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DIGITAL NARRATIVES AND WITNESSING
The ethics of engaging with places at a distance

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DIGITAL NARRATIVES AND WITNESSING

The ethics of engaging with places at a distance

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Abstract

This article explores some of the geographies of crisis and conflict that have become increasingly visible through the use of digital technologies. It attends to the visual politics embedded within such images, whether these are photographs and videos shared through social media or maps produced on platforms such as Google Earth. It also discusses recent practices of spatial analysis that use a forensic approach. Through focusing on the Pakistani city of Gwadar in the restive Balochistan province, my aim is to reveal the complex layered narrative that emerges out of and about such a place through processes of visualisation. Gwadar oscillates between an anticipated role as a strategic regional port and the present reality of being positioned at the periphery. By working through these narratives, I explore what type of ethical spatial engagement is possible with such places that are often constructed as out-of-bounds by governments and non-state actors.

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DISTANT PLACES AND THE TOPOLOGICAL

This article explores the fraught issue of how we might have an ethical engagement with places that are at a distance from us, particularly I am interested in those places that have become more difficult to spend time in through conflict and war or that have been constructed as out-of-bounds by governments, state actors etc. Distance in this sense is not just about being located far away or of being inaccessible, but it speaks of those places that through their material conditions repel us in some way, or from which we are repelled. Distance is here considered in a topological idiom, as resulting from a lack of relational connections that stretch topographical notions of nearness (Sloterdijk 2012; Balibar 2009; Elden 2009). Whilst in the past, such places would remain out-of-sight and out of our consciousness, increasingly they reveal themselves to us. Often this occurs through the use of digital technologies, from the impulse to map and create a digital globe of the whole world to the various social media platforms that transmit images and videos. This situation is very different from the past when such places could only be seen in a few, select images that were often heavily mediated in reports by journalists and through the narrative of NGOs and state actors. More so than ever before, we are compelled to act, to somehow feel responsible for and bear witness to what occurs at a distance from us.

I start by discussing a series of examples that show how the practice of witnessing has transformed in relation to digital technologies. I will then explore these issues through examples related to the Pakistani city of Gwadar, which is situated on the Arabian Sea coast. It is located about an hour and a half from the Iranian border and an eight hour

drive west to the Pakistani port city of Karachi. Gwadar is situated in the province of Balochistan, which is the largest, yet least populated and poorest province of the country, but one that is the most resource rich. It therefore sits within a very particular set of exploitative relations to the rest of the country, as well as having strategic importance within the region. As a deep sea port it is highly prized for the access it provides to the Arabian Sea, and China has recently signed an agreement to build a transport and economic corridor (China Pakistan Economic Corridor – CPEC) along the length of Pakistan in order to gain such access ("China–Pakistan Economic Corridor" 2016). This strategic importance means that the mainstream narrative around Gwadar is restricted to one thing only; searching for Gwadar on the Internet returns articles on oil pipelines, deep sea ports and China and India's competing interests in the region (Haider 2005; Daniels 2013; Malik 2012). In the space of the Internet, the politics of seeing in relation to Gwadar return a very particular perspective that is steeped in the unequal historical relations that the city and province have with the region. Gwadar is therefore an apt place from which to think about relating to places at a distance. Not only is it becoming increasingly visible to the outside world due to its geopolitical importance, but physical access to it is also being restricted by the Pakistani military.

In such a context, the digital realm provides access to and also mediates Gwadar as place. Such mediation can be understood through the term 'power-topologies', which John Allen uses to describe the ability of actors to affect places across distance and proximity (Allen 2011). It shifts the focus from looking at the spatial reach of different types of actors to the mechanisms that allow them to transcend notions of distance. He

writes that thinking of power in a topological mode "is not so much about which actors have become more or less dispersed, more or less networked, as it is about how they make their leverage and presence felt through certain practices of proximity and reach." (Allen 2011, 290) In relation to the spatial practices that are the concern of this article, this necessarily means that we must pay attention to the ways in which places become visible at a distance, and what that visibility does or does not allow us to apprehend and therefore to do. Here the role of digital maps, the ability to remote sense places and the role of social media cannot be overemphasised. Topology in this context highlights the intensive nature of the world that such technologies create because as power reaches across space it is not so much traversing across a fixed space and time, as it is composing its own space-time. That is, in creating for example remote sensed images of places in crisis, or of choosing to give precedence to certain places, people and organisations over others, the actors creating these narrations at a distance exemplify the intensive nature of the topological. The decisions that are made, what is valued and how it is measured all emerge in relation to each other *through* the practice of making visible at a distance (Adkins and Lury 2012).

'SEEING' PLACES IN CRISIS THROUGH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

In this section I focus on the politics of visualisation embedded within such digital technologies. Whilst there is an exponential rise in the use of technologies to 'see' at a distance, such as digital mapping and crowdsourcing, there is currently very little critical

engagement with the ways in which they mediate our engagement with place. Literature on crowd-sourced maps tends to focus on the technological aspects or the experience of making and using the map, not necessarily on how that then affects people's relationships with places (Hudson-Smith et al. 2009; Dodge and Kitchin 2013). One important arena in which digital technologies are producing visual material of distant places in crisis is in the context of humanitarian action. Platforms such as Ushahidi and groups such as the Standby Task Force, Humanitarian OpenStreetMap and Crisis Mappers, all use digital mapping techniques combined with crowd sourcing via SMS or Twitter to respond rapidly to disasters and to assist humanitarian agencies in directing their efforts towards those most at risk. Following the use of such methods in the humanitarian response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake it is widely acknowledged that digital technologies are now a key component of humanitarian action (Burns 2014; Hesse 2010; Zook et al. 2010). One key critique has been the distant nature of such endeavours that could be seen to use technology as a proxy through which to administer aid, whilst keeping western humanitarian agents safe and out of harm's way (Duffield 2013). Another aspect relates to the actual visual material that such engagements produce, often contributing to the impression that certain places are in permanent crisis.

In thinking about the politics of visualisation embedded within humanitarian uses of digital technologies, I would like to start with Michael Buerk's seminal report on the famine in Ethiopia, which was broadcast by the BBC in 1984. Since this report, much has been written on the role of images and the visual in prompting humanitarian

responses to crises and in many ways it has been instrumental in shaping the politics of compassion that humanitarian responses in the West rely upon (Nussbaum 2003; Berlant 2004). One could trace a genealogy of image-making from that single broadcast to the situation as it is today, where techniques of digital story-telling and virtual reality are being used by aid agencies as a way of communicating with the affected populations as well as with potential donors (Madianou, Longboan, and Ong 2015). One such attempt at reaching donors is the film, *Clouds over Sidra*, made in collaboration with the UN, which follows a young Syrian girl around the Za'atri refugee camp in Jordan. The award winning virtual reality film was premièred at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and was credited with increasing the amount of aid pledged to the cause by world leaders (Feltham 2015; Anderson 2015). The film is a good successor to Buerk's BBC report since both rely on the notion of witnessing to mobilise passions. We are shown the emaciated child crying at the pain of hunger, or the harsh realities of life in a desert refugee camp, in order to provoke a response from us at an emotional level. [FIG 1]

Whilst there is this similarity between the two images, there is also a significant shift in the way that these images operate as modes of witnessing that has much to say about our contemporary reality. In the BBC report the familiar and trusted face of the presenter gave an authenticity not only to the images but also to the accompanying analysis, however simplified and unreliable it may have been (Franks 2014; Franks 2013). In *Clouds over Sidra*, a completely different dynamic is at play. We are now in the era of the ubiquity of the image, of the hyper-complexity of politics, where black and white

understandings of right and wrong are simply not possible. It is an era that the artist-philosopher Hito Steyerl has called the time of November, referring to the Sergei Eisenstein film, *October* (Eisenstein and Aleksandrov 1928). She writes, “November is the time after October, a time when revolution seems to be over and peripheral struggles have become particular, localist, and almost impossible to communicate.” (Steyerl 2005, 1) In such a time, whose witnessing could be trustworthy enough? The simple and rather cynical answer that *Clouds over Sidra* provides us with, is yourself and yourself alone. Virtual reality transports us to the refugee camp, where we can see ‘first-hand’ the traumatic conditions and hear the personal stories of refugees who seem to be addressing us alone. As one of the film makers Chris Milk claims; “Virtual reality, fundamentally, is a technology that removes borders… Anything can be local to you.” (Harris 2015) The primacy of vision embedded within such statements is only one in a line of problematic assumptions. This work places the burden of proof on the refugee, in this case a twelve year old girl, who has to show us her destitution and her will in the face of it; she has to perform it. There is also the unerring faith in the technological, which in this particular configuration has rather aptly been named the ‘digital saviour complex’, by the critic Bhakti Shringarpure (2015). This new found practice does of course rest upon a familiar impulse of relying on the technological, but in an age of new media and the almost instant sharing of images via social media, a different set of politics and ethics are at play. No longer reliant on the mediation of newsroom editors and professional journalists in the field, today the images we consume of various crises are often sent by members of the public, people who happen to be there at the time. There is an authenticity and immediacy associated with such images, but at the same

time they are easily exploited, misinterpreted and hijacked by powerful actors. How to make sense of the sheer amount and often shocking nature of these images is difficult. Yet some practices are emerging that use the proliferation and availability of images to do critical work. Many of these practices have a spatial dimension and are allied to the work of investigative journalists

The project Dronestagram by the artist James Bridle is a good example of how seeing through digital technology can produce a different practice of witnessing (Bridle 2015). As leaked reports and the testimonies of former soldiers has slowly revealed the reality of the US drone warfare programme, it has become increasingly apparent that beyond the illegality of such acts, what the US government was claiming in terms of the number of casualties and the accuracy of the bombs, was a far cry from the reality on the ground (Pilkington 2015; Pilkington and MacAskill 2015). Dronestagram, is an Instagram site set up by the artist in 2012, that records the approximate site of each bombing, information that Bridle takes from the unerring work of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and supplements with other news reports into a short précis of target, casualties and the patchy information emerging from the place itself (Bridle 2015; “The Bureau of Investigative Journalism” 2015). Using freely available satellite imagery from Google Earth, Bridle shows the visual reality of areas inaccessible and out-of-bounds to those in the west and also to most citizens of the countries in which the bombs fell. He writes that they are “places most of us will never see. We do not know these landscapes and we cannot visit them.” (Bridle 2012) Bridle was not the first to think of doing this, an app to do something quite similar was rejected by Apple for being

too disturbing, but this is exactly the point the artist is making – perhaps we needed to be disturbed and shown through visual images the places we were complicit in bombing through our silence (Ackerman 2012). The images that Bridle uses are readily available for anyone to access through Google Earth, part of an ongoing attempt to map and visualise every place on the planet, to make it hyper-visible. Yet these images, that are apparently so readily available for anyone to access are also completely inaccessible, since they are difficult to find and hardly anyone chose to look at them. They are somehow rendered consumable by Bridle, allowing us to see the reality of the places that the US and its allies may claim were remote out posts, hamlets consisting of a few buildings, but were also places where people lived out their daily lives. Of course, there were other sources of information, other narratives that we could have chosen to listen to had we the appetite. Tribal leaders and ordinary people from the affected areas were telling of the exact toll that the bombings were taking. Herein lies the ambiguity and critical force of Bridle's work. He is well aware that the remotely sensed images from satellites count for much more than the testimonies of tribal leaders, brown bodies whose truth the west was not yet ready to hear. In Dronestagram the politics of witnessing takes another twist. When difficult stories are being told by distant others, then the testimony of presence is suddenly rendered ineffective. Would *Clouds over Sidra* have gained the sort of international acclaim it received had the narrative been a little different? The stories we listen to and the witnesses we give credence to say much about our own uneven and compromised politics. [FIG 2]

SPATIAL ANALYSIS AND THE FORENSIC GAZE

In the following section I relate a set of practices that combine forms of spatial analysis with social media to create composite narratives of distant places. The citizen journalist Eliot Higgins, or Brown Moses as he was previously known by his Twitter handle, and his organisation Bellingcat also use digital technologies to 'see' at a distance (Brown Moses Media Ltd. 2016). The practice of citizen journalism has perhaps found its most effective incarnation in their work. Higgins was amongst the first to use geo-location techniques on photos gleaned from social media and by combining these with other news sources he was able to report on events that were out of the reach of traditional journalism. Amongst Bellingcat's most effective work has been the tracking of missiles from Russia to parts of Ukraine under Russian control and of proving through this practice of tracking and location that a Russian-made missile was responsible for bringing down the Malaysian Airways flight MH17 (Burrell 2015). Higgins and the volunteers he works with use open-source methods and information freely available on the Internet to meticulously piece together events on the other side of the world. In the work of Bellingcat, Higgins and others, the witness is multiplied, there are several witnesses whose accounts are merged to form a coherent picture. But at the same time, the witness has become expert, that is, it takes the painstaking work of people who are versed in the practice of geo-location, of verifying satellite images and of knowing how to calculate distances and angles from multiple photographs and videos, in order to create a composite account. It could also be considered a forensic exercise that exits us from the world of the speaking political subject (Weizman 2012). This raises a number

of difficult questions, for example, what happens to the witness when the claims that are being made do not come from the testimony of individuals but are made through combining multiple narratives? Where do you locate the political subject in such an account and does it matter that witnessing can no longer be attributed to just one person? Are the multiple volunteers that contribute to Bellingcat the authors of this work or is it the various people from social media whose information has been used to piece together an account, or is it in actuality the figure of Elliott Higgins and his organisation? [FIG 3]

The work of Eyal Weizman and his research agency, Forensic Architecture, might give some answers to these questions surrounding the transformation of the practice of witnessing (Weizman 2011). Their projects use spatial analysis to provide evidence for legal cases or to promote political discussion around cases of human rights abuse. Often this utilises the abundance of photographs and mobile phones videos of any major event to glean relevant information. In an early project they used video analysis in an attempt to prove responsibility for the death of a Palestinian demonstrating against the construction of the separation wall in the West Bank. Their analysis focused on the probable angle of a munition thrown across the wall by the Israeli army. Another project focused on what has come to be known as the Left-to-die Boat, a migrant vessel making its way from Libya towards Europe through one of the most heavily surveilled maritime zones. Here they used surveillance technologies to show the number of different actors who could have rescued the stricken vessel but who used the overlapping jurisdictions at sea to not do so, resulting in the deaths of over sixty people.

Such projects are used by Forensic Architecture to show that we live in an era of the expert witness where the testimony of those who were present, that is the speaking political subject, has been replaced by expert knowledge that deals overwhelmingly in the field of the visual – photographic and video evidence, but also material evidence that is mobilised through scientific practices (Weizman 2012; Forensic Architecture 2014). The extended world of forensics is thus used to gather stories through objects and images, a practice that is based in a very particular understanding of the scientific process.

The examples of Dronestagram, Bellingcat and Forensic Architecture give a glimpse of what type of engagement with a place that is caught up in geopolitics. is possible through digital means. The three emergent practices combine spatial analysis with investigative journalism in order to engage with places that are in conflict, where it is difficult to spend time in the field. Whilst there is much to be learnt from this work it also serves as a warning. These types of accounts are considered more objective and less prone to the falsifications and subjectivity of accounts taken from individual witnesses, their misrememberings and lapses in memory often also being a form of self-preservation in the wake of traumatic events. In giving precedence to the stories that images and objects tell, the narratives of political subjects are taken to not be as 'true' as those gleaned through scientific techniques. While the Dronestagram project is very canny about the limits of seeing through satellite imagery, both Bellingcat and Forensic Architecture's work is based around making such objects speak and so they both partake in the placing of expert knowledge and objects above political subjects. It is a

tension at the heart of a particular understanding of architecture's role within such matters, both these projects use architectural methods even though only one is led by an architect. Here location is understood as *site,* in a fairly reductive manner; a site that is constructed through visuality, measurement and calculability, a term that Weizman himself uses (Weizman 2012; Keenan and Weizman 2012). Taking this important work as a starting point, I would like to explore how in similar situations to those that Weizman deals with location could be addressed differently, so that the possibility of using some expert knowledge and the testimony of objects could also be supplemented by other types of knowledge and other types of seeing. Perhaps what I am also referring to here is the notion of a feminist geopolitics. (Massaro and Williams 2013), which in reference to Weizman's work, the geographer Jo Sharp describes as a "certain blurring of the boundary between object and subject in a way that offers new possibilities for feminist understandings of the ways in which bodies and other materialities are caught up in geopolitics." (Sharp 2015)

BECOMING (IN)VISIBLE

Many of the issues discussed above coalesce in the Pakistani city of Gwadar where bodies and materialities come together in unexpected and cruel ways in the wake of geopolitical manoeuvrings by states and other regional actors. On the one hand, Gwadar as place is almost entirely invisible to those outside the country, on the other it could be described as being hyper visible. However, this visibility is only open to two

types of gaze, both of which are violent in their own way. For those who invest in Special Economic Zones, or those who are interested in the flow of oil, Gwadar is an important node, whose significance is increasing rapidly. Here the gaze is related to modes of extreme speculation, summed up in this quote from a recent book on the Indian Ocean: “If there are great place-names of the past—Carthage, Thebes, Troy, Samarkand, Angkor Wat—and of the present—Dubai, Singapore, Teheran, Beijing, Washington—then Gwadar might qualify as a great place-name of the future.” (Kaplan 2010, 69) Another way in which the city is hyper visible is what Pakistan has perhaps become synonymous with lately. Alongside the discourse on the continuing ‘war on terror’, it is the military drone as lethal killing machine whose use by the US has been perfected in the borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pakistani military has also turned to the use of drones for surveillance purposes and these have been deployed across Balochistan in the army’s fight against insurgents. Recently, in a more worrying development, the drones have been armed.[1] Whilst the city of Gwadar itself has not been bombed by drones, there have been unconfirmed reports of attacks in the mountains surrounding the city (Mustikhan 2015).

For an understanding of how the Pakistani military has come to use drones against its own citizens, some knowledge of the province’s colonial past is useful. The historical area of Balochistan is cut across by one of the earliest colonial borders drawn across a landscape viewed as forbidding to Western eyes. During colonial rule both the Tribal Areas of what was then named the North West Frontier Province (and is now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and parts of Balochistan were only under partial British control.

These were also areas where the British feared the influence of their colonial rivals, the French and the Russians, and attempted to use a mixture of administrative power, strategic military force and self-rule to secure the empire's western frontiers. Up to the establishment of the Goldsmid Line in 1871, the agreed border between Persia and British India, the lines drawn across Balochistan waxed and waned according to tribal rivalries and external interference. These included a 15th century kingdom that for a short period fell to the Mughal rulers of the Indian Subcontinent, followed by the 1666 establishment of an area that would begin to have a Baloch ethnic identity centred on Kalat, an agricultural city that would later become the political centre of the Khanate of Kalat, a princely state under British rule. Whilst this original area was not called Balochistan, it was the British who gave the Khan of Kalat support and legitimacy over the various Baloch tribes in order to create a frontier or buffer zone. Hafeez Jamali writes of how the British "brought together or fused disparate Baloch territories and tribes (and cut-out/separated others) to engender or produce a territory 'Balochistan' and a particular subject of colonial rule, the 'Baloch tribal'" (Jamali, n.d., 1). Following the end of British rule and in the discourse surrounding Partition, Balochistan and the other tribal areas that make up large parts of what is now Pakistan were less than engaged in the idea of a Muslim state, most openly supported the Indian Congress. In 1947 the Khanate of Kalat was granted independence by the British but this embryonic state did not last long, with the Pakistani army invading and forcing an accession agreement. In Gwadar the picture is further complicated by the fact that the city was temporarily granted to the Sultanate of Oman by the Khan of Kalat. The Pakistani state finally bought back Gwadar from Oman in 1958. The coastal area thus has historic ties

with Oman, with many working on the Arabian *dhows,* whilst the Mekran coast formed a part of the slave route from East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. The fishermen of Gwadar are descendants of these slaves who provided domestic labour for the Baloch tribes and they still hold a lower social status to the tribal Baloch.

The British approach towards the Baloch tribes has some resonance with the way in which they dealt with the Pashtun areas of what is now Pakistan, what has been termed a 'frontier mentality' by Benjamin Hopkins (Hopkins 2015). It later crystallised in the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), an insidious practice that purported to give a level of independence to tribal leaders whilst absolving the British of any responsibility towards their colonial subjects. Following the events of September 11, the world is now familiar with the colonial hangover that is the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan where the FCR is still in effect, albeit in a recently modified form (Farooq 2014). Perhaps less familiar are the Provincially Administrated Tribal Areas (PATA), some of which include the northern areas of Balochistan. Whilst these are not under FCR and therefore the citizens of Balochistan have recourse to the same forms of justice as the rest of Pakistan, political and economic representation within PATA is not of the same form and at the same level as the rest of the country.[2] The remaining parts of the province meanwhile are not officially governed by tribal laws but the ways in which the area is treated by the state of Pakistan, leads to a highly ambiguous status somewhere between tribal law, provincial and federal law and a practice of unseeing.[3]

Following independence, there have been a number of insurgencies within the province with an independence movement that has gained popular support through the

discriminatory practices of the Pakistani government and the conduct of the Pakistani army (Rooney 2010; Khan 2015; Wirsing 2008). The revenue from the province's natural gas and mineral resources have not benefited the local population, while the Pakistani army has been accused of the massacres of not only insurgents but also of civilians. With China investing heavily in the port of Gwadar as well as the economic corridor along the length of Pakistan, many local people fear that not only will this new investment not benefit the local population, but that they will also be expelled from their own land. There are many rumours and some verified accounts of land being taken forcibly through forged documentation and by exploiting the lack of written records and land deeds (*Dawn* 2010). In the face of such injustices, the Baloch have historically fought back through whatever means available and in recent times their preferred tactic has been the sabotaging of energy infrastructure in the province. This direct threat to Chinese investment leads to the current situation of the Pakistani army bombing its own citizens using drones in the mountainous regions of Balochistan. Currently, many areas of the province are restricted to foreign nationals who cannot enter without special permission, which is notoriously hard to get. The media whilst not banned is highly restricted and many journalists have been killed in the area. Gwadar and Balochistan in general are thus being constructed as distant by the practices of the Pakistani state and military.

DIGITAL NARRATIVES ON GWADAR

In this section I sketch out the main narratives on Gwadar that can be found on the internet and discuss what they could tell us about the politics of visibility and the ethics of spatial engagement at a distance. Much of this relates to who is responsible for making the narrative and to how it is mediated within the digital realm. The first example relates the contemporary consequences of the 'frontier mentality' discussed above and how this coalesces into a neo-liberal approach towards the exploitation of land, resources and people. In the second example we see how the digital humanitarianism discussed earlier comes to be applied in Gwadar and what remains invisible to such a gaze. Finally, in the last example I relate the use of social media by a political movement that aims to make visible the plight of those who have disappeared, and I speculate on what the forensic practices described in the previous section could bring to such a cause.

The first and most prevalent digital account in relation to Gwadar comes from those in power. It is the standard geopolitical narrative of the deep sea port, discussions on the various proposed oil pipelines, China and India's competing interests in the region, and the sorts of speculative investment in land and property that accompany such developments (Haider 2005; Daniels 2013; Malik 2012). In this case, the information comes from official sources such as the Gwadar Port Authority or the Gwadar Development Authority, who use images of the port, the coastal landscape and of the proposed development to publicise their claim to the area for the resources it can provide ("Gwadar Development Authority" 2006; "Gwadar Port" 2016). These images and the narrative that surrounds them are striking in their lack of representation of the

local population, they neither appear in the photographs nor in the discussions on the impacts of such development. When people do appear they are state dignitaries or representatives of companies visiting the area for investment purposes. With some notable exceptions, in the Pakistani media these discussions have taken centre stage with the vast majority of comment and analysis focusing on the advantages of investment for the country. As the discussion of the 'frontier mentality' above shows, this fits into an historic attitude that views Balochistan as a vast empty expanse at the far edge of the country.

Yet these projected images of Gwadar are not quite as they seem because the desire for modernity and development remains unfulfilled. The developments including Dubai style towers with names to match, such as Burj Al Gwadar and Al Noor Towers, did not materialise and the real estate speculation peaked in 2006. The land that these prospective schemes were to be built upon was acquired by private individuals, even though in many cases it was common land that had neither been surveyed by the colonial authorities nor the Pakistani government. As Jamali recalls well placed locals took full advantage of the situation. "Fishermen, political activists, and other townsfolk told wild tales of local landowners – derogatorily called *Aikari Mirs* or 'lords of sandy acres', revenue officials, and middlemen who had become millionaires or even billionaires overnight." (Jamali 2014, 90) An important public housing project, the Sanghaar Housing Scheme, was also mothballed due to irregularities in land acquisition. While visiting Gwadar it is striking to see the number of plots of land marked out with a hut or a sign declaring a project that has now sunk into the sandy ground.

The feeling of a place suspended in time is further reinforced by the five star hotel on a hilltop, which remains perpetually empty save for a table of diners, presumably those who managed to make their fortunes during the short-lived boom times. [FIG 4]

The second way in which a narrative about a place such as Gwadar might emerge is through an event that acts as catalyst. Often this is a catastrophic event but it could also be something that captures the imagination of online publics in a different way. To explore this type of narrative, I will discuss a video about Gwadar that emerged on YouTube (EriGIA007 and UFOvni 2013). It starts with Google Earth imagery that locates us in the world and zooms down to an area just off the coast of Gwadar in the Arabian Sea. Here we see images of men in shalwar kameez walking on what looks like a moonscape, or at the very least a volcanic landscape. The video is shot at low-level, we see mostly the legs of men scrambling around on this intriguing surface. We then see water bubbling up from the ground followed by images of dead fish floating in pools of water. Suddenly matches are being struck near the openings in the ground – the flame goes out immediately! We are being told that this is a strange, alien environment where mysterious things are occurring. The video is actually of an island, locally named *Zalzala Jazeera* (Earthquake Island) or *Zalzala Koh* (Earthquake Mountain), that appeared in the sea just off the coast of Gwadar following a 7.7 magnitude earthquake (*BBC News* 2013). It was first posted on a YouTube channel that usually curates videos related to alleged UFO sightings and they are speaking of this island as a strange other earthly thing that has appeared out of nowhere, in the middle of nowhere.[4] Whereas in the first narrative there is a silencing of the local population through erasure, in this

example they are merely being used to tell another story, one that exoticises both the place and the people. [FIG 5]

The earthquake, whose epicentre was located in the Awaran district to the north of Gwadar, killed over 800 people and injured many others (*The Nation* 2013). The area is sparsely populated and perhaps many more would have been killed in a more densely populated location, but since nearly all the buildings were constructed using traditional mud brick, around eighty percent were destroyed. In response to the earthquake there was a mobilisation of the digital humanitarian community and the event was used to perform the first live test of a new platform called MicroMappers (Leson, Lucas, and Meier 2016). This is a micro-tasking app that enables large numbers of people to contribute towards filtering the vast amounts of data generated around an humanitarian event. Each Tweet, image or video is tagged with geo-location and other information, such as that relating to damage and casualties, by a potentially global community of volunteers. An article in *Wired* magazine states the many technological innovations and glitches of this test, but it is only at the very end of the article that a small non-technological point is made which is crucial to the success or failure of the system (Collins 2013). What affected efforts to track damage and casualties the most was that people in the area simply did not tweet, or at least this was the conclusion that the article came to, as did the developers of the platform (Meier 2013). The vast majority of the information they collected was second-hand coming from professional journalists, many of whom were not in the area but were tweeting from within Pakistan. Whilst it is true that the area where the earthquake took place is remote and suffers from decades

of under investment by the Pakistani government and even in the city of Gwadar the internet connection is not reliable, the statement that no one in the area was using social media requires some scrutiny. As will become clear in my account of the third narrative on Gwadar, social media is being used, even in the remotest of corners of the province and in areas that the Pakistani military has declared off limits. A simpler explanation for why MicroMappers were not able to find many Tweets could be that no one could speak Balochi or Urdu and they did not have translation capabilities.

It is interesting to note that the earthquake and the devastation it caused did not manage to catch the attention of the international media. It was only the emergence of the island that brought the event to wider attention for a little while, showing how in the aftermath of a big event places can emerge in the global consciousness for a day or two, rising up only to sink back down again. How to control the narrative that emerges from the interplay of traditional and social media is an important concern for many political campaigns. In the last narrative around Gwadar I explore how the issue of the Baloch missing people is being brought to an international audience through the use of the internet and social media. Exact numbers are difficult to ascertain but it is claimed that thousands of activists, those accused of being insurgents and ordinary people have disappeared across Balochistan. The Pakistani military is accused of using such tactics to not only quash the nascent independence movement, but also to suppress any form of dissent or demands for rights made by the local population (Nazish 2014). The group, International Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (IVBMP), has organised several high profile events and regularly uses social media to promote its cause (“International Voice

for Baloch Missing Persons" 2016). For example, they organised a long march that started in October 2013 where activists walked from Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan, south to Karachi and then north again to the national capital, Islamabad. The total length of the walk was 2,800 km, longer than Gandhi's Salt March of 1930 (Hashim 2014; *The Express Tribune* 2014; "Salt March" 2016). Here the covering of distance through walking, however slowly, was used as a way of resisting the state's neo-colonial practices that are using distance to contain and to isolate the Baloch people. It was also a way of creating solidarities with the rest of the country. IVBMP regularly uses images as part of their campaign and these are quite horrific at times, since the mutilated and decomposing bodies of missing people turn up from time-to-time, often in places far from where they disappeared. Whilst these images are difficult to look at, they also demand a response from us that is based around some form of justice for these acts. The arena of international humanitarian law is of course the recourse, however flawed it might be, and the Baloch diaspora has been instrumental in arranging representation through the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO). In an email interview, long standing supporter of the Baloch cause Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur, describes the consequences of using social media as a 'double edged sword'. He states that social media "has helped enlighten the world about the problems and the issues that Baloch face but at the same time indiscreet use and washing of dirty linen in public has certainly acted as an obstacle." (Talpur 2016) Many members of IVBMP are clearly aware of the power of the media and the need to not only protest and lobby but to also use the aesthetic realm to promote their cause. While the social media images of the dead are raw, the use of staged photographs of Balochis

holding pictures of their missing relatives has a different kind of impact. These images also echo the original and ongoing protests of the group that have always included the use of banners and posters with the faces of those who have gone missing. [FIG 6]

In all of the above narratives, affect and emotions play an important role in how Gwadar as a place emerges. In the first narrative the conversation is around national pride and the role of this once remote and invisible place in placing the nation on the regional map. Gwadar is described as the saviour, the key to the nation's energy woes and ailing economy. In the second narrative affect plays a very different role, here not only the alien landscape but the brown bodies promote a notion of a place and a people that are exoticised. While the video is likely to have been recorded by someone from the area, it has been labelled and repackaged by someone on the other side of the world. And the final narrative is one that takes full part in an 'economy of affect' to elicit a response (Ahmed 2004). While Ahmed's concept has been elaborated in the context of terrorism and the discourse around asylum seekers to show how these operate within an economy of fear, a similar understanding of an affective economy would also be useful in understanding the work of IVBMP. On the one hand, the images circulating as part of their work operate very much in the classic sense of human rights work where the gathering of evidence is combined with notions of authenticity through visual evidence. But these same images also work within an economy of fear in the Pakistani context, since the military and intelligence services of the country do not want these testimonies to be widely heard and are using intimidation tactics to stop discussion. Recently a talk by Mama Qadeer, a prominent Baloch rights activist related to IVBMP, at Lahore

University of Management Sciences (LUMS) was cancelled, with the university stating that this was due to government orders (*The Express Tribune* 2015).[5] In such a context the digital realm has provided an important place in which to initiate conversations that cannot be easily be had within Pakistan and digital images have become important forms of testimony.

THE ETHICS OF WITNESSING THROUGH THE DIGITAL

I started this article with the premise that digital technologies have fundamentally transformed our relationship to places and my aim was to explore their potential in engaging ethically with those places that are at a distance from us. I take ethical engagement to range from the 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) of anthropologists to forms of participatory and action based research. Not being able to completely let go of my own disciplinary background, my bias is for those forms of research that not only describe or analyse but also intervene in some meaningful way. Traditionally, such approaches have required a long-term and embedded engagement in the field and as far as distance is concerned, these practices have been honed in the context of the rapidly developing cities of the global South and through an engagement with urban informal settlements, usually in dialogue with development planning. But this means that

a significant number of places are not considered, such as those that are in conflict, those that have been declared out-of-bounds by state or other actors, or those that have been constructed as invisible through legal acts.

I have reviewed a number of contemporary practices and projects that have used digital technologies to make visible, and in some cases, to intervene in such places. They show that while there are many advantages to using digital techniques, not least the possibility of a form of engagement with places that are not easily accessed, such techniques come with their own limitations. There is a problematic filtering that occurs through the technological gaze, which is related to the way in which it has transformed the practice of witnessing. The use of platforms such as Ushahidi and MicroMappers contribute to the portrayal of certain parts of the world as being in a permanent crisis, but one that can be influenced from afar with the click of a button. Such a liberal focus on the agency of individuals to enact change is also echoed in the virtual reality documentary, *Clouds Over Sidra*, where technology is used to transport potential donors to the refugee camp so that they can witness the suffering first-hand. The work of Bellingcat shows how in the age of social media, the witness has multiplied and has become expert. However, the *Dronestagram* project reminds us that beyond the stereoscopic view of remote sensed or crowd sourced images, there is still work to be done so that we do not lose sight of the political subject, whose erasure through a recourse to technology is something to remain vigilant towards. The work of Forensic Architecture gives a glimpse of what is possible and also what is at stake. Weizman's term 'field causality' begins to imagine a response to a distant place or event through

bringing together “individuals, environments, and artifices” in a way that reconfigures the relationship between political action, the law and aesthetics (Forensic Architecture 2014, 26).

I further explored some of these issues through taking the port city of Gwadar in Pakistan as example. Here the necessity of using digital technologies to ‘see at a distance’ is revealed in a context where it is difficult to be present and where traditional media is severely restricted. Yet, it is also a place that highlights the need to analyse the use of social media in culturally appropriate ways since the take up of technologies is not only about access to them but also about the way in which they are used. IVBMP’s campaign shows how digital narratives can be used to promote political claims and in some ways the approach of Forensic Architecture would be ideal to prove some of the organisation’s claims of atrocities against the Pakistani military. It may also be useful in connecting these claims to the wider geopolitical processes in which Balochistan is caught. The construction of the port and its associated developments have no doubt contributed to the disenfranchisement of many, the use of the area by both the US and Pakistani militaries to launch drones and the presence of militants and those fighting for freedom means that it is often difficult to make sense of an increasingly complex situation. At the same time, the difficulties associated with the practice of witnessing in a digital age mean that the fraught question of where to place the speaking political subject is absolutely key.

But in contemporary times the act of witnessing itself has become problematic. In the past, the gathering of testimony from local people had been understood, as Michal

Givoni states as “the idiom in which individual's speak back to power”. (Givoni quoted in Hochberg 2015, 30) But in recent times things have changed somewhat and in numerous articles commentators have spoken of a crisis of witnessing, that is, in an era of twenty-four hour news, social media etc. the line between testimony and representation is blurring (Frosh and Pinchevski 2011; Gibson 2013; Felman and Laub 1991). This means that although on the one hand we see everything almost live and unedited, on the other the narratives that emerge are heavily mediated. There is a tension here that Bernard-Donals describes as “the potential impasse—between witnessing and testimony” and he goes on to say that “this distinction (and impasse) between what we see and what we can say about what we've seen raises some important questions about just what a witness can say and the consequences of that utterance upon those within metaphorical earshot.” (Bernard-Donals 2007, 345) What can be said about events in Gwadar and Balochistan in general is unfortunately severely curtailed within Pakistan. The digital realm does offer a space but one that comes with its own limitations. The forensic turn within spatial practices in contexts of crisis brings much potential but for now its relation to an economy of affect is limited. How these technologically mediated practices can bring with them the affective force of bodily testimonies, how they can claim an authenticity not only through recourse to objective scientific fact, but also through bodily experience and materiality remains an open question. To not only use such practices after the fact, in the arena of international law or as journalistic reporting, but in order to mediate an ethical spatial practice that intervenes within the lives of those who live and work in such places demands this broader engagement.

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1 The first use of armed drones by the Pakistani army was on Taliban militants in North Waziristan in September 2015 (Boyle 2015).

2 In PATA all legislation requires the approval of the governor of the province and the President of Pakistan. In practice this means that such areas have no political or economic autonomy, unlike the rest of the provinces within a federal governmental system. For more information see, ("The Constitution of Pakistan. Part XII: 'Miscellaneous'; Chapter 3: 'Tribal Areas'" 2016)

3 Balochistan and the other tribal areas of Pakistan have since independence not only languished in a grey zone of exception – included within the state and yet not having full rights, these areas have also largely been ignored in the Pakistani media and the country's own cultural self-representations. With the rise of an independent media in Pakistan, following General Pervez Musharaf's liberalisation policies, things have changed a little but as the recent coverage of the ongoing military operations in Balochistan attest, an open dialogue is still not within reach. Those who have attempted to create such a space have often been targeted by the government and Pakistan's feared intelligence services.

4 The video was originally posted on the UFOvni YouTube channel, which specialises in videos of apparent UFO sightings. It has now been removed from their own video channel but is available to view with their logo on a related channel, which correctly states the reason for the appearance of the island (EriGIA007 and UFOvni 2013). The original video is attributed to the National Institute of Oceanography, Pakistan.

5 It is ironic that the event was called 'Unsilencing Balochistan'. A curtailed version of the event

did take place later in Islamabad. It is also worth noting that a second event was held at T2F, a community space in Karachi, and following this the director of T2F, Sabeen Mahmud, was killed in a drive-by shooting (Hashim 2015).

FIGURE CAPTIONS

FIG 1

Delegates watching a virtual reality film at the World Economic Forum 2016. Photo: Moritz Hager, Swiss-image.ch. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License

FIG 2

Dronestagram (screenshots). Credit: James Bridle / booktwo.org, 2012-1015

FIG 3

Video analysis determining direction of firing in Ukraine (for more info see: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/02/17/origin-of-artillery-attacks/). Credit Bellingcat/Google Earth/Digital Globe

FIG 4

Stills from promotional video of Bur Al Gwadar. Available to view at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah1yFFrM5Lc

FIG 5

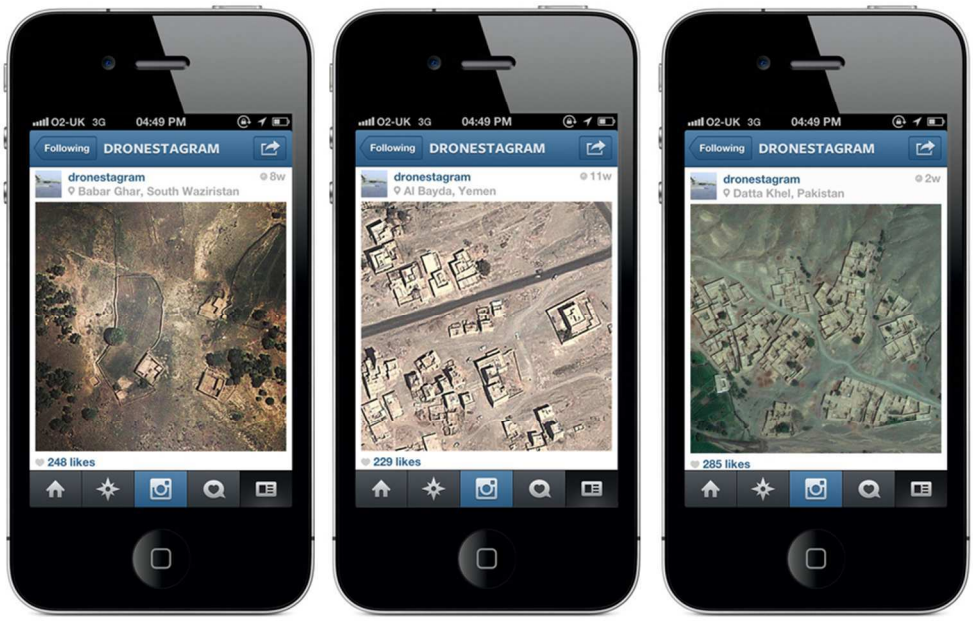
Stills from Zalzala Jazeera video. Original video adapted for the UFOvni account available to view at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AWxtzrhSHs

FIG 6

Ali Haider at the long march holding a picture of his father who has been missing since 14 July 2010. Photo: Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur

Delegates watching a virtual reality film at the World Economic Forum 2016. Photo: Moritz Hager, Swiss-image.ch. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License

1930x1286mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Dronestagram (screenshots). Credit: James Bridle / booktwo.org, 2012-1015

352x224mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Video analysis determining direction of firing in Ukraine (for more info see: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/02/17/origin-of-artillery-attacks/). Credit Bellingcat/Google Earth/Digital Globe

284x79mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Stills from promotional video of Bur Al Gwadar. Available to view at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah1yFFrM5Lc

325x184mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Stills from Zalzala Jazeera video. Original video adapted for the UFOvni account available to view at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AWxtzrhSHs

326x184mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Ali Haider at the long march holding a picture of his father who has been missing since 14 July 2010. Photo: Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur

86x57mm (300 x 300 DPI)