
INTRODUCTION

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The geographic region of Afghanistan and Pakistan has often been depicted with powerful imagery of vast tribal lands where central state authorities maintain a limited or even non-existent presence. During much of the past two decades of US-led foreign intervention, Afghanistan's government influence was concentrated in the country's urban city centers, with far more limited interaction with rural regions of the country. In a similar vein, for much of the twentieth century, large swathes of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northwest Pakistan near the Afghan border maintained a semiautonomous status with strong tribal influences constituting the social, political, and economic dynamics of the region.² While categories such as "rural" or "tribal" help to cast doubt on the strength of state authority across each country, they also risk grouping under a single heading vastly different social arrangements. Pushing against a simplified narrative that views the region as monolithic and determined, both spatially and socially, recent scholarship has emphasized how many parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan exhibit fluidity linked to the considerable social and political variations that exist among its varied communities.³

Building on this critical approach, this volume assembles ethnographic writings that are geographically situated in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. Collections of ethnographic writing about Pakistan and Afghanistan post-2001 are exceedingly rare as to be almost nonexistent. In the 1980s and 1990s, much of Afghanistan was inaccessible for any meaningful periods of field research due to consecutive wars; meanwhile, Pakistan offered its own challenges due to its ever-changing security and political situation. Limited access rendered many

societal dynamics unexplored, misunderstood, and liable to sweeping generalizations that poorly map onto social realities. Since then, much has changed, not only in the actual realities of both countries but also in terms of a new generation of researchers—many who are native to the region—who have dedicated significant time to researching in and on different areas of the regions, with their research offering new insights and much-needed correctives.

Frontier Ethnographies takes a unique approach of treating Afghanistan and Pakistan as a region or as a distinct unit warranting scholarly attention. Afghanistan and Pakistan (whether individually or collectively) are often categorized as part of various regional subgroupings, including Central Asia, South Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian subcontinent. All of the countries within these subgroupings are undoubtedly rich sites for ethnographic exploration, and how one defines regional boundaries impacts questions of knowledge transfer, connectivity, security, and mobility. While Afghanistan and Pakistan could be viewed through a transregional lens given their extensive connections and convergences,⁴ they also represent a symbolic space that sits at the limits of knowledge and understanding.⁵ We treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as a “region” in this book as they share a number of commonalities—they geographically border each other and share an intertwined political history; they host sizeable rural communities (with many communities on the border sharing a common language and ethnicity); they have both come under scrutiny in the post-2001 discourse on the “War on Terror”; they are generally difficult places for conducting long-term, in situ research. These general discourses serve as the background that all of the contributors in this volume have had to navigate in one way or another during the course of their research. Each of the contributors details their individual experience of conducting research in the region, highlighting significant context-specific variations on the process of conducting ethnographic research, which often fall to the wayside.

Frontier Ethnographies explores the ethnographic edges of contemporary anthropological inquiry in Afghanistan and Pakistan by assembling voices of emerging scholars who have conducted field research within the region in the past two decades.

The collection is not meant to be exhaustive—others have used ethnographic methods to explore a broad range of topics in various disciplines—but rather is indicative of the breadth of research and the issues faced when conducting ethnographic research. The authors in this volume all employ ethnographic methods as a means of deconstructing extant knowledge of the places they study. Ethnography as a form of knowledge production destabilizes conventional notions of frontiers as merely a geographic space and offers crucial impulses for investigating the layers of encounters and symbolic meanings produced by diverse forms of research in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ethnography is about attempting to grasp situations and worldviews in all their nuances. Researchers in a variety of disciplines and backgrounds with different subject interests employ ethnography to gain a deepened understanding of a particular setting in all of its real-world heterogeneity and often outright contradiction. Ethnography entails venturing beyond generalizations on a particular subject and understanding the intricate social realities one encounters and partakes in. Researchers situate themselves within a setting for an extended period of time, and over the course of a few weeks up to several years, they become part of the local environment of those being studied. It is through the ongoing daily interactions with individuals and objects that researchers become accustomed to the routines and rhythm of daily life. How to do this practically and within ethical frameworks has been subject to extended debates and animates several contributions of this volume.

As the book title suggests, the two guiding themes are “frontier” and “ethnography.” The authors in this book avoid an extended conceptual discussion on the merits and demerits of these concepts or how they have evolved within the academic literature across various disciplinary domains. Instead, the chapters focus on real-world ethnographic experiences to provoke an imaginative exploration of the various frontiers that imbue their given environment. While the individual chapters take up these terms implicitly, this introduction teases out how they collectively contribute to a revised understanding of the terms. The ethnographic approaches adopted by the authors raise an array of questions that destabilize conventional

notions of frontiers that portrays them as timeless and self-evident, and interrogates and reaffirms the promise and use of ethnography as a method of inquiry.

While adopting ethnographic methods, the authors also remain critical and reflexive on the way it is employed to represent knowledge of a particular setting. This critical engagement reflects debates that are still ongoing within the wider discipline. Elsewhere, authors have questioned the overall use of the term “ethnography.” Tim Ingold suggests that “if we really want to get across what we anthropologists do, in a language that others will understand, then ‘ethnography’ is about the worst possible word to choose.”⁶ In his perspective, it has been applied so widely that it is more likely to obscure rather than clarify extant knowledge. Indeed, the term “ethnography” can refer to a panoply of forms, from descriptive texts about the immersion in a place guided by a sensibility to the lived experience of others, to exploratory forms such as audiovisual and autoethnographic explorations.⁷ This wide array of forms, this indeterminacy of identity and multitudinous existence, some argue, has diluted the term “ethnography” into meaninglessness and should be abandoned. Instead of heedlessly employing the term, researchers should explain what ethnography means for their own work.

Pared down to its core constitutive features, ethnography involves the practice of participant observation. To observe and participate, which often demands ethnographers to learn local languages and dialects (or in the case of ethnomusicologists, to play particular instruments), participation in the everyday lives of individuals or groups and to record observations in field notes is not, by any stretch, a revolutionary shift in how anthropologists operate.⁸ The point to emphasize is that ethnography places the researcher “in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study” so that one’s own perceptions are synchronized with the rhythm of others, “much as melodic lines are coupled in musical counterpoint.”⁹ Still, others have remarked how research among a group of people does not always produce harmonious agreements between researcher and researched, as the “insider-outsider” dynamic never fully vanishes and, furthermore, researching a topic does not necessarily entail being in agreement with one’s interloc-

utors—though it does entail a serious attempt to understand their points of view.

One of the aims of this volume is exploring methodology, and as such, the authors have the space to reflect on their fieldwork experiences, eschewing an artificially refined and synthesized representation of their data. Instead, they examine their moments of insecurity, vulnerability, doubt, fear, failure, and daydreaming. It is in those fissures, those moments of personal reflection and soul-searching, that received knowledge is called into question. This volume hopes to capture some of those ethnographic experiences where certain limits, territorial, interpersonal, or otherwise, are reached, leading the researcher to reflect on their own subjective knowledge and how, faced with frontiers, they have been forced to reimagine or reconstruct their received categories. Finally, it bears noting that a time lag always exists between the period spent conducting ethnography and the publishing of materials, and as such, the contributors conducted their fieldwork all prior to August 2021, when the Taliban regime took control of Afghanistan. Despite, or perhaps because of, the country remaining difficult for researchers to access, we feel the present volume plays a crucial role in de-exoticizing the region by revealing the practicalities and possibilities of in situ research in difficult settings.

The remainder of this introduction provides reflections on three themes that run across the various chapters. Instead of summarizing the individual chapters, grouping the chapters into these themes helps to show how these chapters are in conversation with one another, even if their contents vary significantly. The first theme of “Contesting Frontiers” discusses how—while serving as a title theme—the very notion of “frontier” is subject to deconstruction, questioning, contestation, and friction. The term is used to probe the edges of the known and knowable, and to examine the questions that drive researchers and their interlocutors individually and collectively. The various pieces focus on different forms of frontiers, thereby problematizing the very usefulness of any singular definition, favoring instead a polyphonic approach. The second theme of “Unsettling AfPak Discourses from the Ground Up” questions policy framings and media-led understandings of how Afghanistan and Pakistan have been portrayed in a sim-

plified, Orientalizing manner that served destructive ends in the so-called “War on Terror.” The term “AfPak” has become deeply enmeshed in the global “War on Terror,” which often extracts, frames and packages information from Afghanistan and Pakistan for consumption by Western audiences. The ethnographic approaches of the different authors resist such framings and instead rely on firsthand interactions to shape their understanding of the specific environment they describe. The third theme of “Reexamining Ethnography” takes to task the methods employed by the researchers. While the authors adopt ethnographic methods, they do so in a critical, reflexive and varied manner by seeing themselves in dialogue not only with their interlocutors but also with their chosen research method.

Contesting Frontiers

The association of the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the notion of “frontier” provides an invitation to explore the ways in which frontiers are conceptualized and how this affects the construction of knowledge and research in the region.¹⁰ A frontier is often understood as a territorial limit dividing two nations or empires, conjuring images of separation, contestation, and conquest.¹¹ As a geographic area, the frontier is marked by uncertainty as it covers an “unknown zone” that is characteristically difficult to access and remains to be explored and understood.¹² It signifies the outer limits of a region where statelessness, disorder, and abandonment persist.

It is now well-established in academic discourse that frontiers are more than geographic spaces that counterdistinguish the regions on either side.¹³ Distilled to its fundamental notion, a frontier symbolizes a boundary that lies between two distinct realities, whether those realities are physical spaces, people, types of knowledge, or internal to the self. The frontier represents a social sphere situated at the edge of the known and the unexplored, where both symbolic knowledge and social categories are created, contested, transformed, destroyed, reformed, and reinstated. The term is at once durable and flexible. On the one hand, the world is saturated with frontiers,

whether physical or immaterial, and use of the term serves to demarcate a binary distinction between insiders and outsiders. The frontier as a category encompasses certain underlying assumptions about citizenship, identity, and social distinction, and provides a frame for analyzing those differentiations across settings. On the other hand, the frontier represents a zone of uncertainty, movement, and exchange, thereby allowing for existing frames of reference to be questioned, problematized, and overturned. The elusiveness of frontiers lies in the fact that they are in flux, as their geographic, political, and social particularities are continually renegotiated.

The simultaneous rigidity and elasticity of the term serves as an anchor for the discussions in this volume. Present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan represent a region of the world characterized by shifting political, social, and economic allegiances, and the chapters in this volume reveal how these ongoing societal dynamics in the contributing authors' different contexts reflect the various frontiers that imbue the environment. The "AfPak" frontier (discussed further below) is often used to denote the boundary region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the chapters in this volume cut across Afghanistan and Pakistan (and even beyond), thereby pushing against the tendency to treat the area as spatially closed and determined. The chapters are tied together by their focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and within this landscape, they showcase different ways in which the frontier may be imagined beyond simply its geographic moorings. Similar to literature that conceptualizes the "margin" beyond mere geography by considering power relations and distribution of existing entitlements,¹⁴ the chapters in this volume explore different knowledge frontiers, exposing their various contours in their specific setting.

The discussion that follows in this section focuses on three frontiers that are explored by a number of the authors in this book, namely considerations on the boundaries of safety and personal security for the researcher, the insider-outsider dividing line, and the academic form (i.e., the medium through which the researcher conveys her findings) as a frontier. These three very different examples help to highlight the socially constructed nature of the frontier as a concept. None of these represent geographic boundaries; instead, they grapple with the

interface between the known and the unknown. They represent instances of the researcher pushing the limits of the familiar and conventional, thereby reconfiguring the very boundaries of knowledge in the process. These three examples are meant to be illustrative, as other notions of frontier are also raised across the various chapters (for example, Medhi and Mohammadi discuss the “resource frontier” as well as the rural-urban divide in chapter 3).

When speaking of Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is hard for researchers conducting in-country fieldwork to avoid questions relating to safety. While the image of insecurity concerning these countries produced for Western audiences may be sensationalized and may flatten important variations that exist on the ground, researchers must still come to grips with the real security risks entailed by their choice of setting and find ways to realistically discuss experiences of (in)security when conducting research in conflict zones or on sensitive topics. These discussions help de-exoticize such settings by instead focusing on the practicalities of the research plan. Nafay Choudhury confronts the security challenges he faced conducting research on currency exchangers in Afghanistan at a market frequented by both insurgent groups and criminal gangs (chapter 1). Navigating the security frontier—the ambiguous zone between personal safety and peril—is especially challenging since one often does not know where the boundary lies until one has crossed it. Ethnographic field research in complex environments has been a salient debate in anthropology because of the particular security challenges that long-term, in situ research poses for researchers and their interlocutors.¹⁵ Choudhury details how, despite the security risks, steps may be taken to mitigate dangers, such as by developing relationships of trust not only with their interlocutors but also within a wider community of support. Security plays a role in various chapters—in some more explicitly, like the discussion on suicide bombings (Kerr Chiovenda, chapter 4), in others more oblique, like the discussion of what security denotes in migration and concerning mental health (Schmeding, chapter 2). Choudhury’s discussion of community building is picked up by Annika Schmeding in her discussion of the importance of communities of support for maintaining personal security that may connect the researcher

with new faces within the same network (chapter 2). Through the community network, the unfamiliar is made familiar, connections are evaluated and strengthened, thereby helping to ensure personal safety.

One of the objectives of long-term ethnographic research is to breach the insider-outsider boundary. Insider knowledge is so valuable because access is normally limited, requiring the researcher to establish trust with her envisaged community. In these settings, careful judgment of sensitivities and skillfully cultivated abilities are of equal importance. Michael Lindsey details the process through which he went from being a newcomer to Kabul's community of tabla (hand drum) musicians to positioning himself within that community by becoming an apprentice and student to several respected music teachers, accompanying them to performances, and even displaying his own prowess on his tabla (chapter 7). Lindsey's case shows how much preparation goes into understanding, participating in, and being a part of a particularly skilled community—years of prior relationship building and becoming proficient in multiple music instruments as a prerequisite for conducting the in-depth research as a member of a group of musicians with whom he researched. Saima Khan speaks about how she gained access to the inner circles of upper-class women in Pakistan, the *Begum Sahibas* (chapter 5). While she initially came into association with this group of women through her own status, she details the vulnerabilities she faced when asserting herself as an independent, educated, professional woman and simultaneously angling for status among the *Begum Sahibas*, whose sense of prestige is shaped by a combination of the ranks of their husbands, subjective assessments of fashion senses, and socialization skills. Like Khan, Farhana Rahman's piece delves into a group of women, which in her case consisted of her former-students-cum-friends in Afghanistan (chapter 6). Rahman reflects on her positionality of being able to identify with various personal and intimate experiences of young Afghan women while also possessing privileges as a foreign researcher (of South Asian heritage). She emphasizes the two-way interactions between her and her female friends, which reinforced her social belonging in the setting despite always being aware of the implicit divide that constantly trailed her. The divide is

experienced by all authors in various guises, whether or not they are native to the country and region. Relatedly, Medhi and Mohammadi in chapter 3 and Kerr Chioyenda in chapter 4 grapple with personal experiences that blur the boundaries between objective/subjective, outsider/insider, questioning their usefulness of such dichotomies with increasing immersion.

The politics of knowledge production becomes clearer when one focuses on works that stray from conventional academic writing, thereby pushing the boundaries on the choice of medium used by the researcher to convey their findings to outside audiences. Omer Aijazi's chapter focuses on the fragmentary entries that he made in his diary while conducting fieldwork in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (chapter 9). For Aijazi, fragments—in notes, conversations, pictures—destabilize the expectation of providing coherent narratives that is often expected of scholarly writing. Fragments may be chaotic and inconclusive, but in their indeterminacy, they raise the possibility of new forms of knowledge where the temporal and incomplete are viewed as totalities in themselves with their own symbolic value. The knowledge frontier is also probed in Tom Crowley's chapter, which consists of reflections on images that he illustrated over the many years during which he visited the Kalash people in northern Pakistan (chapter 8). Crowley reflects on how his sketches carried elements that romanticized the Kalash people—a tendency cutting across many colonial writings about the region—even while his writing and research about the people sought to do the opposite. His pictures thus help reveal how researchers may produce conflicting forms of knowledge that may at once glamorize and humanize the subject of their research.

Unsettling “AfPak” Discourses from the Ground Up

Compressed into the inelegant contraction “AfPak,” Afghanistan and Pakistan were the first two targets of the “Global War on Terror.”¹⁶ Western foreign policy circles painted sensationalist pictures of terrorist networks and cave complexes, desert hideouts, and drone targets, effacing a complex sociocultural and historical landscape and its varied people. As war invari-

ably does, it sorted spaces as well as the humans who live in them into neatly apportioned categories: danger zones and “Green Zones,” inside or outside the wire, allies or foes, collaborators or, as in the case of women, those in need of rescue.¹⁷ The politics of these facile representations have been amply critiqued, though the question remains how to not only write against the particular tropes and stereotypes that the “War on Terror” engendered but also how to reckon with the on-the-ground realities for the people with whom researchers engage and how those realities impact relationships.¹⁸

After the attacks in New York and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001, the politics of scholarship in the Middle East and North Africa, and Muslim majority nations more broadly where the “War on Terror” was playing out, became particularly fraught.¹⁹ Social scientists were suddenly en vogue, sought out by military and intelligence services for the valuable insights they could provide about the places and cultures targeted for military and policy intervention.²⁰ Anthropology as a discipline came under public scrutiny for its involvement in the Human Terrain Systems (HTS) program implemented by the US Department of Defense (2007–2015), a program that integrated—and sometimes literally embedded—social scientists into military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.²¹ Moreover, ethnographic approaches were utilized in policy-oriented research by international organizations that became one of the most prolific employers of social scientists in Afghanistan.²² Accompanying this emerging social science military entanglement were the inevitable critiques: What good could possibly come from academics implicating themselves with ideologically driven foreign policy projects? The echoes of the past were indeed evident: anthropology as a discipline developed as an adjunct to the colonial project; area studies in North America were the product of the Cold War.²³ While colonial rule and its uses of ethnography varied,²⁴ the countries experiencing these latest interventions had experienced colonial rule directly or indirectly.²⁵ The “War on Terror” posed the question of the relationship between ethnographic knowledge production and power anew as the countries embroiled in it became the locus of an “ideological battleground” that also deeply affected research relations.²⁶

While the “War on Terror” continues to shape lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan through the physical and epistemological violence it wrought, anthropologists and social scientists have found themselves grappling with the entanglements of this global war and its effects on terminologies, epistemologies, and ethics in the practice of their disciplines.²⁷ Even researchers who were not working in support of the military industrial complex and who positioned themselves critically toward it still need to account for the ways in which their work was embedded in the realities of the “War on Terror.” The contributors to this volume attend to these realities in two crucial ways: firstly, they reflect directly on how an environment of war, occupation and insecurity affected the research processes and the lives of their interlocutors. Acknowledging and reflecting on how research in the social sciences and humanities is embedded in the realities of these large-scale political shifts is crucial for documenting the various levels and effects of these multiscalar wars. Secondly, as discussed further below in “Re-examining Ethnography,” they position ethnography as offering a way to “not cede the frame” to the discourses of the “War on Terror.”²⁸ Instead, ethnography provides a critical approach that opens up alternative avenues for viewing Afghanistan and Pakistan from the ground up and in their full complexity.

The contributions offer alternative visions of various places and communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and beyond, and do not shy away from positioning themselves and their interlocutors within the environment of war, occupation, and insecurity in which the research took place. While security issues are discussed and problematized, the contributions neither reify the danger nor offer checklists for university boards or ethics committees (though these might be increasingly needed for anyone pursuing research in complex environments).²⁹ Instead, the chapters reflect in more expansive ways on the wider ripple effects of securitization of research environments.

Here, we focus on three illustrative examples of how the authors critically engage with AfPak discourses, which inescapably lurk in the background of discussions on the region. Firstly, the AfPak discourse and related conversations on the “War on Terror” too often conjure images of insecurity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which several authors address head-on

or indirectly. Secondly, the “War on Terror” discourse closely shadowed aid and development efforts in the region, with authors examining how this led to highly selective resource allocation dependent on the intended goals of either creating allies or deterring enemies. Third, war, occupation, economic dependencies, and uncertainty often take a direct toll on both researchers and interlocutors, though these discussions seldom get highlighted in militarized perspectives on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The conversations surrounding the “War on Terror” too often and too quickly conjure images of insecurity. While security considerations cannot be avoided when speaking about research in complex environments, the AfPak discourse often skews the discussions by flattening the cultural and historical—and even geographic—terrain. Omer Aijazi provides an account of interactions with insurance companies and Canadian universities, and their evaluations of the risks associated with working in Pakistan (chapter 9). Perceptions of risk are often based on the politics of representation. In the discussions that emerged out of the “War on Terror,” distinct and distant nations with their own rich histories, societies, and cultures were mixed together into an ominous swirl of terrorist danger (“Does Pakistan border with Iraq?” Aijazi was asked). Aijazi creatively deploys fragments—ethnographic vignettes—as a means of unsettling the powerful discourses that shape relational dynamics. At the same time, such frames seem almost inescapable and even shape some of his encounters in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, as his research assistant once related a story of spies being present in the region, and then asked Omer whether he was a spy. However, rather than conjuring the actual security threat, Aijazi recounts how these tropes have become part of shared stories and even jokes as researchers and their interlocutors navigate a context saturated with these tropes and specters. Other chapters challenge the blanket treatment of the region as merely a zone of insecurity. Particular instances and sites of violent incidents become part of a collective memory that shapes shared points of reference and identity: Kerr Chioyenda discusses the site of the Deh Mazang massacre (chapter 4), and Rahman examines the brutal murder of Farkhunda in central Kabul (chapter 6). Both authors

push us to view these respective sites as places of memory and yearning (alongside despair).

The nexus between AfPak discourses, aid, development, and the applied research industry is a theme picked up by Medhi and Mohammadi (chapter 3). These humanitarian and development interventions sprung up concomitant with NATO military contingents in Afghanistan.³⁰ Mohammadi drily notes how the hierarchization of labor in the development sector is also mirrored in academic research, where foreigners, especially Westerners, occupy the top rungs while young (as opposed to elder) locals are relegated to the bottom. The chapter's focus on the research assistant's field diary (as opposed to the principal researcher) challenges this racialized and ageist hierarchy, providing a compelling account from the perspective of a young Afghan who critically engaged with communities in resource peripheries—places of abandonment and resource extraction. The “War on Terror” and its highly selective resource allocation is visible here through its absence. Medhi and Mohammadi observe that the Hazara community was viewed as being friendly toward the newly formed government and foreign forces, which counterintuitively resulted in them receiving little to no development aid. The chapter unveils how the “War on Terror” was not only a conflict fought with machine guns and drones but also with an assemblage of unevenly distributed infrastructural “development” goals.³¹

Other contributions show how many Afghans experienced the ripple effects of war at least as much as its kinetic presence. Those effects included economic dependency and a tense present under military occupation with the constant threat of violence—and occasional outbursts in the form of kidnappings, bombings, and suicide attacks—alongside moments of strained peace and stability. Annika Schmeding grapples with issues of traumatic experiences of interlocutors, highlighting the ways in which relationships between researchers and their interlocutors are differentially located in the post-9/11 world (chapter 2). Her account of a research-supportive friendship with a young Afghan, who had recently returned to Afghanistan from Europe and who belonged to a family in the wider Sufi communities, reflects on how the distinction between refugee and so-called “economic migrants” apportion opportunities

and life chances. Such categories are called into question in a setting where the national economy is characterized by war and dependent on limited Western development schemes. Her contribution speaks to how the material conditions of living in an environment of perpetual conflict and destitution as well as social and economic breakdown, exacerbated through the war, curtailed life choices for youths and impacted mental health. Relatedly, Kerr Chiovenda addresses the contradictory experiences of relative calm in areas of Afghanistan like the majority Hazara province of Bamiyan in the mid-2000s, and the specter of ISIS suicide bombings faced by her and her interlocutors in the capital city, Kabul (chapter 4). Peace in Bamiyan was overshadowed by a prevailing feeling of anxiety by Hazara activists who were targeted for their work. The war here played out both on the physical landscape as well as in the mindscapes of those living under the constant fear of attack. The text signals the simultaneity of relative peace alongside a deepening sense of foreboding and dread, and the kinds of traumas that emerged from the combination of the two.

Reexamining Ethnography

Beyond the confines of anthropology, “ethnography” has seen a vast amount of uptake in other disciplines as well as in mixed-methods approaches and applied research. It often remains undefined and seems to represent something akin to “observations,” as an imprecise attempt at taking “local knowledge” and “local circumstances” into account. But what precisely is ethnography? And why may fitting it into research reports sometimes pose difficulties? One of the challenges of rigorous ethnographic research is that it is resource intensive—it requires spending an extended period of time in a setting, critical reflection and analysis on one’s data, and the intellectual space to question the very categories one started out with.

As to the contents of “ethnography,” as a methodological toolkit, it normally consists of participant observation and interviews. Employing these tools means remaining constantly mindful that method and knowledge production are deeply

intertwined. Participant observation entails learning by doing. Participating in community life often involves long-term reciprocal exchanges and adopting local know-how as a means of accruing the local meanings. As the ethnographer becomes more and more of a “marginal native” or “professional stranger,”³² they are better positioned to avoid romanticized representations of their interlocutors based on sweeping generalizations. Ongoing interactions reduce the sense of researching an “exotic other” by socially attuning the researcher to local culture, which is adopted (even if temporarily or partially) as one’s own.³³ The time spent within a community helps the researcher to understand various values held by its members, the hidden scripts that structure daily life, and the inputs that elicit various emotional responses.

Interviews directly probe an individual or group for information. They provide the opportunity to explore specific topics that may be of particular interest to the researcher, whether through targeted (i.e., structured) or open-ended (i.e., unstructured) interviews. While the researcher decides on what questions to ask, the participant controls the response, and thus the information that is provided or withheld. In this way, interviews can serve as a counterweight to participant observations as the latter relies on the researcher’s own insights. Some researchers use interviews at first encounters to sound out topics, whereas others use them more toward the end of their research to reflect with interlocutors together about interpretations and insights. Both interviews and participant observations entail challenges depending on whether the researcher is already viewed as “native” or belonging to a regional, religious, or other identity category shared with the interlocutors. While familiarity can open doors, it can also result in expectations that the researcher would already “be in the know” about certain issues. Some topics might be more challenging to probe as an outsider, but in certain cases, a group may even feel more comfortable speaking to an “outsider,” as their perceived remoteness may be viewed as less intrusive on local community life. Dynamics are therefore complex for both researchers with more or less cultural familiarity or affiliation.

One characteristic essential to any ethnography—and one that runs across the chapters—is a sense of openness. Ethnog-

raphy entails familiarizing oneself with the unfamiliar by remaining receptive not only to new practices but also to new ways of seeing the world. Equipped with an inquisitorial sense of wanting to better understand the multiplicity of existing viewpoints, ethnographers' explorations often destabilize their own categories and assumptions, exposing the limits of their knowing and new possibility of being in the world. Ethnography is through and through an exercise of breaching such frontiers.

In writing ethnographic descriptions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the authors in this volume confront the controversy of attending to the lived experiences with and beyond dominant framings of war, conflict, and terror, which places the question of proportionality and responsibility squarely into the writing process. This point was succinctly made in a critique of an art exhibition in spring 2023 titled *Emergenc(y): Afghan Lives beyond the Forever Wars*.³⁴ One participant in an exhibition-accompanying online panel criticized the name of the event as there was no "beyond" yet—Afghans were still living in the midst of the "War on Terror's" tremors and aftershocks.³⁵ The lives of people living in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as in many other places brutalized by the War on Terror, remain mired in the same rationales that precipitated the violence; yet, as we would argue, they are also not reducible to them.³⁶ How can an anthropological engagement, cognizant of the impact of these geopolitical forces, stay true to an ethics of listening, which centers the multiplicity of lived experiences of our interlocutors not just as it relates to violence but in all their complexities? The historian James Caron speaks of striking a balance between actively critiquing interventions, war, and empire and resisting the urge to let these discursive frames monopolize attention. He argues that ceding "the basic frame of discussion to war and empire can add yet another layer of violence to the 'War on Terror.'"³⁷ Such frames undermine the perception of longer genealogies, imaginable futures, and, as we would argue, perceiving that the lives of our interlocutors are more than the sum of ways in which their lives become salient to foreign policy concerns.

The chapters in this volume make two contributions to the domain of ethnography. First, they reveal how ethnography rep-

resents a form of resistance and analytical reframing in the context of the “War on Terror.” The “War on Terror” discourse too often reduces the analysis of people and their experiences, changes, and continuities in cultural and social structures and processes to the ways in which they are connected to, limited, enabled, or influenced by the conflict at their doorstep, thus blinding us to the full expression of individual and communal experiences—and also to seeing the spectrum of humanity that exists in each place.³⁸ This dominant discourse tends to exaggerate predetermined categories such as ethnicity, religion, gender, rural residence, and otherwise. The contours of such categories—and how they may bleed into one another—must be studied from the ground up. The existing lenses of war expose particular social, political, or cultural aspects, but obscure those that do not readily fit into preexisting categories, either as an illumination or refutation. The chapters reveal how ethnography serves as a means of interrogating the “War on Terror” discourse (noting the difficulty of escaping it altogether) and postulating new ways of living, being, and knowing based on understandings, patterns and sensibilities of community members themselves.

Second, the chapters in this volume reveal how the push for more egalitarian exchanges between the researcher and researched is not lost in areas affected by conflict but might be more significant in an environment in which differences might be more pronounced and existing political and social institutions may have been worn down. When societies come under the threat of social disintegration, forms of social solidarity and organization originating from ground up may be of particular importance in maintaining stability in local communities. A well-resourced outsider (often carrying preexisting categories) does not automatically have easy access to local knowledge, be that due to the weakness of public institutions or suspicion of outsiders in a shifting and polarized context. Unfortunately, so-called helicopter research has become widespread in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, often owing to the nexus between research and security—and thus the need for quick results (more often than not also for policy consumption). In opposition to this trend, chapters in this volume reassert the crucial role of extended research and rapport building,

and several pieces address how knowledge of the local settings required two-way exchanges where the researcher becomes part of a community. The push for greater and more egalitarian exchanges between the researcher and the researched has reignited a previously smoldering debate over some core approaches in anthropology—questions over the discipline’s goals, methods, commitments, and basic assumptions about the “people” being studied.³⁹ The very notion of “people” is shrouded in ambivalence—who are “they” to begin with?⁴⁰ And what if they are not the type of people with whom one is personally, ethically, in correspondence—for instance fundamentalists and terrorists, or authoritarians and torturers?⁴¹ Any engagement with political anthropology or with what Sherry Ortner termed “dark anthropology” that deals with questions of power, inequality, depression, or oppression brings up these vexing questions.⁴²

In pushing back against received categories and frames of reference, several chapters provide a unique lens to issues such as vocations and socioeconomic class, which are often treated as muted or subservient categories such as ethnic belonging, caste, or *biraderi*.⁴³ Nafay Choudhury’s explorations of money exchangers, not as terrorist financiers (as the informal *hawala* networks have often been characterized) but as practitioners of an everyday vocation (chapter 1), and the description by Medhi and Mohammadi of coal miners offer an outlook onto life within particular occupational specializations (chapter 3). In the case of Michael Lindsey’s ethnography of musicians, the class element becomes more pronounced (chapter 7). Belonging in this social milieu is delineated along family lines, with amateur and nonhereditary musicians inhabiting a different social class than professionals (hereditary). Lindsey, as an ethnomusicologist, brings us inside the cloistered spaces where musicians learn and share their craft, as well as gossip and critique. In another kind of sequestered setting, Saima Khan notes the micro acts of positioning that index the desire to rise in the ranks of classed belonging among Pakistan’s military officer wives (chapter 5). While the Pakistani army has been the focus of several political analyses,⁴⁴ Khan captures the embodied classed belonging in her description of brunches and performative education-talk, as well as behind-the-scenes behavior

toward domestic servants. By highlighting a particular group of women, conscious of their social standing and rank differentiation, class per se becomes perceptible as social distinction.

Some of the contributions arguably take steps toward demolishing some of the categories that inundate academia and policy circles alike. Tom Crowley's reflections trace out the arc of coming to the anthropological perspective from the starting point of the tourist and self-consciously described explorer in the company of the very Orientalist colonial administrators he was criticizing (chapter 8). As an anthropologist, Crowley reflects—not without a certain cringe factor—on his own notebook entries as a young traveler openly sharing his own embarrassment over his initial attempts to grasp what was happening around him. The field notes offer an unabashed insight into changing perspectives and realizations, and at least in the spirit of Ingold, shatters the myth of the purely analytic scholar observing his subject from a cool distance. More than the participatory component of participant observation and the exploration of the human condition emplaced in a particular locale, Crowley shows that ethnography is also deeply embedded in circuits of *reflexivity* about one's own background, position, and potential political entanglements. In critiquing conventional modes of ethnographic writing and representation, Omer Aijazi use "fragments" of field notes (rather than full diary entries) to destabilize the macro-scale geopolitics of India, Pakistan, and China by instead giving primacy to the interstitial and relational terrains that are punctuated with confusions, indeterminacy, and incomplete narratives (chapter 9). Through his fragments, vibrant images of life become palpable—in shared meals encoded in a recipe for a *chicken karahi*, the efforts to make space for the next generation of a "firecracker" research assistant, and vegetable gifts of sympathy for the lonely ethnographer.

The contributors to this volume have chosen a particular stance vis-à-vis ethnography: seeing it still as worthwhile to engage in thereby facilitating immersive knowledge and two-way interactions. We see glimpses of that shared humanity in Mohammadi's (i.e., the Afghan research assistant) experience of falling in love at his field site (chapter 3); or reading Farhana Rahman's descriptions of shared friendships with interlocutors

(chapter 6); or following the threads of anxiety and trauma that Melissa Kerr Chioventa grapples with in her online exchanges with friends upon learning about the atrocities against people for whom she had developed deep respect and admiration over the course of her research (chapter 4). These contributions are not only in conversation with these broader themes—love, friendship, mental health—but also with the necessary process of situating researchers and interlocutors, academics and their community of support, in an ongoing exchange of ideas and perspectives that not only contribute to theory construction, but enliven our understanding of how to be in the world, in a more all-encompassing, ethical sense.

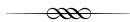
The contributors also avoid being mere cheerleaders of ethnography and speak to deeper questions, in Saima Khan's case (chapter 6) how to deal with noncorrespondence with one's interlocutors? Inhabiting the same national and classed belonging—such as being the wife of a Pakistani army officer herself—does not produce complementary dispositions with her interlocutors. (Un)belonging can set researcher and interlocutor at odds, raising conflicting questions of how to write about a topic or group. The practice of reflexivity in writing lends itself to exactly this exploration: to not sweep one's own subjectivity under the rug but to place it in full view for the reader, to acknowledge it as a core dynamic of what enables access and simultaneously denies full immersion into the researched group of people. Furthermore, it points toward inextricable internal tensions: how to find or define “correspondence” when groups are not of the same opinion internally, or are at their core at odds with one another; or when we interface with interlocutors whom we detest or feel ambivalent about; or when working toward a common goal might seem questionable?

Finally, while other disciplines have readily adopted “ethnographic methods” as an approach, they often recoil from anthropology's reflexive turn embedded in its theoretical approach to writing ethnographic accounts. Some anthropologists have themselves criticized the sometimes navel-gazing, self-referential accounts around which some ethnographic writing revolves, excused by terming it reflexive positioning. However, Lisa Wedeen argued that,

rather than reflexivity as the personal insertion of the “I” into a fieldwork story, one might adopt a sense of epistemological reflexivity toward the discipline, posing questions about what bounds the discipline and normalises its modes of inquiry, rendering other possibilities unsayable, unthinkable, irrelevant, or absurd.⁴⁵

The ethnographic accounts in this volume indeed chronicle themes at the edges of anthropological inquiry and the discipline overall, which often do not make it onto the pages of a journal article or into a book. These omissions say less about their value and more about the narrow confines of knowledge production—about the forms and goals that academic writing usually pursues, or fails to. And yet, the silence of these peripheral themes lingers on: the sharing of trauma and the questions this engenders (Melissa Kerr Chiovenda, chapter 4), the question of belonging to the same socioeconomic category that we categorically reject and yet grapple with for our research (Saima Khan, chapter 5), the way we see our own biography and internal development reflected in the evolution of our notes (Tom Crowley, chapter 8).

A particularly salient theme that Melissa Kerr Chiovenda (chapter 4) takes up is the mental health of the researcher when covering traumatic events. Kerr Chiovenda describes how, after a suicide attack targeting her Hazara interlocutors, she needed to seek aftercare through psychological counseling—a taboo subject that is only slowly attracting attention in academic research. Just as the researcher is not a blank slate who comes to chronicle situations and relationships in a given research site without affecting them, she also does not leave the site unaffected by events in the research environment.



Afghanistan and Pakistan have attracted much scholarly, public and political attention in the past two decades. While accounts about the region may continue to exoticize it as mysterious, unfamiliar, and ultimately fraught with danger, this volume hopefully shows that the region is sprawling with vitality and is accessible for research by committed individuals. The kaleidoscope of authors in the volume cuts across a broad array of topics and provides widely different accounts of their given

settings. However, taken together, they provide compelling evidence that Afghanistan and Pakistan remain productive grounds for extended empirical research. Moreover, beyond the apparent physical frontier that separates the two countries, the ethnographic works in this volume bring attention to the plethora of frontiers that punctuate different settings and, moreover, the methodology of research within those settings. It is hoped that this volume motivates ethnographers focusing on the region and beyond to reflect on their propensity to carry out research in difficult settings, how their subjective experiences in the field impacts knowledge production, and whether their ethnographic study empowers new ways of seeing the world in conversation with those being studied.

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tise in the Middle East and South and Central Asia, Annika's work has been published in a Routledge Compendium, in the *Afghanistan Journal*, at the *American Ethnologist Pandemic Blog*, and in the *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, as well as in public cultural magazines such as *Cabinet*, *Aeon*, and *Zenith*. Her first monograph, *Sufi Civilities—Religious Authority and Political Change in Afghanistan*, was published by Stanford University Press in November 2023.

Notes

1. The authors are listed in alphabetical order and contributed equally to this chapter and to the preparation of this edited volume.
2. Haroon 2007.
3. Marsden and Hopkins 2012; Raza and Shapiro 2021.
4. Marsden 2015, 2022.
5. Fabietti 1997; Manchanda 2017; Marsden and Hopkins 2012.
6. Ingold 2014 in Ahmad 2021: 142–43.
7. Ballestero and Winthereik 2021; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005.
8. Bayard De Volo and Schatz 2004.
9. Ingold 2014: 390, 389.
10. Barfield 1989; Fabietti 2011; Hanifi 2011; Leake 2017; Nichols 2001.
11. Kashani-Sabet 1999; Ludden 2011; Saraf 2020.
12. Saraf 2020, citing Curzon 1907.
13. Anzaldúa 1987.
14. Das and Poole 2004.
15. Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Posocco 2014; Vigh 2007; Zani 2019.
16. The term “AfPak” was used within US policy circles during the era of President Barack Obama, starting around 2008, possibly coined by the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke. While the term came into official disuse, it had entered the popular lexicon of media and geopolitics.
17. Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013; Daulatzai 2008.
18. Manchanda 2020; Hanifi in Keskin 2018; Hannun 2022.
19. While this contribution focuses on the impact on Pakistan and Afghanistan, the “War on Terror” restructured security, policing, and relations between individual and state also in Western countries, as well as globally; see, for example, Bayoumi 2015; Patel 2013; Hughes et al. 2022; see also Yusupov et al.'s panel at the American Anthropological Association Meeting in Seattle in 2022 titled “The Other Wars in Terror”: <https://annualmeeting.americananthro.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Abridged-Program-AM-2022.pdf>.
20. Deeb and Winegar 2016: 144; Keskin 2018.

21. Forte 2011; Montgomery and Fondacaro 2011. Waterston 2008. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement in 2007 that the HTS was “an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise”; see American Anthropological Association Executive Board Statement on the Human Terrain System Project, October 31, 2007: <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1952>.
22. Monsutti 2013.
23. Asad 1973; Ashutosh 2017; Boles 2006; Mandler 2009; Meskell and Pells 2005; Price 2016; Said 1989; Stocking 1991. The establishment of area studies and its linkages with anthropologists’ training is particularly instructive, as anthropology is often also dependent on language training for fieldwork. This has drawn generations of aspiring researchers into specific regional foci and in North America also into language training such as the “National Defense Foreign Language” (NDFL) Fellowships (later Foreign Language and Area Studies [FLAS]), see Deeb and Winegar 2016: 29.
24. Steinmetz 2003.
25. Hanifi 2011; Green 2015; Hopkins 2008.
26. Jalalzai and Jefferess 2011. For discussions on longer trajectories and genealogies that carried on in the “War on Terror,” see Khalili 2013.
27. Gusterson 2007; Hannun, Lin, and Schmeding 2022; Keenan 2006; Robben 2009.
28. Caron 2022.
29. Sluka 2020.
30. Fluri 2009; Fluri et al. 2017.
31. On the material dimension of the “War on Terror” and the way it restructured urban areas as well as the use of aid and development funding in the war, see, e.g., Rubaii 2022; Attewell 2023.
32. “Marginal native”: Freilich 1970; “professional stranger”: Agar 1980.
33. Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997.
34. See <https://art.berkeley.edu/event-calendar/2023/2/8/emergency-afghan-lives-beyond-the-forever-war-exhibitreception> (retrieved April 1, 2023).
35. Online event “Visual Arts in and on Afghanistan: Political Violence, War and the Question of Futurity,” February 10, 2023, moderated and convened by Paniz Musawi Natanzi, Duke University.
36. For a similar argument on Palestine, see Bhungalia 2020.
37. Caron 2022.
38. Pandian 2019.
39. Ahmad 2021.
40. Ahmad 2021: 112.
41. Eisenlohr 2021; Ladwig 2021.
42. Ortner termed “dark anthropology” as anthropological work that focuses on “the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, in-

- equality, and oppression), as well as on the subjective experience of these dimensions in the form of depression and hopelessness” (Ortner 2016).
43. For notable exceptions, particularly with focus on traders as a classed belonging, and mainly on Pakistan, see, for example, Amirali 2022; Marsden 2018; Maqsood 2017.
 44. Siddiqi 2007.
 45. Wedeen 2010: 264.

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