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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Ethics of Fieldwork in Northwest Pakistan

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Abstract

In the wake of the US-led and Pakistan-allied "war on terror", residents in Northwest Pakistan have faced inconceivable structural and physical violence, in ways that pose ethical challenges in ethnographic writing and research. Over the last few decades, militancy, banditry and overall insecurity have hampered relief efforts in the area and significantly weakened basic infrastructure. In this article, the author illustrates how an initial security plan to undertake fieldwork research in this "volatile" region proved somewhat irrelevant because of her positionality, gender and race/ethnicity. The author explores the implications of these dynamics in contexts characterized by unequal gender relations and strict gender segregation. In addition, undertaking empirical work in the context of epistemological frameworks in a region that has been subjected to active conflict, militarised operations and a singular representation in the global and local media, poses other ethical challenges for anthropologists searching for new areas of study and decolonised models of representation. This paper reiterates the importance of a reflexive approach of ethics that acknowledges the interpenetration of race, gender and the thick web of relationships in the production of knowledge and is, at the same time, respectful of cultural specificity.

Keywords: Pakistan, anthropology, fieldwork, research ethics, positionality, gender, race, volatility

Introduction

Ethnographic fieldwork is an empirical form of study that is central to the discipline of anthropology (but not unique to it), one in which long-term cross-cultural encounters are captured and (re)narrativised by scholars to produce knowledge about a place, community or phenomenon. The way in which research findings are understood, written and evaluated in the social sciences is in a constant dialogue with ethical concerns that lie at the intersection of reflexivity, positionality and the history and representation of a research site.

This paper discusses some of the challenges of both conducting and writing about fieldwork in northwest Pakistan by considering two key interrelated themes – positionality and representation – and how they relate to ethical methods.

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First, I begin with a brief overview of anthropological fieldwork and knowledge production steeped in the North-South binary and reflect on the privileges and challenges of my positionality as an East Asian woman researcher in Northwest Pakistan. I discuss the implications of segregated space, what it means to be called a *khor* ("sister"), and how being misidentified as an ethnic minority from a neighbouring country, complicates the already imbalanced process of knowledge production.

Second, I discuss the problems of writing about a place such as Peshawar, which has been severely afflicted, on the one hand, by the burden of its history as a frontier city, and on the other, by various inequalities and the serial violence that the "War on Terror" has wrought. These tend to inform the way the region is represented in media and scholarship as well as how many experience life in Peshawar. What are the ethics of writing about a region that has been, for several decades, an epicentre of extreme and sporadic violence resulting indirectly from Cold War politics, the US-led global "War on Terror", and the rise of various factions of the Taliban and militant groups? The main challenge of conducting ethical research in such a society is to provide a genuine social critique while considering the systematic and often involuntary restructuring of lives under the shadow of contemporary geopolitics.

I conclude the article by positing that, beyond considerations of the structural difficulties of an environment categorised as "volatile" by and for foreign researchers and institutions, we must foreground the challenges of different forms of volatility experienced by the very communities that cannot, unlike the researcher, drop in and out of insecure situations.

Power and ethics in anthropological fieldwork research – An overview

The core methodology and practice of anthropology relies on prolonged fieldwork, often in a country other than one's own, to produce and narrativise experienced realities in the form of ethnography. The personal nature of fieldwork thus requires thoughtful analyses that are based on a constant dialogue with one's own position and perception vis-à-vis the community being "studied". Since its foundation as a discipline in the Euro-American West, or what Michel Trouillot (2003) called the "North Atlantic", anthropology, along with many other disciplines in the social sciences, has been introduced, framed, theorised and dominated by scholars and researchers from the Global North. Such an epistemology and dynamic are the result of the discipline's emergence out of European colonial expansion (Lewis 1973). Fieldwork sites were thus by definition situated "outside of the West" (Hayano 1979, Mughal 2015), in places

that to white Euro-American eyes were inhabited by people from "remote" and "exotic" cultures.

The postcolonial era led to a number of developments within the discipline from which the current moment of reflexivity has emerged.[1] A closer examination of the role of colonialism in the communities of study has also meant interrogating the relationship between colonialism and anthropology, and a serious consideration of the ways "in which the discipline was formed, in service of twentieth century colonial rule and [continues to] play a part in the heritage of modern politics, development and welfare" (Pels 1997: 177). While anthropology is not inherently colonial, it certainly thrived in the colonial period, amid imperial wars, and continued robustly into the Cold War era (Shimizu 1999: 2). Such a fraught trajectory led to the emergence of starkly uneven power relations between researchers from the "West" and the Rest (Wolf 1982). Up until today, these power structures continue to make the object of anthropological study "accessible and safe" for Northern researchers (Asad 1973: 17). Yet from these accounts, one also detects a formation of the notion of safety and security (for the researcher, not the object of study), as the Western scholar has embraced, fetishised and confronted what it means to live in places of instability and conflict, however fleeting.

Many scholars working on various parts of the Global South have provided in-depth overviews of the discipline's evolution.[2] Their academic interventions have contributed to a critique of methodology and ethical conduct, as well as pushing scholars in new conceptual directions. One important intervention is the debunking of the widespread assumption that "objectivity" is only obtainable by anthropologists engaged in research among people whose cultural background is different from their own. Such an idea rests on the premise that fieldworkers can essentially adopt a detached impersonal approach in their research that renders their work real or true – therefore "objective". Postmodernists have long asserted the problems of the claim to a "universal" or "authentic" position (Ashworth 1995), complementing exponents of postcolonial theory. Exemplary (and seminal), of course, is *Orientalism* (1978), in which Edward Said demonstrated how such a "reality" can indeed be constructed using a plethora of supposedly univocal facts about another culture.

Two important developments emerged within the discipline as well as "in the field". First, the anthropological gaze began to turn to "domestic affairs", and second, the field began to witness the rise of non-white, "native" anthropologists (Munthali 2001, Narayan 1993). Anthropology's associations with European colonialism also did not go unnoticed within the very societies that were being studied. Some of the governments of the countries previously studied by Western anthropologists responded by implementing restrictions on foreign researchers

1 Cf. Talal 1973, Lewis 1973, Harrison 1992, Smith 1999, Rappaport 2016.

2 See for example Lewis 1973, Abu-Lughod 1988, Shimizu 1999, Trouillot 2003, Gupta / Stoolman 2022.

for a variety of reasons (ibid.). In the case of post-revolutionary Iran, for example, Shahrashoub Razavi (1992: 152–163) has noted how only Iranian nationals were permitted by the state to do research in villages.[3] Postcolonial states in Africa that became engulfed in civil wars and political instability caused by the expansion of extractive industries were deemed too "volatile" for the presence of Euro-American researchers (Munthali 2001). Here is where the methodological challenge of doing fieldwork in the "Third World" comes in, where difference and volatility both attract and repel researchers from the North.

In what follows, I investigate not so much the evolution of anthropology, but instead how reflexivity as an ethical practice, complemented by postcolonial and postmodern theory, pushes current researchers to think about their engagement and perceptions (both of others and how others perceive them), especially in contexts that are frequently labelled "volatile". Rather than understanding ethics as the rights and wrongs of anthropological researchers, I consider ethics as "essentially a theory of social relations and a fundamental part of human interaction", following Lynn Meskell in *Embedding Ethics* (2005: 126).

Peshawar under the shadow of the War on Terror

In my forthcoming monograph that builds on my dissertation, "Precious Economies: Gems and Value Making in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderlands," I examine the coloured stone[4] trade in and from a region flanked by the mineral-rich Himalayan-Hindu Kush mountains. As part of an ethnographic study of how minerals are rendered into precious commodities, I conducted field research primarily among gem dealers, cutters, miners and gemmologists in a market in Peshawar, Pakistan. The project investigated the ways in which precious stones emerge through a sequence of transformations initiated by different actors who each employ processes of value-addition. From 2017 to 2019, I was based in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, and conducted fieldwork in multiple mining sites in both northwest Pakistan and the bordering areas of Afghanistan, tracing the supply chain of precious stones to Thailand, an international gem trading hub. At the time of research, the city of Peshawar was home to the most important mineral and gemstone trading and processing centre in the region – a mineral and gem wholesale market known as Namak Mandi (lit. "wholesale market for salt"). The city acquired its position as a centre of the gem trade in the region largely due to its geographic location and the geopolitical context that saw the arrival in the 1980s of Afghan refugees, who brought their connections to the gem producing mines.

3 Other places included measures throughout the twentieth century that made it difficult for Western researchers to conduct fieldwork. For instance, the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 led to the subsequent temporary closure of its borders to international researchers (Dos Santos 2006).

4 "Coloured stone" is the market designation for all gemstones or precious stones excluding diamonds.

For various reasons stemming from the domestic politics of Pakistan as well as external factors – most notably its proximity to Afghanistan – Peshawar is, and has been for several decades, a site that is considered too volatile for Western researchers. The official websites of the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States – among others – have both issued an advisory against travel in the provinces of KPK and Balochistan, which includes also the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).[5] The US Department of State, for instance, states in their updated travel advisory of 2021 that these two provinces should be avoided, as "terrorists have targeted US diplomats and diplomatic facilities in the past" and that "attacks continue to happen across Pakistan, with most occurring in Balochistan and KPK, including the former FATA".[6] Added to these precautions was the requirement of a "No Objection Certificate" (NOC), a document to be obtained by visitors from the Ministry of Interior of Pakistan for "prohibited areas in the province", a regulation that had been in place since 2012. In March 2016, however, the NOC was waived for certain areas within the KPK province (The News 2016). In 2019, in an attempt to boost tourism, the government decided to end the NOC requirement for foreigners who want to visit different parts of Pakistan, thus enabling foreign tourists to move freely in the country (Dawn 2015).

At the time of my first entry into the field, I was cautioned by both locals and foreigners alike about the insecurity that plagues the region and told to shift my research to cities where foreign researchers have typically done fieldwork, such as Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Not only were such cities "more manageable" in terms of security, but they also boasted a larger network of institutions and better infrastructure. Perhaps most importantly, at least for my safety-minded advisors, they were also home to large expat communities and therefore could better cater to the needs of a foreigner. Yet the mineral-rich province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the market in Peshawar constituted the heart of the gem trade of my research and thus a central site of ethnographic data collection. I was caught between a rock and a hard place: Was I to abandon the idea of residing in Peshawar entirely and pursue research in a more familiar place with a pre-existing network, even if less relevant to my research, or was I to venture into the unknown against the advice of my interlocutors and friends?

Before I move on to describing my methodology in the field and how various factors related to my (perceived or self-ascribed) identity compounded my interactions, it is necessary to take a brief historical detour to understand how and

5 The former FATA comprised seven agencies: Mohmand, Khyber, Kurram, North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Bajaur, and Orakzai Agencies. Since the 25th amendment to the Constitution in 2019, both FATA and the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) were merged into the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

6 See Pakistan Travel Advisory, US Department of State, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/pakistan-travel-advisory.html (accessed 14 June 2021).

why Peshawar became "volatile" in the eyes of not only foreigners but also non-Peshawari Pakistanis. To be concise, I restrict my historical attention to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that began in late December 1979, which not only triggered a large exodus of Afghans into the region and beyond, but also planted the seeds of violence in the name of religion, rendering it fertile territory for the emergence of varying factions of the Taliban.

War and conflict shape the social and infrastructural contours of any society. This has certainly been the case for Peshawar, a former frontier city of the British empire with a long and fraught history of conflict. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan introduced a coalition of powers from within and outside of the region and generated tremendous insecurity for all. Pakistan's border with Afghanistan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is 1360 kilometres long, artificially dividing communities bound by cultural, kinship and religious ties. From the beginning of the Soviet invasion, the resistance forces in Afghanistan – the Afghan Mujahideen – were supported politically, financially and militarily by the United States. Moral, diplomatic and logistical support also came from neighbouring Pakistan (Abbas 2014: 57–61).

FATA became the site through which the CIA and the Pakistani military establishment collaborated to provide arms and equipment to the Mujahideen. The role of FATA as a conduit indirectly rendered the closest and most populated city of Peshawar a "den of spies and jihadis" (Reuters 2009). These events and triangulations of powers are a major point of departure for understanding how certain circumstances remain crucial and why Peshawar and neighbouring regions continue to be plagued by the violence of geopolitics. The post-Cold War era was marked by the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989, but peace did not return. Instead, the country spun into a spiral of anarchy and civil war between multiple factions of the Mujahideen. One faction rose in prominence from the utter chaos in the mid-1990s: the Taliban.

From the twenty-first century onwards, this region has been most glaringly altered by US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the global "War on Terror" (WoT) has a genealogy that predates 9/11, its beginning as a systematic enterprise can be dated to the attack on the World Trade Center in New York as well as the Pentagon in Washington DC, and to the events leading up to and following the US attack on Afghanistan in late 2001. The bombing of Taliban strategic positions in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 as part of "Operation Enduring Freedom" unleashed a new wave of insecurity in the region. As the US-led invasion of Afghanistan drove fleeing militants across the border, the Taliban and Al Qaeda regrouped and were aided by Pakistani militants (Nazir 2010: 65). Peshawar became an important "transitional and transnational base" for the Taliban as early as the 1980s, when the American CIA and Pakistani army "armed, trained, and prepared soldiers to fight the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union" (Massoumi 2011: 210). The

historian Mejgan Massoumi (2011) has shown how the Taliban's return to Peshawar after 2001 fundamentally shaped the urban landscape and public life through performances and practices of dominance and oppression. The emergence and rise of the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) and its ideological partners, in combination with the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan via FATA, rendered the peripheral region of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as one of the "frontlines" of the WoT (Qadir / Alasuutari 2013). Within a decade, Peshawar went from being a den of spies to being dubbed the "epicenter of jihad" (Reuters 2009).

For the last two decades, Peshawar, the former FATA and several Afghan cities have constituted the heart of the urban WoT, where residents witness its ideological excesses and experience its violence. One of the worst and most reported attacks was the Peshawar school massacre on 16 December 2014, when seven heavily armed Taliban fighters stormed an army-run primary and secondary school and killed 150 people, of whom at least 134 were pupils. By contrast, acts of extreme violence that occur outside of urban centres, including in the peripheries of former FATA, feature less prominently in the national and international mediascape. Over the last few years, Peshawar has witnessed substantially fewer large-scale acts of extreme violence, even as smaller acts continue (Hayet / Akbar 2019; Sirajuddin 2020a, 2020b; AFP 2019). And while these acts of extreme and sporadic violence often intersect with religious affiliation, gender and class, it is mostly the "terrorist attack" that catches the media's attention. What the media often obscures is the general insecurity felt by religious and ethnic minorities as well as the gendered nature of the violence, complexities that long preceded this current moment of "terror".

Knowledge of the history and social contours of a "volatile" place obliges the researcher to adopt an appropriate field methodology. Upon being awarded a fieldwork grant in 2019, I was asked to provide a "Safety Statement" that showed how I planned to ensure my own security, as well as that of others. In the statement, I wrote that while Peshawar had borne the brunt of much violence in the last two decades, the city had become less insecure. I showed how I was cognisant of the kinds of attacks that happened and received regular safety updates provided by interlocutors in the region. I referred to annual reports by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) that have shown that Peshawar is a "more permissible operating environment now" as compared to the past several years (PIPS 2017). According to the Overseas Security Advisory Council,[7] published statistics have also shown that explosions and significant acts of terrorism no longer "occur daily". I emphasised that by avoiding risky areas within the city – this meant avoiding army and police installations, as

7 The Overseas Security Advisory Council is a Federal Advisory Committee with a US Government Charter to promote security cooperation between US-American business and private sector interests and the US Department of State.

well as large political and religious gatherings – I would be less likely to expose myself to unpredictable acts of violence. As my research on the trade of precious stones was neither politically nor religiously sensitive, nor were my sites of investigation located in risky areas, I did not envision encountering any significant acts of violence.

Prior to the commencement of my long-term fieldwork, I relied on a vast body of literature on fieldwork methodology that discusses the challenges of doing research in "volatile" environments in the Global South. While I had access to a body of anthropological research that highlighted the difficulties faced by researchers conducting fieldwork in more volatile places, the anthropological "canon" was often written by white male Euro-American anthropologists conducting research in Africa, Central Asia and South America, and on topics directly related to (structural or physical) violence in these regions.[8] Defined at its outset as "[more of] a problem", these places thus become reservoirs of empirical data by scholars of the Global North, but those that require the concerted efforts of locals (Nhemachena et al. 2016: 19). The result is a plethora of stories told through Northern eyes.[9]

In the last few decades, many more qualitative researchers from Pakistan, many of them women and non-anthropologists, have produced important scholarship using ethnographic methods in both rural and urban areas.[10] In their work, they bring up issues they have faced as local women working in diverse environments and with a range of interlocutors, such as among farmers in Lahore, women in high pastures in the Hushe Valley (Gilgit Baltistan), or middle-class residents in Karachi. Despite being Pakistani or even of the same ethnicity as the communities of their research, Pakistani scholars have noted the challenges of doing research in their own country, which can be chiefly summarised as a symbolic rift between them and their interlocutors that is both social and geographic.

For Asha Amirali, whose field site is based in the *mandi* ("wholesale market" or "marketplace"), the difficulties she experienced came with the visibility of her gender and class as a "Pakistani woman unlike any they [the interlocutors]

8 See for example Gluckman 1954, Goffman 1989, Geertz 1995, Spradley / McCurdy 2012, Stoller 1997, Seale 2004. For scholarly work related to my region of interest, see, among others, Centlivres / Centlivres-Demont 1988, Barth 1956, Lindholm 1982, Tapper / Tapper 1982, Edwards 1998, Grima 2005, Marsden 2005, Sökefeld 2014. I limit my non-exhaustive references to recommended readings within my discipline. For a more grounded critique of North-South relations and "whiteness" in anthropological work, see Ntarangwi 2010.

9 Following the argument advanced by Jean and John Comaroff, places subsumed under "the developing world" for Western researchers became a natural site for "data" as a result of the Western enlightenment, which posited itself as the "wellspring of universal learning, of science and philosophy" (Comaroff / Comaroff 2012: 1). These other worlds, according to them, are perceived less as "sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths, its axioms and certitudes, its premises, postulates, and principles. Just as it has capitalized on non-Western 'raw materials' – materials at once human and physical, moral and medical, mineral and man-made, cultural and agricultural – by ostensibly adding value and refinement to them" (ibid.).

10 Cf. Ahmad 2009, Ahmad 2019, Ahmed 2006, Ali 2019, Amirali 2017, Asif 2020, Azhar-Hewitt 1999, Faiz 2022, Saif 2014.

knew" (Amirali 2017: 148). In the field, she described being a novel creature that "intrigued, puzzled, and confounded" men in the marketplace (Amirali 2019: 148). Despite possessing similar "skin colour, faith, or citizenship" that can render Pakistani fieldworkers as "insiders", the affiliation to a foreign university (typically based in the US or UK) can spark both interest and suspicion (Sattar 2016: 32), especially in areas where Western intervention has left its indelible mark.

More specific to the region of my research – the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – Akbar Ahmed (1976, 1980) and Fredrik Barth (1956) pioneered anthropological work on Pashtun men, as did Benedict Grima (1993, 2005) and Amineh Ahmed (2006) for Pashtun women; these studies described the limitations of conducting research in gender-segregated societies. While these works are ethnographically rich, it was nonetheless hard to locate within them my own positionality and fieldwork difficulties as an East Asian woman trained in the Euro-American academy pursuing fieldwork in a region characterised by particular gender and ethnic dynamics. For many, writing and thinking about fieldwork remains a discussion that is kept in the methods section of a dissertation, and far less foregrounded in the conventional work that is published. Fieldwork experience is unique to each researcher and the challenges experienced depend upon diverse factors. How local conditions shape ideas about one's culture and history, and the marked social and moral schisms between the researcher and the "research subject", are important exercises in reflexive ethnography. Anthropological knowledge is, after all, produced through interaction and collaboration between people, rather than through the "detached" and supposedly "neutral" practices of the researcher alone.

While Peshawar and the gem mining areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are not "volatile" in the ways some of the aforementioned scholarship characterises "warzones", they remain places of insecurity and precarity for many. Although the volatility in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is of course felt by local actors, my own positionality as an East Asian woman confounded many of them. This raised questions about the particularity of my experience, and how my racial and ethnic identity was affecting and shaping my experiences in the field.

"Why aren't you married?": Gendered identity in the field[11]

When I began the project on the gem trade, I had not intended to focus entirely on the social lives of men – but they happened to dominate the trade that I studied and hence my field site. As a woman, I had by default more access to women's lives, yet much of my participant-observation took place in the market, a male-dominated public space. Therefore, even if gender is not at the core of

11 Parts of this section are drawn from the introduction of my dissertation (Lin 2021).

my study of a precious commodity chain, it is critical to discussions of field practices and ethics because of how it filters and shapes my social relations and interactions, and thus the information I collect. It is widely assumed that Pakistan is a "patriarchal" society in which men, as fathers, brothers and husbands, wield or are expected to wield authority over the household.[12] Since men tend to have economic control over their households, including over their wives and children, they also exercise social control over their family. These dynamics run true transnationally. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the province of my research, Pashtuns are the dominant ethnic group, and social norms regulating gender roles and segregation are even stricter.

Writing about fieldwork and one's gendered positionality in the region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa carries the burden of mitigating certain longstanding Western and local tropes about Islamic or Pashtun society's patriarchal qualities while acknowledging a distinctive set of conventions between religion and Pashtun identity, moral choice and compulsion, and the undeniable presence of patriarchal authority within society at large. Ethnographers of women's worlds in Muslim-majority countries – often in the Middle East – have long sought to complicate understandings of gender beyond the simplistic registers of patriarchy in a corrective effort to restore women's voices and agency.[13] In my ethnographic writing, I struggle to displace an essentialist framing of Pakistan and Pashtun society as uniquely "patriarchal" and women as "voiceless", yet the material I gathered and places I frequented for research were almost exclusively male spaces. However, to view Pakistani or Pashtun society solely through the lens of patriarchy would be reductive – to orchestrate a series of equivalences associated with Islam or Pashtunness in past scholarship and in contemporary foreign media representations. The salience of patriarchy as both social and spatial emerges from my fieldwork practices and shapes the ethnographic focus of my research and my role as a researcher.

As a woman and a foreign researcher, I faced multiple challenges that ranged from finding a residence in the city of field research to navigating social spaces. In terms of finding a place to stay in Peshawar, the biggest challenge proved to be my gender and age. The search ended up taking close to a month and involved every last network I had in the city. In the context of Peshawar, it was simply unheard of – some would go the extent of saying "possibly dangerous" – for an unmarried and foreign female to reside on her own, especially if she had not come as part of a foreign mission. In some cases, I was outright denied apartment rentals, while in others I was asked to provide marital papers that attested to my married status, which I did not possess. These are problems that

12 The systematic domination of men over women exists in different forms in societies across the world. While notions of differentiated patriarchy permeate Northern spaces as well, it is too often defined and captured as only a "Southern problem" (Mohanty 1984).

13 See for example Abu-Lughod 1986, Altorki 1986, Atiya 1982, S. Davis 1983, Dwyer 1978, Fernea 1985, Wikan 1991.

are not uniquely faced by foreign researchers but shared by single Pakistani men and women alike. A few potential landlords, mistaking me as a "Chinese national", appeared enthusiastic to rent their place to me. They told me they welcomed "the Chinese" and gestured to the flourishing bilateral relationships between China and Pakistan. Their attitude did not change when they realised that I held a Taiwanese passport – the privilege remained. It was my single status that proved to be the definitive problem. Eventually, I circumvented the problem of housing when a gracious family, business partners of a close friend in Hong Kong, decided to host me in their own home. Thus began my fieldwork proper in Peshawar. The presence of a family reduced my vulnerability as a single woman, while allowing me to conform to local gender norms.

Drawing on my experiences in different parts of Pakistan, especially in areas frequented by the middle- or upper-middle class, I knew that women can be highly visible in public.[14] Yet with my field site situated in the marketplace – either in the *mandi* or bazaar – where men form the overwhelming majority, I recognise that my fieldwork in Pakistan can be said to have been spent mostly in a "man's world". My Pashto language teacher, research assistants and the gem dealers and cutters in Namak Mandi were all men. In societies characterised by a high degree of gender segregation, factors such as one's gender, class and foreign-ness could also imply relatively privileged access in the marketplace and mobility around the city. In some ways, I was better placed than a male researcher, as I had access not only to the women's domain but also to the men's, especially in residential neighbourhoods where strict *purdah*[15] was practised.

Rather than my gender, the major obstacle to movement around the city in general was urban infrastructure. The lack of proper public transport impacts many lives, particularly those of middle- or lower-class women, who rely on male members of their family for all transportation. I was often told that public transport was not advisable for foreigners in this area – another instance where my "outsider" status and class was highlighted in interactions. Fortunately, the time of my fieldwork coincided with the arrival of the Careem app, a transportation network and web-based private taxi service, which enables its users to travel from one place to another using a simple mobile phone application. Careem is often touted as the most reliable mode of transport in Pakistan because it has vetted its drivers; both the company and the user can track the ride and driver through the application. Careem thus became my preferred mode of transport.

14 The visibility of women and gender segregation in urban centres varies widely from one neighbourhood to the next. In rural areas, gender segregation is more pronounced and female visibility far less.

15 The word *purdah* is polysemous here as it can refer to a curtain or a veil of two distinctive types, literal as well as metaphorical, the latter enshrined within the religious and social practice of gender segregation.

Even so, I travelled primarily during the day and only on very rare occasions ventured out in the evening – and always in company. It was during these long rides to and from my field site, once it was established that I was not a local/Afghan woman, that questions brazenly moved from my religious beliefs to who I lived with and my marital status – questions that other Pakistani women ethnographers have also faced in their fieldwork experiences (Amirali 2017: 148, see also Holz / Bano in this special issue). When I responded that I was single, the question that often followed was: "Why aren't you married?" These moments reminded me that interactions during field research are never one-dimensional and are often filled with complex dynamics, shaped by (at times) uncomfortable and awkward social interactions. Questions of such a nature, depending on the identities and personal histories of the interlocutor, can elicit emotions of discomfort and even offence, as they did for me the first time. In that moment, my feelings of vulnerability arose less from my interlocutors' directness than it did from the uncomfortable realisation of the inconsistencies between, on the one hand, my own geographical background and societal norms, and, on the other, the interpretations and associations generated by my interlocutors.

As an unmarried woman, I was also often assumed to be much younger than my thirty-something age. This often led my interlocutors to treat me like a "girl" (*jinay*) and assume that I needed a companion (chaperone) on any outdoor excursions. My host family cautiously warned me against taking public transport or rickshaws, and advised me on sartorial choices and standards adapted to context-specific environments, all of which I welcomed as a way to ensure not only my respectability but also safety. I considered these acts an ethical commitment on the part of my interlocutors to help me operate within respectable and kin-based networks of mobility and sociality, even if the practices of my ethnographic enquiry in the marketplace (or in the mines) were emphatically unconventional to my middle-class host family.

In the Pashtun-majority city of Peshawar, where I spent the bulk of my time doing field research, gender roles and boundaries frame social interaction. Patriarchal norms shape the everyday, as notions of seclusion and segregation, family systems, *chaddar* ("veiling") and *chardiwari* ("four walls of the house") organise social relations at large. Undergirding these practices is the larger religious concept of *purdah*, which represents a regulatory system for both men and women, but specifically determines and restricts the movement of the latter to the domestic sphere, the "house" (*kor*), from where the word *kor-wala* ("women of the house" / wife) is derived.[16] A plethora of local idioms articulate

16 This practice is not unique to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and intersects with class. Anthropologists have observed that elite women in the Middle East and South Asia generally keep strictly to *purdah* as a sign of privilege and status among Muslim communities (Mernissi 1985: 142, Hoodfar 1997, Papanek 1973, Abu-Lughod 1988).

such ideas of purdah and rendered my behaviour of regularly leaving the *kor* a "conceptual anomaly" (Kondo 1990: 11). Almost all of the female household members of my interlocutors in Peshawar observe these customs. To speak and interact with women would necessarily require my entering into their homes, after spending the day in the market. These moments were instances when my gender offered a clear advantage and gained me a vista – however small – into the lives of lower-, lower-middle- and rural-class women with roots in the former FATA and Afghanistan, who are less likely to engage in forms of sociality outside of their homes.

To avoid drawing unnecessary attention in the public space, I accordingly donned *chaddars* in white and beige, favoured by local Pashtun women, whenever I stepped outside the house. Whether I was in a taxi or walking in the market, I learnt to balance one part of my *chaddar* over my nose, a skill I had acquired from my friends – albeit with little success at the beginning. The strategy of drawing less overt attention to my foreignness worked to a limited extent. I was less noticeable when seated in the back of a car in moving traffic, yet my attempts at "blending", through my sartorial practice, into the crowd in the market spaces where I conducted fieldwork did little to conceal the gait and the fidgeting of a clumsy outsider from the gazes of the more observant passers-by. As the days and weeks wore on, I grew less bothered by the curious gaze of men and walked with more ease as marketplace regulars also grew more accustomed to my presence.

Still, my gendered identity mattered most in Namak Mandi, the gemstone market where I conducted research. Although my main research contact, Amaan,[17] did not accompany me on my first visit to Namak Mandi, his many brothers and nephews made sure that I was never alone when I was in the market. My initial encounters with the mineral trading and cutting community were shaped by my role as Amaan's "adoptive" kin, for I was always seen in the company of male members of the extended family and stayed in their home in 2017. My first few visits to the market yielded few contacts willing to speak to me. I was somewhat restricted to the shop of Amaan's elder brother and the company of Imtiaz, a jovial man in his early fifties who ran errands for the family firm. When Amaan first related my research project to Imtiaz, the latter made a point of introducing me to all the "big players" of the market. His enthusiastic disposition and chattiness made him the perfect fieldwork associate. Imtiaz knew practically everyone in Namak Mandi, but he chose specific men and families who were involved in the trade of the variety of minerals he specialised in. When introducing me to other men in the market, Imtiaz and Amaan's siblings would address me as their "sister" (*khor*), a boundary-marking label that set a precedent and positioned me in clear relation to them as well as others.

17 In accordance with anthropological convention, I have used pseudonyms in the text.

During the initial weeks of my fieldwork, my sense of the market and of my relations with the gem-dealing community was more or less shaped by this role, and while it gained me access and protection as a guest of a well-known business family, it also made it difficult to establish new relationships and collect interviews with those outside their immediate circle. This was not, of course, because of any explicit restriction imposed by my hosts. Although rarely expressed, it was understood that as kin, as someone who lived within their home, and as a woman, I was to be especially careful and refrain from interacting with unknown men. My interactions were confined to only those who were introduced to me, and whose "honour" could be vouchsafed by my hosts, as any other circumstances would place me, their guest, in potentially dangerous or inappropriate situations in which I might be offended, and thus implicate my host and their reputation. Since the 2000s, anthropologists have increasingly written about sexual(ised)[18] harassment and assault during fieldwork, its implications and the need to raise awareness of the difficulties and dangers for early-career fieldworkers (Green et al. 1993, Sharp / Kremer 2006, Pollard 2009). Questions of conduct, as much as the place itself, can be sources of insecurity. This highlights the complex relationship between personal safety and researchers' ethical obligations towards their interlocutors and kin in the field. I had to constantly negotiate the complexity of these relationships.

While fieldworkers document and analyse a social phenomenon in what might seem like a bounded site and community of research, the reality is that the ethnographic data is in fact more bounded by the fieldworker's own positionality as well as that of her gatekeepers. My fieldwork experience and data collection are entangled with these interpersonal and structural relations, which ultimately shape the construction of anthropological knowledge and reveal it as both a collaborative and sometimes contentious process.

Being identified as someone's "kin", even if in a performative sense, can become an important point of entry into the field as well as a marker of status and safety for a female ethnographer in a male-dominant space. In *Veiled Sentiments*, Lila Abu-Lughod (1988: 11), describes how her father insisted on accompanying her to her field site in Egypt, an offer she accepted rather reluctantly and with some embarrassment – it was simply not a convention that the "fathers of anthropologists accompany them to the field to make their initial contacts". She later understood that his act of coming with her was an indispensable "field strategy" that served a very useful purpose: offering one way to identify her, thus securing her own security as someone's kin and not just a young, unmarried woman "traveling alone on uncertain business".

18 Following Kloß (2017: 400), I use "sexual(ised) harassment" instead of sexual harassment to highlight that the basis of this behaviour lies not in sexual attraction but "modes of reinforcing (patriarchal) power". Harassment may differ across cultural norms but here it refers to both verbal and physical actions that violate prevailing local sexual norms.

Many people with whom I discuss my research (including local and foreign social scientists working on diverse issues in Pakistan) were shocked that I, a lone East Asian woman, was pursuing fieldwork in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For two decades, the region and its capital were considered to be largely off limits to foreigners as a result of their widespread reputation for acts of terrorism and the kidnapping of Westerners. Furthermore, the conventional image of the fieldworker in Pashtun / Pukhtun society has been the archetypical white male[19] whose status as an independent and autonomous researcher is widely praised. It is their identity as researchers and outsiders endowed with a certain degree of status – both from past colonial authority and contemporary racial politics – that promises them access to these places. For women to be legible within such a social milieu, they need to be granted the status of "honorary male" or "third gender" – a questionable category of its own. But even this is complicated by dynamics of race, ethnicity and class, subjects I address in the next section.

The marketplace, as I later discovered during fieldwork, was teeming with conspiracy theories.[20] Given the specific geopolitical history of Peshawar and the region more broadly, a foreigner who could not be placed in an easy social category – Western tourists and NGO workers were a rare sight during the time of my field research – would often draw unwitting suspicion from locals. Such was the case for the occasional Western journalist I met who came to the mandi to conduct interviews. However, as an East Asian woman and house guest of one of the gem traders, I was rarely assumed to be working for the "intelligence agency" or the Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). Ethnically Chinese, I was legible in the gem market first as a potential customer or businessperson – mainland Chinese are increasingly emerging as the dominant consumers of luxury goods such as gemstones – and then as a potential language assistant when dealers of gems discovered that I could converse in both Pashto and Chinese. Despite my gendered identity, I was also able to define my own role with a high degree of autonomy and forge friendships with men in the market, relationships that would have been impossible between local men and women.

Misrecognitions: race and ethnicity

There is now ample literature on how a researcher's identity might affect ethnographic methods and their outcomes (cf. Bouka 2015, Clark / Cavatorta 2018, Naz 2012, Yacob-Haliso 2018). While anthropology continues to take as its primary object of study communities and phenomena situated outside Europe

19 See Barth 1956, Lindholm 1982, Edwards 1990, Bartlotti 2000, Watkins 2003.

20 Conspiracy theories about Western intervention are rife in the region, especially since the widely known vaccination ruse orchestrated by the CIA in 2010 in the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden, which continues to inhibit polio eradication efforts in northwest Pakistan today.

and the United States – although exceptions are increasing – the field is now increasingly also populated by scholars of colour, many of whom choose to study their own communities. This demographic expansion reflects a ubiquitous shift in the relationship between ethnographer and interlocutor. My identity as a Taiwanese raised in multicultural contexts is no longer unique within my field. However, my profile as one of the few East Asians to specialise in a geographic region ironically not too far from my own remains an anomaly in South Asian studies, and more specifically, in Pakistan studies. Many non-native ethnographers of Pakistan tend to be white, Euro-American and male.[21] There are undeniable privileges that come with being identified as a white or Euro-American (male) individual conducting fieldwork in certain parts of the world. In the case of Pakistan, a former British colony, the frequent tendency to accord space and respect to foreigners generally (but more specifically white Euro-Americans) is sometimes coined as the "*gora* complex"[22] and was recently most prominently exhibited in the unprecedented entitlement and attention given to foreign travel bloggers like Eva Zu Beck, Cynthia Richie and Rosie Gabrielle (Shackle 2020).

While the access and connections acquired by way of one's positionality and social standing may indeed enhance academic or entrepreneurial projects, considerations of race and power dynamics are peripheral to much of the literature on Pakistan by foreign researchers. Cultural ideas, structures and processes such as colonialism,[23] neoliberalism and the global order interact to affect a researcher's experiences in the field, and there is certainly more accounting that needs to be done on how one's race and gender, as perceived by the communities being studied, alter the field experience and the collection of "data". Access in the field – and by extension the production of knowledge – continues to be shaped by gendered, racialised and nation-based positionalities.

According to Kai Thaler, variables such as gender, race, politics and ethnicity "can be barriers to access, depending on the setting, research topic, or interlocutors" (Thaler 2021: 23). "Native" fieldworkers, or at least those seen as native, navigate an entirely different field that offers them advantages as well as disadvantages. Their closer connections to the communities they research, language skills and context-specific knowledge help them assuage the concerns of exposing local matters to an "outsider" of a community or sometimes nation/continent. Pakistani anthropologist Muhammad Aurang Zeb Mughal recounts, for instance, how his decision to work in Punjab lies primarily in his proficiency in several regional languages. He further explains how his father's personal con-

21 See for example Verkaaik 2004, Marsden 2005, Ring 2006, Gayer 2014, Hull 2012, Walter 2016. The only other exception to this general pattern is the ethnomusicologist Huang Pei-ling (2020), who, interestingly, is also Taiwanese and has worked extensively in the Sindh province of Pakistan.

22 The Urdu and Hindi word *gora* refers to a light-skinned person or group of people typically originating from "the West".

23 Pakistan is a relatively young country, gaining its political independence only in 1947 after the departure of the British and their colonial rule over "British India".

tacts in the village led to his choice of Lodhan, Punjab, as a field site (Mughal 2015). Likewise, anthropologist Amineh Ahmed, because she was both an ethnic-Pashtun (Pukhtun) woman and could claim *bibi* class identity,[24] gained unprecedented access to the rituals of *gham-khadi* (funerals and weddings) of upper-middle class Pashtun women (Ahmed 2006). Class distinctions aside, Zora Neale Hurston's concept of "skinfolk connection" (cited in Williams 1996: 77), through which she identifies the importance of the perception of "shared race" as "shared culture", is also important here. Yet, the same emotional connections can leave scholars beholden to more personal obligations.

In the case of Mughal's research, his class distinction as a Pakistani educated in the "West" also set him apart from an "insider". As he notes, "studying in the UK grants one a prestigious status in Pakistan" and means that someone who straddles the positionality of both an insider and outsider – a "hybrid" if you want – can be received with a warm(er) welcome in ways that an insider perhaps would not, revealing the complexity of power dynamics present among insiders. As a foreign-educated Pakistani, he might also receive preferential treatment from interlocutors of less advantageous socio-economic backgrounds, given the perceived and structural power imbalances between the two. Researchers deemed as "native" have identified their Western education as both an advantage and obstacle during their fieldwork (Khalid 2014: 82–93, Munthali 2001).

I have benefitted from the works of contemporary African and African American women scholars who are not only mindful of their intersectional identities but of how certain aspects become important at certain times, and how these can also vary across one's interlocutors (cf. Lughod 1991, Bouka 2015, Yacob-Haliso 2019). While their reflexivity and positionality led me to consider more seriously the dynamics inherent in knowledge production, I found it nonetheless difficult to locate myself in these accounts. As neither a "white" nor "native" anthropologist, my appearance solicited two kinds of responses: either complete avoidance of any verbal exchange due to my gender and perceived ethnicity, or a stream of questions that would otherwise not be directed at Pashtun or Euro-American women.

As a Han-Taiwanese (Chinese for my interlocutors) and given my sartorial choice, my appearance often led to my being misrecognised by locals as "Afghan", which is a label that subsumes diverse ethnic groups and appearances. The ethnic group of Hazaras, a predominantly Shia minority in Afghanistan, are among the many Afghan refugees who arrived in Peshawar starting in the late 1970s. In my daily interactions in the market, men hearing me speak in an accented Pashto would ask whether I was "Afghan", by which they meant Hazara. During a long conversation on the complex political situation in Afghanistan, an Afghan interlocutor based in Peshawar commented on the shape of my eyes: "You look

24 *Bibi* is a title of respect for a woman from a wealthy family.

like one of my friends in Quetta, you know? You have eyes like the Hazara."[25] I was further made conscious of this assumption whilst in Kabul, where I was often spoken to in Dari and surprised my interlocutors when I responded in a broken Dari or Pashto. In Pakistan, Hazara minorities are based predominantly in the province of Balochistan and for decades have suffered under the growing sectarian violence that intensified with the militancy in the FATA region.[26] In Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, the Shia Hazara community account for about a quarter of the city's population of approximately 2.2 million. Since 1999, Sunni sectarian groups have killed at least 1000 Hazaras and forced more than 200,000 to relocate to other Pakistani cities such as Peshawar, thus providing a potential reason for my interlocutors to misrecognise me as Hazara, despite the fact that I did not think I looked Hazara.

Given this complex ethnic connection, which caused much confusion among my interlocutors, I inhabited multiple, sometimes fluid, positionalities in the field. Depending on how I was perceived, I was treated differently by my interlocutors. When I was mistaken as Hazara or Afghan, there would be minimal exchange between me and some of the more transient interlocutors, such as taxi drivers or shopkeepers. Being identified as a "Chinese" woman and not an Afghan woman meant that Pashtun – men especially – could engage in open and fluid conversations with me without being perceived as "crossing a line" in local customs. Yet I am also cognisant of the fact that it may have been because I was an Urdu- and Pashto-speaking woman with Hazara-like features, wearing what I wore, that I was able to do this research without stirring up too much suspicion. As a foreigner, I was exempted from the strict patriarchal codes that confined sisters and wives of the men working in Namak Mandi. I was able to interact and mingle with men – young and old – in the market, where I was accorded the kind of respect and distance given to a foreign guest (*mehman*).

Others who recognised me as Chinese were eager to speak with me, hopeful that I was a buyer of gems. Chinese businesspersons, men and women, living in Islamabad did occasionally visit Namak Mandi for their purchases and were thus not an unfamiliar sight. Once it was established that I was Taiwanese, which in their eyes, was the equivalent of "Chinese", gem dealers in Namak Mandi began to utilise my linguistic assistance in negotiations with their Chinese clients. Throughout my year-long fieldwork, I became an ad-hoc interpreter for Pashtun and Chinese interlocutors engaged in the gem trade, as well as for Chinese entrepreneurs based in Islamabad. My role as a translator during the

25 Interview, Peshawar, December 2018.

26 The Persian-speaking Hazara ethnic minority forms a small part of the larger Shia population in Pakistan, a group that is roughly one-fifth of Pakistan's population and both ethnically and linguistically diverse. Relations between Sunnis and Shias in Pakistan declined in the late 1970s and early 1980s under the dictatorship of Army General Zia-ul-Haq, whose policies privileged Sunni jurisprudence at the expense of Pakistan's Shia population (Abou-Zahab 2002: 115–130).

time of my fieldwork was mostly unplanned; the experience brought me haphazardly into the world of China-Pakistan relations on the ground that are too often studied through a geopolitical and economic lens focused on the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Although I benefited from the independence of mobility and the ease of social relations across genders as a "Chinese" in Peshawar, there were many moments when I would also be subjected to local norms precisely because of the way I looked and the clothes I wore: the *chaddar* along with the *kurta pajama*. Sometimes, during interactions with men in the market, I would often be reminded to "move less" between shops as it didn't "look good" for me, to arrange my *chaddar* in ways that covered my hair properly, or to be seated at the end of the shop when an unknown guest arrived.

On one occasion, when a gem businessman from Lahore sought to shake my hand upon meeting me, knowing I was a foreigner, he was curtly stopped from doing so by my friend and informant in the shop, who admonished him gently for seeking to shake my hand, reminding him to give *izzat* ("respect") to his "sister" (me). My women interlocutors also cautioned me against spending too much time with *ghair mard* (unrelated men) in the market, asking me to spend more time at home.

Rather than interpret such instances as limits to my sociality, and by extension my research, I understood these encounters and interventions of my interlocutors as examples in which they sought to include me within their communities and practices as a pseudo-insider, recognising the kind of vulnerability and exposure I would be subjected to, given my perceived identity in the public space. These aspects of research positionality often go unacknowledged in what scholars eventually publish as "empirical data". Our observations and participant testimonies resulting from ethnographic immersion are too often represented and recognised as tidy, orderly and systematic, unlike the realities of sociality that is teeming with complexity, contradiction and human agency, which all come to bear on our knowledge production (Nilan 2002).

The subject of volatility, or volatility for whom?

Time spent in a place often unsettles the researcher's assumptions of the field and brings to the fore imaginaries of volatility and how they can differ from ground realities. Peshawar, despite all its tragedies, is a place of refuge for internally displaced people from the former-FATA as well as for Afghan refugees. Volatility is both a judgement and an interpretation of the overall sense of in/security of a place. I want to consider here how these ideas and designations of volatility, which affect practices in the field, an otherwise optional undertaking, foreshadow the challenges of those who inhabit it in their every day.

Our understanding of volatility is highly subjective and necessitates a look at one's position, race and gender in the society where one conducts research.

In my interactions at the University of Peshawar, I came to know and befriended several students who originate from former FATA but currently reside in Peshawar, often without their immediate families. Our conversations about their varying backgrounds and stories from their native villages were intermingled with tales of the intense difficulties and trauma they had experienced before arriving in Peshawar. For example, one young man reminded me that the reason why many people like him had come to Peshawar is because they had to flee their hometowns in various parts of Waziristan, which witnessed egregious injustices and violence at the hands of both militants (Taliban and Al Qaeda) and the Pakistani army.[27] Peshawar was for my interlocutors an "upgrade" as far security was concerned, a place where they had access to education and other services. It was not perceived as a "volatile environment" in comparison with their own homes in former FATA. Some confided that they had relatives or friends who suffered from psychological and health problems as a result of the trauma experienced in their conflict-ridden hometowns. Many of the students are categorised as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), defined as individuals who have been forced to flee their residences as a result of armed conflict, militancy or natural disaster, but remain within the national borders of their country. According to my interlocutors, the number of IDPs in Waziristan proliferated in the last two decades as Pakistan joined the US-led WoT, and "turned many of their primary schools into army check posts".[28] For the sake of basic education as well as other amenities, the more fortunate were able to move to places within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as Kohat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Abbotabad and of course, the capital Peshawar.

It is often difficult as an outsider to appreciate sufficiently how volatility is experienced by interlocutors. The different snapshots of intense violence that they themselves have witnessed or experienced are rarely foregrounded in the mainstream media within Pakistan, and thereby figure even more marginally in the perceptions of foreign researchers. As a result of such conversations, I retain a profound ambivalence when encountering our (the anthropologists') classification of a place's "volatility". No longer am I able to separate it from what I have heard and how it has made me conscious of my subject position. Expressed in such stories is the misleading notion of "volatility" in any environment, which permeates the decisions of researchers and the everyday lives of locals. But a place labelled as "volatile" for many can also serve as a refuge for others in the way Peshawar has been for IDPs from Waziristan. Hearing these accounts has had a tremendous bearing on the work of reflexivity that I

27 Interview, Peshawar, December 2018.
28 Interview, Peshawar, December 2018.

emphasise in this article as a form of ethical practice, however difficult it is in the given capacity of an "outsider".

In the decolonising push that is gaining ground within the social sciences today, it has become imperative for qualitative researchers (especially those with connections to the Global North) to reflect upon the implications and ethics of how and why they gain access to cultural and social information. Kate Cronin-Furman and Mili Lake (2018) offer some suggestions towards a more ethical research practice that includes recognising complex layers of identity and social dynamics, which have implications for interactions not only with research subjects but also with local partners. The insights of feminist scholars also emphasise the importance of recognising the asymmetrical effects of the global order, as they intersect with the gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, race and religion of individuals, especially in the production of critical scholarship in volatile areas (Medie / Kang 2018). Reflexivity is not only a resource for good and critical scholarship but also a conceptual tool one can use to achieve ethical practice in research. As Cronin-Furman and Lake argue, to emphasise these identities and power dynamics is not to "deny the agency of actors within the South, but rather to produce explanations and theories that capture the complexity of women, gender and politics" (ibid.: 39). And to this I would also add the importance of providing a perspective for our understanding of volatility outside of our own immediate environments.

I want to end, therefore, with an anecdote that demonstrates the importance of such an approach. It is a story of volatility, but not in what we might label a "traditional" site of volatility. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I spent several weekends in Islamabad, where I moonlighted as a translator for members of the Chinese community, several of whom are entrepreneurs. In July 2019, the residence of a Chinese businessman where I was staying was broken into by two armed men wearing police uniforms. As they entered the house – I was sitting in the guest room on the second floor – they swiftly destroyed the CCTV that monitored the gates and locked the main entrance. I was startled by the rowdy entry into my room by one of the "officers". Gun in hand, he shouted at me to come with him. I duly obeyed. As I descended (or better flew) down the stairs with the menacing man behind me, I saw that the Chinese entrepreneur, whom I'll call Mr Wu, was already seated on the sofa facing the other "officer". As soon as I sat down next to him, it became clear to me that I had been brought in for my interpreting services. The two "officers" began showing us images on their phones containing material that implicated Mr Wu in charges of illegal possession of alcohol, cigarettes and weapons, and of hosting an "illegal interracial marriage" on his premises. As I fumbled to translate these accusations into Chinese for Mr Wu, one of the bottles of alcohol that had been discovered stashed in the kitchen was placed on the table in front of us.

They then began to videorecord Mr Wu's face next to the bottle of alcohol, asking me to explain to him that unless he compromised, he stood to lose all his assets and businesses in Pakistan. At this point I understood they were trying to blackmail Mr Wu, but their police identities remained a mystery. When one began to take a video of me next to my passport, my anger flared. Summoning what little courage I could, I demanded to see their police IDs. In response, the younger of the two said in a false sweet tone: "You are our sister. No harm will come to you. You are a scholar and have travelled to Thailand and Swat recently." Then, as if I did not already feel adequately threatened, he added: "We know everything about you."

Nothing came of their threats, since Mr Wu, despite being held at gunpoint, retained his composure, and insisted that he had no more than 20,000 PKR on him and could not offer them the amount they demanded. Exasperated by Mr Wu's intransigence, they turned on me angrily and blamed me for not translating accurately. It is indeed likely that I was *not* translating their threats correctly. They added that they were going to kidnap Mr Wu if he did not pay – did he not understand this? I panicked and relayed these additional threats to Mr Wu, choking back tears of anxiety. During the entire incident, which lasted no more than two hours, from 9 am to 11 am, we were in a large house that Mr Wu had rented in one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Islamabad, near the Kohsar market. The episode ended with Mr Wu promising to deliver more money on Monday when the banks opened – it was a Saturday. Once the two "officers" left, we were also able to seek help from the Chinese consulate and a local lawyer, before eventually turning to the local police force, whom we suspected to be the perpetrators all along.

This particularly traumatic incident offers us a useful way to reflect upon the notion of volatility inherent in the field. It muddies our usual understanding of *where* and *how* insecure instances take place and *to whom*. While it is Peshawar and its neighbouring regions that are classified as volatile – the marketplace that I study is even described by Western media as "home to terrorist financiers and drug smugglers" (Khan 2014) – it was in fact in the capital city of Islamabad where I experienced my greatest moment of insecurity and danger. In such situations, our notion of volatility – defined mostly by terrorism and other conflict settlings – may not at all align with the kinds of crime that emerge on the ground, specifically in an era of heightened China-Pakistan relations and interactions that are too often subsumed within larger geopolitical discourses. The idea of relative (non-)volatility in larger cities instils among researchers a false sense of overall security, yet it is one that offers vital insight into the kinds of threats a researcher in my position can encounter in any location. As I have shown, the intersection of my gender, race/ethnicity, class in Pakistan led to distinct privileges and also unanticipated moments of vulnerability yet to be rigorously grappled with by Euro-American scholars of the region. The absence

of reference points for an East Asian anthropologist working on Pakistan serves as a useful reminder that we need to continue broadening our discussions of race, gender, ethnicity and nationality as we grapple with the methodological and ethical concerns surrounding fieldwork in supposedly "volatile" contexts.

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