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Writing war, and the politics of poetic conversation

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ABSTRACT

This article's premise is that war is ontological devastation, which opens up questions as to how to write about it. The paper contends that even critiques of war, whether critical-geopolitical analyses of global structures or ethnographies of the everyday, center war in ways that underscore erasures of non-war life, and therefore risk participating in that same ontological devastation. Engagement with extra-academic conversational worlds, both their social lives and their intellectual ones, is ethically necessary in writing war. To that end, this article examines poetic production from one front in the US-led "Global War on Terror": Swat Valley, Pakistan. Poets in Swat have produced an analysis of war as ontological devastation, but also protest their reduction, in the minds of others and themselves, to the violence-stricken present. This intervention is not an intellectual critique alone. Focusing on a new genre of "resistance" poetry, this article shows how poets resist war by maintaining worlds partly beyond it. In this, the critical content and the social lives of poetry are inseparable.

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Introduction

From 2007 to 2009, the upland region of Swat, in what was then the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan, experienced widespread insurgency, then Taliban rule. As the paramount branch of Pakistan's fissiparous Taliban movements, the Swat Taliban's leadership negotiated a power-sharing deal with the Pakistan government in 2009. Then very soon, as this deal broke down, everyday Taliban repression was compounded by devastating Pakistan Army operations and state violence. Two and a half million people were displaced; countless lives destroyed.¹

Initially, we identified two vantage points in literature on the US-led global War on Terror: top-down and the everyday. Northwest Pakistan has been ruled as a frontier

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¹We are both scholars based in London. Salman grew up in Malakand during the conflict this essay addresses and, like many others in this highly poetry-aware society, composed poetry about it in a diary. We both noticed a disjuncture in reading about this war in academic spaces, versus how people in our experience expressed and reflected upon their experiences in Swat and its broader region. We wanted to explore how we could write about this war in a way that would address the latter experience. Poetry seemed a natural route to us. All poems in this article are translated from Pashto to English by James, in consultation with Salman. Interview excerpts have been translated from Pashto to English by Salman in consultation with James. We conducted all interviews together.

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by multiple securitized states, and academic knowledge of it has often reflected these states' self-universalizing vantage points – a more general result of academic disciplines that emerged in institutional fields tied to imperial states.² As Magnus Marsden and Ben Hopkins illustrate in their introduction to the edited volume *Beyond Swat* (2013), conflict on the frontier has frequently been seen as the normal state of an aberrant region: much literature has assumed that a default condition of civility is disrupted by the pathological character of an area that is seen by others mostly in terms of its status as a frontier problem. This critique resonates with recent work in interdisciplinary studies of war. Tarak Barkawi notes the Eurocentrism involved in the main categories that scholars in his field, war studies, have used to think about war, including the idea that war and peace are binaries and the idea that the basic unit in war is the nation-state. Instead, Barkawi sees war as a contingent manifestation of an underlying long-term dynamic, the violence of international hierarchies. He suggests replacing the “war/peace” binary with a “battle/repression” model “in which the use of force is an integral, not extraordinary, dimension of politics” in a world textured by empire.³ Complementing the material side of this, Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton note how war, in this more expansive sense of the use of force as politics, produces its own ontology that expands throughout societies – producing “relations between war, knowledge, and power” throughout society that they call “War/Truth,” in institutions and in knowledge formations alike.⁴ Global violence creates the reality in which it operates.

From a bottom-up direction, some scholars in fields such as anthropology, critical geopolitics, and development have decentered accounts of the agency of states and systems, and turned toward the “implements” of violence and the “discursive-material practices” of actors distributed throughout society.⁵ Feminist and subaltern scholars have emphasized affect, embodied knowledge, and inter-relational positions rather than individuated ones. Such work, centered on the everyday, considers geopolitical violence but highlights subaltern representations of it that researchers hope can inform metropolitan theory.⁶ In her work situated in Anbar Province, Iraq, Kali Rubaii draws on everyday interlocutors' responses to changes in the material environment. In a warscape built by counterinsurgency, even less-than-lethal violent material change destabilizes meaning via affect, making preexisting modes of life unthinkable and unlivable. Viewing counterinsurgency from the position of the population targeted for intervention, Rubaii's Anbari farmer interlocutors cannot differentiate between a positive-constructive and subtractive-destructive face to it:

For them, counterterrorism is a modus operandi that affects whole populations in the same way torture strategies may affect an individual, by distorting their world until they cannot make meaning out of anything.⁷

Both these lines of inquiry shape our own thinking in writing about the War on Terror and our intervention is additive, not polemic. Our point is that we largely have found either holistic reckoning with structures of global violence as seen by critical theorists,

²Bhambra 2014.

³Barkawi 2016.

⁴Barkawi and Brighton 2011; 127.

⁵Tillotson and Mustafa 2020.

⁶Rivas 2020; Hyndman 2019; Sharp 2011.

⁷Rubaii 2018; 6.

or carefully drawn textural views of everyday knowledge as seen by participant ethnographers. Both perspectives pay attention to long-term histories and to how war creates metaphysical reality itself, on multiple scales. Ethnographies of war also describe ways that everyday life resists this, building temporary new subaltern realities in the interstices. Furthermore, ethnographic work also generally incorporates top-down views. But what has been missing is the middle.

As we read poetry and talked to poets and others from Swat, we noticed that poetry took place in social spaces that were not top-down, nor interstitial, nor exactly subaltern. Indeed, the poetic critiques we discuss here are not dominant in Pakistan or on its frontier, but they could be called mainstream in Pashto. Larger than the everyday, poetic conversation about war in Swat and the frontier highlights society-wide connections from before and outside the 2009 war. The War on Terror has not been a rupture; it is a neoliberal-era evolution of existing colonial and Mughal state-frontier processes, and poems in Pashto (not only from Swat) written since the recent Swat conflict locate this moment within just such longer histories of repression. But Swat's contemporary poetic communities seek to exceed even this long-term war. Their poems at once describe, and exist as a product of, long-term social conversations that have resisted War/Truth all along by exceeding it in space, in remembered pasts, and in aspirations for a future informed by these worlds rather than by War/Truth.

War, we argue, is ontological destruction in service of large-scale civilizational projects: the breaking of existing local patterns of meaning to create a blank slate on which to write a new future. Ceding the frame excessively to war destruction, whether focusing on its long-term global structures or on everyday responses in the ethnographic present, reinforces the centrality of War/Truth at a time when there exist long-standing local intellectual-cultural-social formations that consciously position themselves beyond it. This opens up a moral question: might not a general transdisciplinary tendency toward either top-down or everyday views contribute, even in a small way, to that very same erasing effect of war by centering it, even in critique?

In contrast, centering middle ground critical-poetic conversations in society presents insurgency, military, neoliberal geopolitics, and even the War/Truth of counterterrorism as characters, but does not allow them to colonize the story, displacing local society as protagonist or erasing the large-scale, non-war worlds it painstakingly builds. In this article, we show that local theories of war parallel much of the above insights about ontological destruction, but also that this critique is inseparable from actively maintaining the life of a cultural formation in a militarized frontier society. Poetic critique and poetry's social organization are two parts of the same thing. We show this through a study of poems, poets, and their networks in Swat from 2005 to the present, particularly exploring the rise of a new genre of *muzāḥimatī* ("resistance") literature.⁸ This genre is inseparable from the violent present, but nonetheless is animated by, and reanimates, older conventions and life from outside War/Truth. We spoke to men and women from across greater

⁸See Qadir and Ahmed 2013; Raza 2014. We should note that we did not engage poetry that was transparently part of hegemonic or counterhegemonic projects, like poetry that was directly sponsored by liberal peacebuilding initiatives, although we do mention it here. Similarly, we did not engage the vast body of Taliban songs that also arose in this period. The reasons for this latter choice were compounded by risk and ethical considerations. On this, though, see Caron 2012; two of the sources therein are drawn from this conflict.

Swat's oral-written literary formation,⁹ including academics, cultural organizers, journalists, musicians, publishers, bookstore owners, and poets from all class backgrounds. We asked about changes in performed and written poetic styles, audiences, and wartime life.¹⁰ Our Pashto and our experience with poets, performers, publishers, audiences, and texts in what we here call the "literary formation,"¹¹ the fact that we had read, watched, or listened to (as relevant) these poets' available work beforehand, and (in Salman's case) a life in the community all helped our conversations start from shared assumptions and vocabularies.¹²

In what follows, we draw on conversations, excerpts from printed works, and descriptions of live poetry exchanges (*mushā'ire*) to build a four-way analysis of this conflict supplied by our interlocutors: linkages between material violence, affect, poetic language, and social fields. We argue that meaning-making in poetry is inextricable from rapid destruction on several fronts. The salient selfhood of Swat and the frontier has been displaced by a War on Terror-era othering that has rendered Pashtuns' self-representation newly difficult in Pakistan. More than that, though, voicelessness has been fostered by violent interventions in the material-sensory environment, which create ambiguity, displacement, and powerlessness. This violence has been physical but, as we show, Swati poets see in it a strategic destruction of meaning, destabilizing people's affective-emotional-cognitive worlds, and making any reality apart from the Pakistan Army's hegemony, or Taliban counterhegemony, hard to imagine. Swati poetry reflects upon such material/epistemic colonization as a matter of course. Like other regional trends, this literature draws a view of conflict centered on "visceral lessons of [ongoing] colonialism in the habits of mind and emotive reflexes of the postcolonial subject."¹³ We underscore that this is about more than representation. This poetry describes violence, but also pushes back to create new meaning amidst violence – new senses of how things, emotions, and concepts in the world fit together. If a loss of meaning is an active strategy of war, as our poets theorize, then the very act of speaking poetry in publics – the act of collective meaning-making – pushes back against this.

These conversations take place among actual people in a concrete society, not in an abstract conceptual world alone. We must attend to their sociological life to draw out poetry's full resistivity. Literary exchange in Swat, in hybrid oral and written spaces, builds publics that cross class, gender, and other divides. Across varied sectors of society, poetic-emotional investment in worlds beyond war generate feelings aimed at realizing not just conceptual critiques, but also feelings of solidarity, responsibility, and social service, as well as anti-hierarchy and skepticism toward power. This all has played out in the social action of networks built upon this ethos.

⁹Districts Swat, Malakand, and Lower Dir.

¹⁰This article draws on 11 of our interviews, conducted electronically due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We have reconstructed quotations from notes in most cases, due to various sensitivities. Swat remains tense. Some statements, if attributed to specific individuals, might jeopardize respondents' places in networks. Others might bring unwanted state or other political attention. If individuals spoke about themselves, however, and said we should indicate this, we have done so.

¹¹We use the term "literary formation" following Mir 2010: "those individuals who shared practices of producing, circulating, performing, and consuming ... literary texts" (6).

¹²Conducting these interviews electronically meant interviewees could calibrate how they would be seen and heard. While we as researchers were transparent about our positions and our professional interests, this medium fostered much more emotionally rich conversations across lines of gender, nationality, and other sites of belonging than either of us had experienced before when conducting interviews in person.

¹³Khanna 2020, 4.

In the second half of our essay, we examine how poetic networks have built institutions, brought together wider interests in them, and invigorated non-literary social-service organizations with such sentiments, too. This has remained so, even as anti-war poetry started getting bound up in neoliberal peacebuilding and counterinsurgency. As we demonstrate, poetic networks have engaged national and global development institutions tied to such programs but have resisted co-optation even when using peacebuilding initiatives to expand. This is another way that poetry creates alternate worlds.

Part I: Poetic visions of devastation

In this section, we present poetry that explores how material violence of war is inseparable for residents in war zones from a destruction of reality. Poets problematize this destruction and, in so doing, fight against it by unmasking it, thus reducing some of its impact, and by preserving landscapes of images from outside war, even amidst the devastation. What follows is kaleidoscopic more than linear, but two trends recur throughout: poets point to ontological devastation, and they seek to preserve life-potential and to create meaning larger than War/Truth.

Amjad Shahzad: Displacement as cultural loss

Beginning in 2002, in the wake of George W. Bush's proclamation that in the War on Terror, all members of the world community were either "with us or with the terrorists,"¹⁴ Pakistan's military chose the former path. President/General Musharraf outlined a policy officially called "Enlightened Moderation," with US encouragement. Enlightened Moderation combined economic and cultural liberalism with politically-neutral Islam, and aimed to subjectify Pakistanis as rational, moderate, and individual citizen-subjects.¹⁵ The government extended unprecedented freedoms to civil society activists and formerly-repressed provincial parties, so long as they avoided questioning the military's political-economic supremacy, or the increasingly violent war in Pakistan's north-western borderlands. At the same time, anecdotally in both authors' everyday conversations from 2005 onward, was a widespread feeling in the region that the state also actively promoted conservative Islamic groups in those borderlands. The sense was that the state did so to foster zero-sum competition between Pashtun nationalist tendencies and pan-Islamic (potentially pro-center) sentiment, and to manage conservative elements in the province. Finally, the existence of the figure of "extremist" or "terrorist" as internal enemy helped in conjuring an image of the military as "enlightened" for both domestic and international consumption.

From a Pashtun nationalist view, both the central authoritarian state and pan-Islamists were hegemony-seeking imports to the region which conspired to devastate local histories. These themes appear especially strongly in the following poem written by Amjad Shahzad in 2012:

Our houses, *hujras*, mosques burned; our libraries were ruined
When war was announced from Lahore's minarets

¹⁴G. W. Bush. Address to a Joint Session of Congress. Sept. 20, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>. Accessed 12/30/2021

¹⁵Naqvi 2011.

The clang of Khushhal's sword has left Pashtun ears
 Amidst Jalandhari's songs, they forgot those lessons of honor.
 How many bodies will I weep for; or martyrs will I count?
 O you who care about the nation, O leaders safeguarding our heads?
 This will require resolve, a reckoning must come
 We'll draw a line in the sand, and say this categorically
 I won't carry the corpses of a failed state on my shoulders
 I won't offer any more martyrs to that green flag
 Whether Boots or Turbans, let all hear my words
 I'll neither fear nor flee these honorless armies
 There's no other solution; the one path is liberty
 We must walk the path of unity, but always for liberty ¹⁶

Amjad composed this poem after Bashir Bilour – a Member of Parliament for the Pashtun-nationalist, secularist, and center-left Awami National Party (ANP) – was assassinated by a suicide bomber in Peshawar, the capital of the former NWFP, of which Swat is part. Amjad read this poem at Bilour's wake.

A musician and poet, Amjad is among the region's most prominent entrepreneurs of arts education. He runs school-based programs for youth, and trains adult musicians and poets. Like many poets who choose Pashto as their medium, Amjad appreciates many ANP positions even if he is not a party member: Pashtun identity, anti-authoritarianism, executive and legislative decentralization, secularism, and liberal democracy. These concepts inform his poem's agonized defiance, as Amjad uses "boots" and "turbans" as metonyms for forces warring in Swat. In describing the announcement of war as coming from "Lahore's minarets," both militarized state power and militarized religious reform become alien impositions from Pakistan's metropole, and intimately connect parts of one phenomenon: destruction of local history and society. Amjad also calls attention to the physical landscape and how it is connected to intangibles, such as how the destruction of libraries destroys local self-knowledge. Destroying mosques and *hujras* (sitting rooms that function as public discussion forums in Pashtun society) breaks public space where local collective conversation thrives. On the Pashtun frontier, increasingly defined as a warscape, the military's message is material destruction and erasure of existing modes of speech. The only speech available, says Amjad, is refusal.

Refusal alone, though, only cedes ground to War/Truth. Hence the specific form of this protest. Amjad invokes Hafeez Jalandhari, the Urdu-language poet of Pakistan's national anthem, often accused of sycophancy toward Pakistan's 1960s military ruler Ayub Khan. Amjad juxtaposes Jalandhari with Khushhal Khan, the seventeenth-century Pashtun polymath whose poetic condemnations of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb are remembered as vividly as his anti-Mughal armed skirmishes, but whose Pashto-specific forms of knowledge are also a touchstone for Pashtun historians at odds with Pakistan's official state narrative. Amjad therefore highlights destruction of the past and its forms of life, but in doing so, recalls that same past in both intangible (poetic) and tangible (*hujra*) modes, resurrecting them in the collective imagination.

Didar Tahir: Displacement, and structures of devastation

Poets with less involvement in elite circles voice some of these same concerns, though their systemic perspectives are less embedded in the formal political field. Rather, they

¹⁶Recited in interview, July 31; 2020.

often focus on structures that enable ontological devastation and on that devastation itself. Didar Tahir is a retired schoolteacher from Batkhela, a medium-sized market town. He participates in local literary circles organized around informal meetups. Unlike Amjad, Tahir's concern is not ethnonationalism, though Tahir expresses just as much a feeling of responsibility to Pashtun society in conversation. Rather, this poem, from his 2010 collection, is about empire:

This era has no Nimruds, this era has no Pharaohs
 This era has no Hishams, this era has no Hamans
 No Alexander and no Darius, no Yazid and no Shimar
 In this era there's no Bakhtzaman, no murderous Hulegu Khan
 Still, red fires burn everywhere, burning red coals rain down
 Oppression, violence, tumult, rivers of red blood flow in every direction
 These subcontractors of peace are snakes hiding in our sleeves
 These doctors, saying they'll cure any patient Are traders in heads
 War-chief and manager, both at once: That's the sort who rules this world ¹⁷

Drawing a lineage of autocrats from antiquity to the Mongols, Tahir breaks off; in the modern world violence abounds, but one cannot pinpoint individual folk-demons. Instead, one must look at systems. As Tahir explained to us in interview, "contractors of peace" refers to the US, and its pressure on Pakistan's military-state.¹⁸ The commonplace Pashto epithet *da dunyā ŧekedār* ("the world's subcontractor") avers that the US government, directly or outsourced, arrogates to itself a role of peacebuilding on behalf of peoples worldwide, but enforces solutions that actually fuel violence. Neoliberal structures reproduce fractally, as Faisal Devji argued in a 2009 article for *The Guardian*:

The Army ... is a corporation that owns vast tracts of land, industries, and commercial enterprises, of which the military forms only a part ... For their part, the Pakistani Taliban and other militant groups no longer speak the language of Islamic revolution or an Islamic state ... Instead they behave like private companies or NGOs, claiming to provide good governance or ethical lifestyles in areas that have been taken over from the state and transformed into militant versions of the model communities and special economic zones that also proliferate ... ¹⁹

Having attended to structure, Tahir flips the view in his book's next poem toward local affective change:

Our rose-garden has become a Land of Thorns, our date orchard's become a desert
 Our peace, our abode of tranquility has gone, like Iraq and Afghanistan
 The Jamī'a Ḥafṣa school became a killing ground; our Red Mosque, a graveyard
 Every primary school of ours, Damadola; every city, Waziristan
 Everywhere, bombs, cannon, and rifles; every public square, gunpowder-stan
 If the rifle is our Raja, our country's become Rajasthan
 We're all each other's enemies; our village lanes and homes are now Rebel-stan
 Where do we go; where do we hide? Even our duvet's now a Deathistan
 Our Swat, more beautiful than Paradise's garden: became a graveyard for flowers
 What name should I coin for it, Tahir? This whole land is a Land of Death-Throes ²⁰

¹⁷Tahir 2010, 4.

¹⁸Interview, August 14; 2020.

¹⁹Devji 2009

²⁰Tahir 2010, 5.

While the War on Terror had long affected the Pashtun borderlands, the Army's July 2007 siege of the Red Mosque in the national capital, Islamabad, marked the point when Pakistan's national media first paid attention to the human pain in that War on Terror.²¹ Tahir moves from his own space to the global War on Terror, down to the national-scale Red Mosque, then back to a local, intimate geography of traumas, as out-sourced state violence in a neoliberal era sparks local violence. Finally, he mentions Swat. In the hundreds of poems we have read and listened to, this is one of a very few that specifically names events and localities. This is part of his point. He describes the destruction of place and a rendering of home as alien and painful. But at the same time, he preserves a prior Swat by mentioning its name, against all the new identities this dystopian war-scape has taken on.

Neelum Arzu and the breakdown of meaning in a war-scape

Neelum Arzu's poems are yet more self-reflective in exploring society-wide change on the level of cognition and emotion. They focus on subjectification and affect, linking physical violence to psycho-cognitive trauma. In an interview, Arzu linked this to her perspective as a young woman who observes strict physical gender segregation (*parda*), but one whose family is supportive of her intellectual life and her career as a women's college chemistry lecturer.²² For her, the constrained immediacy of *parda*, juxtaposed against her interactions (via her profession) with life outside, is what leads her to link everyday violence to larger patterns. In the following poem, Arzu describes war violence as an abusive marriage, to draw out multifarious connections between both. She contrasts the confused "blackness" of violence with the "red" of her interiority. The cosmetic beauty-mark, a common romantic symbol in Pashto literature, is replaced with blood:

I reside in your love's blackness; that's why I beauty-mark myself with red
 I reside in darkness's oppression; that's why I beauty-mark myself with red ...
 In pitch-blackness, black surroundings, what value can a black beauty-spot have?
 I reside in my suffering's heat; that's why I beauty-mark myself with red ...
 This separation from sensation is a white burial shroud of hopes
 I reside in a living grave; that's why I beauty-mark myself with red
 This art, with its lacerated tongue, gives voice to Arzu's desire
 I reside in lamentation's fire; that's why I beauty-mark myself with red ²³

Arzu explained to us that the darkness of war, a deprivation of any meaningful sense in the world, parallels the restricted experience that many women must adapt to around the age of 15, and linked this restriction to limits on how far women can imagine the world. Drawing her connections out, both military and Taliban violence (like the violence of some families) rendered existing chains of meaning in the world unavailable. Even more, Arzu describes a loss not only of meaning but of any recognizable feeling. Attention given to a population by a military organization, for instance, may be care of a sort,

²¹This refers to the Army's siege on the Red Mosque/Jāmi'a Ḥafṣa compound in Islamabad, amidst accusations that weapons were being stockpiled in the men's and women's *madrasas* located in the compound (just opposite the military's intelligence headquarters). This was the first time that army violence played out in real-time in national media, and its location not on the frontier but in the capital led to a newfound skepticism about the War on Terror among Pakistan's metropolitan citizens.

²²August 11; 2020.

²³Arzu 2018, 69.

and Pakistan's military made these connections itself: one of its 2010 anti-Taliban campaigns was titled Operation *Khawab ba de Sham* ("You will come to love me"). Of course this is care in a violent, dominating, unrecognizable form. In a transformed reality, responses to care from before (a marriage, a war) no longer fit with what one feels. All is dark obscurity. Emotions no longer make sense. Bodily-affective symbols like the blood scar, replacing a traditional tattooed beauty-spot, are the last echoes of a past so horrifically transformed as to be inaccessible.

Take a moment before moving on to the following poem. In this one, Arzu looks outward, linking emotional devastation to the conflict's legacy of fracturing society – exacerbating and giving new significance to disparities of class, region, gender, and political access. This is again so destructive that it results in the loss of capacity to find any connection, or even meaning, in an alien new world:

If the world smiles, let it; there's no ban on that
 As for me, I cry; I have no home or burial shroud
 I see the gold threads across your velvet finery
 My clothes are patched; there's no embroidery on my hem
 In this thief's beard I see not one hay straw, but a bundle
 But unfortunately, there's no effect in saying so
 O my land, what flowers would your flamed earth sprout?
 There's not one piece of your body without gunpowder on it
 These ones in white clothes go about performing uprightness like falcons
 While there's not one wispy thread of nobility on their bodies
 My spirit's left my soul; I just drag my wounded heart around
 Smiles confront me everywhere; that's why I have no home
 Arzu, I'll keep the bird of poetic-images²⁴ locked up at home
 For now, let's not write songs; there's no garden here.²⁵

In conversation with us, Arzu carefully bracketed this poem as general commentary. Still, it conjures specific images, especially of rank-and-file Taliban. Consisting of local youths disaffected during the pre-war era, "Falcon Forces" began as insurgent cells during initial Taliban mobilizations in 2007.²⁶ When Taliban rule in the region began in 2009, these groups were deployed as morality squads, and their authority to search homes served as pretext for plunder of all sorts – displacing feelings of domestic security, robbing houses of any sense of home. Arzu also said she composed this poem when refugee displacements were highest. The fusion of these two displacements is startling: the predatory gaze of militant youth blend into mainstream Pakistan's distant empty smiles toward refugees. Together, they hollow out the pre-existing selfhood of the population, and recast Swatis – even to themselves – as powerless, even faceless.

In her poem, Arzu tells us that life has become so hostile to previous senses of reality that imagination itself is precluded, as Swatis' individual and collective prior experiences are no longer relevant. The "bird of poetic-images" – creative thinking-feeling – flees from body to soul to thought, and ultimately is locked up, isolated. The place for this bird is a conventionalized Indo-Persian landscape of sublime garden imagery, one that emerged in the poetic conversations of an older world that had the capacity to generate

²⁴Poetic-images: *khayal*.

²⁵Arzu 2018; 68.

²⁶Majeed 2016, 73. See also various contributions in Marsden and Hopkins 2013 on the roots of Taliban social history in Swat and elsewhere in Pakistan.

continuous new thoughts about the world through reflections on these images. Both that image-world and its companion social world are now gone.

How is poetic thinking resistance?

Though she is particularly incisive in drawing links between violence, affect, cognition, and destruction of reality itself, Arzu was far from the only one making these points. The following excerpts are from an interview with an influential non-poet figure in the literary formation:²⁷

[Poets] vocalize the war's emotional impact on Swati society and Pashtuns generally. They express disgust, distrust, helplessness, exploitation, anger. These feelings come from practical life, our surroundings.

For instance, during the curfews, the army occupied numerous schools to use as bases, and utterly destroyed them and their libraries. One felt the army was maybe the bigger enemy of knowledge [than the Taliban]. Or, one morning, I saw a Frontier Corps soldier's head hanging from an electric pole and his body on the ground below. The Taliban pinned a message on, threatening violence if he was removed before eleven am. And army personnel carriers surrounded this, guarding, waiting for eleven am! Whose side was who on? Both sights generated visceral terror, long-lasting trauma, and distrust in the army's motives. This is how the Taliban spread their message in the public mind. Not words; images. But leaving the body there exhibits to the world how deadly the conflict is and justifies the army's actions too. Both sides wanted the media to see. Both used ambiguous material things like this against us, too.

An army officer claimed it was impossible to close the Taliban's FM radio station [which they used for broadcasting decrees and demands, as well as individualized threats against enemies]. So, they lacked the technology to jam low-frequency radio, when any technician in Swat could do it? This is how our whole environment was anxiety, trauma, distrust, alienation. Apart from what the radio said, it was just there, invading daily life, and the army left it on. Things like this got people suspecting that the army and Taliban were on one page, united in conspiracy against the local people.

There would be gunfire and shelling all night, and come morning, it was innocent people who were dead, not Taliban like we expected. As bodies piled up, we felt exploited, and more and more uncertain as to what was what. You have strategic objectives, but you could inform people beforehand. Why sacrifice ordinary people to keep everyone in the dark?²⁸

This insight, that material violence communicates its own non-meaning and erases other meaning, is striking in the way that it mirrors Rubaii's vision of war as described in the introduction. Earlier ecologies of signification and feeling were rendered unfamiliar by violent new surroundings, fostering feelings of anxious confusion – of being in the dark – that this interviewee relates. And this interviewee also concretizes the idea that the violent fog of confusion can be deliberate. This mirrors work on military intervention elsewhere in Pakistan.²⁹ It is a way to paralyze resistance and it aims to create a situation in which the military or Taliban's preferred futures are the only ones, if any, that are imaginable.³⁰

²⁷This interviewee, who lived in Swat's center of Mingora during the war, requested anonymity for reasons of sensitivity, but also requested that this excerpt from our interview be printed.

²⁸Interview, Anonymous, July 25, 2020.

²⁹Ahmad (2019) calls this phenomenon a "technology of destruction" that atomizes the present and severs it from previous subjective histories and geographies, rendering any existing sense of causality unintelligible.

³⁰This is similar to what Kusha Sefat notes in his work on language, materiality, and the person/rule of Khomeini in revolutionary Iran. See Sefat 2020.

Much poetry written since 2007 has been preoccupied with heavily concrete images, reflecting a proliferation in material life of violent objects like corpses, boots, gunpowder, rifles, bullets, bombs, fire, thorns, and chains. Poets use these images to build a dystopic, superficially senseless image-landscape. This is often juxtaposed against a pre-war Indo-Persian image-landscape of gardens, birds, and trees, at a time when meanings were stable, the same landscape that Arzu invokes as absent. In interviews, poet after poet claimed that their new poetic symbol-set, and the emergent *muzāḥimat* genre it defines, was necessitated by the wholesale society-wide transformations in emotion that have resulted from traumatic changes in material-social relationships during war. All noted a destruction of previous life-worlds, and of the ability to even create meaning in this new one. Arzu, again, sums up this loss in the following poem:

What a lovely time it was; poets used to write songs
 There was none of this stench; thoughts would write the morning breeze
 Today, my faculty of image-creation is sacrificed on the pyres all around³¹
 Pens are no help in writing when every hand is trembling ...³²

But Arzu's pen and hand *are* writing these couplets. And even if they are doing something new, it is not entirely new. Indo-Persianate *ghazals*, the most widespread and prestigious genre in contemporary Pashto literature, rely on concrete figures relating to and constituting each other in a landscape, stereotypically a garden of birds, flowers, trees, and the morning breeze. As poets over centuries created new permutations of how these figures' interrelationships play out, chains of meaning emerged as culturally embedded ways of understanding how the world works.³³ In contemporary poetry, this millennium-old garden-scape often appears only to be destroyed and replaced by an apocalypse. But this new external landscape is in turn subjected to the same conventionalized rules of poetic meaning-making applied to the garden, even as the birds and trees are replaced by new violent objects. In so doing, poets make sense of life. Even meaninglessness itself is encapsulated as a poetic object that can be grasped and politically analyzed: defusing that particular war weapon by positioning the poetic vantage point, in its capacity to make meaning, beyond and above the destruction. Finally, in mentioning a garden lost, do not Tahir and Arzu remind their audiences and themselves of this? Even as it turns into a supplement to a violent new normal, keeping the garden alive in memory allows one to hold on to extra-war patterns of conversation, collective feeling, and metaphysical reality. All this provides ground to stand on, amidst the destruction.

Part II: Poetry's social lives: how affects and institutions together resist war/truth

All this is not only a phenomenon in the imaginal world. The preservation of an imaginal garden-scape and an active, conscious resignification of the exterior world are organic to a corresponding rise in social-activist sentiment. Interviewee after interviewee narrated desires to "be useful," and to "do something." Hence the label *muzāḥimat* for this

³¹The "faculty of image-creation" (*takhayyul*) is the level of cognition that relies on a creative recombination of concrete sensory-based mental images, rather than a discursive processing of abstract concepts. See Key 2018; Rahman 2012.

³²Arzu 2018; 60.

³³See Pritchett 1994.

genre: “resistance,” derived from the affect-heavy word *zahmat*, “exertion; effort.” The interview that we excerpted above began with a question about the ways in which the conflict had affected poetic culture, and this was the interviewee’s response:

The conflict generated a power to act. It generated a new genre of resistance (*muzāḥimatī*) poetry against war, terrorism, and the ongoing countrywide treatment of Pashtuns, and this replaced the earlier romantic trend as predominant in Swati poetry. The organization of region-wide *aman mushā’ire* [peace-themed poetry slams] and the proliferation of poets’ associations are features of Swat’s landscape, post-conflict. Such *mushā’ire* are not restricted to a particular school of thought, and people from all walks of life participate. In these *mushā’ire*, poets vocalize the war’s emotional impact on Swati society and Pashtuns generally. They express feelings like hatred, distrust, helplessness, exploitation, and anger. These feelings come from practical life, they come from our physical surroundings.³⁴

As poets processed their feelings from the material world, reflected on them, and worked them into new meanings, they recognized they were building tools that could help others examine their own new experience to interrogate this physical dystopia’s deeper structures, and to realize alternatives. But poetry does not exist independently of its networks, and we cannot build an account on transparent readings of poetry separate from their socio-political lives. Poets do not restrict themselves so, as the above quote illustrates. Pashto poetry emerges within geopolitical interplays of affect, discourse, and institutions, and in so doing aims to reshape them.

Anti-war poetry can go in many directions. Individual poetic exploration of war might emphasize subjectivity and trauma at the expense of attention to structures that generate violence. Of course, this contention is difficult to sustain in the cases of Arzu, Tahir, and Amjad, but it is the case with a range of other works we heard, particularly at poetic-musical performances. In these cases, we identified some cooption of anti-war poetry to larger projects, particularly army-led efforts at liberal peacebuilding, in league with transnational organizations. Nonetheless, this was not the case with much *muzāḥimatī* poetry, even that which could be seen as apolitical. Its social context prevented such a reading.

From local activism to liberal peacebuilding

Interviewees described how the war initially dispersed poets and curfews dampened vibrant literary associations. Much as Zarin Anzor described Pashto literary circles amidst the earlier Afghan-Soviet war, these organizations devolved into a plethora of small, informal circles, each developing idiosyncratic conversations and symbolic vocabularies.³⁵ But this also led to re-combinations. For instance, Akbar Siyal usually gathered a circle of around two dozen poets from greater Swat at his Islamabad residence. In his poetry Siyal tends to emphasize individualized lyrics re-inflected with the trauma and confusion other poets note, but he also devotes attention to longer trends engulfing the entire borderland region. As early as 2000, Siyal (among a few others) popularized poetic attention to the Afghan war’s fallout, with his collection *Pa Jang de Or Olaḡī* (“Let War Itself be Burned”) In his 2009 collection, *Zamūṅ pa Kilī kxe Fasād ma Joṛawa* (“Don’t Spread Discord in our Village”) he interrogates both trauma and historical structural violence

³⁴Interview, Anonymous, July 25; 2020.

³⁵Anzor 1993.

while lamenting the atomization of alternative visions. This formerly individual set of pre-occupations was adopted more broadly as the *muzāḥimat* genre rose.

Poetic cross-fertilization amidst the new Swat crisis linked multiple Pashtun space-times together. Phrased in Indo-Persianate *ghazal* registers, many poets articulated pre-war worlds, as noted above (as well as what Taimoor Shahid calls “precapitalist” ones).³⁶ Though he was based outside Swat, Siyal’s circle had cross-cutting links with a range of others located there. Poets from one circle attended others’ events, in social practices that also built on precapitalist processes. Amjad, for instance, said he attended many *mushā‘ire* not for professional reasons, but to fulfill what he called *adabī gham-xādī*, a literary version of the webs of solidarity and reciprocity forged in social networks as people from different families, villages, and even regions physically attend to each other in moments of sorrow and celebration.³⁷ Others said that amidst the army curfews, these networks fulfilled a basic need for sociability itself. Literary exchange was at once a social-bonding activity and a way to talk about pain.

As the War on Terror progressed, even informal poetic networks did not go unnoticed. Additionally, some networks were already more institutionalized than others, and state actors and international donors sought to co-opt these into liberal peacebuilding initiatives.

By 2010, the Pakistan Army had dismantled the Taliban in Swat. The situation remained tense, but still, attempts at revitalizing Pashtun arts and culture in non-political “cultural heritage” modes, were afoot. The center-left, secularist ANP had won the 2008 provincial election, replacing an Islamist party coalition. Pashto heritage enthusiasts in the UK diaspora, including a Conservative Party MP, raised funds for an event that persuaded the new provincial government to reopen Nishtar Hall – Peshawar’s largest performing arts venue – after it had been closed for eight years by the previous government for “promoting vulgarity.” This inaugural event intersected with a two-year project called “Protection, Preservation and Revival of Local Culture, Arts and Heritage” that an ANP-linked body, the Baacha Khan Trust Educational Foundation, had created with funding from the Norwegian Embassy. This encompassed visual and performing arts, poetry, handicrafts, and village festivals. Part of the remit was to create vibrant, non-political public connectivities on the frontier to help fill a vacuum of sociability that was presumed to have enabled the rise of militancy.³⁸ This too, aimed at social re-engineering of an assumed empty space, a liberal form of War/Truth.

Networks of Swat-based activists like Usman Ulasayar and Amjad Shahzad had been holding similar events privately, despite Taliban reprisals. Unlike some others, Ulasayar and Amjad’s networks had even mobilized resources to train musicians and poets. Around the time the Nishtar Hall inauguration was being planned, Ulasayar and others planned a major public event in Swat, but the army vetoed this just before it happened, ostensibly for security reasons (more likely, our interviewees suspected, in fear that some performers might speak subversively). So, their event was moved to Peshawar under provincial civilian-government sponsorship and combined with province-wide performers with Norwegian funding. This thus subsumed the Swati networks’ event into the

³⁶See Shahid 2013.

³⁷On *gham-xādī* in Swat see Grima 1992.

³⁸Press release, BKTEF, November 30; 2010.

globalized Nishtar Hall inauguration project. Broadcast province-wide on FM radio, the combined event was reframed by the emcees both as a non-political celebration of Pashtun culture and a special tribute to Swat and its trauma. All this indexes how Swat-based networks' power-to-act³⁹ began adapting to various external forces, and then began exerting productive new liberal hegemony over mass cultural production in the Pashto-sphere.

Liberal peacebuilding: institutions

Underneath layers of this depoliticized celebration of Pashtun culture, involvement by *muzāḥimatī* (resistance) poets and singers from Swat gave this Nishtar Hall event undercurrents of protest. Nonetheless, the mostly depoliticized nature of this event emerged from a new cultivation of Pakistani civil society under President/General Musharraf. Thousands of local organizations formed, nationwide.⁴⁰ Some campaigned on specific political issues that fit with moderation generally. Others provided goods, services, and technical solutions to social problems, outside the domain of politics or the state. While this upswelling of NGO activity occurred mainly in the urban centers of Punjab and Karachi, it also encouraged and, through institutional links, fostered the emergence of a strategic action field⁴¹ in the NWFP, including Swat, with funding from newly available national and international sources. The Nishtar Hall event, and Ulasyar's and Amjad's careers, came to be tied to this field, even if not fully determined by it.

In our interviews, Ulasyar emerged as a paramount cultural-heritage entrepreneur of Swat. In 1989, he and his college classmates established the Swat Art and Culture Association for the "intellectual and artistic development of poet, writer, and musician friends," holding *mushā'ire* that attracted some of Swat's most prominent poets.⁴² Activities were financed by members, but as they graduated and moved on, Ulasyar formalized the organization. Renamed the Suvastu Art and Culture Association, he registered it under the Societies Act, branched out, and made links through the 1990s and 2000s with other civil society activists. Particularly important has been Khpal Kor Foundation (KKF), an orphanage, educational, and social welfare group on whose board Ulasyar serves. KKF in turn partnered with UNICEF and the AkzoNobel Foundation⁴³ to build institutional capacity. Ulasyar organized several Suvastu *mushā'ire* in KKF's hall during the 1990s and 2000s. These attracted sizeable audiences of intellectuals as well as influential people from business and social development sectors.

In 2010, under the umbrella of an international project,⁴⁴ Suvastu was commissioned to work with poets and writers while Amjad Shahzad was brought on to work with musicians who performed poetry and folklore. Amjad and his family had already established a small organization, Da Hunar Kor, which held local '*aman* (peace) *mushā'ire*' – poetic-musical gatherings specifically designed to frame the ongoing situation. This was part of a larger trend of similar activities organized by local associations. When the project took

³⁹Kashwan, Maclean, and García-López 2018.

⁴⁰Naviwala 2010.

⁴¹Kluttz and Fligstein 2016.

⁴²Ulasyar, interview, July 30, 2020.

⁴³AkzoNobel Foundation was a corporate social responsibility body attached to Imperial Chemicals Industries Ltd. (Pakistan) from 2008 to 2012, the time during which ICI Pakistan was a subsidiary of the multinational AkzoNobel Corporation.

⁴⁴None of those who participated in this effort would name the project or its donors.

off, Amjad's small organization gained a much larger institutional capacity that could encompass the entire frontier. In an interview he recalled:

We set the project's direction. We thought to activate all the poets of all the tribal regions: Mohmand, Waziristan, Bajaur, etc. We acquired a list of poets, and registered literary associations with the project. We gave them representation, and funds for conducting activities. We also centrally organized two or three events in Peshawar every month – *mushā'ire*, music – and invited poets from all over. We wanted people from different districts to develop interactions with each other. In those events, we selected poems suitable for musical performance [and matched them to singers]. We wanted to give a chance to established musicians who'd fallen from visibility [in such difficult times]. We facilitated them financially and recorded that poetry, from the monthly events, in their voices. Second, we tried to give opportunities to new singers. For that, we conducted auditions in each district.⁴⁵

Eventually, they produced 90 recordings which were broadcast province-wide on commercial FM radio, the widest possible venue at the time. External patronage meant that most of these recordings were politically safe and emphasized beauty, entertainment, and the return of “springtime” to the “garden” of Swat. This in turn influenced public poetry more broadly. The majority of these songs lamented war generally without much analysis, simply asking listeners as individuals not to choose violence while remaining mute about the structures generating it. This liberal way of speaking also heavily textured *aman melas* (peace celebrations), including ones organized at camps to mark the return of refugees. Both state and global institutions attempted to assimilate local critiques, and both the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Provincial Relief, Rehabilitation, and Settlement Authority (PaRRSA) sponsored high-profile events of this sort, often with Army support, over the next years.

Liberal peacebuilding: hearts and minds

The depoliticization of even sharply political poets' activities cannot be explained by sponsors' influence and expectations alone. Nor can this be explained by government demands or repression, though these played roles. Instead, one must relate this to the way that even critical actors in the literary ecosystem negotiate a warscape in which “hearts and minds” are a primary arena of conflict, and the way in which actors internalized transnational and state cultural politics. Musharraf's national-cultural program of Enlightened Moderation, disseminated by a variety of corporate and NGO interests, “orchestrate[d] meanings and practices of identity, mark[ed] bodies, and condition[ed] political subjectivities.”⁴⁶ Elites and members of the middle class in metropolitan centers of Punjab, Sindh, and the NWFP could contrast their own forward-thinking, moderate subjectivities with ethnic stereotypes of “Talibanization” on the frontier, stereotypes that legitimated state violence.⁴⁷ And poetry – its affective performance in music, its rich yet fluid fields of signification – lent itself especially well to this. In songs that focus only on trauma and not structures, symbols like turbans (equated with obscurantism and extremism) can displace blame for violence onto stereotyped individuals' dispositions, rather than structural factors.

⁴⁵July 31; 2020.

⁴⁶Naqvi 2011; 116.

⁴⁷Mustafa, Anwar, and Sawas 2019.

Finally, this affective regime also produces commodities of virtue, allowing audiences to counter-define themselves by performing and internalizing opposition to these fictive character-types. In Swat, a specific performative selfhood was evident, both in remarks at older *mushā'ire* and in our conversations with elite poets: the phrase *da sho'ūr aw aḥsās khāwindān*, “men of perception and sensitivity,” arose again and again. In some of those conversations, this self-image contrasted with images of both militarist and religious extremists. In the process, the act of adopting this self-image also served to negatively formulate something like a notion of “the unenlightened masses” at large, whose subjectivities have not been formed within liberal binaries.

Muzāḥimat as criticality and subversion within hegemonic spaces

Even amidst all the above, we did not find a totalizing hegemony in these networks. While liberal projects have affected them, they are also shaped by the activist impulse that the conflict created. *Muzāḥimat* came to be an adoptable, even virtuous, attribute of perception and sensitivity, and subverted elitist elements in it. At times, performative *muzāḥimat* can be depoliticized. Other times, it performs liberal-ethnonationalist politics that questions disconnections between the ideals of liberalism and the realities of empire, as seen from the state's hinterland. In such cases it opposes military authoritarianism (as seen in Amjad's poem, above). But equally often, it calls for collective revolution against any and all psychosocial, political, and economic structures of oppression. This is particularly true of work by poets like Tahir and Arzu. When we asked Arzu how she responds to the label of *inqilābī* (“revolutionary”) that fans have given her, she agreed that it spoke to a certain reality.⁴⁸ All this pulls on the subject-position of poets within the literary formation as a whole.

The majority of Pashto poets, including some of the most influential ones, maintain relatively modest day jobs as, for example, tailors or schoolteachers. Highly-politicized *muzāḥimat* actually received a boost from the overall growth of institutional activity related to peacebuilding. In 2008, a small peace *mushā'ira* held by the Socha Likwal association included the usually comedic Sajid Afghan reciting a poem that outlined structural factors in militancy, ranging from inequality to repression, and directly countered liberal ideas that violence results from individuals' backwardness, or that education and books are the most important solution. By 2014, *muzāḥimatī* cross-currents were able to take over even the major officially sponsored events. At a 2014 peace *mushā'ira* held by PaRRSA in Swat's stately Wadudia Hall, veteran poet Abasin Yousufzai publicly debuted his poem *Ihtijāj* (“Protest”). He berated listeners for not protesting attacks on funerals, weddings, *jirgas*, mosques, and *hujras*, for not voicing truth despite seeing it, for not combatting antagonism, and for not fulfilling Pashtun ethics. At first, Yousufzai seemed like he wanted to single out extremist thinking and society's failure to condemn it, in keeping with liberal ideas of violence. Using a call-and-response technique, he then recited a litany of traumas, asking each time, “And did you protest?” As choruses of “No!” drowned out his heavily amplified voice, he asked each time, “Why not?” A half-mocking response of *Hase!* (“We just didn't!”) caught on. Yousufzai deftly redirected the collective thought process, positing a

⁴⁸August 11, 2020.

depoliticization by internalized imperial structures as the reason “why not.” The audience seemed much more sympathetically invested thenceforth.⁴⁹

In drawing out the wider social context that has helped generate poetic ideas in Swat, *muzāḥimat* interacts with regional registers of neoliberalism and is textured by it, but is not the same thing. It involves collaborative impulses and civic service, but also, counter to depoliticizing impulses, it encourages poets to locate and speak to structural violence. *Muzāḥimat* reterritorialize formal events and hegemonic narratives, partly because it thrives in crosscurrents. Indeed, its rebelliousness can be antipathetic to participation in overly institutionalized projects. Amjad mentioned that he did not register his organizations with the state (making these ineligible for most donor funds) for the same reasons he did not join any political party: he wanted flexibility, which was, he said, “just part of his *āzādāna tabī‘at*,” or freedom-inclined nature. This was tied to sentiments voiced by every one of our interviewees, that literature should exist “for life,” not for its own sake, nor (especially) as a professional industry. Poets like Didar Tahir were highly skeptical of *mushā‘ire* receiving outside funding at all. Most of the organizations we encountered were self-funded by monthly member contributions of 300–500 Pakistan rupees, and only two – Suvastu and Mrastiyal Adabi Likwal (MAL) – were officially registered.

MAL, a literary collective overseen by the poet Iqbal Shakir in the market town of Batkhela, is member-supported but also accepts contributions and other support from local politicians, professionals, and traders. Still, MAL retains a strongly *muzāḥimatī* orientation due to shared networks with other groups, including Pukhtun Adabi Malgari (PAM), of which Didar Tahir was a founder, and MAL propagates this ethos upwards via elite partners, more than its activities are disciplined by them. PAM holds mostly small impromptu meetings, and consciously eschews external fundraising. Tahir noted that PAM has a strong ethos of “literature for life’s sake,” and a very strong bias against “literature for personal gain” that intersected with the positive value on autonomy noted above. At the same time, MAL has partnered with external civil society groups, especially Strengthening Participatory Organization (SPO), a well-established national NGO. This partnership allowed MAL to fund the printing of the proceedings of one of its *mushā‘ire* in 2009, at the height of the crisis, under the title *Sawe Sawe Wāwra* (“Burnt Snow”). This anthology’s poems examine structural, physical, and emotional aspects of violence. Some even explicitly comment on the politics of epistemology, pre-emptively lampooning any possible fetishization of trauma that would reduce imaginations of Swat to warscape alone.⁵⁰ The more MAL worked with SPO, the more autonomy it gained; SPO gave them *carte-blanche* in arranging events like International Mother Tongue Day, Human Rights Day, even benefits for tuberculosis and HIV treatment. According to Shakir, MAL was ultimately so successful in spreading critical *muzāḥimat* through SPO that SPO’s director jokingly remarked that MAL had “hijacked” his organization. MAL’s trajectory, then, is a larger institutional manifestation of the same negotiations in which Abasin Yousafzai redirected the state-sponsored PaRRSA event in real-time.

⁴⁹We thank Ulasyar for sharing these videos from his archive.

⁵⁰See, among others, Abasin Yousafzai’s free-verse contribution that opens the volume and sets its tone.

Conclusion

We conclude by relinking the two halves of this article: the imaginative content that draws links between the world and the feeling self, and the networks and institutions that link social selves to the world. Even poetry that, on its surface, expresses nothing but devastation can be a part of this world-building. The following poem, by Malakand poet Rahmat Shah Sayil, was among the most iconic songs circulating throughout our period of concern (2007 to now, and especially since 2009):

My land has become chains, entrenchments, garrisons everywhere
 Burn on, O my feelings! My land has become a living hell.
 No one's deigned to consider contributing anything positive to it;
 My land is now an abject begging bowl for its own inhabitants.
 I don't have even the authority to shed tears for it;
 My land has become just the stake in a pointless game.
 In it, I no longer recognize even my own self-image;
 My land has sacrificed its head to power and lordship.
 This is no small story, Sayil, but here's the nub of it:
 My land has become an agonized sigh, caught in my throat.⁵¹

The sequence of “chains, entrenchments, and garrisons” moves from everyday policing of space and tactical competition between Taliban and Army forces to strategic land occupation. It moves from materiality to affect (“Burn on, O my feelings!”), then speaks to the displacement of both the poet’s and the listener’s richly-experienced land being reformatted as warscape. To listeners, Sayil evokes how this region, with its discrete histories, has been deprived of selfhood just as individuals have been, as the region has been converted into the frontier of somewhere else, from the British era to now. He then returns to affect, testifying that the situation is so enormous, the repression so extreme, and outsiders so insensitive to Pashtun lives, that things are as unspeakable as they are visceral: home can only exist as a sigh, indefinitely and agonizingly deferred.

But while this poem’s content seems to leave little space for preserving life, thought, or even selfhood, the social life of this poem instantiates the reverse: it is a living example of the cross-generational, trans-local poetic conversations that we highlight. This poem was actually first published decades before the current Swat crisis, and portrays how Pashtun regions have been ruled throughout history. But Amjad sang it meaningfully in the 2010 Nishtar Hall inauguration, aimed at Swat solidarity.⁵² It was posted on a community Facebook page in April 2015, when an agreement to establish a China–Pakistan Economic Corridor was signed, which many in the province expected would further garrison and marginalize their region.⁵³ It was tweeted in 2019 by activists protesting curfews in Waziristan, which were in turn aimed at defusing rallies by Pashtun civil rights activists.⁵⁴ Its opening lines appeared as a proverb in a 2019 editorial in *Pukhtun* magazine, protesting the imposition of women’s face coverings in Peshawar District schools.⁵⁵ For the author of that piece, it encapsulated the trauma of imposing embodied, gendered modes of restriction, and they linked military restrictions of space and mobility to

⁵¹As performed by Amjad Shahzad, November 1, 2012; video courtesy of Usman Ulasyar.

⁵²Again, thanks to Usman Ulasyar for sharing his archived video of this event.

⁵³<https://www.facebook.com/277217232328165/posts/807872102596006>, accessed August 17, 2020.

⁵⁴<https://twitter.com/TuriNaem/status/1139966949025300480>, accessed August 17; 2020.

⁵⁵*Pukhtun* 2019.

bodily repressions by right-wing political structures. Finally, four of our interviewees quoted this poem to summarize their points about Swat.

Belying the content of what it is saying – War/Truth now is all that there is – this poem became a magnet, attracting the very same cross-temporal and cross-regional community conversation that war seeks to atomize and then reorient elsewhere. And if that is the effect of just one text, then what of many voices and other poems, all in networked conversation? Poetic conversation simultaneously describes effects of the conflict and indexes social spaces that cut across its atomizing destruction, in space and in time.

When we shift the focus away from hegemony, we find autonomy arising from self-organized, informal circles, again and again. Organized activities draw vitality from informal modes of association which are organic with critical community dispositions outside neoliberal subjecthood, and reshape wider worlds as they respond to outside donors. Similar to how Nosheen Ali describes state employees' *mushā'ire* in another frontierized region, Gilgit-Baltistan,⁵⁶ literary activity in Swat thrives within dominant organizations but generates subversive content as a result of external networks. On the frontier, state and international patrons have attempted to harness poetic production for non-local projects, in the process positioning Swat's networks as especially important in Pashto. But in so doing, they have given space to the *muzāḥimat* generated by these networks to proliferate. Of course, in Swat and on the frontier, as anywhere, emergent fields operate; some people accumulate status and influence through these, and their work interfaces with more powerful fields like international development. But this is not all that is happening in Swat. At least partly due to the civic yet deconstructive ethos of *muzāḥimat*, institutions are pulled toward horizontality and flexibility, as skepticism toward hierarchized structures becomes a virtue in this emerging affective-discursive-institutional formation.

This also relates to the relative weakness of new elite interventions, compared to the longer-term life of Pashto poetic conversations and their informal institutions. Not supported by the government in education, or in any sector *except* new campaigns (since 2008 or so) for hearts and minds, most Pashto speakers usually read only in other languages. This is another reason why real-time events preoccupy our account. But the fact of being rooted in mainly face-to-face realms and informal networks seeking to remain informal and autonomous gives *muzāḥimat* an autonomy, allowing it to spin outward and transform public Pashto overall. This is even more the case when such events spread through new pathways that online media platforms offer. The firebrand poet Bakhtzada Daanish said in interview that his 2019 compilation *Za ba na Līwanai Keḡam!* (I Refuse to go Insane!) received critical acclaim because he voiced his refusal of a breakdown of meaning amidst violence, but his compelling live recitations on YouTube are what facilitated this success. Meanwhile, the singer Karan Khan has become one of the most popular performers not only in his native Swat but across the Pashto-speaking region. He has done so by monetizing his online presence, revolutionizing business models for Pashto recording artists everywhere, but most observers, including himself in an interview, attribute his success to the thought-provoking *muzāḥimatī* poetry he selects. Thus, in new realms that circumvent patronage structures in favor of decentralized creation and consumption, Pashto literature has enjoyed mass interest

⁵⁶Ali 2010.

post-2009 as never before, while the rise of critical civic-oriented *muzāḥimat* has been an inseparable part of this phenomenon.

How can we make sense of this simultaneous ontological breakdown and new flourishing that have appeared alongside each other? Heriberto Yépez theorizes frontiers as places where hegemonic political-economic, psycho-social, and epistemic systems meet and fragment. These are processes of fission and mutual destruction, and people and their subjectivities at the borders form the primary battlefield. Yet the fluid recombination of fragments sometimes has productive power to create new forms that ripple back to rework powerful systems.⁵⁷ Writing about similar processes, Gloria Anzaldúa highlights such re-combinations while giving them an ethical-normative content; frontier lifeways and subjectivities are more than a power-capitulating form of resilience within a neoliberal age, they demand that fulfilling their potential be therapeutic, transformative of the multiple historic layers of violence that compose hegemonic orders.⁵⁸

Frontier perspectives like *muzāḥimat* critique War/Truth for us all, from a uniquely skilled vantage point – centuries of experience – and show ways out. In this case, the sentiments and strategies underlying *muzāḥimat* gained an explicit, self-conscious critical voice during this period, and just a few years later this conscious ethos pervaded the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), a Pashtun-led national civil rights organization that for the first time united frontier and metropolitan citizens of Pakistan in a widespread critique of both military and Taliban-style aspirations to hegemony.⁵⁹ At the same time, Anzaldúa's vision is also permeated with the pain of breakdown as part of this long-term violence, the same thing that our counterinsurgency authors point to: ontological devastation as prelude to resubjectification by powerful projects initiated elsewhere. As in the poetry of Sayil, Arzu, Didar Tahir and others, the vitality of frontier worlds does not minimize this loss, or the fact of long-term war.

Some colleagues that we shared this paper with heard a story about the resilient flourishing of heritage. Others found in it a story about inevitable assimilation and destruction in the face of overwhelming forces beyond any local ability to resist. For our part, we have wanted to highlight the “middle conversation” in its complexity. Studying war, but through this consciously maintained space of “not-war,” is the best way not to underline war's erasures, and a way for us not to contribute to those erasures.

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⁵⁷Yépez 2007.

⁵⁸Anzaldúa 1987.

⁵⁹See Mallick 2020.

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