of Baghlan). He brought the rock to town. Soon after people realized there was gold in the rock but they were unable to extract more, given their primitive tools and methods. That mountain is infamously stubborn and tough, and it’s not possible to crack it without serious machinery. The mountain is yellow in color, a beautiful yellow hue.”

I asked Aydin about the arrival of the work machinery, and his thoughts shifted from the yellow mountain to language and writing, and also to a distributive approximation of what he imagines will be the profit. He switched from the pronoun they (*anhâ*) to we (*mâ*):

“We understood (*mâ fahmedeim*) and expected that the gold was a mine, a real treasure trove that we are lucky enough to live on! At the very least, twenty percent of the profit belongs to us (*az mâst*) and it will improve our lives. It will provide our children with access to school, medical care, infrastructure. Our real problem (*Asleh mushkil e mâ*) is that we are very illiterate (*ke mâ besiyar behsowad hast'em*) and therefore the government does not pay us any mind. There are people who cannot read or write their own names. Can you believe that? It’s such a shame in today’s world. In the whole

⁵¹⁴ Aydin’s experiences extend from Qara Zaghan to a copper site known as Khaki Jabar, to the north of the now famous *Mes Aynak* (little copper well) mine in Logar, some 50 miles north of Kabul. Khaki Jabar is connected to *Mes Aynak*, and believed to be a segment of the same copper vein now under the auspices of the China Metallurgical Group Corporation.

village, maybe three or four boys have gone to school and are literate. Of course, if you ask them a basic math question they don't know the answer. Someone else has to read their employment contracts for them, but they always insist on retaining a copy of their contract. They bring it back later. They come and fight with the company. They are a stubborn bunch. They say to the *kharijis* (foreigners): 'You promised me x, y in the contract and didn't deliver.' They bring the contracts and point to something and say: 'Here it is!' The *khariji* will say: 'Ok, where in the contract?' and the Afghan will say: 'Right here!' or 'I don't know where, but it is somewhere in this damn thing.'"

The pronominal appropriation of *mâ* (we) enables Aydin to transpose himself in Qara Zaghan not as a corporate liaison but as a resident with rights to the share of divided profit. He extends that appropriation to the attribution of illiteracy to himself, to *mâ*—a collective which eclipses his own literacy and those of the school boys he mentions. But for the locals who retain copies of their contracts and bring them back in order to demand additional wages, it is not literacy that constitutes an absent potential. For them, the hidden absence (what is being secreted in the contract) is the incapacity of the written word to remain faithful to its content, necessitating that they return and “bring back” the contract with them in order to make an oral demand. The pointing at the contract is a moment of unfolding, when its hidden promise is brought to the surface. Writing preserves the content of the oral negotiations. The delay enabled by the written word (they are able to take their contracts home and bring them back after time has passed, unlike oral negotiations which occur only in the moment) becomes not the site of writing's promise (as Aydin perceives) but signifies an erasure: the substitutive occurrence of words on paper for what was promised as more money and assistance:

“The Afghans have a lot of grievances—some want and expect more social assistance from the company while others are simply happy to be employed and do not care about the future of their families or the community. There are differences of opinion. But there are basic things they all know and want: like electricity so they can have TV and at least have a relation to the modern world outside of their village. But they are only thinking about the current situation, the present and not about the future, or about other generations. We need to be moral beings. I would tell them that they should pick representatives from the youth to talk to the company so that they can approach them with new ideas, with expectations that are current and good for everyone and moral. But

it's hard. It will take a long time for those people to realize these things. I fear that the future of this country is mute if we do not recognize that first as Muslims we are to be ethical beings, to want what is best for everyone, and then to desire it for ourselves.⁵¹⁵ We must learn to change and to read, to understand the ultimate reason behind why things happen. The Holy Quran says: 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.'”



(Left) an exploration road in Qara Zaghan (Right) evidence of artisanal excavation examined by Adil, a geologist.

In the midst of this large-scale simulation of a quest for riches the yellow mountain became the scene of potentially enormous wealth, and the realization that wealth requires the concomitant acquisition of literacy. Literacy (rather than the site of failure as it is for the locals themselves—especially the written word’s unfaithfulness to itself) is interwoven with an ethical sensibility that encourages the residents of Qara Zaghan to think of the future and generational continuity. This, Aydin tells us, revitalizes a moral energy and a set of expectations that are “good for everyone.” It displaces disputations over the content of the written contract with the

⁵¹⁵ Aydin uses the Persian word *gung*, as opposed to silent: *khamosh*, *sâket* or the more colloquial: *chup*. *Gung* can also connote dumb or tongueless and *gunga* means to be incapable of speaking, literally a mute.

failure of the moral imagination, turning the former into a supplementary extension rather than the basis of the locals' grievances.

For Aydin the redistributive allotment (twenty percent in his estimation) refers us *first* to literacy, and to the necessity of reading and signing one's name. By citing the Quranic injunction to perpetually seek knowledge he binds the power of literacy with an understanding of the nature of intermediary and final causes, with the logic that lies behind events that otherwise seem senseless and result in confused finger-pointing. In the absence of traversing the gap between the apparent (like the accidental discovery of gold) and what gives rise to it (a deeper geological truth) illiteracy gives way to an unknown signifying chain—captured rather palpably by the attempt of local Afghans to fixate on one point, —“Right here!” —rendering the issue as one of displaced value rather than dispossession.

For Aydin everything resides with literacy. Its domain is the same as that of economic value and an ethical life. One can say he is obsessed with it, besotted with its powers. Though he is literate himself, the illiteracy of others manages to infatuate and haunt him, trailing him like a shadow he cannot trust. It sneaks into his conversations—most definitely *every single* conversation I had with him. It galvanizes his self-deprecation: “my daughters are very literate and educated, too literate for me to be of help to them.” It charges his intonation with regret. It stops him in his tracks, and holds the future of the nation (*ayendeh-millat*) in abeyance. Although some of this apprehension is recuperated in the face of wonderment with gold and treasure, the absence of literacy threatens to pervade not only what he perceives as a relationship between the ground of value and the incapacities of orality but representation on the whole:

“They take the wages they earn from the camp very seriously. Despite being farmers and making enough from the land to provide for their families the extra few hundred dollars,

up to four hundred, is *sarmâya* (capital) for them. They simply save and accumulate it for the future, for their future. They don't pay rent or electricity or anything else. They grow rice and grain, depending on the season and they sell their rice to buy oil and the other things they need. They save the entirety of their wage, it was *sarmâya*. They are hopeful, very hopeful that the company will stay long term. If the company closes, they will be devastated. They've now tied their future hopes to the company. That camp and that area...how can I describe it to you? It's like a mother who breast feeds her child. It will be like severing them from their mother in the middle of infancy. They've told me that they've never dealt in money before. They have never seen money! One guy told me he'd never seen such 'colorful papers', with so many images and pictures on it. They would be devastated and hopeless if the camp closes. What would they do? Who would remember, let alone look after them? They are used to making money now. And the same goes for everyone, if I am making \$1,000 per month, and get fired and find a job that gives \$200 I would be devastated, its very hard to see the quality of your life deteriorate. It is sad they are illiterate and have no one to ensure their *namâyendagî* (representation). They cannot even sign their names. There cannot be any representation."

The obvious fetish of money expressed through color and image, becomes the promise of literacy as the condition of possibility to access wealth. Reading and writing straddle the potential gain of a twenty percent share in revenue to be distributed up to \$400 per month in wages per family in Aydin's estimation. His misrecognition of the allure of profit, especially when it seems to emanate from the ground with the assurance of literacy, illustrates a fantasy of reproducible ground rent (which enables wage labor). It is anchored in the signature (especially on the labor contract) as a communicative act that portends future possibility, and that risks a "mute" future if literacy is not generalized. The signing of employment contracts with security and translational service companies was also emphasized by Timūr and by Matin and Zia as irrevocable moments of transformation. For Timūr, signing his name onto the Empire Security work contract as a convoy escort guard meant becoming what he describes as a prosthetic body between imminent death and the bodies of foreign security guards. It meant taking bullets for others. For Matin and Zia signing on to become translators resulted in living under the weight of suspicion; during any given translation they might secretly disseminate information to the enemy, or otherwise collaborate with the Taliban insurgency. By signing their names, they all

live out the logic and ambivalence of an immunizing function—potentially harming their military supervisors while protecting them from the ingress of insurgent violence, from the virulence of local Afghans like themselves.

In the *Amniyat* courthouse—and in Kabul’s civil courthouse where cases ranging from property disputes to incest are heard, the personal signature or thumb print (in the event of illiteracy) was the indispensable condition of representative certainty and judicial guarantee. It enables a relationship to the law that became, in turn, the basis for self-reflexivity and causal apperception. In one unforgettable case the judge’s demand for a young illiterate convict’s thumb print (he was accused of murder in Paghman, a mountainous resort town outside of Kabul) resulted in a hysterical outburst and the accusation that through the magical power of “that accursed purple pad you want my thumb in,” he was being wrongly convicted and sentenced.

More still, during the heavily contested presidential election of 2014 the Taliban initiated a campaign of reprisal and severed the thumbs and index fingers of anyone who had purple ink stains from voting, turning purple not into the color of the sacred but into that of wartime collaboration and corporeal violence. The images that accompanied that violence cathected the importance of fingers and hands to the prerogatives of participatory democracy and to the ballot box as the condition for political representation, turning the violence of severance into the refusal of representative action and the denial of what would otherwise be an order of self-expression and shared meaning. Indexical capture could supersede ideological difference and even the representative vacancies imagined as the privation of orality. Where there is no writing, the thumb and index finger do its expressive bidding. Unless already literate, where there is no finger there is no representation, only muteness.

The inherently visual nature of fingerprints situates it in an optical modality crucial to imperial sense-making and political order. Its colonial legacies help us understand the contemporary fixation with biometric enrollment in Afghanistan as the return of a much older logic of imperial ordering, and as an attempt to make the sphere of representation concomitant with the knowable, and seeable. To appease the fear of Afghans transgressing (or “getting into”) the Green Zone and its varied security compounds and the anxiety that Afghan insurgents may obtain employment in US military establishments using fake identity cards (which is to say false names), the US military’s Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (HIIDE) teams turn Afghan bodies (especially irises and fingers) into a medium for the analysis of insurgency and deception, for making visible the persons who dissimulate as ordinary civilians. But fingerprinting extends beyond the prophylactic functions imagined by the US military and touches on the question of forgery and personhood, and the force of illiteracy amidst the territorializing of capital in natural resources, when access to profit depends more than ever on writing.

At the MMS offices there was a general anxiety among the Afghan workers, leading to ridicule from their expatriate counterparts. The Afghans valued an excessive formality, not only with office rules but in their everyday demeanor and interactions. Details were belabored. They needed to be needed by the expatriates. One afternoon one of the expatriate geologists, Jacob, made a point about the Bijan’s (the office manager) behavior: “He’s such a tool, a typical third world business man in a cheap suit. He makes such a show of signing his name. A slow signature like this———,” Jacob mimicked Bijan’s elaborated signature on a wooden desk.

Aydin’s concern was different. He worried about the impossibility of the other’s signature. He expresses uncertainty about Qara Zaghan as a site for mining, and it is possible that

he somehow found out about its exploratory aims, but he is even more bothered by the written contract, and the displacement of literacy expressed as the name, within it. For Aydin and the Qara Zaghan locals the absence of a capacity to locate the name results in literal indexicality—the pointing of the finger to “here” in the contract where the promises of a Multi-National Corporation are thought to reside: “You said so right here!” For Aydin the signature would have protected against the dramatic uncertainty of finger-pointing and prints (especially thumb)—a custom widely practiced in government offices, courtrooms, businesses and between family members as recourse in the event of disputes and contestations over land. In all of these contexts, the signature is the condition of possibility for representation. Its corollary is not just the disclosure of identity but the ability to assimilate to structural dislocation, a presumption that transforms that violence into a question of (self) expressive mediation.

In its absence there is only the elusive displacement of signs, that leads either to loss of ground or to the wealth that emanates from it. This metonymic slide between signature and fingerprint, and between fingerprint and the memory of “right here” is not a linking of meaning across different signs but a display of the receding capacity for representation in toto. It is a diminution that doubles as the loss of wealth and income—the monthly wages imagined by Aydin as coming from reproducible ground rent. Representation recedes wherever ground rent proliferates without rightful capture and becomes, for the capitalists and landowners, the aporetic basis for the possibility of endless wealth creation as dispossession. That capture, however, is

indissociable from the logic of ground rent, which opens onto the uncertainty of profit and the demand for what Marx calls “absolute rent.”⁵¹⁶

One of the risks with a signature is forgery, a duplicity that has surged in recent years owing to the dramatic rise in land and property values across Afghanistan, and especially in major cities like Kabul where the distortions of a war economy created a market for real estate characterized by some of the highest prices per square meter in the world. In essence, the desire for “safe” space has converted itself into a material search for actual land which appears amenable to securitization. This has resulted in a dramatic upsurge in family conflicts over property and inheritance, many of them to the detriment of women who are disinherited in the aftermath of becoming widows or divorcées. This is also the case between siblings, especially brothers and sisters. In the case of Zaid’s family, we saw how the failure to obtain his father’s thumb print (in lieu of his signature) on documents pertaining to their forty-acre family farm burgeoned into murderous rage. In other cases, the issue of impersonation and simulation is mitigated by the fingerprint that accompanies signatures on official documents (next to text on a will, a land deed, a letter, etc. as the cornerstone of bureaucratic certainty and personal identity).

⁵¹⁶ Marx distinguishes between *differential* and *absolute* rent. While differential rent obtains either as a result of different conditions in production owing to natural variation (location, climate, soil quality etc.) or to differences in capital investment (which usually enhances the productivity of the ground, for example through fertilization) (1991, 789-790); absolute rent occurs when land is withheld from cultivation (or excavation) *until a rent is paid*. In the case of mineral extraction this would consist of royalty payments to host country governments, an often contentious issue that suffuses the discourse on resource nationalism in the developing world. Absolute rent is a function of the ownership of land rather than the future guarantee of differential rent.

But while differential rent is never guaranteed, absolute rent is a condition of possibility: “Landed property is here the barrier which does not permit any new investment on formerly uncultivated or unleased land without levying a toll, i.e. demanding a rent, even if the land newly brought under cultivation is of a kind that does not yield any differential rent... (1991, 896). See: Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, Ernest Mandel, David Fernbach, and Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume III*. London: Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, 1991.

As in the colonial encounter, where the signature was supplemented by fingerprints in order to foreclose the possibility of disavowal so too can they be buttressed to mitigate the possibility of interminable dissimulation in conditions of advanced capitalism.

The fingerprint is always a matter of holding someone accountable by grounding identity in a corporal trace, a trace that is a substitute for a perduring presence (for example at a crime scene) or a supplement for the written name (in contexts of illiteracy). Hence, although its power is amplified through its proximity to the signature it does not require the written name in the same way that a signature requires a print as a final attestation. But there is a difference, one which Aydin intuits as a distortion in profit sharing, but that is actually a matter of linguistic difference. Even when they exist, Afghan signatures are not deemed to be adequately expressive, as conveyed by Jacob's ridicule. Their groundlessness owes itself not only to the problem of simulation but perhaps also to scriptural difference as the basis of the signature becoming both an illegitimate mark and an inadequate guarantee. The desire to still nominal identity as a perduring feature of personhood is threatened in a context where first names and signatures are insufficient.

The desire for unmediated representation and for an indexical mark that can function as a transposable system unmediated by linguistic difference emerges from the perception that Afghan names are inherently unstable. That they do not sufficiently bear the logic of self-referentiality.⁵¹⁷ Afghan names, which are typically compound names without a fixed last name (last names may change depending on occupation, place of residence, honorific title or other

⁵¹⁷ Megerdooian, Karine. "The Structure of Afghan Names." MITRE Product. November 2009.

affiliation) have been described as inherently fluid: “nearly all Afghans while they may not have a last name, do have a tribal name, which they add at the end when they feel like it”⁵¹⁸ or confused through a structure of subordinate and proper names, which together comprise a first name (for example Mohammad Hamid), and the possibility of using any part of the compound name as a last name (for example Mohammad Ali). These different segmentations are a function of shifting networks of persons and desires, affiliations and faith structures. Last names, when they are taken up, are not strictly passed down through patrilineal descent but may be creative combinations of honorific titles, patronymic names, or occupations such as *Engineer Sahib*, as Aydin is called by many.

But the demand for indexical representation cannot be reduced to the inherent qualities of indexical signs. It must also be understood alongside the violent US fantasy of a self-referential political order that is transposable onto diverse political and linguistic polities through the machinations of electoral politics, a legitimizing structure exemplified through the literal act of “giving” one’s thumb in an act of assent. Rosalind Krauss reminds us that although the index is typically described as a physical trace, it can also be symptomatic.⁵¹⁹ Indexes can be medical symptoms or even the shadow cast alongside an object. They partake in shifts as much as they establish a literal trace. For Jakobson (and Benveniste) “shifters” are indexical symbols such as pronouns. The meaning of shifters are only definable with reference to the message.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 5

⁵¹⁹ Krauss, Rosalind. “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” in *October*, vol 3 (Spring, 1977).

⁵²⁰ Building on Pierce’s trichotomy, especially the symbol and index Jakobson describes shifters as combining elements of both. They are indexical symbols: “*I* means the person uttering *I*. Thus on one hand, the sign *I* cannot represent its object without being associated with the latter ‘by a conventional

What is peculiar about pronouns is both the “compulsory reference” and the radical multiplicity through which they are taken up. But the question of when one is obsessed with pronouns (or afraid to utter one’s own name) is caught in the parallel drama of what is expected from the function of the name as opposed to “I.” In Afghanistan the complexity of pronominal usage is both a source of anxiety that attends the status of Persian and Pashto as commodified mediums of war-time translation, and transforms the question of economic fraud, as we will see with the Kabul Bank crisis (when borrowed names were used to perpetuate theft) into a matter of dissimulative practice.

Indexes function in much more mundane ways in the world of mining. They are instrumental to making the unknown—the uncertainty of geological formations, the opacity of mineral strata and the feasibility of mineral valuation—comprehensible as potentiality. The use of natural resource samples and the hydrocarbon occurrence of “first oil” are gestural phenomena that fill the temporal pauses of natural extraction with the imagined form of wealth and the promise of profit in peripheral zones of extraction.⁵²¹ Like the metallic trunks in the MMS laboratory filled with bags of core samples obtained from various sites in *Qara Zaghan* and *Khaki Jabar*, so too does the valorization of an initial contract with the MOMP, seismic survey or test well transform the ephemeral possibility of geological treasure into a palpable promise. Weszkalnys demonstrates that in the São Tomé Príncipe (STP) exploration zone these practices

rule,’ and in different codes the same meaning is assigned to different sequences such as *I, ego, ich, ja*, etc.: consequently *I* is a symbol. On the other hand, the sign *I* cannot represent its object without “being in existential relation” with this object: the word designating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance, and hence functions as an index.” Jakobson, Roman, Linda R. Waugh, and Morris Halle. *Russian and Slavic Grammar: Studies*, 1931-1981. Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984, pg. 43.

⁵²¹ Weszkalnys, Gisa. “Geology, Potentiality, Speculation: On the Indeterminacy of First Oil.” *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 4 (November 23, 2015): 611–39.

comprise a speculative epistemology that doubles as “gestures of resource potentiality” even during long periods of dormant stagnation. Although the geologists and managers at MMS regularly spoke to me through temporal metaphors—allaying their own anxiety about the inherently nebulous prospect of striking gold, and copper through an earnest resort to the fullness of time, the force of the gesture or index in the world of Afghan multinational mining is not just the trace of a speculative epistemology but the violence of literal finger pointing and severing, and the concomitance of imperial violence and mining as a demonstration of reproductive power.

This is a Camp

When the *Qara Zaghan* exploration mining camp was first built, a young man named Samim became the “operations manager.” Samim was responsible for an array of security and logistical tasks and claimed to find his work rewarding, though he injected his accounts with a note of ambivalence. The more he talked to me about his experiences, the more his encounters with the local Afghans outside the camp assumed a preponderance, casting a shadow over his belief in the viability of a foreign MNC mining endeavor and a democratic future. The more he talked of his encounters with the locals, the more he seemed to think of the future of Afghanistan as a nation, *his* nation. Samim lived in Pakistan during the Afghan Civil War of the 1990s and returned to Kabul in 2005, taking on an array of jobs for the Afghans Women's Network, the Ariana Television station, Network Innovations, with the Ministry of Defense (MOD), the Ministry of Interior (MOI), and now for MMS. At the MOD and MOI Samim helped set up an internal network operations center, a project commissioned by the US Army which had as its goal setting up internal phone lines and activating the ministries’ internet service, software and phone securitization programs. Samim spoke excitedly about all the information the ministries

previously lost and the espionage that regularly occurred through a breaching of their data, a breaching he helped to lessen in consequence.

Because he was already familiar with the technicalities of surveillance and technological securitization Samim joined MMS when he was fired from Network Innovations for taking a leave in order to travel to India and search for his missing brother, a mentally challenged man who had travelled to India to seek treatment and instead went missing. Despite all his technical expertise Samim understood his work in *Qara Zaghan* to be one of interpretive mediation, explaining to the local Afghans the role and capacity of the mining camp. He understood his job as an essentially mediatory one, moving between languages and the groundswell of proliferating trouble:

“All they care about is language and communication skills because they cannot solve their own problems in local areas, they cannot deal or negotiate with locals and villagers. The only language they speak is English. I don’t know how well you know Afghanistan, but here at any given moment one thousand problems may arise. You just never know what will happen. You have attacks, land mines, resistance militias, political and contract negotiations. All of these take a specific talent and manner of speaking in order to convince the locals to let the companies do their work. Think of the dangers. Think of the category 1, 2, and 3 translators who don't know what they are doing, they barely speak Persian and Pashto.⁵²² I know a lot of Afghans who come from abroad who barely speak Persian but they come from America and translate for the military, they get people into serious trouble, it is very consequential, innocent people are accused all the time. People just disappear after a translator implicates them falsely. It’s just a way to get “credit” with your foreign bosses. It’s all about credit seeking around here. Afghans will happily accuse someone, or will instantly report their co-workers for small transgressions. It’s part of the work culture. It’s very common. If a poor worker takes some extra food, another will tell the boss. I’ve seen this a million times. Some foreigner will give something away because it is about to expire, a food item or something, but an Afghan immediately interferes and says: “No don’t give it away just like that. We can use it for such and such purpose there is no need to give it away. It’s the same here in the office. These guys all complain about the elderly cleaning lady (Rabia). I tell them, rather than telling on her and

⁵²² Category 1, 2, 3 refer to three different pay grades for translators, including local Afghans who are considered category 1 and paid the least. CAT 1, 2, and 3 also correspond to the following clearance levels: no clearance, secret clearance, top secret. For additional detail see the following job call: <http://www.militarylinguists.com/category/linguists/>

getting her fired we should just accept that she is doing her best, and that we need more cleaners—not to overwork one poor woman. I’ve seen people shrink, physically become weak under the weight of that kind of pressure and stress.”

Samim’s narrative reports linguistic difference as the basis of a series of misunderstandings that occur between Afghans and expatriates, and also as a gap he closes in order to enable capital to be invested in the ground. The unique combination of industrial capital and ground rent that mining entails begins for him with “communication skills” and the importance of suasion, in a context where international mining is not yet an actuality.⁵²³ He also describes for us the scenes we encounter through the experiences of Matin and Zia, and through Hyder Akbar and the tragic demise of Abdul Wali—when translational ambiguity led to torture and death at the hands of a CIA contractor. Although in those encounters the question of violence was attributed to the Afghan refusal to fully inhabit speech (not taking on pronouns, not speaking in full sentences, the use of excessive colloquialisms, etc.) Samim wants to bridge the gap (which for him arises from the monolingualism of the expatriates) and foreclose the violence it generates. But there is a remainder that eludes him. It transforms his initial recognition of the daunting pressure put on Rabia (the pressure of increased labor productivity), into a concern with a general disregard for the future—a concern that also converts the political question of linguistic difference into the failure of the transcendental imagination:

“In the camp we taught them how to sleep, wash their bodies, eat and use the bathroom toilets. The day laborers are Pashtuns—very rural and illiterate Pashtuns who know nothing and face many difficulties, *they did not concern themselves with the future, with what would happen, with what was or was not certain. They took it all in as kismet* (emphasis mine). And yet they had very high expectations from us, which I was curious about so I would ask them what they wanted. The Khaki Jabar camp was a drilling support camp and we were taking samples (reverse circulation drilling and core samples)

⁵²³ There are numerous indigenous Afghan mines (especially for marble, lapis lazuli and precious gems) but no large scale Multi-National Mining such as the kind MMS represents.

in accordance with satellite information and imagery. The images told us where to look and what to expect. So it was very important that we first establish contact with the local community through a cultural liaison so the locals don't think we are here to steal their minerals and leave."

If for a moment Samim saw himself as other, as Rabia who was becoming physically weak under the weight of pressure, a gap was almost immediately introduced to repress that identification, and to create a sense of delay that requires his mediation. Harnessing that gap, Samim's job was to translate economic uncertainty into the promise of indefatigable value, a "long term" investment that would impart stable employment opportunities for the village *maliks* (elders) to apportion between families. For Samim translation has the power to be productive. The delay it requires (between words and intentions) mirrors the delay between potential and the value that can emerge through core drilling. Translation can turn the confusion of tongues into a meaningful address, and soon after into economic value. But the promise of potential (as something which must be worked on and cultivated) was misunderstood as *immediate potential*—the misrecognition that began to result in literal finger-pointing:

"Afghans have become obsessed with certain notions, with the idea that these camps are American or British and therefore that they have everything inside of them and in great abundance all the time. They think these camps are full of coke products, full of food, energy drinks, medical supplies. And that is why locals approach us. They think it's a military camp. They point at it with their finger and say: 'There is the camp! Right there and it has everything in it.' They don't realize that we don't have containers full of drinks, water and food that our camp is a private company's camp with equipment inside. It's not a military base with stores and cafeterias and medical clinics. But all they do is point to it and say: 'No it is a military camp like the other camps' or they would say: 'Well I once worked in a military camp and they had everything—they had food, drinks, and supplies so your camp must have it too. It's all right *there* inside the camp.'"

Samim experiences the obduracy of their belief as the unshakable faith in endless possibility. He describes it as an unfortunate surge of great expectations. Those expectations took place between an imagination of derivation (where goods and value could be obtained from the camp as a source of plenty) and one of deferral, where patience and labor become a kind of

substituted presence, one which takes the place of immediately available goods. But that substitution rests on another deferral, and on the belief that in the aftermath of a period of scientific and hard labor the value desired would finally emerge:

“The locals would always tell me to mind my own business. ‘Don’t stop a donkey that isn’t yours! What do you care, it isn’t your money we’re after is it? It’s *their* money!’ They would come up and tell me to give them new boots, clothes, a phone and when I didn’t they thought I was being malicious. The foreigners would tell them to eat less fatty foods and warn them about cholesterol and they would say: ‘Who do you think you are telling me how to eat?’ Our guards would give them 20 liters of gas for free and they would say: ‘why only 20 liters?’ They would ask me for candy and chocolate and I would say I don’t have any. Then they would point to the shipping containers on the bases—the ones with our laboratory equipment inside—and would point and say: ‘*There, right there.* Everything is in that container.’ They had enormous expectations. They could not adjust to the reality of the situation. *They wanted everything to always be unlimited and endlessly available. But they gave no thought to how something happens—what goes into a mining camp, who builds it, what it’s for, what is its purpose, what is happening underground, why or what happens next* (emphasis mine). It was all just the present and when I asked about the future they would say: ‘*What’s it to you what happens, nobody knows.*’ (emphasis mine) If I gave them a pair of boots they would come back and say: ‘Give me one more pair!’ If we fixed their bridge, they would point to the roads and say: ‘Look at those roads. Fix them. And then build us schools, fix our mosques and when you’re done with that fix our homes too.’”

The difference here is between a desire to consume because of the radical alterity of the future (when asked about the future the locals would say: “nobody knows”) and a belief that the future would be self-same, that it would possess the same conditions for the production of value as it does now, but that Afghan labor is the condition of its realization (for Samim). Thus, while Samim experiences the problem as endless consumption and a local refusal to actually perform labor (rather than just making demands on the expatriates), the locals understood the presence of the camp and the distortions that capital investment (and eventually *differential* ground rent) would introduce as an imminent forfeiture of their property rights:

“In *Khaki Jabar* people would bring land deeds from the 1920’s and say *the land was still theirs, not government land as we were told* (emphasis mine). The next day another guy would come and present another deed *with fingerprints all over it* (emphasis mine), and

say this land is *ours*, not *theirs*. So we had a lot of problems with land usage. When we closed the camp, they came up to us and said if we ever returned we would have to pay rent for the land we used. At first they didn't know the concept of rent, but by the end they learned it from us! What can you do with these people? They don't listen. But once they understood the idea they began to demand it from us. We had to be careful and we employed certain tricks—sleights of hand, like pointing to all the benefits that would accrue in the long run, the infrastructural benefits and the arrival of wage labor, employment that would last for generations, and so on. They are illiterate people. They don't understand or think about their own future. Whatever happens they will say it was meant to be. Uff! They can drive anyone *diwana* (mad).”

La Terre Capital

The concept of rent the locals “learned” is what Marx distinguishes as absolute rent. As we've read for Marx the problem of absolute rent is fundamentally temporal, it is the first instance when the uncertainty of future profit (what he calls differential rent) and the initial demand for ground rent by landowners confront one another. Samim is aware of this tension and emphasizes to the locals the importance of imagining “all the benefits that would accrue in the long run.” The local demand made for rent is also a threat that in the future their land would be withheld from MMS until it is paid. It is inextricable from the question of land ownership (for which they provide deeds) and irrespective of future differential rent (which is never guaranteed and depends on mineral quality, security, and global commodity prices). The question of the indexical trace emerges here (on the deeds) as a barrier to capital investment, as the expressive force which would not permit unrented land to be mined.

Samim describes this for us as the extended scene of finger pointing. In *Qara Zaghan* and *Khaki Jabar* the force of indexicality assimilates ideation with the concept of rent. Indeed, once talk of rent surfaced a feverish spell seemed to overtake the locals. It was powerful enough to render Samim's explanations and mediation moot: “What can you do with these people? They don't listen.” The expansion of capital enables the expectation of futurity, turning it into the

ground for the passage of time and the basis for a series of accusations: against Samim who is accused of taking sides with the foreigners and against the foreigners who possess a disproportionate amount of goods and refuse to distribute it with the locals, and the locals themselves who do not understand (from Samim's perspective) the derivations of purpose and cause. Samim believes the locals point at the mining camp as a source of plenty and as a military endeavor. But the ground is a site of contestation evidenced not only by the presence of the mining endeavor but also the very *possibility* of ground rent. Thus, from the perspective of the locals Samim conveys rent as the initial form of dispossession, as a gestural index that points to a loss of ground rather than what is actually a concern with the transitory nature of capital invested in the ground. In Persian *sarmâya guzarî* (capital investment) does not connote "investment" but "establishment." The word *guzarî* (also *guzarish*, *guzar*) has related valences that mean to reside (*guzarish*), to be loyal (*guzarî*) and to endure. It has a fundamentally temporal dimension that is not reducible to the logic of investment and profit but to social and economic relationships that arise from the sustained investment of capital.

What Samim perceives as the inability of the locals to listen is not only the contention over ground rent but over what Marx specifically calls *la terre-capital*—the difference between a transitory or permanent investment of capital in land. Marx distinguishes between capital that is incorporated in the land in a transitory way (such as chemical or fertilization improvements) or the more permanent investments of canals, buildings and irrigation works. The local Afghans explicitly demand the latter from Samim. Alongside the goods they want from the camp, they ask for bridges, schools, mosques, home improvement, road building and canals. They want the kind of fixed capital that turns land "into an instrument of production" and which "transforms the land from mere material into land-capital...i.e, when it is not reduced to brutal spoliation of the

soil.”⁵²⁴ *Madame la terre* and *la terre-capital* are not the same thing. What Samim perceives as their hallucinatory demand for endless consumption is precisely the distinction between the two, and the desire for fixed capital which can increase the output and value of the land, enabling increased production over long rather than transitory periods of time. Unlike what Samim perceives as their illiterate short-sightedness, it is an imagination of the future.

Moreover, the perception of a conflation between the efforts of mining and warfare are not a misrecognition of the mining camp as such but a cognizance that military violence and intelligence gathering practices are fundamental and indissociable features of modern capitalism, and of the yoked demands that empire makes on its foot soldiers. This is an obvious matter of ideological labor, and the economic interests of empire have always been attired in political and military exigency. The representation of empire as a galvanizing economic force, one that only enhances productivity, owes itself to a multiplicity of historical discourses, ranging from the botanical to those of the Afghan modernists and the East India company. In Kabul, the assimilation of military expertise and the efforts of multinational mining are especially obvious in the MMS offices, where a majority of the expatriate managers (including the CEO of the company, the COO, the head of reconnaissance missions, the general manager and country security director) were former officers in the British Army and Special Forces. Rhys, the Deputy Chief of Operations and also a former SAS major and former member of the air assault infantry regiment reflected on the relationship between mining and warfare. Rhys was in charge of the operations of the mining camps, a large scale initiative for which his military training proved

⁵²⁴ Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, Ernest Mandel, David Fernbach, and Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume III*. London: Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, 1991, pg. 756.

useful, though he still found himself in awe at times. At Khaki Jabar, he was in charge of setting up the camp, air freighting, customs, setting up tents, drilling. He told me that one day, from the top of a hill, he stared down at the camp and said to himself: “Wow, I built that.”

He spoke about the early years of the war, and explicitly about what American empire expected and demanded from its inaugural theater of the twenty-first century:

“It wasn’t very satisfying when we first fought here. We didn’t have large tanks, or advances of men approaching each other and shooting each other and achieving victory. It was a dirty war in caves, and compounds that couldn’t be shown on television. It was Counter-Terrorism and not what we wanted to do, so we left some troops here and decided Saddam Hussein was the next enemy and moved on because Iraq was a state actor we could fight, with a national army. We could show that we were fighting a real war. We could show tanks, soldiers, arrows on a map.”

Rhys had been to Northern Ireland and Kosovo, he fought during the Iraq invasion from 2003-2004 and during the Afghan insurgency in Helmand in 2008. He was one of the key persons involved in the Kajaki turbine project, the largest project the British army has undertaken since World War II, and which involved transporting the turbine to an aqua dam. The turbine was in China. His regiment called it “Op Certain Death,” but nobody was injured during the actual transport. “I had unlimited assets...it was a complex operation that involved moving the hundred-ton turbine, arranging rigs, low loaders, in bad roads and in insurgent controlled territory. The roads weren’t passable and needed engineering work. One hundred and thirty projects worth. To be done under fire. It was horrible just horrible. Soldiers are machines. We just take orders and do it. They anticipated up to eight hundred would die. We were literally writing letters and stuff.” But then, during one of the initial reconnaissance trips, they encountered a local Afghan man:

“There was an old bloke just out on the road and we asked him about the route we were supposed to take, route 611, and he says: ‘Oh that road, eh? Oh we never use that road because the Taliban attack you all up and down it. We never use that. We go this way....I’ll

show you another route.’ Well that route eventually became known as “Route Harriet” it is by a pass—the Gorak Pass, and it has a whole road and motorway that nobody even knew about. Our aerial photography was off by about fifty kilometers east—so that was the road we used in the end. We were happy we weren’t going to die, but it goes to show you that we don’t know the ground—we are just foreign soldiers in your country. We can’t just drive around and map the place out freely. Anyway we avoided enemy territory but in order to do that there was an eight kilometer stretch where people were living—they had built houses, but we paid them all off and demolished the compounds. Money was no objective and we paid them much more than their homes were worth anyway.”

Other times things became more complex. In the Afghan underground, it was a scene of surprise:

“During this one mission we had to airlift one thousand people in three helicopters and it was like Vietnam! We were just dropping mortar rounds on Big Top, a Taliban controlled hill and we just thought they had some positions on the hill, we didn't know what was inside it. And afterwards, we went down and got inside and there were like Vietnamese tunnels, they had medical centers, accommodation centers, the whole thing, surgical facilities, the whole lot, kitchens, bathrooms. Rooms and tunnels they had dug out of a hill, and we basically shelled the hill to bits. It’s below the Kajaki Dam. They have other strongholds: Brown Hill and Black Hill, just below that, and going around Big Top when we went in, after they were all dead and we’d blown it up, we just dropped artillery on it, missiles, just firing for about two days. It’s horrible. It desensitizes you. You watch the power mortar man who is there in flip flops and dropping mortar rounds like “clunk” and smiling, dropping mortar rounds onto people—clunk, clunk, clunk. It was overwhelming force. The whole thing had gone weird. And afterwards the engineers going in and setting chargers and blowing up tunnels and things, which were totally reinforced. That’s why I left the army, because they do no good.”

And earlier in Iraq:

“We were clearing Basra and the surrounding towns. We stopped, held ground and did counter-terrorism. They were training the Iraqi forces after they had been disbanded and we spent quite a bit of time by oil pipelines by the major port, there is only one way the oil goes out. So we turned onto Saddam Hussain because we couldn’t show an enemy we were actually dealing with in Afghanistan. We were told we were there not for oil but for WMDs, and there I am standing by an oil pipeline getting RPG ed, mortared and shot. And we are being told it's not for oil. We stood guard by those pipelines every night and got hammered. Meanwhile contracts were going out to KBR, Halliburton—the fighting phase and the “Green Zone” contract phase happen together. Loads of security, infrastructure and logistics contracts. And then we just left because it got boring and we left the Shias and Sunnis and everyone else to butcher each other. You know what? My father was a medical supply exporter who did a lot of business in Basra before the sanctions and he was horrified when I showed him photos...saw it rubberized. We’ve bombed it back one hundred years—people living in mud, rabid feral dog packs feeding

on bodies. Basra used to be like Saint Tropez, he says. Fucking hell. But Afghanistan? Nobody in their right mind should invade this place. You can't conquer it. They've been kicking everyone out since Alexander. The place is not what it seems. Nobody knows or gives a shit about Hamid Karzai. Democracy? The President? There's a bloody joke if I've ever heard one. We saw it in Helmand. The governor could barely travel. The shadow Taliban government was doing a much better job of providing justice and security. In Iraq they were better off under Saddam. They had a state, army, industry, national healthcare, infrastructure. Now you go to the Basra hospital and it doesn't even have a roof, people lying in the open. That's why I left the army."

Rhys also recounted an incident when a suicide bomber blew himself up but missed ISAF forces and instead blew off a four-year-old girl's hand. He was remorseful, and explained that chinooks don't land because they are "rare assets." They are not used to help civilians: "It's horrible because the people who make decisions make sensible but cold and objective decisions. But it's not a matter of objectivity when someone has a small girl in front of him and she is dying." He takes distance from the perceived cruelties of others and also remembers how local Afghans turn to Forward Operating Bases (FOBS) when they needed medical attention. "They scream out of pain and on in the inside, in the medical room there is a watch keeper that says: 'Nope sorry this is a civilian issue unless its life or limb or we caused it. Unless you can prove it's our fault, the medical response team cannot provide treatment.' Rhys distances himself from a mode of war that not only effaces the boundary between combatant and civilian, but that puts the burden of proving the relationship between injury and source on the wounded.

A structure of identification is crucial to war making. MacCannell locates the violence of war in a relationship of exchange in which sacrifice is guaranteed through an extension of identification.⁵²⁵ Loss and sacrifice are concealed through the "structures of its leadership," which no longer figures the leader as a vengeful father but as a group leader radiating love. This

⁵²⁵ MacCannell, Juliet Flower. "More Thoughts for the Times on War and Death." *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis Reflections on Seminar XVII* sic Vi, 2006, 195-215.

is common sense logic and anyone who has interviewed soldiers would readily agree that it accounts for the fraternal bonds and idioms they often speak through. This was true for almost all the military or former military personnel I spoke to, and it distorts the violence they inflict into a brotherly defense of their fellow soldiers. When Rhys remarks on “getting RPG ed” by an oil pipeline, only to then talk of his empathy for wounded Afghans, he illustrates for us a discourse of war that produces its own lack and excess. Privation (the hard reality of a war fought for oil) and that of a libidinal *jouissance* (the affective investment in wounded Afghans) demand a sacrifice from Rhys which is then obscured through an identificatory extension—a “reverse envy” for the “enemy-brother” who is denied medical care for the injuries caused by the violence of what MacCannell describes as “the aura of universal love” involved in any “liberation from without.”⁵²⁶

There are others at MMS who echo this narrative, like Chav a former Special Air Service (SAS) officer who was head of security at MMS. Chav is from Belfast and was deeply involved in counter IRA intelligence work. He exudes a playful machismo. “Belfast had lots of terrorists, like Kabul,” he described to me. Chav would sit in bars and gather intelligence and go on counter-terrorism missions. Growing up he never had the means to travel, but he wanted to see the world and “take a look around.” He first joined the parachute regiment and the British Army Path Finders (advanced “reki” or reconnaissance work) and then the SAS where he did everything from covert operations to urban and rural warfare. As part of that work, Chav was in Afghanistan in 2001 before the war commenced. He was parachuted in for: “aggressive reconnaissance...if you know what I mean.” In 2003 he went to Jordan and prepared for

⁵²⁶ Ibid., pg. 212.

“infiltrating” Iraq. He was in the Western Desert on a mission to locate Saddam Hussein’s infamous weapons of mass destruction before the start of the Iraq War. He never found any:

“We didn’t find any. It was a load of bullocks. What a joke. We were there for six weeks before the invasion in the middle of the desert...we didn’t believe the whole American WMD story anyway, because the American satellite feeds were coming in to us and the guys I worked with...look we call a spade a spade ok? You know what I mean? I remember looking at these images, on big boards and so on and there was a place Al Qaim where there were factories and therefore possibly chemical weapons. It’s near Syria. Anyway, every single thing detailed on that photograph or image was *possible*. This is a possible scud launcher site, those are possible scuds, that’s a possible scud stronghold, the concrete factory was a possible chemical and sulfate plant. Everything was possibly something else we were told. “

For Chav the privation of the war, which Rhys experienced while guarding oil pipelines, becomes the site of overflow on the surface of the Iraqi landscape. It infuses it with nefarious possibility, turning everything (in the imagination of his commanding officers) from “this” and “that” to the concrete factory into dangerous excess. The qualifiers he cites function as floating signifiers, alternating across the terrain and transforming it into the undifferentiated scene of a dangerous warscape. The American satellite imagery contains a repetitive movement from “this” to “that” from “possible scuds” to a “possible scud stronghold.” The feeds erect an image of dissimulation. The landscape’s most crucial feature is its own nondisclosure. In the transition from one disguise to another, the past of the landscape (a time when a concrete factory was in fact a concrete factory) becomes a repressible blindspot, and hence a point of non-recovery—a fiction which the special forces find themselves in no way obligated to maintain:

“We had a final debrief before the infiltration. I was with the B squadron. We infilled on vehicles and shot our way in, it was a noisy infill, lots of shooting and we went through the western desert across the Iraqi border. The East squadron went in helos (helicopters) and chinooks. But a week before this a high ranking American fellow visited and we had so many questions for him, all the guys had questions about the intel and he finally just said: ‘I understand what you’re saying, and where you’re comin’ from but this big green machine is turning and burning and we’re going with it.’ He basically put his hands up and said I know the intel suggests that there is nothing there, and we had weapons inspectors who were

coming back to us all the time and saying *there is nothing here* (emphasis mine). Not very many people know this. You're the first person I've told apart from some of my friends here. There was nothing there, because there was nothing there. It was just cement factories. We saw it was all just a farce. And we got into some trouble but just like the Afghans it was because people were defending their cities or their own populace."

The transformation of the landscape via satellite imagery before the "infiltration" turned it into the imminent scene of violent exchange, of a "noisy infill" with "lots of shooting." That conversion enables military strategy, the presumed veracity of satellite intelligence and the force of ideology to turn the ground into what Allen Feldman describes in Northern Ireland's ethnicized "no-go" areas as a "spectacle which channeled the perception and performance of violent exchanges."⁵²⁷

Chav continues:

"We were soldiers and you're expected to follow orders at the end of the day. We found nothing. The biggest fucking things we found were old armories with old Ba'ath party weapons. Just weapons. In fact, the closest thing I've ever seen to a WMD or dirty bomb was actually here in Afghanistan in the South. We were looking for Osama Bin Laden in the cave complexes by the border, we were looking for him, didn't find him, but we found these caves. Fucking hell these cave complexes are big! Have you been down there?"

Me: "No way. Can I go?"

Chav: "Aw you've got to go. You've got to go and see those complexes. You can easily drive lorries into them if you know what I'm saying. They are not just caves if you know what I mean. So we were there and got into trouble and shot our way out, and in the back part of one of these caves there were ammunition dumps and we saw Russian boxes with red stenciling like something out of the movies. We thought what the bloody hell are these wooden crates and hell and we took them outside, very bloody heavy, out of the arms cache and inside there is straw and material that had rotted and was inside the size of a rugby ball or something. Very very heavy and something slushing around on the inside so we sent pictures back to UK and they said its Russian encased uranium, depleted uranium. It was left over from the Russian era because they left everything behind but why it was in the South and why they left it we don't know. The only way was to fill it in actual containers, fill it with lead and put it two hundred meters underground and leave it. That was the closest I ever got to a bloody WMD. But in the Western Desert? Not a sausage."

⁵²⁷ Feldman, Allen. *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pg. 36.

In Afghanistan, Chav claims he has done it all. He's been actively involved in disrupting "terrorist cells," he was embedded in intelligence networks, he's arranged kinetic strikes with F 14's at 30,000 feet "so these guys wouldn't know what hit them," he's landed on top of compound roofs and ambushed homes. He's found evidence. He's listened to cell phone calls with translators. He's used voice recognition. He's heard Mullah Omar's voice (the former leader of the Taliban and America's most wanted Afghan) on the other line. He's eliminated enemies. He's put the money he's earned away in case he suffers an injury while on duty because he knows nobody else will "give a toss." He's been to Angola and Sierra Leone. In between fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan he spent eighteen months doing undercover surveillance for the British Army in Northern Ireland. Later, in Iraq he was a part of the Special Forces mission that found Norman Kember, a member of the Christian Peacemaker Team who was kidnapped in Iraq in 2005 in the widely covered hostage crisis. Chav recalled it as a "proper hostage situation, they were about to have their heads chopped off." Chav's unit tried to rescue Kember thirty to forty times before they finally found him in a house through random intelligence: "It was a total fluke but we found him crying his eyes out...I have a picture I can show you sometime," he said.

Despite his range of combat and intelligence experiences, there was something distinct and dangerous about the Afghans, who were: "well trained, devout, extreme. They believe thoroughly in what they're doing and that makes them dangerous."

"These people don't know any better. I grew up with violence. My family stood in bread lines. All the Afghans know is war—thirty-five years of it. But the violence in Northern Ireland was nothing like this. This is very extreme. We didn't have any suicide bombers. Loads of car bombs, yes, but not people. I'd sit up at night and listen to the car bombs go off—the sound was boom, boom, two or three per night. The IRA would come in just like that and hold entire families for ransom, and chain people to vehicles full of explosives and drive them to checkpoints. Same as here eh. I've been to Kabul before and all over Afghanistan. It's a funny place. The Afghans are a funny breed. There doesn't seem to be much hierarchy. No hierarchies based on power. A very egalitarian bunch. A damn funny

bunch. All on the same level. Intense bunch. All the time I've spent in Basra, Fallujah, Baghdad and now here, I have found that people have to help themselves. But the Afghans they don't get that. They have to learn to help themselves if they want to move on."

Chav's discourse on the landscape and the actual danger of the Russian encased uranium he found in the "back part" of an Afghan cave become a site of double absence: the uranium which is again secreted into the ground (two hundred meters underground) and the generalized perception of Afghans who do not know why they do what they do. This anxiety, of having come face to face with the closest thing to an WMD during his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, coalesces with an anxiety over the radical equality he perceives (only among Afghan men no doubt). His apprehension over the danger of the caves and the danger that Afghans (knowingly and unknowingly) pose to themselves and others are allayed by the conjuring of imperial volition. Empire and mining, he believes, will displace danger and dirty weapons in the underground with the generation of value and the concomitant hierarchies necessary in any modern capitalist economy; a perversion that conflates the misrecognition of imperial violence with power at a time of intense imperial anxiety over the futures of both Iraq and Afghanistan.

For the local Afghans who face dispossession the specter of imperial power entails the loss of ground. That loss is indissociable from the foreign capture of rent *and* illiteracy, two difficulties which result in a confused groundswell of evidentiary refutations and a bunch of overlapping land deeds "covered in fingerprints," as Samim describes. The finger-pointing of the local Afghans illustrates the violence subsumed by the demands of mining capital and the acquisition of ground rent by the Afghan government. The belief in the possibility of wealth in the underground doubles not only as the scene of potential accumulation but one of direct transposition: where mining wealth magically becomes a buttress for democratic politics (a presumption largely dislodged by the literature on rentier states) but one that circulates in Afghan

ministries and media as the promise of wealth and ideological harmony. Direct transposition, as we recall, was also the basis of Marx's concern with the "Trinity Formula" and especially the fetishistic (and direct) attribution of auto-genesis to nature. Above all, Marx demonstrates that this is a perversion of cause and effect—one that turns appearances into the ground for repetition—for more of the same.

Nature's productivity is the dream that sustains this. The fecundity of the ground (and underground) establishes the scene of a double fascination with generation. The treasures presumed to lie in wait are fabulous prophetic signs. They refer as much to the possibility of capital accumulation as to the nearly inexhaustible virtues of the ground itself. This dream is not new and it even endows the state with an aura of institutionalized power and what Fernando Coronil describes in Venezuela as the "deification of the state" as part of the establishment of an oil (or "black gold") economy.⁵²⁸

Relatedly, a discussion of the appearance of the Afghan State as the custodian of natural treasure and hence as a transcendent force in the unification of Afghanistan as a nation-state readying for a democratic "take off" (Rostow, 1960) also blinds us to the complex ideological and epistemological transformations that such transitions engender, and the histories of linguistic and symbolic difference they are captured and galvanized by. This is not to deny that states depend upon oil or mining revenue (or income from foreign aid), and that this reliance illustrates the uneven contradictions⁵²⁹ of geo-political orders drawn into an international economy

⁵²⁸ Coronil, Fernando. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, pg. 4.

⁵²⁹ Smith, Neil. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

predicated upon the consumption of fossil fuels or the predicaments of primary producers and late developers.⁵³⁰ To be sure, the Afghan twentieth century was one of enormous windfall gain. The Afghan State emerged in a precipitous context of foreign aid and credit (in the aftermath of the Anglo-Afghan wars) that operated outside the bounds of any national fiscal policy and much like rentier income does in oil economies. That boon extended from the establishment of the Afghan monarchy in 1880⁵³¹ to the provision of an enormous line of credit by the Soviet Union to the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) after the 1978 communist revolution, when taxes financed less than a quarter of the state's expenditure or were indirectly levied on

⁵³⁰ There is a vast literature on "late" development:

Bauer, P.T. *Dissent on Development*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Revised edition, 1976.

Evans, Peter and John Stephens, "Development and the World Economy," in N. Smelser, *The Handbook of Sociology*. Sage, 1988.

Galtung, Johan. "A Structural Theory of Imperialism." *Journal of Peace Research* 8, no. 2 (June 1, 1971): 81–117.

Gerschenkron, Alexander. *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Gunder Frank, Andre. "The Development of Underdevelopment," *Monthly Review*, Vol. 18, September 1966.

Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, translated by Harriet de Onís. Duke University Press, Durham: 1995.

Rostow, W. W. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge University Press, 1960.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *The Capitalist World Economy*, Cambridge, 1979.

⁵³¹ Gregorian, Vartan. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan; Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969.

foreign trade.⁵³² The loss of PDPA power in the countryside, in the aftermath of failed land reforms and the brutal suppression of local resistance meant that the government could not reinstate a program of land tax, turning the ground into an even more sovereign source of wealth—an autonomous force outside the administrative purview of the state.

Ground Speak

In the laboratory and especially upstairs in the headquarters there is a lot of talk of gold. “Gold! Gold! Gold!” Maira says, “It’s all they know! All I know is it’s shiny. A yellow thing. I don’t know if it’s meant for me.” She leans on color in order to conjure an image of the ephemeral substance that is obsessively sought not only in the laboratory but in the national imaginary as an indefatigable treasure, one which reifies the nation through the magic of money from the ground, its *own* ground nonetheless. When Marx says ground rent is as sensical as a “yellow logarithm” something eludes him which Maira touches on with her repetitive reference. A logarithm is a mathematical function used to solve problems of growth and decay. The logarithm of a number accounts for repeated multiplication, indicating how many times the base has to be repeated (or raised) in order to reach that number. The function of the logarithm is to express exponential growth. For Maira gold possesses such exponential powers of growth. She speaks of it like a force or as if it possesses a mana, one which the color yellow gives her some traction over, also giving some idea of what her kismet might be.

Root and cognate words are not unlike color in this regard. They float between signifiers in polymorphous fashion, touching on them despite their ephemerality just as color moves

⁵³² Rubin, Barnett R. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

between abstraction and reality. The word gold stems from the Proto-Germanic *ghl* and the PIE root *ghel* which means “to shine” and has as one of its derivatives the old Persian *daraniya* and the Avestan *zaranya* (or “gold”). Like the Pashto word for gold (*zar*) and for yellow (*zard*), the notion of shine constitutes their shared etymology. The word glass (or the Germanic *glasam*) shares the PIE root of *ghel* which is also the “ancestor of widespread words for gray, blue, green, and yellow.”⁵³³ The origin of color is an homage to luster just as the shared root between glass and gold tells us of an association between value and the world of appearances, the *zahir* (surface or exteriority) that displaces the real—in Maira’s case of laying eyes on gold, gold, gold: “I don’t know if it’s for me.”

A fantasy trails Maira’s words. But it isn’t only hers. Before the problem of ground can become one of resources it is one of images and transubstantiation; it is a world of fantasy that transforms the opacity of geological matter into a belief in fabulous wealth and surplus, a representation that takes as its support the promise of earthly boon— to be made visible as an object of national knowledge and transformation. And while this certainly isn’t unique to Afghanistan (or to the Afghan State as the potential custodian of resources) it does constitute the basis of a US military and Pentagon discourse on the future of Afghanistan as the future of its extractive industry, an assimilation disseminated through print and televisual media, mineral maps, and by the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, The Ministry of Finance, the Afghan Geological Services, and Afghanistan Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative. In the MMS offices this assimilation—and the notion of the Afghan modern as the product of imperial pedagogy— is reproduced everywhere: the starched white uniforms of the kitchen staff, their hair and beard nets, the glistening floors, the meticulous laboratory, the large sophisticated

⁵³³ See: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=glass&allowed_in_frame=0

equipment, the gleaming desks, the files, the contracts (under review by the MOMP), the rubber stamps, the well appointed meeting rooms where only bona fide employees can enter, the old and new geological maps, the armed security at the door, and even on the walls where Samsung HD flat screen television screens endlessly display crisp images of cheerful Afghan men donning hard hats and working with exploratory drilling equipment. All of this staging proclaims that change is possible. It's a veritable exhortation.

National economic prosperity reflected as an image of labor and treasure recuperates a certain *Gestalt*: an image of coherence or totality that subsumes the very anxious or desperate fragmentations that energizes the need for external affirmation in the first place (Lacan, 1977). In MMS those fragmentations and anxieties are the product of a much deeper ambivalence about the ground itself, one that is expressed in Khaki Jabar as the difference between differential and absolute rent. In the accounts of Rhys and Chav it is ambivalence over the ground of value and the ground condensed into the scene of violence and death dealing. For others, like Idris, the constitutive ambivalence of ground emerges as a problem of language. Idris is a junior geologist at MMS. He is 20 and majored in mining at Kabul's polytechnic institute. He wasn't sure what to major in, but his friend Adil (also a geologist at MMS) told him that a vast amount of minerals had recently been discovered—there were maps to prove this— and that he should study mining because it was the only line of work with guaranteed employment. Idris is shy but friendly, he likes to talk. His tone shifts from informal to formal, his smiles emerge and vanish in a flash, especially when heavier memories dawn on him. Like most of his colleagues, he proclaimed that I listened to him “like a sister might.” His father was in the army during Najibullah's presidency and was threatened by the Taliban for his collusion in the aftermath of the deeply polarizing Afghan Civil War. Fearing for their lives, Idris's family escaped to Pakistan, a country he

describes as “one that is counted upon by the international community.” Facing numerous difficulties, from discrimination to poverty, his family returned to Afghanistan during the early years of Afghan-American war.

“It takes time for fate to reveal itself, to show what is going on. I didn’t know. We had returned to Afghanistan and everything was perilous. It was hard to go to school. Many restless nights passed, and still fate did not make itself known to us. Difficulty sometimes spearheads its way into one’s life. It’s hard to predict, impossible to avoid. But it’s important to remain hopeful and to think of the future. To refuse to believe that the bitter experiences of your past will be a forecast for your future. I’m optimistic that things will change here, that is why I studied mineral extraction. I defended my thesis successfully and got a job.”

At Polytechnic he had learned from his teachers about the horrors of underground mining. He never wanted to go down that far. It all seemed like a perilous plunge into the unknown for him:

“It was really scary just learning about what happens inside the earth. Nobody really knows what happens that far, or what could happen. We heard a story one day in class about a worker—some poor guy of course, who fell onto a track and had a metal instrument in his pocket. The track was also metal and because of the atmosphere of the mine the mine exploded! He had a key in his pocket. At that depth two metals produce a spark that interact with the elements and cause an explosion.”

Idris also went to a coal mine in Northern Afghanistan, where an explosion had killed dozens of men some thirty years ago—a story that the present day miners still talk about. This time Idris went down:

“I went to a coal mine once and from the outside you would never guess it had tunnels in it. Some were 80 meters inside. We went all the way inside. Workers were propped up to reach what they needed. Some had wooden blocks underneath their feet. In some constricted places they would walk on their chest. I mean that they would drag themselves on their chests because space was so tight. It’s unfathomable down there! This is a government operated coal mine. We went 280 meters down into the earth. It was dark. It was surreal. What if we were lost? How do we find our way? The only way at that depth is to take dirt and drop it while turning on your light. You see where the dirt falls and you determine where the draft is coming from. Follow the draft until you get out. That’s what we were told. These are matters of experience, they are difficult and amazing. The miners would talk to us, the ones from coal mines, about a blast some

30 years ago that killed many people. They still talk about it. They are obsessed. Mining is very dangerous. It's very technical. Humans must know that going into the earth is dangerous. It's hard to breath, there are dangerous gasses. You must wear masks, hats, it's loud and damages the ear. Mining has many myths and stories. It's fascinating.”

For Idris a substitutive presence emerges deep underground, displacing the imminence of death and confusion (the confusion of getting back out) with stories that produce wonderment and fantasy. His profound ambivalence over the uncertainty of making it out alive or maintaining his sensorial capacities is transcribed as secreted knowledge, as a power that requires a habitus of careful attention and reflection on the ground's earthly exhortations:

“We have to know all the characteristics of all the minerals. Otherwise, how would we know what's in front of our eyes? But it's very difficult, very difficult. It's very difficult to understand and diagnose and discern the formation of rocks. Material can only be extracted once we know how much exists, where it is, and where on the map. Then we choose a method of extraction: surface level, deep in the ground etc. The engineer picks the method, not us. We just diagnose. It's all a guess ultimately, but what is certain is that the ground has limitless potential.

...

Minerals and rocks exist in families, in categories and have relations with one another that can be deceptive. They might be from different families but share very similar features and look like the same thing. You can never just believe the appearance of something, you have to get to the inside of it—its nature, from the *zahir* (outside) to the *batin* (interior). You must look at it very carefully. You cannot just look at it and take it for what it is—for its surface manifestation. There is no way to instantly understand and define a rock or formation. You must go and be with it. You must kneel by it. Sit by it, even for hours, and try to understand its nature and what it is you're looking at. You must put incredible *feshâr* (pressure) on yourself to discern its depth, to discern what it is—from what geological era, how it was formed? What is its nature? Geology is a deep discipline. It is a discipline of depth not surface. You lose yourself in thought—in how it is that we know something. How was this rock formed? How did it get here? From where? Why? Why has any of this occurred in the first place? Everything has a cause but I want to know the ultimate cause. All sciences are important, but geology is exceedingly complex. Rocks have no language.

It is precisely when the content of reflection is culled as a technology of discernment that Idris foregrounds the inviolable importance of ultimate causes, the *batin* of the earth that is belied by surface manifestations. The fixation with that interior, the insistence on putting *feshâr*

or pressure on oneself and “being with” the ground is put forth in service of a final cause, a truth that turns intermediary causes into means to an end and inspires Idris with a chain of reasoning that culminates in an act of grounding. It is significant that Idris does not speak about the actual methodology of his work on the ground (how he categorizes rocks, what the classificatory families are, how samples are studied etc). In fact, he seems paralyzed by awe:

You must understand what it is. You need at least twenty to twenty-five years of experience to be good at this. I’ve just graduated and have only been working eight months. I don’t have many interesting stories yet. But I’ve seen drills that go very deep and I’ve seen drillers hesitate beyond 5 meters because they don’t know if going further will ruin what lies beneath. You have to pay attention to the direction of the sedimentation, the *oofadagi* of the rock. It’s too bad but we need private companies to come and spend millions of dollars. We didn’t know how to operate anything in the beginning. We would just stare, in awe, at the drill. What is this thing? How does it work? We could only stare. We’d never seen such machines.”

Instead Idris valorizes the line between the impenetrable and obvious. His surprising statement that: “rocks have no language” turns the self-evident into a problem of translation, and hence the presumption of a nondisclosure which he comes to mediate. This occurs under a condition of double lack: rocks have no language and the surface of the ground cannot be fully representative of the nature of the *batin* (Idris thinks what is manifest is insufficient to understanding the latent). What emerges at that interstice of final cause and ruminative thought is the problem of language and futurity. As we’ve seen, that problematic suffuses other translational contexts where Afghans are exhorted to speak clearly and “get to the point” rather than losing themselves in oral digression, but for Idris (who also wants to get to the final point) the problem is redoubled on the order of technological mediation, where the relationship between the real and simulacra become the point of political difference and capital investment (*sarmâya guzarî*):

“Things in this country would be much better if these capitalists work seriously and if Afghans work hard as laborers. The mining sector has the potential for a lot of employment, more than any other. The Afghan government has to make serious efforts and plans. A lot of my friends are unemployed and worried. What will happen to them? I’ve seen many difficulties. If you want to get a civil service job in this country it’s impossible, you have to bribe all the *intermediary characters* (emphasis mine) first, if you want to get a job with a foreign company you need experience and English. How can someone obtain experience while going to school? There is no mine in Kabul for experience. Someone asked the Minister of Mines and Petroleum this and he did not answer—he said: “*such and such and so on.*” *It’s like they talk to themselves* (emphasis mine). It isn’t a joke. Unemployment will soar after 2014. All the ten year international projects have been completed or are no longer funded, NGOs are leaving, budgets are disappearing. Imagine the unemployment.”

Multiple discourses begin to converge in Idris’s narrative, which is itself a digression on the possibility of the unseen. His belief that things would be better if the capitalists “worked seriously” is itself a surface level manifestation of the more grounded discourse that emerges from Khaki Jabar, where the locals explicitly demand absolute rent in the form of rent and infrastructural development (schools, mosques, roads, home repair, dams). In that context, the force of the indexical trace (which Samim only understood as the confusion of illiteracy and a proliferation of land deeds) served as a barrier to capital investment. For Idris, that investment (once undertaken *seriously*) is not understood in relation to the productive improvement of the ground but the spectacular wealth that resides in it.

The idea of surplus is particularly powerful in the context of both a vanishing war economy and a counterinsurgency that converts visibility into a logic of cultural & military superiority (the images and tactics described by Rhys and Chav). For them, the hidden is the site of value when Afghans and weapons are made visible as targets of war by technologies of visual and aural capture (biometric technology, aerial surveillance and satellite imagery, intercepted phone calls like Chav’s claim to have heard Mullah Omar on the other line). The correlate of this for Idris (and many others) is that the materially invisible is the site of surplus value (under

ground and above ground in Kabul's sprawling Green Zone). Thus, if for military forces valuable targets are captured after they are rendered visible for Idris economic value is presumed to lie in wait behind various structures of obfuscation and control: a cordoned off Green Zone, a prohibitive and corrupt bureaucracy with intermediary persons who require bribes, the formal & scientific processes of geological classification and most importantly the earthen ground.

“International forces have invested capital and persons and soldiers but forty countries could not stabilize this place. The future is bound to security. If there is security, there is investment. The introduction of capital is better for the future. And that can happen in mining, because it is nature itself that gives you capital. There will be employment and wages, and the very possibility of a future. Otherwise it's chaos. Look at what happened in Shar e Nau (a central neighborhood in Kabul) two nights ago—a bomb goes off, and three attacks just today. Then the Ministry of Defense spokesman comes on television and says state security forces are strong. How can you say that when you have multiple attacks in the capital city? Just last year, when I lived near the airport, I was in a car and six cars ahead of me the car blew up. Boom! Just like that it exploded. They killed Russian pilots, and South Africans who were in the convoy. It blew up right in front of me. You cannot leave your house with the certainty that you will return in the evening. But we need to be hopeful, we need to work hard. Afghanistan is replete with mineral wealth, and we must focus on that so that Afghanistan can be independent, free from the aid and the intrigues of foreign countries.”

The Afghan War, not only for Idris but for many, has precipitated a representational crisis in which the ground and ground rent constitute the basis of a series of profound misrecognitions, not just as it is expressed in the commodity form but more generally. Surface and ground, future and prosperity, minerals and endless potential—all of these are located for Idris in a transformative transition that has the potential to portend better or worse times while turning the operations of the fetish into a collective belief in the fecundity of the ground.

When Idris kneels on the ground, when he sits there for hours and ruminates—inspecting rocks and warning me against just believing in the “appearance of something” rather than getting to “the inside of it—its nature,” and the history occluded by its surface manifestation; when he says you must put *feshâr* (pressure) on yourself to discern the enormity of what lies underground,

and lose yourself in thought—he talks about considering the evidentiary powers of nature not only to penetrate their secrets but as part of a chain of reasoning that infers what is hidden from perception through intermediary and final causes—the final cause that Idris is seeking.

Fredric Jameson writes that postmodernity is marked by the appearance of culture as an “immense dilation” of the sphere of commodities, images, experiences and representations that feel like “second nature.”⁵³⁴ He is saying that cultural refraction (and the “intensities” and euphorias that extend from individual schizophrenia to “hallucinatory splendor”) are an encounter with a different kind of sublime. Building on Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime as terror, a frightful awe arising from the impression of overwhelming power or the possibility of destruction, and Kant’s extension to include the idea of representation (the sublime is not just an encounter with nature but with the limits of figurative and representative thought), Jameson argues that in the postmodern period we can think of the sublime as an encounter with an eclipsed nature. The other of society, as it was during the modernist period, is not the unsullied nature of pre-capitalism but something else for which technology is a figure: the “power of dead human labor” which confronts us through “unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis.”⁵³⁵

⁵³⁴ Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, Durham: 1991, vii-ix.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 34.

It is helpful to recall that for Jameson technology, in our “third machine age,” no longer possess the capacity of representation that industrial machinery and technologies of steam, electricity and combustion had: “not the turbine, nor even Sheeler’s grain elevators or smokestacks, not the baroque elaboration of pipes and conveyer belts, not even the streamlined profile of the railroad train—all vehicles of speed still concentrated at rest—but rather the computer, whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power, or even the casings of various media themselves, as with that home appliance called television

But for Idris this is certainly not the case. It is precisely the “immense dilation” of the natural world which serves as an encounter with the sublime (Idris speaks about awe and fascination) and also his concomitant discourse on the necessity of rational thought, which is for him the same as causal reasoning. For Idris this is especially important (if it is to lead to “serious” capital investment) because of the lack of industry and the irresolvable demands placed by mass media on representational thought. He thinks the failures of the Afghan State largely arise from the distortions of foreign intrigue and aid (which could be mitigated with mining capital), but are also the function of representational implosion—a self-referential flattening that defines the nature of Afghan politics and which is disseminated through mass media. He describes this as a displacement of industrial technology, and the representations they enabled. Idris wants things he can grasp. Hard things like iron:

“The Afghan government needs to think about this. Countries like to have things. Every country wants to secure its future needs. Like iron ore for example. Think about future generations, they will need iron much more than television. Right? But this government doesn’t care. You’ve seen the student hunger strikes, but have you seen it on TV? You watch TV and all it is is political talk shows and debates *where people answer themselves* (emphasis mine). ‘Should we use the word *dânishga* or *faculta*?’ Those are the debates.⁵³⁶ It’s nonsense! Then someone calls in and says “*dânishga*” and another person calls and says: “no, we should say *faculta*.” These are trivial questions, these are not serious issues—certainly not the issues facing us and threatening our security without which nothing can happen. We need to do real things—mine for iron, build factories, invest in industry so that at least the future generation says a prayer on our behalf when we are gone. But the Afghan government has done nothing but talk to itself on TV. They have not built a single factory.”

which articulates nothing but rather implodes, carrying its flattened image surface within itself” (1991, pg. 35-36).

⁵³⁶ Both words mean university, but *dânishgah* is considered more Persian and *faculta* more appropriate for Dari speakers.

The implosion and folding in on itself that Idris describes as the representative failure of technology in the age of multinational capital (when capital could otherwise be invested in mining and hard industry), owes itself to the demand made on representation which has, as Jameson describes, “less to do with kinetic energy than with all kinds of new reproductive processes.”⁵³⁷ For Idris they slip into a self-referential discourse, in which talk (especially televisual talk) answers itself and displaces the proper object of critique (the lack of industry) with a meaningless concern with surface level things that entail the reproduction of prattle rather than mineral wealth.⁵³⁸ He conceives of a direct correlation between the concern with language (dialect and word choices, which have acquired renewed energy alongside a fixation with ethnic identity) and a neglect of the harder realities that threaten the Afghan future with the specter of devastation. This displacement concerns the status of productivity, one whose potential has been transferred from the earthen ground (its proper site) to the world of mediatic technology. But

⁵³⁷ Jameson claims: “the aesthetic embodiment of such processes often tends to slip back more comfortably into a mere thematic representation of content -- into narratives which are about the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum” (1991, 36). There is for him a fundamental relationship to language and especially the narrative arc which gives these processes the “mere thematic representation of content,” or the kind of surface level appearance of coherence that Idris extends from the surface of the ground to the discursive superficiality of mass media.

⁵³⁸ It is helpful to recall here that for Baudrillard mass media also exceeds the kind of representational demand Jameson largely conceives as irresolvable. Writing a decade earlier, Baudrillard describes the ascendancy of an era of non-response (ranging from electoral politics to mass media) that makes the “absolutization of speech” the *sine qua non* of power. For Baudrillard much of this owes itself to the logic of mass media, which isn’t one of class monopolization (as Enzenberger maintains) but the structure through which ideology occurs as the operation of an exchange. The media are “effectors of ideology” and like the commodity form (which does not possess ontological significance outside of exchange value) they exist only through the content of ideology. The grammar of this, he boldly states, is an intransitive and “anti-mediatory” one that enables simulation but makes response impossible (1981, 170). Idris is also speaking of this intransitivity, and the refusal of the Afghan State to take on direct objects of discourse. This enhances its powers, and gives it an abstract power that is effectuated through media and outside of the kinds of economic, industrial and political concerns that Idris considers formative for a national and generational future. See: Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Translated by Charles Levin. Telos Press, 1991.

what is at stake here is not technology per se— though we have seen that communication technology came to define the Afghan state's perception of its modernity and even the understanding of its insurgents' self-destructive criminality (the suicide bomber case photos which foretold of more violence against the Afghan State), but the relationship between self-referentiality (through the supplanting of an aesthetic aura with the urgency of mechanical reproduction) and a logic of reproducibility that displaces the production of meaning with reproduction.⁵³⁹

Indeed, if there is nothing quite as disagreeable as self-referential speech perhaps there is nothing quite as agonizing as being told to be the other, to be just like the other who only sees in you the capacity to be an extension of him or herself—and of the imperial desires contained in these encounters. This is the expectation that pervades the MMS offices, residential houses and laboratory—infusing conversations, postures, fashion, accents, reconnaissance missions, signatures, decorative motifs, expectations and directives. It is at once a narcissistic fantasy and an opening, a space that seems to grow and invite the Afghan workers in, making it seem like their willingness and entry is concomitant with their employment. But for the cleaning staff, especially for Sabine who cleans the upstairs offices with her sister Rabia, it always assumes the form of harsh directives, orders which seek to extract more labor from her: “They tell me to be quick quick, to clean faster. They say that the cleaners *dar kharij* (abroad) clean fast and well. But what does that have to do with me? I am not them. They are not me. Tell them to go hire one instead!”

⁵³⁹ Ibid., pg. 174.

Makorakoza

A sense of sameness and immediacy—to be *tez* (quick) and just like the expatriates sweeps up words and moods like an inexorable gust of wind:

“Everything is so fucking slow with Afghans. Can’t get anything done around here!”

“I’ll tell you this, we’re not waiting around forever for the Afghan government to come around.”

“All that gold has been sitting underground for thousands of years, if it’s up to the Afghan government it’ll still be there ten thousand years from now.”

“I just don’t see how the bloody hell this country can have a democracy without first changing the culture, and the people. I mean we’re talking about people who can’t read, and how the hell are they supposed to elect leaders? That’s not democracy that’s a disaster.”

This was typical talk inside and outside of MMS, and a recurring theme of my conversations with the expatriates, like Jacob who was responsible for exploratory missions and for training the Afghan geologists and laborers at Khaki Jabar and Qara Zaghan:

“If I had to transpose myself into this country I’d rather be some guy in the mountains and not know any better. It must be incredibly frustrating to be in this country, to have access to the internet, and to see what’s available in the world, to know what the rest of the world looks like and how different it is from you, and to live your life the way you’re forced to. When I got out at the airport my first thought was: ‘Can I just go back home right now?’”

Jacob, who made fun of Bijan’s belabored signature, had spoken to me earlier about the Marikana massacre at the Lonmin platinum mine near Rustenburg, South Africa. The incident had come up in conversations with Afghans and with Danisa and Lereko, the two black Zimbabweans who worked in the basement laboratory. They complained to me on multiple occasions about the racial hierarchy within the MMS office (where all the managerial staff is white) and also at their shared guesthouse in Wazir Akbar Khan, where the black residents found themselves regularly excluded from social outings and communal dinners. Marikana came to signify the extremis of these hierarchies for them, making racial violence the enabling condition

for the extraction of surplus value. Lereko had worked in Harare as a senior lab technician in an assay lab prior to coming to Kabul. His work consisted of “mineral dressing,” or figuring out the best way to extract minerals. In Kabul his task was mineral assaying, trying to determine the existence of the mineral. He enjoyed sharing his technical expertise with me—beaming with pride when he explained chemical leeching, cyanidation, the economic difference between hydrometallurgy and pyrometallurgy, or how to dissolve a value mineral like gold into a compound solution and reclaim it. In Afghanistan, pyrometallurgy (which consists of applying heat and smelting) is utilized because of the difficulties of importing the acids necessary for hydrometallurgy, a ban imposed on both acids and dynamite due to their use in the making of improvised explosive devices.⁵⁴⁰ The lab’s importing of an atomic absorption spectrometer took ages, and raised red flags for the Afghan government about the possibility of it being used to make nuclear weapons. Hydrocyanic acid, or cyanide, which is used to recover gold, proved impossible to import because the government feared it would be used to assassinate people or that the Taliban would dump it in public water supplies.

Lereko recounted his first time in a mine, being lowered in a cage one and half kilometers right into “the middle of the earth.” The pressure closed his ears and frightened him, leaving him without the one sense crucial to detecting underground accidents (Morris, 2008). Sometimes, in the older mines without generators the electricity would shut off plunging workers into a deeper darkness: “I could never be a miner, I would never last under ground,” he said. Afghanistan’s

⁵⁴⁰ In Afghanistan open cast mining (which is mining from the top soil with the use of tippers and bull dozers) is much more common than underground mining because that would require the use of dynamite to break the rock and create room for a mine shaft. That said, many informal or “pirate miners” use dynamite, and are also said to be a crucial source of funding for the Taliban who smuggle their products across the border to Pakistan.

proclivity for earthquakes made him even more terrified, even though no underground mines exist as of yet. He laments the outflow of skilled labor from Zimbabwe to South Africa, and now to Afghanistan. Kabul never occurred to him, even in his wildest dreams: “I never ever thought I’d end up in Kabul. But man, what a place! I’ve never seen anything this dysfunctional, or in need of so much transformation.”



Two mine shafts in Zimbabwe where Jacob also works as a geologist.

Lereko blames Robert Mugabe’s Indigenization and Economic Empowerment act of 2008 for his eventual move to Kabul, citing its requirement that fifty-one percent of a company’s shares be held by indigenous Zimbabweans as a barrier to foreign direct investment and the loss of jobs across the mining sector. Like the others he is equally nervous about whether the Afghan Government will pass a new mining law (which it did in 2014)—permitting exploratory

companies to also mine for minerals: “If the law is not passed, nobody will stay here. I do not know if I will still have a job.” Lereko relies on a discourse of danger and hazard, not just deep in the mine, but especially owing to the *makorakoza*—small scale or informal gold miners who sometimes dig unstable trenches and build makeshift shafts without support: “In Africa the *makorakoza* build these shafts, and have horrible accidents, on the basis of rumors they hear. They collapse on them!” Danisa echoed these sentiments and told me about the minimum distance required between levels of a mine (fifty meters) and the proper shaft support. “You have to calculate these things carefully, not just like they do in Africa. You have to make sure the dynamite does not destroy the level and that you put enough cement to strengthen the walls of the shaft. The first level of a mine is never actually mined because you need its pillars for support.”

“In Zimbabwe the *makorakoza* go right in with ropes, illegally of course just like Afghanistan. Usually illiterate folks. A lot of gold is mined that way by people, and they will use dynamite if they have access to it. But if you make a hole from top soil straight down, in a new area, and then go down without reinforcements it’ll collapse on you. What’s worse, they (the illegal miners) don’t even close up the hole after they are done. It causes land degradation. They just make huge holes and leave it that way. People fall in. Cars fall in.”

One afternoon Lereko and I met in a cafe in the neighborhood of Taimani for lunch and he talked more openly—as was always the case outside of the MMS laboratory or offices. The subject of platinum and the Marikana massacre came up:

“Lonmin is a platinum mine. When you’re mining platinum, the mine doesn’t only make money from platinum but from all the other associated metals you obtain during the processing of platinum. Those are the minerals that are actually sold at a profit, and one of them is gold. And those are the minerals whose value is used to run the mine and pay the workers. So the platinum is all surplus value, all profit. You can see why these South African workers were complaining! On top of everything their working conditions are bad, there is no sanitation.”

In Kabul he didn't see the Afghan workers as victims of exploitation or war. He was frustrated with them, and with the threat their incompetence posed to the coveted ISO accreditation he and Danisa were working towards. They were just like the *makorakoza*: "I am trying to teach the Afghans appreciation. So they know they are not just crushing rocks in a rock crusher but so that they *know why they do what they do*. You have to understand the process, not just do it. That is what Danisa is trying hard to teach them." The problem they faced is primarily linguistic. Despite the small makeshift English classroom set up in the laboratory break-room, the Afghan workers were slow to learn:

"It's hard teaching them a technical language and in English. They don't understand the language. We tell them to buy supplies for the lab and write things down, they bring back the wrong stuff. It's a culture clash! Things are not as you would expect. What you would expect from someone of a certain position and what you get are two totally different things. Maybe it's the poor education system, the lack of schooling and democracy and the fact that job training makes up for an entire education and culture."

Lereko and Danisa spoke often of danger, encouraging an abundance of precaution. Many things can happen. Singularities suddenly jut out of the unknown and harm you. If you are a *makorakoza* panning for gold you have to be careful with the mercury you need to make your product amalgamate into one mass. If you've created a shaft you need to make sure it has proper structural support. If you're in the lab there is lead to watch out for. There are odorless poisons, and you might get cyanide on your hands. Everything is potentially hazardous. You must wear masks. You must follow every safety precaution. The aluminum pipings and the fixers on the pipes used to extract lead and oxidized waste must be maintained so that the air can be kept clean. The smelter needs to be properly handled, the hypersensitive scale used carefully, the complex machinery left only to the real professionals.

One afternoon I decided to head straight down into the laboratory and bypass the main office entirely. Lereko and Danisa were in the lab and training the new Kabul Polytechnic recruits who had been recently hired by MMS. Everyone seemed excited. The negotiations between MMS and the MOMP were ongoing and it seemed that MMS would have a future in Afghanistan. The potential of the contract being approved was already resulting in thoughts of endless opportunity.

The basement was throbbing with voices. Danisa was conducting a training session and allowed me to join them. It was long and incredibly detailed, extending across the entire length of the laboratory hallway where Maira was mopping the floor—cleaning and cleaning. Through the glass doors I could see that she was even picking at the crevice between the floor tiles with an angled blade. She looked up and smirked at me. The training session included instruction on receiving core samples, labeling, crushing, milling, heating, and weighing. It was conducted in English and in a highly technical vocabulary the Afghans struggled to understand. Each sentence seemed pregnant with science and expertise. Each word seemed orotund. The Afghans were being warned: their habit of mindlessly performing tasks would result in important details being overlooked. They had to not only be careful, but *present*. Accidents happened all the time in Africa and people died. “You don’t want that to happen to you,” Danisa admonished. “No, No, of course not,” a young man Taha said in return, looking at me and flashing a knowing smile.

We stood in front of a large table staring at neatly arranged trays with small cups inside—porcelain cups—each containing a small bead in its center. The cups were arranged in a specific order that matched the blue and white pictorial simulacra spread out on a sheet of paper. The paper indicated which cups contained bits of copper and which had waste material. Danisa explained that the difference between value and waste lies in a process of scientific revelation. If

perfectly followed the process, he was training them in was not just a methodology but a relationship between method and valuation: “At its core that is what mineral assaying is.”

Danisa calls on them one by one:

“Taha, why do we use concentrated hydrochloric acid? Why not something more diluted?”

“Soloman, why do we run the water bath?”

“Hadi, why must the ventilation be turned on?”

“Hamid, what is the advantage of direct mercury analysis?”

Some were able to answer. Others didn't understand and looked to me for mediation. We had learned an overwhelming amount of procedure: their strict and sequential nature, the synchrony of attention and effort that prevents physical catastrophes ranging from the inhalation of deadly fumes to electrocution. We also learned that another danger loomed ahead of technical error, that of losing value. A mistake made anywhere along the assay process could result in discarding a valuable sample, which costs as much as the lost revenue plus the cost of the actual assay. The students were exhorted to understand that any lapse in attention, no matter how small, was an unaffordable human error and that they must be present to everything they do: “*You must be here*. Not at home, not outside, not with your problems. When you are here *you must be present*. You have to understand that everything you do has a consequence. For every cause there is an effect. It's a basic law of the universe. The future is in your hands.”

After the lesson in the “sorting room” we moved to the “weighing room” where a micro-scale sat proudly on a large table: “When you come into this room you must check the temperature. It must be set between twenty-one and twenty-four degrees Celsius. Be sure that

you check the thermometer immediately upon entering the room. Do not forget. It is *very very* important that you pay attention and that you do not forget.” The weighing room was the most tightly controlled room in the entire laboratory, housing a scale worth more than \$10,000 and sensitive enough to pick up draft energy if the air shaft is open. It was a remarkable piece of technology. As we all stood in the room and shifted around it picked up the static electricity between us as infinitesimal weight. “There is always matter to be found,” Danisa continued, “you must pay attention. Everything is in your hands.” Inattention was like a veil that threatened to cast a shadow across the relationship between persons and things, and across the length of the entire multi-million-dollar laboratory. More importantly inattention threatened to distort the relationship between science and value.

Danisa draws our attention to “attention” as such, but also to the content of what should be repressed (constituting a “lack” in the Lacanian sense) in order for his Afghan colleagues to understand what the processes of mineral assay discloses to them. He tells them the future (*ayنده*) is in their hands and that it rests on the fundamental condition of forgetting everything that draws them away from being present in the workplace. I had heard this before, in the Empire Security residential compound where expatriate security contractors spoke of the necessity of Afghans “forgetting” their outside problems when they come to work. One of the managers, Laura, said to me: “We never know what can happen in someone’s life, or what is happening at home. For example, I work with and care about Fazel but I do not know what is happening to his life. What if the Taliban kidnap and hold his child hostage and ask him to carry out a suicide mission at work? What if there is some kind of mental breakdown, blackmail and he comes here and attacks us. We can never know what is really going on in their lives so we have to be vigilant. And they have to leave all those problems at home.”

Laura and her colleagues at Empire really did not know. They did not know about Timūr's difficult life, that his brother had been kidnapped by the Taliban while on en route with a military supply convoy and that the family had raised thirty-thousand dollars to free him, they did not know that Timūr had been shot multiple times while working with other companies, and that he considered himself nothing more than living body armor with no hope for a future. They did not know that he was willing to be dangerously trafficked out of the country and that he would prefer the uncertainty of the sea to life in Kabul. They did not know that Sharif, the Bangladeshi cook was subject to unimaginable degradation while living in Iraq. Sharif was practically a slave in a local Baghdadi woman's house where she made him sleep in the back yard and drink from a water hose, confiscating his passport and phone and locking him out of the house (even on unbearably hot days) when she was away. Sharif's family did not hear from him for over two years and presumed he was dead. They held a memorial service for him in Dhaka. He returned years later and met his daughter at the age of eight. He had saved enough money to buy a small house and, now that he owned a house and was traveling again (to Kabul) he was: "Same like you, same like you." They did not know about Zaid (who worked under Sharif) and whose family faced the murderous rage of his uncle over the forty-acre property dispute. Zaid never told his colleagues. They did not know about the female janitorial staff at Empire, who were too afraid to speak to me about the sexual violence they endured and who would only say: "Things are very bad for us. Sometimes there are no words for it." All of this and much more, nobody seemed to know.

At MMS the issue is not security but economic value. For Danisa the relationship between forgetting and the loss of value was particularly acute, and in the hands of the Afghan workers alone. Forgetting pushes them away from painful distraction and into the workplace

where they can be present, and where everything: “is in their hands.” In the laboratory they are entrusted with the kind of forgetfulness that transforms their lives into a repressible exteriority that should remain concealed precisely because it is intimately familiar and radically different. The acquisition of techno-scientific expertise rests with an oblivious dismissal of everything on the outside. Thus when Danisa instructs them to “be here,” he demands that they conceal and estrange what is familiar in order to enable a relationship to valuation to appear precisely where it is concealed from itself, where an absence (or self-absencing) becomes the mark of pure productivity and precision. This is the logic of empire, which always figures itself as production even as it devastates forms of productivity and surplus, and all the forms of livelihood that might resist its ingress. Imperialists lie, and in doing so create the sense that in their absence, a greater absence will overtake people. Outside of MMS that sense was expressed as a mysterious force: “*Chi hâl amad sar e mâ?*” What has overcome us? “*Dar kojâ khatem khad shod?*” Where might it end? People spoke as if a sense of disclosure and distinction had suddenly vanished, erasing the contours of their concerns and hopes: “*Na omid, na showq, hich chiz namand.*” No hope. No desire. Nothing remains. “*Ayendeh-e mah dar dast e mâ nist.*” The future is not in our hands. *Ayendeh-e mâ gung hast.* Our future is mute.

Capital

Upstairs the belief in value was precarious and a general sense of caution and frustration with the Afghan workers seemed to make the office pulsate with tension. One afternoon the Marikana massacre came up again with Jacob. He maintained the incident was the result of an ongoing rivalry between the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the labor union which had promised the mine workers benefits they could not deliver. On that fateful day it was the fault of the laborers: “who

paid the ultimate price for their own stupidity. Who the hell confronts armed policemen and runs at them? Of course you'll be shot. Sometimes there is a price to pay for stupidity." My insistence that most of the mine workers were shot in the back, as they were *fleeing* from the police, did little to change his mind.⁵⁴¹ He went on to say they (the miners) were very well paid by South African standards and that his own sister, a college educated (white) woman, would never make as much as a miner does. He moved quickly from this to the dissonance between potential and inertia in Afghanistan:

"If you look at what is happening in the mining sector, there is a delay in the mining law, why on earth would you (the Afghan Government) delay things? You need to move quickly and set up a framework that is as investor friendly as possible."

The window for attracting capital was closing in on the Afghan Government. On another day, while explaining to me the importance of exploration companies, he elaborated:

"Every exploration company will always consider two things: 1. Geological risk and 2. Political risk. By this I mean the security risk. Now in this country geological risk is high even though the Russians have done quite a bit of work and now USGS has rehashed that data and come up with new data sets, with added value. But we are starting from the ground up, from scratch pretty much. They've defined ten areas of high interest but they haven't allowed companies to just come and pick them up—so we can't go through the normal process of just applying for a piece of ground and exploring it. The Afghan government doesn't allow it. So the government has taken a bunch of areas, certain areas, because they have enough data from Russian research that assumes certain geological potential, they've put a block around it and put it out on international tenders. In Badakhshan it's gold. In Balkhab it's copper. In Bamiyan (the Haji Gak mine) it's iron ore. In Logar (the Mes Aynak mine) it's also copper. The iron ore potential is huge but there is no railway system so we can't be sure it's economically viable. Industrialization didn't happen here because they were not colonized. Anyway, so they've tendered these areas and companies are free to apply for land outside of these areas of interest but mining laws haven't been put into effect, the law is a legislative guarantee protecting the company's asset. You have projects and international

⁵⁴¹ I had recently learned about the Marikana miners being shot in the back from a lecture: Morris, Rosalind. "In the Event of Protest: Mediating Opposition in South Africa," delivered at the *Das Internationale Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie* (IKKM in Weimer) on January, 23 2013. I was surprised that Jacob did not already know this, given his interest in the topic and the amount of detail he offered about the role of the two labor unions.

companies that are keen to start work, start spending money, but the mining law isn't passed. So we are stuck, waiting for the Afghan Government. They need to stay away from unreasonable royalty fees. They need employment. You want people to come in quickly and spend money. They need change.”

The perceptions of the Afghan workers were the opposite. They believed that there was so much change that it defied foresight with relentless variety: “Things change here on a daily basis. I don’t know if I’ll even have a job tomorrow,” said Ali one of the security guards: “Maybe for these people it isn’t such a big deal but for us it means we don’t eat. In an ant colony dew is a flood.” In the spring of 2013 the Taliban unleashed one of their deadliest “Spring uprisings,” engaging the Afghan National Army, NATO forces and the Afghan National Police in a prolonged battle for territorial and symbolic capital—inspiring countless suicide bombers and setting off improvised explosive devices across the country, and especially in Kabul. Unsurprisingly the mood at MMS shifted quickly. A thick tension seemed to rise above the formalities between the managers and geological staff and suspend itself like an overhang. The Afghans were chattier, more nervous. Everyone seemed inquisitive: “What's happening with the *sherkat* (the company)? Do you know if their contracts went through?” Much like what transpired at Empire Security, I became a coveted intermediary: “Fatima *jaan* (dear) we trust you with our concerns, but watch out with the foreigners. Walls have mice and mice have ears!”

Kabul Bank Crisis

Although greatly exacerbated by the collapse of the counterinsurgency economy, this sense of anxiety and of an impending crisis was not new. In different scenes ranging from the MMS offices to government ministries to Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative meetings and televisual talk shows, a myth of ground-rent is endlessly perpetuated as the one thing that will ensure the safe passage of time, the Afghan future. That April the Ministries of Finance and

Mining held a conference. I first heard about it from Mansoor, one of the young directors at Integrity Watch Afghanistan. I had met him at other events pertaining to the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative and had visited their offices, where they were overseeing surveys about the effects of mining on the local community in Logar (the site of the Chinese copper mine—Mes Aynak). I tagged along with him to the meeting as an observer. The Ministry of Finance had, since 2010, come under intense scrutiny for misallocation and management of funds. Talk of corruption was everywhere. The conference was on revenue management, and especially on mining as a new source of recapitalization—one that could replenish government funds lost to corruption or the cessation of foreign aid. It was a particularly acute issue given the surge of discourse on anti-corruption and graft, especially in the aftermath of the Kabul Bank Crisis of 2010.

I first learned of that crisis somewhere in the Dubai International Airport in late August 2010. I had just left Kabul that morning and saw the front page headline: “Kabul Bank Collapses” in an airport newspaper stand. Kabul Bank was Afghanistan’s largest private bank with an estimated \$1.3 billion in deposits. It had \$500 million in cash.⁵⁴² The week prior, in Kabul, I had witnessed long lines and scenes of frustration outside of the bank, but didn’t know it was on the brink of imminent collapse. That same month the bank posted a \$300 million loss, prompting panicked customers to withdraw as much of their money as possible. A veritable panic had set in the week prior, so profound that when I returned to Kabul in 2011 and 2012, it was still on everyone’s mind. I received endless advice on which banks to avoid, fielded questions about the American banking system, and was told repeatedly that the only reason there

⁵⁴² Partlow, Joshua and Andrew Higgins. “Afghan Authorities Take Over Largest Bank to Avoid Meltdown,” *The Washington Post*. August 31, 2010.

are five flights a week between Kabul and Dubai is to launder money. A friend of mine, a man in his late forties, who was involved in real estate speculation described the frequent flights from Kabul to Dubai: “None of the world’s airlines will land in Kabul except Emirates, and five times a week! They say you if you’ve been bitten by a snake you’ll even be afraid of rope. I would never put my money in an Afghan bank—do you really think they are all going on holiday to Dubai? They are stealing from the rest of us is what they are doing. May Allah curse them and guide us on the righteous path. And may he give you patience to keep listening to us.”

The crisis shook the Afghan economy to its core. Afghan government and military personnel all banked with Kabul Bank, and the alarm over their back wages resulted in an \$820 million bailout from the Afghan government’s reserve fund. International and national audits revealed that eighteen banking laws had been violated. They involved the entire leadership of the bank. Reports of abuse and intimidation surfaced. Foreign consultants hired by the US Government failed to detect problems and the Office of Inspector General at the US Agency for International Development reported that private consultants working for Deloitte and Bearing Point had ignored “red flags.”⁵⁴³ Former President Hamid Karzai and Vice President Marshal Fahim were implicated. Their well known brothers, Mahmoud Karzai and Abdul Haseen Fahim were shareholders. The bank’s Chairman of the Board of Supervisors Sherkhan Farnood and the Chief Executive Officer Khalilullah Ferozi had participated in an elaborate Ponzi scheme through which they transferred hundreds of millions of dollars in loans to fictitious companies in Dubai using Shaheen Exchange, a money transfer outfit that was based in Dubai and owned by

⁵⁴³ Boone, Jon. “Kabul Bank Fraud: Consultants Ignored Warning Signs, Report Says,” *The Guardian*, May 11, 2011.

Farnood.⁵⁴⁴ Farnood used the money to buy \$150 million in property in his wife's name. They kept two sets of books and used fictitious names to retransfer the money back to the bank's shareholders.⁵⁴⁵ Some of that money was even used to finance Hamid Karzai's 2009 re-election campaign.

I was told that anxiety descended on the city like a hailstorm and never abated. Worried customers withdrew their money: "Why does madness always descends on us?" Others lost everything. Some branches ran out of dollars. Others out of money entirely. Armed guards stood in front of the bank and beat away customers. Men sat on street corners and held their heads in their hands: "What sin have I committed? Why me?" Those lucky enough to be employed wanted to work only for cash thereafter, and cash was hoarded by anyone who could get their hands on it. Some were brutally robbed. When I return the following year, one elderly woman gave me a worthless Af100,000 note she had kept from the Najibullah era as a reminder: "It used to buy us a stale loaf of bread if we ran out of government *kupâns* (vouchers). Money is always worthless in this country. Use it as a book mark." Currency exchange was handled in piles of money on the street, often by young kids who sit in front of stacks of cash.

"Pound! Euro! Dollar! Which do you want miss? Why do you walk like the Americans? They are always in a hurry. Like the *shohla* (risotto) is about to go cold on them. Wait wait...tell me if you're engaged to someone miss!"

"Yes, I am."

⁵⁴⁴ Partlow, Joshua and Andrew Higgins. "Afghan Authorities Take Over Largest Bank to Avoid Meltdown," *The Washington Post*. August 31, 2010.

⁵⁴⁵ Rosenberg, Matthew. "Withdrawals Continue at Afghanistan's Largest Bank," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 2010.

“Ah! You kill me miss! I would have done anything for you. You show up. You break a heart just like that and you don’t even exchange your cash! What do you need? Pound? Euro? Dollar?”

They were unworried about their safety. Others would rest a tea cup on the stacks of cash, or rest their prosthetic leg. Throngs of people walked by and didn’t even seem to even notice. I did not hear of a single incident of theft or violence in the Kabul money market, and would frequently walk through it to get to the civil courthouse. It was all incredibly ordinary: “Money is like filth that rolls off your palm. Forget about it.” Talk of crony capitalism turned into support for the insurgency. The Afghan State was suddenly imperiled and talk of bank “receivership” led to questions of revolution and blood.

For others the Afghan State became one specter among others. The Afghan economy nothing but a vanishing point: “Allah makes the world turn, not money. They (the westerners) worship money instead of God.” A sense of ennui burgeoned into hopeless despair: “Oh Allah, why is it always us who feel your wrath?” Nobody ever stood trial. In the end, it was the largest “per capita fraud in history.”⁵⁴⁶

A discourse of renewal sometimes accompanies a sense of doom. In the aftermath of the Kabul Bank crisis the aim of national rehabilitation, to be achieved through economic revival and political transparency amassed incredible momentum. This required a new vocabulary and a sense of optimism that was disseminated through Afghan government twitter accounts (@MOIAFGHANISTAN, @TOLONNEWS, @MODAFGHANISTAN, @MOISPOKESMAN @RESOLUTESUPPORT), televisual and print media, mosque sermons, and all across towns on

⁵⁴⁶ Boone, Jon. “Kabul Bank Fraud: Consultants Ignored Warning Signs, Report Says,” *The Guardian*, May 11, 2011.

large billboards—the vast majority of them about the benefits of banking or telecommunication: “Bank Anywhere” or “Roam More.” *Shafâfyat* (transparency) and *sidâqat* (honesty) were especially central to this discourse, functioning as quilting points between the exigencies of economic disaster (and the reforms those crises necessitate) and the form of political representation thought to contain its future excess. Talk of *ifrat* (excess), *rishwat* (bribes) and *mâdyat* (materialism) and *sogati* (cheapness) winnowed through conversations ranging from mosques to schoolyards: “Miss! What does an Afghan do when his house is on fire? He gives the fire station a missed call.”⁵⁴⁷

At the Ministry of Finance’s Afghanistan Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (AEITI) conference this optimism was especially vivid. We sat around a large wooden table with microphones at each seat, in large leather desk chairs and were encouraged to speak up: “Please, express your desires freely.” In addition to MMS I was also visiting the MOMP and the AEITI and Integrity Watch offices. The ministry and the office had a tense relationship, but I had managed to make two friends at each site, and so I was invited to a range of conferences, meetings and seminars on the future of Afghanistan’s mining economy and democracy. The two were always invariably coupled. I became somewhat of a regular presence. Some considered me a friend and others a nuisance. Mansoor had told me about the conference and promised it would be very interesting.

He said he would personally ensure that the issue of *shafâfyat* (transparency) was central to the conversation. On one end of the table sat the deputy minister of finance and others from

⁵⁴⁷ Placing a missed call was a common practice among those whose cell phone credits were running low. They would call the person they wanted to speak to and hang up, so she/he could call back and spare them the cost of an outgoing call. A seven-year old boy told me this joke, and said a friend had told him in school.

the MOMP. On the other side sat Bijan (the manager from MMS), myself and Mansoor from AEITI. I had arrived with Mansoor after meeting him at his office. Bijan looked surprised and said, with a look of consternation: “I didn’t know you knew these people.” Bijan and I were the only two observers at the meeting. The topic and concern was “revenue management,” and with the issue of foreign capital investment: how to attract and administer it. Concerns were raised about the disconnect between the Afghan judicial system and the economy: “We don’t have time. We have until 2014 to strengthen our institutions and encourage the private sector if we want democracy. Soon the international community will wash their hands of Afghanistan.” Mongolia, Chile and Norway were mentioned as examples of “balanced capitalism,” and as evidence that there are some “twenty-seven modes of capitalism” in the world from which Afghanistan had its pick.

The deputy minister of finance claimed that the previous year (2011) mining income amounted to \$556 million. But 2012 was more uncertain—more susceptible to fluctuation. That inconstancy, he continued, didn’t owe itself to the shortcomings of the Afghan government but to the nature of the mining industry itself. When others tried to interject he put up his hand as if to say: “stop, stop,” and sighed out of frustration: “What can I say to make you understand?” He seemed spent, and uncertain of why so many in the room had no faith in his ministry, or no real hope in the promise of capital or the flooding of the local economy with liquid cash. He forced a wary smile. As he saw it, the path was clear. “Look, income for the Afghan government accrues from royalties, land leases, taxes and the exporting of the minerals. All of that currently accounts for 7% of the GDP but could increase up to 35% by 2018-2019.” As a counterpoint to the booms and busts of any commodity market, he urged the Afghan government to set up a sovereign wealth fund (SWF) that could invest in stocks, bonds and commodity markets worldwide,

protecting against potential losses at home by enhancing its portfolio abroad. Capital should be “traced” and monitored. Money leaves signs behind, signs which a centralized MOF can observe and understand. Already mining income had increased astronomically, from a mere \$4 million from 2002-2008 to \$556 million, a dramatic increase he leaned on as crutch throughout the meeting, slackening a bit out of relief each time he repeated this fact: “Brothers and sisters this \$556 million is without major contracts being signed so imagine the potential. Just imagine how much more we have underground. The future of this country is bright.”

To imagine grounded wealth is to overcome the crises of value that have distorted the Afghan economy since 2001, and especially after the bursting of the economic bubble beginning in 2012. Among other things, that collapse was precipitated by the consolidation of military camps across the country, and especially in Kabul, where the Green Zone had a hold on the Afghan imaginary as a contradictory site of inclusion and secrecy, wealth accumulation and conspicuous consumption, freedom and surveillance. The loss of that world changed the lives of migrant laborers (some of whom I worked alongside in a make shift pizza hut on a military base), foreign security workers, menial laborers, cooks, chauffeurs, security guards, soldiers, linguistic translators, cultural liaisons, and other green zone personnel. The consolidation of that world resulted in the specter of sudden and widespread unemployment, burgeoning into a general anxiety that was mentioned to me in almost every single interview I conducted, over three hundred in total. It was a sense of panic that ranged from ministerial concerns with economic order and exchange value, to whether or not people could provide food for their children: “My son is seven and he came up to me one afternoon in all seriousness and said he would quit school and start working so he could help his family. It was like a dagger in my heart. No father can bear to hear that,” Sultan, one of the drivers at Empire Security said.

The demand for change quickly became an overdetermined belief in the unconditional nature of wealth, literally. Afghans were relentlessly told that if there was any hope it could only spring out of the ground beneath their feet. Mining was immune to the economic volatilities that had shaken their faith in capital. Nothing else could be counted on. It is different when it's the bounty of nature: "Allah has blessed this land, but now it is time to realize that. Allah says take one step towards me and I will take one thousand towards you." Military bases would close, jobs would vanish, exchange rates were unpredictable: "Sorry sister our prices have gone up today because the dollar is now 55Afs per \$1. It was 53Afs just a few days ago. It's all because of 2014." Banks and politicians could not be trusted. "You can't even count on your own shadow these days," as Maira would say in the lab. The prevailing sense of a delay between one's wishes and representations, and between the appearance and reality of things accompanied this expansive project of demilitarization. The concomitant change in the status of the Afghan ground was a critical juncture not only at the intersection of demilitarization and international mining endeavors, but also the torqued relationship to vanishing capital and the imaginative labor of securing an unconditional source. The calamitous loss of capital on the ground (and in the Green Zone) transferred a collective fantasy about the location of surplus value from an urban economy (made increasingly visible as the site of finite and exhausted value as bases were literally shipped away) to its new site—the underground, giving way to a story and hope about the emergence of an inclusive national market grounded in terrestrial fruits of nature.

The discourse on translational value was displaced with a new reflective discourse on purposive nature and the relationship between culture and history. Natural resource economies are, of course, also highly speculative but they are subtended with a fantasy of guarantee anchored in the materiality of hard elements that is thought to mitigate its inflatability. In Kabul,

the transition from a “green zone” economy to one newly anchored in the ground also portends a collective effort to ground the logic of speculation in materiality, even as natural resources become the foundation for a series of complex inter-ethnic, national and international arbitrations. The sudden availability of mineral and hydro-carbon treasure doubles as a world of extra-terrestrial instruction, previously missed *ibars* and *ahwals* (signs and messages) made available through the medium of the earth on the purpose and method of historical and cultural reproduction.

This helps us understand the meeting at the ministry. In that imagination ground rent is synonymous with the fortuitous passage of time, as the deputy minister’s remarks evince. The valorization of an estimated one trillion dollars (along with the windfalls of literacy) enables an *ayendeh i milli* (a national future) in which generational continuity is grounded in the promise of wage-labor and the Afghan government acquires hundreds of millions of dollars per year in revenue. At the meeting, there was no talk of a rentier curse, which might result in the influx of foreign currency, not only increasing the money supply but also domestic prices and decreasing the overall competitiveness of other sectors. There was no mention of the effects of foreign capital on institutional development, on labor remittances, on the trans-border movement of capital and persons, the legal frameworks adjudicating government-business relations, the volume and forms of control imposed on capital flight, the ability for local institutions and bureaucracy to respond to the booms and busts of global commodity prices. There was no mention of the geography of natural resources, and the different ethno-linguistic communities which either stood to gain or to suffer dispossession—their homes demolished just like they suffered during military battles. There was no mention of the Taliban efforts to undermine formal mining ventures. There was no talk of the distribution of wealth. Of collapsing shafts, of

explosions, or of the innumerable hazards that haunt any mining endeavor. They were simply concerned with the fabulous boon of nature.

The week after that meeting I went across town to the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MOMP) to meet the Director General for Policy and Promotion, a young man named Talal. He recounted to me contract negotiations between the ministry and China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC). In 2012 MCC was still negotiating a \$3 billion copper contract, a complex project which included the discovery of a five-thousand-year-old underground Buddhist monastery that subsequently led to intensive archeological work, delaying MCC's access to the site. Tensions between the Afghan Government (only 10% of the treasures have been unearthed) and MCC, which wanted to excavate as soon as possible (copper prices were declining as of 2011) were high. The head archeologist, Dr. Timori whom I had met on several occasions, has in recent years become an archeological hero, inspiring media coverage and a film entitled *Saving Mes Aynak*. The Mes Aynak mine is presumed to be worth over \$100 billion and have the capacity to produce 343,000 tonnes per year and with 48 million tonnes of copper in total. The negotiations are still stalled after the latest demand by the Chinese government that Afghanistan reduce its royalty rate from 19.5% to 10%.⁵⁴⁸

The negotiations included two linguistic translators and focused on the building of a 980 kilometer railway to be used to transport the copper and which would increase its market value. MCC offered to pay for seventy percent of the costs and to provide the labor. But the former Minister of the MOMP wanted MCC to cover 100% of the costs, resulting in deadlock and

⁵⁴⁸ Daniel, Frank Jack and Mirwais Harooni. "Chinese demands, rebels and Buddhist ruins all stall Afghan copper dream," *Reuters*. April 11, 2015.

eventually MCC's refusal to build the railway because its costs outweighed the profits. Talal spoke calmly. But he was anxious. The potential loss of the China deal made it even more important that the Afghan Government finalize the "Haji-gak" iron ore contract with the Indian Government. Talal was also in the midst of negotiating the TAPI deal, a vast transnational pipeline beginning in Tajikistan, passing through Afghanistan and Pakistan and terminating in India. The Indian Government was offering a seven million tonne steel plant, to be built after the railway line was laid. Thereafter, once the market value of steel was determined in the region, they would finance a second steel plant. The contract was especially important to the Ministry of Mines because of the number of Afghans who would be employed unearthing an estimated thirty-million tons of iron ore:

"But all the Afghans do is complain. They complain about 6% royalties but Anglo-American is paying 2% in South Africa. I tell the parliamentarians that there are lots of costs associated with iron ore, and that we will benefit from the related infrastructure projects and the employment but they don't understand. They don't know what is good for them. This is the problem with Afghans. They don't plan for the future."

Talal also recounted a story involving the former mayor of Kabul and a meeting between the Ministry of Finance and the Asian Development Bank, where a two hundred-million-dollar loan had been promised for the purpose of rehabilitating Kabul's roads:

"The bank representative said: 'All you have to do is go through the procurement process,' and the mayor did not know what the word 'procurement' meant! He said: 'No. Put the money in the municipality account and I'll spend it as I see fit.' Can you imagine? When will we learn to be responsible for ourselves? The *kharijis* (foreigners) cannot do everything for us. If you speak English, Afghans will accuse you of being an agent of the American Government. So, those of us who are competent are automatically barred from important positions. This is how the world works, people move around and speak different languages. It's called *globalization* and Afghans cannot afford to be hostile to foreigners forever. I've met with people from Saudi-Aramco and they told me their workers are not even allowed to speak Arabic at work. Only English or French. *Those* are the standards *they* have. We have to change."

...

“We are not out of the Taliban era, and it doesn't help to have nothing but criticism in the media. People think foreigners are here to convert us, or change our cultural ways. When I go to the potential mining sites the first thing I tell those people is that they have to educate their children so that they will know how to work in the mines, so that it is not Chinese labor operating the mines. This is wealth that will last for generations. You have to tell these people explicitly or else they will never understand these things. They are illiterate people. They are different. They think everyone is intolerant of them. They don't know the importance of things, the kind of wealth that would emerge.”

Whatever else those differences are imagined to consist of, it is strikingly clear that the reproduction of capital—a momentum presumed to lie in wait under the ground and beyond geological risk and the crisis of value above ground—is at one with a greater lesson in cultural and linguistic transformation that privileges presence and being in the world. This is sutured to the demand for literacy that not only accompanies a discourse of self-interest but the ingress of foreign capital. That deluge has overtaken the Afghan economy like never before, flooding it with an estimated \$9.9 billion in military aid from the United States alone, and at least \$62 million in foreign direct investment in 2012.⁵⁴⁹ The meteoric rise in bureaucratic constraints and procedures, the proliferation of offices, NGOs, agencies and companies has made it more important than ever to attest to one's word, making the signature and fingerprint crucial to navigating not only Afghanistan's incredibly complex judicial system but all manner of institutions above ground.

But for Talal and others like him the generativity of capital falls victim to the general proclivity of Afghans to act without knowing why they do what they do—the kind of self-

⁵⁴⁹ Dhillon, Kiran. “Afghanistan is the Big Winner in US Foreign Aid,” in *Time Magazine*, March 31, 2014.

See also the following link: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD>

absencing that is denounced in the laboratory but which also is the mark of a self-destructive tendency that necessitates new and old forms of imperial intervention. This ranges from the mechanistic reproduction of accident (toxic and structural) to unwitting sabotage (from botched deals with MCC to forfeited Asian Development Bank loans). It is a regressive discourse inscribed in a fantasy about the emergence of value. Literacy replaces mere presence with the value of a representation, just as it ensures the materialization of economic value. There is no economy without writing. In its absence there can only be the repetition of the prior that Aydin laments when he predicts that the future of Afghanistan will soon go “mute.”

Hands and Fingers

The demand for literacy is cathected onto the desire for capital—an accumulative process that nature and imperial knowledge makes endlessly repeatable. For Aydin the *sine qua non* of that reproducibility is the surpassing of literal indexicality and hence the contestation and proliferation of land deeds “covered in fingerprints,” an outpouring of confusion that he fears could hamper the company’s mining project and by extension his own position as *Engineer Sahib* and cultural liaison. But this isn’t only the case in Qara Zaghan. The convergence of land, literacy and indexicality is accompanied by the largest property boom in Afghan history and an implacable rise in deadly disputes among families, of which Zaid’s family is an especially tragic example. The vast majority of murder trials heard in the civil court in 2012-2013 were in some way related to property—to the ground and to the bitter disputes that arise from a desire to possess it. In this context, fingerprints—the very sign of illiteracy, became a coveted form of identification, doubling as an evidentiary basis for claims that property had been inherited within the family. Indeed, one of the most striking things about these trials (including the suicide bomber trials in the *Amniyat* court), was the sheer abundance of fingerprints—and the

extraordinary reactions they elicited ranging from refusal to outright hysteria in the case of the young man who claimed that his prison sentence increased each time he placed his thumb in the ink pad and then on the court's paperwork.

If Heidegger is right that the hand possesses a peculiar relationship to the word⁵⁵⁰ then perhaps the finger possess a peculiar relationship to proper names, and to the transcendental presence that Derrida describes as the signature's enigmatic *maintenance*.⁵⁵¹ Like signatures, fingerprints evoke a sense of having *been there* crucial to thinking of repetition without difference, or at least to thinking enough sameness to demarcate reproducibility—in this case of a (papillary) “pure event.”⁵⁵² Pure events can lend themselves to a self-referential imaginary, and they can invigorate an imagination of reproducibility—the abiding feature of capital that is most indissociable from fetishistic thinking writ large. Writing about the relationship between sense (abstract coherence) and “pure events” Deleuze emphasizes that the purpose of sense (or sense-making) is to overcome the barriers of thought produced by binaries, including that of the general and particular. Unlike cause, which finds its provenance precisely in that middle ground, the notion of sense rises to the surface where it surmounts oppositions. Sense is independent of spatio-temporal realization.⁵⁵³ Thus Deleuze describes the event as the “object as expressed or

⁵⁵⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *Parmenides*. Translated by Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, pg. 85-88.

⁵⁵¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc*. Edited by Gerald Graff. Northwestern University Press, 1972, pg. 20.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*,

⁵⁵³ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pg. 137.

expressible, never present, but always already in the past and yet to come.”⁵⁵⁴ It is an aleatory point that is displaced, but through which “the event bursts forth as sense”.⁵⁵⁵ Fingerprints make sense in this way. Although they are fundamentally divided between being there and having been there, their indexical power is grounded in a sudden burst of presence through which that plurality appears as a unitary relationship to what is self-same, or to an extension of self and then in its second iteration to a repetition since each fingerprint can only be verified by another matching one.

Aside from the distortions of the property and land market, fingerprints and signatures have become important alongside the diminishing importance of proper names. It is Maira, the underpaid and overworked laboratory custodian who asked what I wanted with her name—a woman who refuses the hierarchies of the laboratory despite the more encompassing ones of a patriarchal social order, who helps us see not only the receding importance of names but that fetishistic outflow and a fantasy of the self-same (a self-same inscribed in the pronominal displacement of names) are indissociable.

This was echoed by Rabia one of two janitors who cleaned the expansive main offices upstairs. She was removed from Maira as if she was working in another world, but they shared the denial of their names and endured the same daily predations of underpaid labor and patriarchy. Rabia and her older sister Sabine also live in Taimani, not far from the office. They wake up at four in the morning to make it to work by six: “*Safa karī, safa karī, safa karī*

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 136.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., pg 137.

(cleaning, cleaning, cleaning). It's all I do all day long, where does so much gold even come from? You know these people don't even know my name, they call me: 'you'." She asked me my name one afternoon over a plate of rice and chicken in the shared lunch room, several weeks after we had met. Rabia is young, though she cannot be too certain of how young. Perhaps thirty. She works hard and also takes some of her sister's shifts—telling her to "sit, sit" while she cleans the lunch room in her stead. Like Maira, she is barely noticed by her Afghan and expatriate colleagues though she eventually forged a friendship with me and insisted that I have lunch with her each time I was at MMS. She was often given orders: "*Tez! Tez! megán tez bash.*" ("Quick! Quick! They tell me to be quick"). She leaves work and hurries home on foot so that she can care for her elderly parents. "What do they pay you each month?" I asked her one afternoon: "*char sad, faqad char sad* (four hundred, just four hundred) and all they do is talk of gold and cleaning, gold and cleaning. I am illiterate so what else can I do? Four hundred is barely enough to buy my parents' medication and food. But I trust my kismet, whatever will come in the future is what it will be, there is no amount of digging for gold that can change that. I struggle and I need more money, I know that, but I rest my back against my fate."

For Rabia, Sabine and Maira, the ideal subject from the perspective of the company is one is without a name, and one who does not believe in kismet but the agency of labor. This was not only the case with them but the entirety of the Afghan staff and especially with the custodians, kitchen and security personnel—those most likely to also be illiterate and who were almost uniformly referred to as "you" "he" "she" by the expatriate staff and who responded to my questions about the future with a sense of deferral "What do you want to do with the future now?" or a belief in kismet "There are many possible things that can happen, nothing is simply one thing. This is why one has to trust one's *naseeb* and *kismet* (destiny and fate)." But the

question of proper names and illiteracy are never far from each other, and the diminution of names raises a question about a concept of writing that comes to compensate for that loss and, one that extends to signatures and fingerprints and which makes of them singular moments of presence in atmospheres otherwise unconcerned with difference.

Getting Ass

One afternoon when I arrived at the MMS office I could immediately tell something was awry. Foreheads were wrinkled and postures were tense. The mood was dour and the managers seemed more nervous than usual. They stretched their backs in their seats and heaved sighs of frustration. The previous night a major fight had broken out at the MMS residential house in Wazir Akbar Khan. I had heard about the house from Danisa and Lereko, who told me that their white colleagues regularly excluded them from social occasions—waiting until they were in the bathroom or in their rooms before making plans in their absence and going out to dinner: “When we come downstairs everyone is gone, and we find out they were at the Golden Key (the same Chinese restaurant where I found the young boy conducting security at the door) or out drinking together. They pretend like they forget to tell us or like we were not home but we know it’s because we are black.” Lereko often echoed this sentiment. Rhys had invited me there for dinner several times, but knowing it was an exclusively male house I refrained from going. I also spoke to Jacob many times when he was living there, and understood it from his perspective as a friendly atmosphere of banter and joking, the majority of it likely at the expense of women. He went out with his colleagues almost every night it seemed. But Jacob also spoke about leaving his bedroom door open at night, so that in the event of a “Taliban attack” he would be able to escape. He had an entire escape plan figured out with Chav, the head of security whom he admired and trusted.

This kind of ambivalence extended to the mining camps, where Jacob would go for exploratory or training work, and about which he frequently made jokes to express that Afghan men were sexually intimate with each other: “Hey listen, if I am not back in two weeks, send me some hemorrhoid cream, OK?” The question of homosexuality, while outside of the purview of this chapter, was often raised during my interviews, and frequently became fodder for humor with expatriates and Afghans alike: “You never know with these guys so I’ve just started running backwards on the treadmill.” “Allah saves everything but only sleeping with your back pressed to the wall can save your ass.” “Afghanistan is the gay capital of the world,” one of the security guards at Empire once said. “These guys have a kalashnikov in one hand and a flower in their hair.” The derogation, contained to male sex, is endless:

“A man went to the dentist’s office and took off his pants. The dentist enters: ‘You idiot put your pants back on. This is not a physical exam. This is a dentist’s office! The man says: ‘I know! I know! I came so you could take the mullah’s dentures out!’”

“They say that when you arrive in Kandahar there is a sign that says: *Khosh amadeid* (Welcome). When you leave there is a sign that says: *Khoshet amad?* (Did you like that)?”

“One day an ISAF commander went to a prison in Kandahar where Afghan insurgents were being held. Instead, he found his own soldiers buck naked. ‘What the hell is going on here?’ One of the soldiers replied: ‘Sir the Afghans have escaped. Don’t worry once they see us they’ll run back!’”

The night of the fight in the MMS house dinner was served by the cook whose name nobody knew. I will call him X. All the expatriate residents saw him every evening, and despite only referring to him as “the cook,” they did seem to engage with him in banter and conversation. As everyone was eating and drinking alcohol, someone challenged him to drink—betting that he did not have the tolerance to keep up with the expatriates. It was rumored that X and a young Afghan office worker named Adam were having an affair. Adam only interacted with X in the guesthouse, and had also initiated another affair with an Afghan man named Yousuf who was one of the security guards. X eventually found out and a fight erupted with

both of Adam's lovers pulling guns out at each other. "These guys will pull out a gun out over some guy's ass! Afghans are crazy." Nobody was hurt. I don't know if this story of the affair is true or if it was used to ridicule X at the guesthouse that night. But he demurred and refused to drink initially, and then when the badgering intensified he relented and drank a copious amount. He became increasingly angry at the residents. In a fit of rage he took his chef's knife out, and put his own hand on the counter. He heaved the knife down and shockingly severed his own fingers. Panic erupted and he was immediately rushed to the hospital and his fingers were partially sutured back on. The next day at the office everyone was in shock. Everyone wanted to tell me the story of X, the cook who chopped his own fingers off: "You'll never believe what happened last night. It was so awful. What the fuck is wrong with these people?"

X's fingers are perplexing. But is it any surprise that we are confronted with severance and with the disruption of presence, a literal disruption expressed through the language of war-time fearlessness nonetheless, precisely at the juncture where the relationship between thumb prints and signatures becomes a matter of economic contingency (especially the capture of surplus value)? More specifically, that it might have occurred where the question of sexual desire became a demand for conviction and a demonstration of masculine prowess and sameness? Or that the question of conviction, rather than leading to an expression of an active presence (for example by flipping them off—which in Afghanistan is done by showing someone your thumb) instead resulted in an attempt to bring indexical iteration to a final and dexterous end?

The fascination with literacy, signatures, thumb prints, memory, and attention—with all that can fix what is otherwise the inadequacy of orality, comes during a moment when capital is in desperate search for new ground. It has precipitated a belief, as Derrida describes, that: "the

representational character of writing will be the invariant trait of all progress to come.”⁵⁵⁶ In the world of MMS and the MOMP progress is largely defined as the generation of wealth from the ground, a propagation ensured by the acquisition of literacy and an Afghan sense of presence and attention to the world. It presumes that despite the different means of expression, a continuous sphere of shared meaning enables a definitive act of self-disclosure that says: “I” (want it) in response to the possibility of a wage (which was for Aydin the same as surplus value), and hence as a form of recognition that arises from the fetishistic ghostwalking of land as a social character—one that demands rent for the value it produces. When Marx wrote about ground rent and the unholy trinity, one as varied as “lawyers’ fees, red beets and music,” he warned about the double estrangement that occurs when these confront us as independent forces and when appropriation and distribution appear like the independent generation of value and the effortless production of wealth from natural phenomena.

The question of ground, which binds that misrecognition to its natural element, becomes an intensifier. It completes the estrangement of surplus value from social relations and the coalescence of recognition and fetishistic thinking. Thus, when we find ourselves confronted with a call for the signature in contexts of production and for the thumb in those of electoral politics, the question is not the surpassing of one with the other (though Aydin and others certainly want that to see a world of signatures) but a coalescence between the hallucinatory discourse of a liberation from without and that of relations of production as features of the ground.

⁵⁵⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc.* Edited by Gerald Graff. Northwestern University Press, 1972, pg 5.

9 In The Wake of War

Exhortations

The promise of the end of war was being broadcast everywhere in Kabul by the summer of 2013. It was a crucial year and one couldn't get away from exaggerated and resounding pronouncements that the Americans were leaving soon. "It's the 2014 thing. The Americans are leaving and the world will forget about Afghanistan. You just wait and see," Najiba would often say. Local currency vendors would yell out things like: "Get your hands on dollars while we have them!" The signs of demilitarization were more conspicuous than ever before. Prices fluctuated wildly for a range of goods, and the local butchers found it more difficult to sell red meat. Over the course of the last thirteen years red meat was seldom seen in Najiba's home. Once when I tried to give her some she initially balked and looked at me with candid surprise. She raised an un-tweezed eyebrow and asked where it was from? How much did I pay for it anyway? I told her it was from a local Sufi shrine, two neighborhoods away in a much more traditional, more predictable and certainly less modern part of town, where supplicants would make offerings of goats and sheep after seeking spiritual intervention. The animals were always killed according to *halal* rules and the meat, too much for any single household, would be shared with friends and relations. "Now that's a different kind of meat," Najiba said adjusting her posture a bit, and leaning to her side. She put her prayer beads away in a small second-hand Cathay Pacific airways pouch she always wore around her neck, in order to free her hands. It was a small opening in her demeanor, a tiny moment of fission she used to intimate that she would take some home. But the problem persisted for everyone else. The price of meat had increased beyond the average person's means. Even more, the butchers could hardly be trusted. Najiba

warned that they were in the habit of mixing it all up, adding a bit of donkey meat to ground beef in order to ensure a *poundaki* (per-pound) profit. “Everything these days is *poundaki*. They’ll do anything for money, the *haram khorha* (*haram* profiteers). But this here, well this is *pure* meat,” she said.⁵⁵⁷

Local television and news stations, which provided a vast array of news and cultural propaganda, were almost exclusively focused on communicating the exigency of the US military’s proposed 2014 withdrawal. Televised political debates became increasingly heated and fragmented sources of information, from mosque sermons to mass media, cohered around one message: the end of the American presence in Afghanistan was near. In the mosques the sermons (*khutbas*) were imbued with urgency and exhortation: “This is a time for reflection. To know God, one must know oneself, and to know oneself one must not succumb to the desires of the ego. Our prophet Mohammad, peace and blessings be upon him, taught us through the example of his life that we must resist the temptations of the material world. And now we see the consequences before our very eyes. Look what greed and materialism has done to the world and to this *millat* (nation).”

Rumors and stories spread about the status of US and NATO military bases: “Do you know when the camps will close?” one shop owner asked me, worried the price of dried fruits

⁵⁵⁷ It wasn’t only the meat that bothered her. She often came home with a furrowed brow, angry and excited to have had an encounter in town on her way to my neighborhood. A young man once rolled down the window of his old white Toyota Corolla and said he’d like to take her out for a kabob. “The little *jawana marg* (one who should die young). He was mocking me!” One afternoon she got in a cab for 50 *Afghanis* (approximately \$1) and the driver piled on several more passengers afterwards, refusing to drop her off at her actual destination unless she paid him more. “All of them. The whole city. All *haram khors!*” she later exclaimed before sitting down with me to watch her favorite Turkish soap opera: *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman Ki* (Time Goes By).

and nuts would fall further. For Najiba, the question was not when—that much she knew because of the “2014 thing,” for her the pressing matter was *how* it would all transpire: “What do they do with all the things inside the camps? If I could get my hands on the medicine, I’d ask for nothing more. Well, that and a healthier husband!”⁵⁵⁸ Goods and arms were being transferred between security bases and compounds, from the Empire private security compound to the US Army Corps of Engineers residential camp, and from larger bases (where they no longer needed all of their supplies) to smaller compounds. One afternoon I went along with several of the contractors to pick up gym equipment from a large base which was consolidating. I was sending my fieldwork materials to New York and needed to use the APO postal service. We went in several “Humvees” and a truck. At one point, we had to pull over on the side of a road. There was a lot of equipment in the bed of the trunk, and a young Afghan boy ran across the street and stood by our car, mesmerized by everything he saw—by the huge heap of excess.

Inside the Green Zone talk of waste and immoderation displaced any concern with the specter of unemployment for local Afghans, or the possibility of deadly retribution for those who were now considered war-time collaborators. The identification between them was not “virgin territory” but as Primo Levi describes: “a badly plowed field, trampled and torn up.”⁵⁵⁹ For the expatriates and contractors, Kabul was not unlike Baghdad.⁵⁶⁰ And like the *Baghdadis*, *Kabulis*

⁵⁵⁸ Najiba’s husband was in his 90’s and considerably older than her. He died last year.

⁵⁵⁹ Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Vintage International. New York: 1989, pg. 48.

⁵⁶⁰ Many of the defense contractors I interviewed had either worked or fought in Iraq. Some of them, like a former US soldier named Vincent, recalled blowing up entire residential blocks. His mission in Baghdad was explicit: Clear. Hold. Build. His unit would do combat operations in Baghdad’s neighborhoods and destroy them, in order to then rebuild as part of the “hearts and minds” operation, re-engaging the local population in their reconstruction efforts. They would empower local leaders—*sheikhs* and *mukhtars*—in the process, unwittingly igniting sectarian strife. Vincent described blocks of empty

were seen as lazy and corrupt. They didn't seize the opportunities of war. They didn't labor hard enough to learn English. They stole. Amongst Afghans accusations of corruption, especially against Hamid Karzai's government and family, proliferated like wild fire: "They should hang him," one local man casually suggested. Talk of graft and theft was everywhere. Where had all the money, over \$100 billion in US developmental and military aid, more than the Marshall Plan, gone? *Kabulis* claimed Kabul hadn't transformed like they anticipated and that theirs was an experience drastically different from Europe in the aftermath of World War II. Nothing had actually changed if one *really* looked around, many claimed. All that money simply transferred hands and the roads were still unpaved.

The construction projects were abandoned half-completed and electricity was sporadic, plunging anyone without political power or wealth into darkness. Water was scarce and the insurgency was raging on. One young acquaintance, Idris, had a well (*châ*) dug on his property. Local shops in Kabul (selling vegetables, nuts, leather goods, hand-woven carpets, antiques and memorabilia from the Soviet-Afghan War) fell into disrepair and merchants sulked. They complained to anyone who would lend an ear: "*Khwarak* (little sister) look around you. Nobody is shopping. There is no activity in the marketplace because everyone is holding onto their cash. This is what we call the calm before the storm."

Distrust imbued the most intimate of relations with danger. One afternoon, Najiba brought her elderly husband, who went by Mullah Sahib, to my apartment for the day. As the day went on he became increasingly nervous about the status of his small *kânkrete* house near the Kabul International Airport (the same *beh nakhsha*, "unmapped," neighborhood that Matin and

houses they would go into to make sure Al-Qaeda insurgents weren't taking cover. In one house they found a dining table with plates and dishes of food on it. The family had fled and the food had rotted. "There was a layer of dust on it," he recalled. In comparison, things were much better in Kabul, he reassured me.

Zia live in). The longer they stayed at my *mâdern* apartment for lunch, dinner and then prayers at the mosque, he believed, the more time his daughter Sedra would have to forge some paperwork and put the family house in her name. Sedra's husband, a drinker and wild gambler—a man of ill repute and fickle ways, was physically abusive. Najiba and Mullah Sahib hated him. “May he never see a day of health and peace. May his love of money ruin him. Oh Allah! Spite him and his kin but spare my daughter and her children,” Najiba would curse. She always had a fusillade of words. We would often sit around and plot Sedra's divorce and revenge but nothing came to fruition. But this aside, Mullah Sahib's conviction was inviolable. As far as he was concerned Sedra was minutes away from stealing her parents' fortified but modest house. “What to do with him? He doesn't listen to reason!” Najiba exclaimed, “nobody steals a house in two hours.” She handed him a chilled soft drink, as if to placate a young child: “Tsk. Drink this. It's the kind you love these days.”

All over town the large serial-numbered, and rusting shipping containers were more plentiful. They indicated tare and maximum weight and although temporarily empty, signified all the goods and technology which would soon be placed in them and shipped far away back to the *khar'ij*—the foreign lands many Afghans will never see but which some dangerously aspire to reach by sea. The Pizza Hut shipping container I had volunteered in was scheduled to close within three months and the migrant and Afghan laborers were deeply worried: “What's ninety days? It goes by like this!” one worker said while snapping his fingers. The uncertainty hung in the air like an unwanted phantom. One of the Afghan workers, Sabir, who was nineteen and madly in love with a young Afghan girl who taught English at a local private school, was suicidal. Sabir was always concerned about my safety. “Memorize my number,” he once instructed, “and if anyone so much as looks at you the wrong way you call me immediately.” But

now he was much more concerned about himself: “What will I do without a job and a place to go to? Is there some way you can help me before you leave? Do you have connections? I can’t get a job in some office and be a *computer kaar* (computer worker). I don’t have the skills or experience.” Sabir was an avid fan of the American television series 24, featuring Jack Bauer the intrepid counter-terror agent. He wanted to be just like him. He wanted to train and join the National Directorate of Security. When I asked if it was so he could capture and kill Taliban or Al Qaeda insurgents (ISIS had no presence in Afghanistan at that time), or if he liked the idea of racing against the clock in order to foil a plot he said: “Not at all! I like the risk of death. If I die it’s ok because without love life is *beh mahnâ* (meaningless).”

Sabir’s father is a security guard. He worked on a separate US military base and the two were separated as much by generational perspective as they were by the protocols of militarized camps. The latter Sabir was quite happy about. Like his Indian friend and co-worker Naveen, who had come to Kabul to pay off a large debt he incurred purchasing gold for his sister’s dowry and wedding in Goa, Sabir felt he had a bit of freedom in Camp Eggers. In the shipping container he could work, talk freely with me and his colleagues and make pizza—joking around and mixing up toppings. But he was troubled. His father prohibited him from proposing to the girl on account of her knowing how to speak English, and worse, her willingness to teach it to others and disseminate a language that had, in his opinion, no dignity in Afghanistan. She was helping it spread like a disease.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁶¹ Sabir never argued with his father, despite his feelings, and instead would go to her neighborhood (Mikrorayan) and to her drab Soviet built apartment complex. He would wait to see her pass on the street and go home. She would be home around the same time, 3 PM, every day and Sabir took enormous comfort in the regularity of her routine. One afternoon he noticed a few young men noticing her as she

Outside of the base and Pizza Hut, the astronomical rents that provided many upper-class *Kabuli* home-owners with a small fortune, were now plummeting and “Villa For Rent” signs were being put up all over town. Property dealers (many of them worked out of shipping containers) started closing shop: “There’s nothing. Hardly any commission to be made these day. *Kammission-karī* (commission work) is over. Everyone is taking their money and investing in Dubai because of 2014,” the broker who found my apartment complained to me. People improvised to make a bit of extra cash. When it was obtained it was converted into dollars and put away. The maintenance man in my apartment complex, having rightly intuited that I was often fearful, regularly encouraged me to change my locks so he could charge me twenty dollars for installing a new set. It wasn’t only dollars that were sought. Obtaining a foreign visa seemed to be on everyone’s mind. Nazeer, one of the young office employees at Millenium Mining Services left for Europe, and after an arduous journey, made it safely to Germany. This was a common ambition and local television stations started to air infomercials on the dangers of human trafficking on the Mediterranean, interrupting fantasy with ominous predictions of death at sea: “You too will drown!”

First Salvos

From the very first salvos in 2001 the Afghan War effaced the boundaries that might have contained what Agamben describes not as a regression toward anachronistic cruelty but *new* forms barbarism, the “premonitory events” which are “like bloody masses, announcing the

walked by, and he claims he jumped out of nowhere and tackled them, fighting all three of them and teaching them a lesson “they’ll never forget.”

new *nomos* of the earth.”⁵⁶² The torture of Afghan detainees laid bare the fiction of national and international law. The Afghan State’s limited powers exemplified the paradox of sovereignty as foreign militaries unleashed the catastrophic force of newer and automated technologies of destruction in order to help it defeat its enemies. The establishment of sprawling military bases in densely inhabited urban spaces where bombs, land mines, and firefights already infuse the everyday with harrowing predacity, also made them the scene of a normalized state of exception. But despite this normalization an intensified sense of anxiety descended on Kabul by 2013. It was like a miasma of hopelessness and it seemed to stir everyone into a state of deep and unfettered apprehension. Fate was entirely uncertain. Living with human fallibility and with the possibility of tragedy and accident seemed to gain unusual momentum. The problem with experiencing devastation was that it had also become completely ordinary and, in its banality, made it more difficult to share or narrate one’s experiences with others for they too had similar things to say: “You tell an Afghan woman you have a headache and she will immediately tell you her kidneys are failing!” Najiba once joked. War-time violence had made it difficult to trust one’s previous experiences as much as it made it unlikely that one could solicit sympathy, or locate the cause behind a symptom. The force of something approximating specular and generalized dispossession was gaining ground.

In the neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan the sprawling “Green Zone” that gripped the imagination of many *Kabulis* as a source of fantastic economic value, as a kind of theater where war creates spectacular wealth even as it destroys value through intensive bombing and combat-related damage, was vanishing. Nothing could ameliorate the sense of betrayal except the most

⁵⁶² Agamben, Giorgio. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998, pg. 38.

conspicuous and belated display of capitalist modernity, as part of a future still to come in which the desire for consumption was guaranteed through a fantasy of domestic commodity production: “Once we have sky scrapers, industry, factories, and make our own goods, only then, will I believe this war wasn’t about plundering natural resources,” a courthouse employee named Wasim said. But the encounter with imminent change cannot be reduced to a sudden preoccupation with excess and the possibility of consumption in the purported aftermath of war, when resources are no longer contained by an economy of death and combat expenditure.

Najiba’s warning about butchers and her husband’s fear of forgery and losing his home delineate how it is that *Kabulis* know what they know, and what it is that the question of knowing has to do with a war-drive that not only commodifies linguistic difference in order to effectuate ideological suasion but, crucially, turns what is not immediately perceptible into the possibility of hidden potentiality. We have seen that the fantasy of creating economic and cultural value is crucial to the efforts of counterinsurgency. As a paradigm shift in military practice COIN relies on the cultural discourse of capturing “hearts and minds” but brutally operates through the instrumentalization of language: of words spoken, heard, and exchanged on the ground. The possibility of spectacular value was imagined alongside that goal and it fused visibility and perception into a logic of cultural & military superiority, one which came to condition a series of structural and symbolic predicaments.

In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, the fascination with capitalist and technological modernity has foregrounded an accelerated sense of cultural demise, evoking what Marilyn Ivy describes in Japan as a state where the marginal guarantees the fantasy of stasis and “the vanishing is never allowed actually to disappear, but is kept hovering, with anxiety and dread, on the edge of

absence.”⁵⁶³ But this anxiety emerges most obviously through the perceived force of logo and phonocentrism, and especially through the perversion of calculative reason (itself thought to reside exclusively with literacy) as the ground of economic value production. The early botanical and railway prospecting missions of the East India Company and the contemporary predicament of Afghan suicide bombers or laborers in a rural and exploratory gold mining camp may at first seem to be only tenuously linked as part of an overarching concern. But they demonstrate for us the operations of this artificial binary through a series of historical and ethnographic counterpoints, inside the folds where the necessity of literacy is tucked into avowals of technological modernity in conditions of imperial, industrial and late modern warfare.

I have tried to evoke a sense of anticipation and recurrence in the chapters, ranging from Mahmud Tarzī’s early twentieth century warnings about the catastrophic nature of capitalist expansion to Abdul Wali’s hesitation to submit himself to the interrogation practices of US military and CIA contractors, fearing that like other Afghans he too would be tortured to death. Transient words, a fleeting sense of safety and even earthly exhortations are bound up with the distinction between proximate and more receding causes, and with the formulation of an opposition alongside the concern with the *zahir* (exterior) and *batin* (interior) of things. That opposition was increasingly defined by the interests of Afghans on one hand, and their own self-destruction on the other—a self-destruction thought to be rooted in an ignorance of law and in excessive forms of localism which result in incestuous tendencies and even incredible

⁵⁶³ Ivy, Marilyn J. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1995, pg. 242.

vulnerability to ideological suasion, so incredible that ordinary Afghans like Salar could be inspired to turn their own bodies into bombs.

In various milieus a certain secreting of intention (presumed to be grounded in forms of irrationalism) was fantasized to be hidden in symbolic and material configurations: in colloquially enunciated words, in the failures of illiteracy, in the refusal of appropriating pronominal reference, in the telegraphic wire and Marconi wireless systems, even inside the earthen ground. In time, the distinction between catastrophe and kismet collapsed alongside the binaristic regeneration of unfettered passion as the obsolete prior of calculative rationality and capitalist modernity.⁵⁶⁴ It came to relentlessly condition perceptions of illiteracy and the distribution of war-time violence, including Abdul Wali's death by torture.

Supplementarity

The fantasy of passage from the infliction of war-time devastation and material destruction to the fetish that capitalism is an auto-generative process of value production that can shape a post-war period of Afghan prosperity through an extractive industry is no less circumscribed than the belief that the acquisition of literacy can result in literary rationality and the general exercise of reason. These are two irreducible fantasies that delineate the experience of contemporary warfare. But this doubling begins with language, and especially the perceived problem of superfluous talk and oral expression. The danger of linguistic difference and

⁵⁶⁴ For a trenchant analysis of the discursive relationship between the notion of passion and interest in shaping early capitalist ideology see: Hirschman, Albert O. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1997.

colloquial signification, transposed onto a concern with illiteracy and the divide between Kabul and the Afghan countryside, is a bifurcation that is also reinvested with the possibility of deadly revenge seeking and precarious war-time translation. Afghan translators are tasked with distinguishing between insurgents and civilians. They find themselves facing not only linguistic particularity but also its intensification as the site of a differential capacity to rationalize and understand the value of human life. In Kunar the perception of excessive talk overtook translations and turned the victims of military violence into sources of danger, sources that had to be killed and silenced. The exact moments when the words of local *Kunaris* become unbearable for US military personnel, are also the moments when *Kunaris* themselves were perceived to be superfluous, as bodies and lives that were expendable.

I argue that those moments are partially conditioned by the much earlier introduction and silencing of communication technology, a silencing that occurred around perceived moments of excess when mass-mediated voices and transmission could not be contained. These technologies (telegraphy, telephony, radio and cinema) transformed from media of access and connectivity into harbingers of dangerous proximity (from a British perspective) between Afghanistan and the European metropolis. They introduced, along with the possibility of addressing the modern world, an anticipatory perspective on the future that was inseparable from media technology's representational and corruptive capacities. With each technological transition, the status of the mass-mediated voice and later the world of cinematic images, was granted unprecedented powers. But still, Afghans newly yearned for disembodied voices and images, estranged by cultural and physical distances, but made close through the magic of the telephone receiver and cinema, and their ability to conjure the work of memory and imagination in a context where orality newly became the target of mediation, and then much later, of translational labor.

This history also helps us understand how images assume a logic of self-disclosure, pushing their representational content from the realm of the concealed to the obvious, baring it of symbolic aura and privileging it as the excrescence of reality. In the contemporary moment the notion of terroristic guilt as the intent to repeat in the *Amniyat* suicide hearings illustrates how photographic images become purveyors of a reality yet to come, and how that reality is subordinated to the perception of a future in the grip of self-destructive tendencies, tendencies which overrun a context of individualistic and judicial representation and which also shape the post-2014 (now post-2016) Afghan imaginary of its own future. In this context I argue that both guilt and repetition are attached to images as purveyors of truth, and that photographic images function as a direct mode of transmission. They prove past guilt and establish imminent violence as violence against the Afghan State. The larger problem of repetition occurs as a corollary of the fact of mechanical reproducibility, and it stages for Afghan judges a compulsive death drive alongside the receding power of linguistic exchange.

As we saw, the feverish perception of Afghan implacability doubles, in Kabul, as a discourse on Afghan mobility (and especially the purported ability of Afghans to “get into” places they are prohibited from). I argue that this is deeply implicated both in the material proliferation of land mines, and in the materialization of the logic of supplementarity, a logic which extends from the linguistic terrain to that of warfare, and becomes the site of uncontrollable proliferation in contexts overshadowed by terroristic doubt. The actual loss of limbs to land mine and improvised explosive device violence and the need for linguistic translation leads to a literal realization of a general course of action and line of reasoning. Afghan bodies (bodies like Matin’s, Timūr’s or Wahidullah’s) become supplements of American

military and private security strategy, and the site of corporeal violence serious enough to necessitate prosthetic supplementation.

The notion that an outside is the object of fascination and a threat to the inside also structures the history of the Afghan encounter with capitalist modernity, and the tumultuous intellectual and infrastructural projects that accompanied that often fraught and aspirational confrontation. The Afghan twentieth century, a long period when the blows of fate encountered the unbridled optimism of modernist hope was itself an aporetic opening, allowing for the passage of complex and irreducible contradictions. Notions of self, language, representation, value, orality, and literacy all came under a radical scrutiny that touched as much upon the earthen ground as it did the realm of causal relations, the wondrous connections that hold events and sense-making in unison, however fleetingly. Thus, by tracing a complex history of supplemental discourses pertaining to the ground and war-time strategy (both imperial and contemporary), I illustrate how notions of sense-making and causality are re-imagined alongside an incapacity to accommodate linguistic and social difference.

It is not only the binary of literacy and illiteracy that gains momentum in modern warfare and counterinsurgency. Bodies also become the locus of new forms of inclusion and expendability. The incorporation of Afghans into the dragnet of a war economy predicated on their prosthetic capacities, the availability of Afghans as human armor for their expatriate and military counterparts, also relies on the concomitant production of a sense of interiority. Militarized strategies of segregation reconfigure what it means for misfortune and devastation to occur and make sense for Afghans, as the notion of *kismet* becomes increasingly central to understandings of catastrophe.

Kabul today cannot be understood without also recognizing the importance of linguistic and written warnings, and the crucial role they play in the production of interiority. Warnings presume a division between spheres of life, a division that is inextricable from the notion of impending danger. They constitute the language of events as such. Warnings are the linguistic form that turns the possible into a function of imminence and proximity, and that gathers our attention and directs it toward the eruption of local Afghan violence or crisis. The order of spatio-urban segregation effectuated by these practices turn injury into the outcome of transgression occurring *only* in those militarized spaces that are meant to be immune. Bodily injury becomes the provenance and bad fortune of the interior, the fate of those persons who encounter the violence of a breach, who face the people who manage to “get in.” This perceptual shift not only confers visibility onto the vulnerability of those “on the inside” but also renders the manifold forms of corporeal trauma that Afghans face as ordinary war-time accidents, as the stuff of the outside (*berūn*).

This inversion is not only important because of the unresolved inclusion it results in, though collaboration is its most dramatic political effect. It is also indicative of an interaction occurring between two modes of life, and the brutal institution of two bodily orders—that of foreign life, which must be protected and extended (encouraged to perdure despite the unmitigated hazards of one of the most dangerous places on earth) and Afghan prosthetic bodies—the *form* that affirms foreign life by acting as its remedial supplement. This paradox has as its core a profound expectation, a startling banality: Afghans must be willing to die for their expatriate colleagues, willing to lay their life on the line that Timūr conjures in the idiom of the generalized value form when he speaks about his numerous experiences.

The production of economic value is itself conditioned by perceptions of linguistic incapacity (especially the inability to sign one's own name) and indexical insufficiency. The world of multi-national mining and exploration is the intensified scene where a preoccupation with excess (especially forms of material excess), the fantasized "real" and final sources of economic value and the exigency of generalized literacy transform the experience of social violence and economic speculation into bifurcated avowals of continued dispossession on one hand, and the possibility of a singular and transformative moment through which political fantasy can finally culminate in belated technological modernity and economic prosperity, on the other.

The larger question that emerges from these predicaments has to do with the nature of repetition, and whether in the wake of war it refers us to a recurrence of forms of violence that have, since the 1880s, been experienced in Afghanistan as part of a long encounter with various forms imperial warfare, or if a transformation, one which can break free from deadly perceptions of a cultural malaise grounded in forms of compulsive destruction and generalized stasis, can occur alongside the general acquisition of the written word.

I have traced how the production of a binary around literacy and illiteracy produces, even in moments of technological acquisition, the retrospective fantasy that orality is not only the prior but also the locus of unfettered subversion and ignorance of the law. This misrecognition of linguistic diversity as lack comes to inform, in contexts of unprecedented transnational war-time activity, the charge that Afghans are beholden to an excessive localism that fuels the predicaments of the Afghan State and more general errors of judgement (such as incestuous transgressions, and attempts at suicide bombing) which would destroy society altogether. The issue of vulnerability to ideological suasion emerges alongside these presuppositions. It informs

the belief that the incapacity to exercise reason (due to illiteracy) renders Afghans vulnerable to diverse forms of propaganda and the inability to distinguish between the world of appearances (both media images and the Islamic notion of the *zahir* (surface manifestation)) and reality.

But this diversity of experience and encounter illustrates that it is the logic of supplementarity that constantly betrays itself. The ideology of COIN and its necessitating of Afghan collaboration incorporated linguistic and cultural translators into a structure that then demanded of them their own willingness to become prosthetic bodies. To die if necessary. Human voices became the extensions of failed imperial propaganda efforts (the British “whispering campaign”), only to then become the site of an excess that had to be contained and silenced. The regeneration of a binary between literacy and illiteracy (and the modernist fantasy of writing embedded in it) was repeatedly traversed as part of a war in which the distribution of violence on the ground (and pertaining to the ground as a site of unrealized economic potential) was increasingly characterized through the denigration of illiteracy and the extolling of literacy as the spread of literary rationalism. All of this was meant to diminish the importance of beliefs and forms of compulsive localism. It was meant to lessen the consequence of enchantment. But as the modernist ideology and practices of material writing increasingly came to account for accident, injury and loss, so too has *kismet* become its representational and causal correlate; the belief that categorizes the accidents and catastrophes of both writing and war. More than ever, it now accounts for terrestrial things.

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