4 Friendship

The first time I met Ablikim he was sitting in the corner farthest from the door. He was a thin man with a closely trimmed mustache. He sat hunched over, his shoulders drawn in. As is customary among Uyghurs, no one introduced us. The previous week I had met a young man named Batur at a Turkish coffee shop. Now I was at his apartment for a birthday party. I assumed the man in the corner might be Batur's cousin visiting from the countryside. We told each other our names, but I still wasn't really sure how to place him. Over the course of the evening, he sat in the corner quietly, his eyes darting around the room. It wasn't until much later, when we were walking to our respective homes, that he began to speak. Ablikim didn't like speaking in groups.

He wasn't a new arrival from the countryside; he was Batur's closest friend. They had been living in the city for nearly a decade. Unlike the other migrants

I have discussed in preceding chapters, he had a bachelor's degree from a local university. Because of this certification, he had hoped he would be able to find more institutional affiliation and security in the city—something he desperately wanted. But he had recently been forced by a combination of defiance from his students, daily mockery from his coworkers, and a discriminatory work assignment to leave his job as a teacher in a government-operated vocational school that received funding from the World Bank. Since then, he had been trying to find work that would not make him feel isolated and emasculated. He had gone to Beijing, a distance of nearly two thousand miles, to try to find a job as a business consultant with Batur. He had come back to Ürümchi with Batur to try to work for a Turkish food import company as a warehouse manager, but none of these jobs had worked out. He said: "I went to Beijing, and then back to Ürümchi, just to try to figure things out. But I didn't get anything figured out. I'm still trying to figure things out." He said that his friendship with Batur was now the only thing that kept him from giving up on life.

As I built my own friendship with Ablikim, I was struck by how his story as a failed professional and the importance of his friendships resonated with the experiences of the dozens of low-income Uyghur migrants I observed. In the big city, Ablikim and the thousands of unemployed young Uyghur men just like him found themselves trying to figure out a Chinese world while using a Uyghur framework. And as they tried to enter that social flow, they constantly found themselves pushed into eddies along the side. Since they were often cut off from their extended families through the process of migration, the violence of this movement made these single young men cling to each other as they waited to become the authors of their own stories.

Although Ablikim had been able to find institutional support as a teacher for a time, like migrants with less formal education, he too had been caught up in the tumult of social violence in Xinjiang. He had first found a job during the summer of 2009—the same summer that Ürümchi was rocked by Uyghur citizens' rights protests described in chapter 1. Although he had been in a nearby city during the protests, when he came back to Ürümchi a few weeks later to take up his position as a chemistry teacher, he had been detained by the police. He was let go after a drawn-out interrogation, but that experience, along with countless other experiences of everyday ethno-racism over the subsequent years, had wounded him to the point that he had finally dropped out of mainstream Chinese city life and stopped looking for work outside the Uyghur enclave at Ürümchi's south end. He gave up his job. He developed a constant tremor in his hands. He stayed in his bare, concrete apartment for days

at a time, sleeping little. He often spoke about suicide and how his friendship with Batur prevented him from ending his life.

In many ways, Ablikim's position was symptomatic of displacements and dispossessions that were happening all across the world. As capitalism spread around the globe post-2000, nearly 2 billion people moved from rural poverty to urban precarity ("World Urbanization Prospects" 2019). They were being forced to move away from a fragile yet ontologically stable existence as subsistence farmers by urban development, industrial agriculture, and forms of dispossession. Over the past two decades in China, 221 million people have abandoned their small plots of land for the hustle of city streets and small concrete apartments (Xiong 2015); since the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is one of the primary receivers of Han migrant urban construction workers, miners, and oil workers, the majority of the 25 million inhabitants of the region are also living far from home. Yet, as I described in the preceding chapters, for Ablikim—and the hundreds of thousands of other Uyghur migrants to Ürümchi—the additional repulsion of the colonial relation of ethno-racial domination was folded into this economic and class-based structural foment. The discrimination that was fostered by the surveillance enclosures of counterterrorism was a mechanism that marked and sorted their bodies in unique and particular ways. In the end, they often found themselves slotted by ethno-racialized hiring and renting practices into the Uyghur enclave in Ürümchi, where, for rural underemployed migrants, the violence of ethno-racial policing mixed with feelings of desperation to find a firm social footing. Local police entered Uyghur migrants' homes on a weekly basis, searching for unregistered Uyghurs from the countryside. Checkpoints were built on street corners, Uyghur men were asked to produce their papers and allow their cell phones to be scanned for links to terrorism. Jobs were hard to find, particularly if a migrant was alone in the city. They hustled just to get by, to stay just out of reach of police surveillance.

As Ablikim said one day, "The countryside felt like a lake of stagnant water, but the city feels like a 'raging river' [Uy: *derya süyi dawalghup turatti*]." The relative stability of a tightly policed, yet stagnant, boring Uyghur community on the flat desert plain in Southern Xinjiang had been replaced by the frenetic pace and dangerous terrain of a city where he was surrounded by strangers. The word Ablikim used to describe the "raging" river, *dawalghup*, also carries with it the feeling of social vulnerability, of life in chaos and agitation. These feelings of disconnection and desperation, in turn, produced a Uyghur experience of what Alan Bray describes as a "crisis of friendship" in which social networks become a valuable yet fragile source of stability (2003, 2). Increasingly, Bray

argues, elective relationships in market-oriented environments have become essential elements in processes of social identification and economic productivity. This development in social reproduction pushes capitalist subjects to extend their social network beyond coworkers, fellow citizens, and their immediate family members—to use their friends as a way of achieving economic stability. What stands apart in the Uyghur context is that, given the colonial violence of the racialized city, homosocial friendships were experienced not as elective but essential in the boundary struggle against enclosure and devaluation (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

As in all social contexts, the conditions of Uyghur male friendships and the shape of Uyghur masculinity itself is historically contingent, shaped by the social forces that define it.[1] While in the past, Uyghur manhood was largely defined by tradition maintenance, a patrilineal domination of women and competition with other Uyghur men (Dautcher 2009; Smith Finley 2015), in the context of the colonial violence of the city new forms of masculine definition emerged. Young Uyghur men saw themselves increasingly defined as a threat to the smooth economic functioning of the city as the institutions of the city came to center on general Islamophobia and the ethnocentrism of the city's Han settler population. As urban migrants, they were isolated from their rural families, forced to delay marriage, and in turn compelled to rely on each other for support.

When young men like Ablikim discovered that their dreams of becoming a success in the urban marketplace were blocked, the hope that was associated with the seeming openness and vital movement that came from economic migration often became a source of cruelty. Since job placement rates for more-privileged Uyghur college students with baccalaureate degrees were now less than 15 percent due to state-authorized job discrimination (Tohti 2015), finding a job that would give Uyghur migrants legal status in the city was often seen as a major stroke of luck and a way of escaping a life of policing and poverty in small towns in the countryside. Underemployment was endemic throughout much of Uyghur society, with less than 20 percent able to travel to the city and find some form of wage labor (Tohti 2015). Escaping rural poverty was made even more difficult because their social networks, both in daily life and on social media, were used by the policing contractors, beginning with the People's War on Terror in 2014, as a way of surveilling their movements, cultivating informants, and as evidence for detention or expulsion from the city. These forms of social enclosure and devaluation pushed them into tight homosocial bonds with fellow migrants they could trust. It was through these forms of care that they maintained a sense of urban belonging.

In this chapter, I consider how homosocial friendships can act as a form of palliative care for heavily policed Uyghur young men who are marginalized by the economic and political processes of contemporary colonization. I examine why friendship became so crucial for Uyghur young men and how such homosocial friendships are developed. I argue that the forms of care that arise from hearing each other's stories and sharing the same ethos and life produce a fragile source of Uyghur existential stability. Although these anticolonial homosocial male friendships are often blocked by the techno-political surveillance system from developing into formal decolonial politics, they have general implications for decolonial masculinities more broadly and the work of anthropology itself.

Ultimately, I develop an analytic for understanding what I call anticolonial friendship as a form of homosocial empowerment and care. It places scholarship in feminist social science on the social construction of masculinity (Sedgwick 1985; Gutmann 1997; Kimmel 2004) in conversation with anthropological studies of Islamic masculinities (Dautcher 2009; Rana 2011), Indigenous masculinities (Innes and Anderson 2015), and my own ethnographic evidence, to show that Uyghur male friendships can define manhood less in terms of the domination of women described in the previous chapter and more as protection from the dispossessing effects of enclosure and devaluation. Drawing inspiration from feminist, decolonial, and existential anthropology,[2] I demonstrate that these friendships are built largely out of an intersubjective being "together" (Uy: *bille*) that is fostered by sharing stories and life rhythms. Storytelling and friendship offer forms of protection from the violence of police contractors and market expropriation, resulting in a new experience of manhood and social reproduction itself. At the same time, if these friendships are severed, they can also become the locus of violence and emasculation.

Subtraction, Ethics of Friendship, Storytelling

During my two years of fieldwork, many friends and acquaintances told me about the way their friends and members of their families disappeared or have been detained indefinitely by state authorities for resisting or appearing to resist Chinese settler colonialism ("'We Are Afraid to Even Look'" 2009). Following the uprising against the racialized killings of Uyghurs in 2009, disappearances of young Uyghur men became so endemic that local police stations issued a form for families to fill out to request information on the whereabouts of their loved ones. If they were able to recover the living bodies

of their sons and brothers from reeducation facilities and prisons, often they found them in a state of psychic brokenness—frail shells of the vital persons they had once been. My friends spoke often about the struggle to overcome their fear that the same might happen to them. They talked about how they had to swallow their pride and not react when confronted with institutional forms of racialization and the everyday encounters it produced. They compared Xinjiang to contemporary North Korea and their ethno-racial position to the Jews in Germany, just before the Holocaust. They saw their situation as both a typical site of China's rapid capitalist development and an extreme case of state-directed oppression and Han ethno-racism. Dispossession was forced on Uyghurs in the city since they were often legally prevented from renting and working. Since their bodies were seen as worthless and not worth grieving for, they were made to bear the burden of underemployment, illegalization, and heightened exposure to violence and death.

As I grappled with the stories and experiences I heard about from Ablikim and dozens of other migrants, I found scholarship that frames dispossession as a co-constituted effect of global capitalism and colonialism stimulating for thinking through Uyghur male trauma and daily struggles (Coulthard 2014; Goldstein 2017). Throughout the modern history of capitalism and colonization, conditions of dispossession have disproportionately affected minoritized groups at the margins of societies. Karl Marx ([1848] 1963) conceptualized the dispossessed as the "lumpenproletariat." This "lumpenization" process refers to the ways in which groups of people, often the descendants of slaves and the Indigenous, have been refused a class status and instead find ways to work and live in a "gray zone" of the informal economy (Bourgois and Schoenberg 2009, 19). As Marx noted, changes in modes of production and the partitioning and commodification of land that came with the unending expansion of the capitalist frontier has the effect of disturbing the social order, particularly for the most vulnerable. This results in a range of disposability from homelessness to human warehousing in prisons and ghettos and unfree labor.

Thinking about dispossession as a processual working out of life, allows for less focus on more static "zones of exception" such as camps and prisons (Agamben 1998), and more on an insistence that engagement with colonized subjects must focus on the exposure and agency of intersubjective life itself (K. Mitchell 2006). In general terms, colonial forms of dispossession often occur over a long, seemingly unending duration. The gendered, intergenerational trauma of colonial violence plays out over the scale of decades and centuries through the replacement of language, removal from the land, and the fragmentation of social institutions. It is a process not an event (Wolfe 2006). By focusing on

the minutiae of vulnerable life, this decolonial studies approach supplements existing scholarship on the politics of Uyghur identity (Bovingdon 2010; Smith Finley 2013). This approach builds on previous studies of Chinese minorities that utilize a gendered analytic attendant to relations and processes of power,[3] to consider how masculinity and homosocial relationships emerge as a lived process of Uyghur anticolonialism.

In gender-segregated Uyghur society, friendship has historically been a major source of ethical obligation and sociality. In some areas of the Uyghur homeland, people commonly used the word *friend* (Uy: *adash*) at the beginning and end of every sentence when speaking to anyone of the same gender and generation. There are many words for friend: *dost*, *adash*, *aghine*, *borader*; all these variations combined with adjectival modifiers lend a different tone to the sort of friendship being described. But Uyghurs reserve a special referent for the sort of friendship that is shared by young men such as Ablikim and Batur, the figures I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. They referred to that sort of friendship as a "life and liver friendship" (Uy: *jan-jiger dost*)—meaning they were friends who shared the same life-spirit and liver organ. The liver is considered to be the seat of courage in Uyghur epistemology (much like the gall of a gall bladder connotes a sense of audacity in other contexts). The Uyghur concept of a "life and liver" friend conveys the feeling not only of the "soul mate" aspect of close friendship but also a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the other as a "blood brother."

The friendship inscribed in contemporary "life and liver" friendships comes from multiple sources. Since Uyghurs have a long tradition of yerlik urbanism in the oasis cities along the old Silk Road, the development of specialized trades and crafts has long affected the life paths of young men. For centuries, a minority of young men—like those I discuss in chapter 2—have left their hometowns and traveled to nearby cities to apprentice as bakers, tinsmiths, woodworkers, and the like. Often these earlier forms of migration were formed around natal-home social relationships. Young men who shared the same hometown (Uy: *yurtdash*) were often the first people to become friends in a new urban location. The second element in the contemporary iteration of "life and liver" friendship was a newer development. Often close friends were classmates (Uy: *sawaqdash*) from the same school. This emphasis on classmate relationships was a recent phenomenon that corresponded with Chinese late-socialist family planning policy and the organization of Chinese school systems. Since most Uyghur families were permitted only three children and since the education system placed children within a singular, segmented, unchanging class throughout primary and secondary education, many young Uyghurs (as with

Chinese classmates [Ch: *tongban tongxue*] more generally) have come to think of classmates of the same gender in terms similar to that of siblings. In the case of Ablikim and Batur, they had been classmates for over seventeen years. All through their lives, they had shared an interwoven life path. State institutions of family planning and education that were meant to corral their bodies into permitted Chinese "model minority" slots had also shaped the conditions of the relationships that sustained their autonomy (Schein 2000).

For many contemporary Islamic societies, gender segregation along with changes in methods of economic production have led to a greater reliance on homosocial relations (Ouzgane 2006), particularly in the process of migration (Rana 2011, 119). Initially, as the Chinese economy was opened to market forces, Uyghur elective relationships became more inflected by the utility of socioeconomic networks expressed as business "associations" (Uy: *munasivet*), a development that parallels the elaboration of *guanxi* relations in other parts of China.[4] As Jay Dautcher has shown, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the 1990s, in the near past Uyghur male friendships were often formed around utilitarian relations and economic success (2009, 136). At the level of peri-urban neighborhoods, or *mehelle*, formalized friendship networks formed important senses of belonging that were developed through rituals of competition at regular gatherings, or *meshrep* (141).[5] Yet, as the colonization of the Uyghur homeland intensified in the 2000s and young men were forced to leave their neighborhoods for the city, these relationships of utility and competition were increasingly replaced. The enclosure system and Han settler evaluations had the effect of forcing young Uyghur men to identify with each other in new and deeper ways. The ethical imperatives of jan-jiger friendships turned on an obligation of being together: of listening to the friend in such a way that they came to feel as though their lives had entered into the same experience.

Over the course of the 2010s, Uyghur young men increasingly used "life and liver" friendships as a resource to survive life in the city. For example, in 2011 when I did my first year of fieldwork, I met a young bazaar worker named Nurali whose jan-jiger dost was a young kabob-seller named Shirali. In 2014, during my second year of fieldwork, I met two young jade sellers from Yaken—Hasan and Adil—who described their relationship as one of "life and liver" friends. I met a cell-phone repairman from a small village outside of Khotan who had a jan-jiger dost named Erkin from the same village. Nearly all of the more than forty young men I interviewed had a very close male friend who helped them survive. Those who did not, often said they wished they did.

These homosocial friendships demonstrated that the way young men struggled with dispossession was never fully singular. For young Uyghur men in the

city, living with dispossession was often a struggle that engaged their friendships. Friendships did not offer a cure for the exposure they felt in the "raging" (Uy: *dawalghup*) torrent of the ethno-racialized city, but they provided a space for narrating it—trying to "figure things out" as Ablikim mentioned when I first met him—and thus an avenue for coping with it "together" (Uy: *bille*).

Storytelling as Constitutive of Uyghur Male Friendships

One of the things friendships did was give young Uyghur men a daily space for the "subjective in-between" of storytelling (Arendt 1958, 182–84, cited in Jackson 2002, 11). As the anthropologist Michael D. Jackson has argued, storytelling is a way of giving order and consistency to events in the lives of modernist subjects, who often begin to experience their lives through a life-path narrative of "free will" and self-possession, as discussed in the previous chapter. In personal stories, market-oriented subjects—often the narrators—become the main characters rather than bit players on the sidelines of social change. It is not just that stories give meaning to human lives in general but rather that they change how people "*experience* the events that have befallen [them] by symbolically restructuring them" (Jackson 2002, 16). By defining lives, stories supply people with a way of overcoming how social structures block subjects from realizing their hopes. By narrating existence and staging representations of their lives, modernist subjects make their words and thoughts stand in the place of the world. As Jackson points out, what is crucial here is to understand that the stories which are told are not identical with the structure of societies—rather, storytelling is important because it shows subjects how they live. Their importance rests less on whether stories are empirically true or whether they offer a sense of hope than in what they indicate about systems that constrain them and what this knowledge enables subjects, particularly colonized subjects, to do. Of course, there are many kinds of stories. Some stories confirm what is already known, while others call into question what had previously been thought of as sound knowledge.

For Uyghur friends, this latter form—stories that undermined authority and refused the regime of truth imposed by the enclosures of the techno-political surveillance system—became a powerful weapon in maintaining a sense of existential well-being. Often their stories focused on a moment of affective encounter—a time when they felt extremely angry, scared, or sad—and how they resolved that situation. Uyghurs have always been subjects who actively remake their worlds, but they were now also subjects confronted by new forms of devaluation and dispossession. The stories they told became

a kind of palliative therapy—not a cure—for the vulnerability of young Uyghur friends in the city. But no matter how partial storytelling might be in recovering a sense of well-being, my argument here is that storytelling worked to give people a feeling of autonomy and protection even as their friends and relatives disappeared into the mass detention and unfree labor system in the countryside.

This approach to storytelling as a processual building of an intersubjective lifeworld emerges out of feminist, decolonial, and existentialist traditions in anthropology.[6] In this tradition, attention to embodied practice and discursive narration are seen as entwined "traces of meaning left in the wake of human action" (Desjarlais 2003, 7). As in the societies studied by other scholars, Uyghurs have a ritualized storytelling tradition that centers on transmitting traditional knowledge and conveying gendered forms of authority and rights to knowledge.[7] The intensification of policing over the period of this study turned storytelling and the being "together" (Uy: *bille*) it fostered into a sharply anticolonial mode of care and empowerment that resonates with the decolonial struggles of Indigenous men elsewhere. Sharing stories of trauma and emasculation opened up spaces of care and belonging for Uyghurs, a process that was similar to the findings of Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson (2015) among alienated Indigenous young men in North America. As the Cree/Métis scholar Gregory Scofield noted, listening to stories of colonial struggle and alienation opens up ways for Indigenous men to find modes of being "which you can embody, which you can pull yourself into" (quoted in Innes and Anderson 2015, 253). Storytelling can foster Indigenous brotherhood and make "the world come alive" (Innes and Anderson 2015, 258) by fostering vital modes of protection and, in spaces where civil rights are protected, collective action.

The obligations that sprang from dispossession provided the conditions of possibility for stories to be told and heard among friends. Since the majority of Uyghur migrants to the city were single young men who were delaying marriage in order to make a better life for their families back in the countryside, there was also a strong gender component to this phenomenon as well. Young men were sent to the city because they were young men. Uyghur parents often thought that it would not be safe for unmarried young women to try to make it in the city as underemployed hustlers. Young women did come to the city to work as maids for wealthier Uyghurs who worked in the state apparatus, but they were less of a public presence. In the patriarchal structure of Uyghur society, they were seen as part of the household where they worked. Young men, on the other hand, were often on their own. Like Yusup, Mahmud, and

Aziz—whose stories I told in previous chapters—they often came to the city full of masculine energy, the pride of their families and their villages. They wore their mustaches with dignity and wore their single set of clothes boldly. Yet it was precisely this appearance that rendered them untrustworthy and dangerous—as potential ethnic separatists or Islamic terrorists—in the evaluative gaze of Han urbanites, and, by extension, the techno-political system. Uyghur men, like racialized men elsewhere in the world, were often seen as being guilty of harboring violent intentions, of being prone to wild behavior, until proven otherwise (Welch et al. 2002). Thousands of underemployed, proud young men without families, who faced widespread discrimination, thus provided the social ground for these emerging friendship networks.

In addition to a "subjective in-between" of oral storytelling with trusted friends, in the early 2010s there was also an emerging body of Uyghur fiction and poetry that resonated with common experiences of Uyghur male alienation in the city. As in other urban Indigenous contexts (Furlan 2017), these written texts provided a shared temporal and spatial discursive frame and a way of staging the grief and rage of other depressed young men. As I began to show in Chapter 2, these textual artifacts offered me a broader framing method through which to start conversations about shared stories and friendship with Uyghur migrant men. As I conducted ethnography between 2014–15, I found that the relationship of young men to these novels and poems enabled an analytic that held the violence of racialization and the palliative care of homosocial friendships in tension. In ways that were similar to the effects of loss and mourning in the work of Renato Rosaldo (1993) and Charles Briggs (2014), the conditions of my research and its modes of expression forced me to adapt my ethnographic methodology. It took on the shape of anticolonial friendship, and drew into sharper focus the work of anthropology itself.

Ablikim's Stories

The story Ablikim told Batur and me most often was of his detention in 2009. It happened when he was on a public bus traveling from his school—which was in a predominantly Han neighborhood in the northern part of Ürümchi—a few weeks after the large-scale interethnic violence in the city. As they were going through a checkpoint, he realized that he was the only Uyghur on the bus. Not only that, but he had a mustache, which marked him not as an urban Uyghur with a high level of Chinese-language education but as a migrant from the countryside. His face could be read as overtly masculine and unassimilable in its difference relative to Han faces. He knew that, in the minds of many

Han he met, he looked like a suicide bomber. The police took one look at him and immediately forced him off the bus. He said, "At that time I didn't even know what I said. I was just so terrified. I didn't know what they would do to me." The trauma of this experience gave him an unshakable feeling of fear. He said that he felt completely exposed and vulnerable. After that he realized that being a Uyghur in Xinjiang meant that his body could be taken at any time.

Ablikim said his depression stemmed not only from his experience with policing but also from the apathy and discrimination of his coworkers at the school where he worked as a teacher. He said that the experience of being harassed humiliated, and isolated turned him into a "crazy person" (Uy: *sarang*).

> After I was put in the interrogation room for a couple of hours that time in 2009, it took me years to feel normal again. Actually, I still don't feel normal. That was the whole reason why I started hating that school and my job and why I eventually quit. It is so hard to get over things like that. For the next year, I acted like a crazy person. I think I gave all of my coworkers a very bad impression of me. They thought I was some strange guy who was always nervous, always shy, never willing to talk or act in normal ways.

He told Batur and me he found out later that his students and fellow teachers, who were mostly Han, openly referred to him as the "Mustache Teacher" (Ch: *Huzi Laoshi*) behind his back. He said that perhaps for these reasons, and because he had no friends at the school, the administrators decided that he should be sent to the countryside as a political instruction "volunteer" (Ch: *zhiyuanzhe*)—a practice that became a standard method of implementing colonial reeducation in rural Xinjiang post-2009 (Byler 2018b). As Ablikim put it: "After I taught at that school in Ürümchi for two years, they sent me away to 'volunteer.' But in the end, I just quit. I couldn't do it." He hated being in the position of enacting colonial domination on other Uyghurs, forcing them to memorize party dogma and punishing them if they violated the rules. Yet because there were few other possibilities to support his family back in the countryside and start his own family, Ablikim felt an intense obligation to continue to work. Yet, at the same time, he hated himself and the way Uyghur farmers who were forced to attend his political ideology classes looked at him as a "collaborator" or "traitor."[8]

> One of the hardest things about quitting my job was that most of my family was really upset with me. They felt like they had sacrificed a lot so that I could get that job, and that I wasn't being very grateful. But I

really wasn't very happy in that situation. I had no real role. It was just a fake government job [as a propaganda worker from the city]. There was no way that I could be happy doing it. So I quit that job.

The reason Ablikim began studying chemistry in the first place was not in order to work as a teacher. Like many of his classmates, he saw science as the answer to overcoming the perceived "backwardness" (Ch: *luohou*) of Uyghur positions relative to mainstream Chinese society. Already in the 1980s—before the market economy and mass media infrastructure had reached the Uyghur homeland—science and engineering had become a primary focus of Chinese education and, thus, had become a central focus of the Uyghur-language curriculum. Since the language of science was seen as universal and necessary for developing the nation, it became the preferred topic of study for both Han and Uyghurs. In opposition to the political rhetoric that dominated the earlier Maoist era, science came to be seen as the way of the future.

In Xinjiang this push toward engineering became even more prominent as resource expropriation became the primary driver of the economy in the 1990s. As Ablikim plainly put it, "I got interested in chemistry because I thought it would lead to a good job in the oil industry." But Ablikim also found solace in chemistry research; he learned to speak its language and took pleasure in it. "There is something about me that makes remembering rare facts about chemicals and compounds easy. I also really liked working in the lab and creating chemicals that had never been seen before. The colors that those compounds could create were so strange and unnatural. I had never seen anything like it." Like many young Uyghur students, Ablikim gained a strong feeling of self-worth from mastering something as universal and modern as chemistry. For the first time in his life, he did not feel the limits of being a minority; with science he could fashion a self that seemed to have universal social value. As a scientist he had access to a world beyond language and skin color. When he was in the lab, he felt as though his primary position was that of a scientist. His ethnicity seemed as though it was no longer a disadvantage relative to his Han colleagues.

Yet, despite the pleasure and security he took in science, he found that outside of the lab his scientific skill had little currency. Immediately after college, his uncle, who was a leader in a county-level state-owned utility company in the countryside, pulled some strings to get Ablikim a job at a chemical factory on the outskirts of Ürümchi. Unlike the laboratory, which he had loved so much, this job required intense manual labor alongside Han migrant workers; it didn't require any expertise at all. And Ablikim was one of the only Uyghurs

working for the company. "When I worked at the chemical factory, I really felt as though there was no place for me. I worked at that factory for four months, but during that whole time I never felt comfortable. It was just too Han."

The same uncle then arranged a teaching position at a state-run vocational school but again the same result. "At that school too, I never felt comfortable the whole time. On the surface everyone was always really nice to me; they never said anything bad to me. But I could always see in their eyes that they were judging me. They were thinking that I wasn't qualified for the job. I felt this the whole time. And so I put on a fake persona too. I tried to act really nice all the time. Really agreeable. But it always felt fake to me." For Ablikim, the experience of working for Han employers required him to give up too much of what he valued. In order to make himself marketable in the new environment, he felt he had to give up his attachment to devalued forms of Uyghur masculinity. The impossibility of developing what felt like authentic relationships with his Han coworkers, the stress of teaching unmotivated students, coupled with the dispossessing effects of enclosure and ethno-racialized evaluation forced him to reroute his life.

The institutions that Ablikim encountered were oriented around Hanness. As Sara Ahmed points out, racialized institutions "take the shape of 'what' resides within them" (2006, 132). In these kinds of homogeneous spaces, bodies of the majority are "somatic norms" that make nonmajority bodies feel "'out of place,' like strangers" (Ahmed 2006, 133). As in racialized spaces elsewhere, the bodies of minoritized men in Xinjiang were framed as simultaneously dependent and violent, inept and predatory (Kimmel 2004). Although Ablikim could never pass as Han, he was nevertheless called into these spaces that were built around the power and reach of Han bodies. When Ablikim entered these institutions, he told me he felt his body being stopped and searched over and over again not only by security guards at the entrance to the institutions but also by all the bureaucrats and other Han workers and students he encountered. Many of the stories he told me and Batur focused on this. He felt as though every conversation, every encounter in Chinese institutions was filled with questions: Who are you? What are you doing here? He felt as though he was being rejected by the institutions and was being forced to go back to Southern Xinjiang "where he belonged." As a rural-origin Uyghur law student told me:

> I saw really quickly [after I began studying law] that Uyghurs were charged much more heavily than Han people for the same crime. In hospitals and in the court we often do not receive the same treatment as Han people. Often they cheated us, and made us pay more. So we always

tried to avoid those places. Everyone knows this. The legal system and the health care system were not made for us. We just accept this.

As in other contexts of racialization and impoverishment, Uyghurs saw state and Han-majority institutions as indifferent, exploitative, and violent spaces (Gupta 2012).

Lauren Berlant uses the phrase "slow death" to describe the "physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (2011, 95). For her, the key here is the way "mass physical attenuation" results from the vulnerability of social violence and displacement. For Uyghurs, this feeling was not just a condition of capitalist exploitation and expropriation, as it was primarily in Berlant's case. Instead, it was also a relationship of a deeper and broader epistemic and material colonial dispossession. For this reason, a "slow death" was experienced like a "subtraction"—a physical wearing out and *disappearance* that defined their historical existence—by state-capital directed institutions and corporations, and by surveillance systems carried out by police contractors and Han settlers. These systems of enclosure and devaluation prevented them from finding jobs or working their own land; blocked them from moving except under direct orders; forced them to watch state television, censor their speech, and proclaim their undying loyalty to the state; dictated what they could wear and how they cut their hair; and tracked their digital social network to determine who should be detained. The lack of solidity in knowing the truth of what was happening, the capabilities of the surveillance systems that were tracking them, and the apparent arbitrariness of who was chosen for detention placed the burden of narrating this process on the shoulders of the individual. There were no institutions that would help them assess the truth of what was occurring. Ablikim's experiences were thus often symptomatic of the experiences of someone attempting to live while being subtracted from social life, a theme I will return to in the final chapter of this book.

The trauma of police harassment and losing his job transformed Ablikim. As with many young Uyghur men, the past five years of intensified discrimination and disillusionment triggered a defensiveness that pushed him toward conflict escalation—a kind of lashing out in order to grasp for agency. He told Batur and me a story over and over again about how sometime in 2013, four years after he was detained on the bus, he and another of his friends, Tursun, were walking in a market area near the train station when a Han policeman confronted them and asked to check their ID cards. He said, "I told him, 'Why

do you want to check our ID cards? We're not doing anything. Why don't you check some Han people's ID cards?' He immediately made us go with him to the police station. I wasn't scared at all. Tursun was scared. But I wasn't scared at all. I didn't do anything wrong so why should I be scared of them? If they don't respect me, why should I respect them?" After threatening them, eventually the police let them go. This incident was similar to numerous incidents I observed in which Ablikim and a wide range of other underemployed migrants confronted other people, both Uyghur and Han, over perceived slights or offenses. Beneath his placid expression, nervous eyes, and trembling hands, he carried a deep anger.

Homosocial Friendship through Storytelling

> I suddenly realized that no matter how hard I tried I couldn't figure out where my place was, where I was, or what street I was on. Not only this, but I didn't really know which city I was in. The clarity of my thoughts gradually faded and I lost my perception of space. What country was I in? I gradually came to realize that I didn't even know what planet I was on. I was lost in the infinite universe. Just then I realized that everyone becomes a homeless wanderer after they are born and has difficulty finding a proper place for themselves as soon as they touch the ground and let out their initial cry. They will spend their whole life trying to determine their position—becoming anxious and griping about its vagueness. Everyone is a wanderer in space.
>
> —From *The Backstreets* by Perhat Tursun

As I got to know Ablikim better, I suggested that we should meet regularly to read and discuss Uyghur-language urban fiction that represented Uyghur migrant life in the city. I had heard from other migrants that they had found reading Uyghur urban fiction and poetry illuminating. Perhaps because Ablikim was chronically underemployed and because the two of us were becoming close friends, he agreed to help guide me through these texts. The Uyghur-language novel I suggested was called *The Backstreets* (2021) from a collection called *The Big City* by Perhat Tursun—one of the most provocative contemporary writers of Uyghur contemporary life. Rather than using literature as a tool of moral instruction, Tursun writes about social violence, mental illness, and sexual desire (Byler 2018c). Since Uyghur literature was heavily influenced by Chinese socialist-realism, as well as an Indigenous tradition of epic storytelling that privileges didactic and heroic Uyghur moral instruction (Thum 2014), this modernist approach

to literature was not well received. Instead, historical fiction that highlighted the exploits of the modern founders of the Uyghur nation as well as satirical fiction informed by socialist-realist moralism became wildly popular with Uyghur readers. Since Tursun, instead, wrote in conversation with Western authors such as Ralph Ellison, Franz Kafka, and Albert Camus about traditionally taboo subjects, many Uyghur intellectuals distanced themselves from his work. It was precisely for these reasons that Ablikim had not read his work previously. Since it was the first time for both of us, our encounter with the warrens of *The Backstreets* was a shared experience of reading and interpreting.

I also chose this text purposefully since it staged the experience of an alienated Uyghur migrant in a Chinese city. As I discussed it with Ablikim, and subsequently with dozens of other young men over the course of my fieldwork, I came to understand that, while it staged much of what I was witnessing in the lives of so many young men, the absence of homosocial friendships in the text made the narrative deeply troubling for them. Ablikim told me that "the difference between me and the person in the novel is that he has no friends, that is why he goes crazy."

The Backstreets follows several days in the life of an unnamed Uyghur man who comes to Ürümchi from the countryside after finding a job in a state-owned publishing house. As we read through the story, Ablikim and I began to understand the protagonist's estrangement in his Han-dominated work environment; we read how the young man was trying to escape the violence and poverty of his rural village; he used mathematics as a language to transcend his minority status; and we saw how his coworkers rejected him and he slowly descended into mental illness. As we read, we noticed the way the protagonist translated the Chinese world around him in his mind. The character in the novel never quoted anyone speaking Chinese directly. Instead, he used Uyghur words and imagery to reconstruct a Chinese world as a vivid Uyghur world full of fog, cold, sewage, beauty, lust, and loathing. The smog of the world made the future appear bleak and hazy, but it also held some potentiality as the protagonist wandered the city while dreaming of the past in the countryside and holding out hope for a place in the city.

As we read, Ablikim found striking parallels between the novel and the migrant life he knew. We sat close to each other, our knees touching, in the corner of a Turkish teahouse reading out loud. The soundtrack of Uyghur folk music playing over the speakers in the bustling shop, and the raucous laughter of young migrants using the free Wi-Fi to watch videos on their smartphones formed the rhythm of our conversations. We spent hours discussing how disorienting life in the city was for young people who had just come from the

countryside. Over bowls of rice pilaf (Uy: *polu*), hand-pulled noodles (Uy: *laghman*), and endless cups of sweet Turkish tea, we talked about how in the city young migrants needed to develop a new sense of direction; how the geographical features they had used to organize their world appeared scrambled. Mountains that used to be to the north were now to the southwest. Houses in the countryside were often built in reference to Mecca—a wall forming the spot where people prayed. He felt it was hard to locate oneself in the city since the orientation of apartment buildings was rectilinear and dictated by the grid of the streets. As Perhat Tursun wrote in *The Backstreets*:

> I lost my sense of direction when I first came to the city. Since I was a kid I always thought the higher side was the north and the lower side was the south, and because of this I always gave myself a feeling of disorientation. Even after I realized that my method for determining the direction was wrong, I couldn't correct it. My small village was located on the southern slope of the mountains. As you walked to the south, the land gradually descended into a scrubby marshland. When the sheep we were herding were grazing in the marshland, I would lie in the grass with my head resting toward the north and feel as though it was higher than the rest of my body. This feeling which I got from my birthplace became a permanent principle of my constitution. It grasped me very firmly and prevented me from correctly understanding the geographical situation and cardinal directions of other places. (26)

For Ablikim and the protagonist of *The Backstreets*, this sense of disorientation was complicated by the material and digital enclosure of the city. Unlike contemporary Chinese cities outside of Xinjiang, in Ürümchi every company, every school, every mosque, every police station, every park, every residential area was surrounded by walls and gates. There was no way to enter these spaces without the tacit consent of the police contractors who, along with automated camera systems, watched who came and went. It was at these bottlenecks that Uyghur young men were most frequently detained and questioned. As Ablikim put it:

> Gatekeepers in the city are always trying to exert their authority over other people. Even though they know and you know that they have no real power other than their control over the gate, they will still often demand that you show a lot of respect for them. And unless you manage to develop a good relationship with them, they will never help you solve any problems you have with the bureaucracy of the place they are

guarding. They will always tell you "It's not my problem." They are one of the most frustrating aspects of living in the city. But people still think they are necessary. Most of them think that a place is not secure without them. I can't believe they are treating us [Uyghurs] like this. This is a modern developed city of over three million people, but they are still trying to herd us like animals. What do they think they will really accomplish by doing this?[9]

Prior to the protests of 2009, many Uyghur migrant workers, or underemployed schoolteachers like Ablikim, lived in tightly built neighborhoods of gray, single-story courtyard (Uy: *hoyla öy*; Ch: *pingfang*) housing. This housing, which was primarily owned by Uyghur and Hui migrants, was often built in an ad hoc manner without the requisite legal paperwork. In the years that followed the eruption of violence and suppression in 2009, much of this housing was demolished and replaced with government housing for documented migrants in high-rise apartment buildings. Neighborhoods with a high percentage of Uyghur residents that were not demolished were radically transformed through the introduction of new walls blocking off alleyways and the installation of tens of thousands of closed-circuit surveillance cameras, which were monitored from command centers and People's Convenience Police Stations in every city block. The policing contractors Ablikim complained about were part of this security apparatus—reporting any suspicious activity directly to the state police. They made Ablikim feel as though even living in the Uyghur parts of the city was no longer really safe.

As noted in the introduction to this book, the scholar Pun Ngai (2005) has developed an analytic for understanding the way the gendered and rural origins of Han migrant women in Shenzhen often resulted in a negative intersectionality. In a similar dispossessing intersectionality, the criminalized, gendered, ethno-racial positioning and rural origins of young Uyghur men acted as an intensifier of social violence.[10] Their bodies justified the massive build-out of detention facilities. In their subtraction, they offered numerous forms of capital accumulation: spaces open for Han settlement, the promise of commodified security technology that could be exported along the New Silk Road, and jobs for hundreds of thousands of police.

Even as we were reading *The Backstreets* together, Ablikim's feelings of insecurity occasionally interrupted our reading just as they seemed to interrupt the thoughts of the protagonist of the book. On one occasion, we met at Ablikim's apartment in a government housing project near Ürümchi's South Bus Station. Being together in that space had an effect on us since it was a Uyghur-dominated

area that was tightly controlled by police contractors, checkpoints, and camera systems. Up until two weeks prior, Ablikim's cousin had been living with him. Since Ablikim's cousin did not have the requisite documentation, neighborhood security officers had entered his home every few nights to check on the situation. Ablikim said that when they came,

> they thought I was hiding something, so they searched all the rooms and looked under all the beds. Once they even demanded that I let them look at my computer. I was like, what the hell! You don't know anything about me, but you think I'm some sort of criminal. I asked them if they had some sort of warrant that gave them the right to demand this sort of thing. And this made them really mad. But I was furious. What the hell! It is bad enough that they come here to check on us all the time, but then they try to push us around like this as well. What the hell!

As he spoke, Ablikim, who was normally so quiet and withdrawn, became really animated. He was pacing around. He normally never swore, but now he was interjecting curse words into every sentence. The invasion of his digital life, the mapping of his social network, had the effect of forcing him to retreat further into himself and at the same time lash out, flailing at the system that was closing in on his social life.

A few minutes after he told me this story, the buzzer from the front door of his building rang. Both of us looked at each other. He said, "What the hell! I'm not answering." My mind raced as I thought about how I would explain what we were doing—an American researcher and Uyghur migrant alone in a Uyghur apartment—when the police contractors started knocking on the door.

The knock never came. It must have just been neighbors who forgot their key to the building. We had merely been interpellated as disciplined subjects of the state. In an intensification of the way someone walking down the street is hailed when they hear a police officer yell "Hey you!" into a crowd—to use Althusser's famous example (1971)—with the buzzer the enclosure system had invaded even the most intimate spaces of Ablikim's life. In the span of several minutes, an intimate conversation between friends was shattered by the call; for a second we were terrified. Then we turned to each other and said we were going to refuse this appeal. We decided in a split second to stand as friends and ignore the police.

This moment offers a window into the way psychic stress gets allocated to the least powerful in the racialized politics of Uyghur dispossession, and the way bonds of care that are built through storytelling produce forms of anticolonial friendship. Just as in the book—where the protagonist was pushed

around by even the Han janitors in his work unit—Ablikim lived in a state of constant paranoia and fear. He said, "Now you can see what my life is really like." This moment also shows how intersubjective relations can refuse colonial forms of subjectification. The self can also be formed, at least partially, through fragile, yet essential, bonds of friendship.

This is not to say that Ablikim did not also continue to seek his own individuated forms of protection by claiming ownership over his time and space. Despite the inherent threat he felt from the enclosure system, like the main figure in *The Backstreets*, Ablikim often sought shelter from the anonymity of the city. He tried to fight his boredom and depression by walking the city as an anonymous observer. "When I feel depressed I just walk. Sometimes I walk most of the day, just trying to get lost in what people are doing or noticing how things look. I never did this when I was growing up in the countryside because we were always too busy. People there just work hard and then come home and eat and sleep." As the People's War on Terror intensified though, the fear of being noticed by the police made him want to walk in circuits where he could blend in with other Uyghurs. The anonymity of being unrecognized made him feel more secure. While he was walking, Ablikim did interesting things with the scenes he observed. Just like the main character in the novel, he let the feeling of the city take on a life of its own. He liked collecting phrases from T-shirts people wore and billboards he saw around the city. He often wrote down Chinese and English phrases he saw like: "Can't tame me," "Fast or last," "Hey, love me," "I am lost," "Think, think, think." He said thinking about them made him laugh. It gave him the feeling that he was narrating the city; getting lost in the way its images created a kaleidoscope of feeling. Of course, in the end, the sense of agency he received from reading the city was often met with a sense of paralysis since the inevitable enclosure project that was underway seemed to make it impossible for him to find a place for himself in the city. Often walking the streets was not enough for him to overcome his boredom and depression. He said:

> I just worry all the time about my future. It makes me really depressed. Mostly it has to do with my work. I've been trying for such a long time to find a real job, but I just can't find one. The longer it goes the more apathetic I become. I completely understand why someone could commit suicide. So much of the time life feels meaningless, and the parts of life that I enjoy are so rare.

It was in these moments of "meaninglessness" (Uy: *ehmiyetsizlik*) that Ablikim turned to a resource that the protagonist in the novel did not seem to have: friendship.

In *The Backstreets* the main protagonist continuously mutters the phrase "No one in this city recognizes me, so it's impossible for me to be friends or even enemies with anyone." When I asked the author of the novel, Perhat Tursun, why this phrase became the refrain of the book, Perhat said that the feeling of invisibility was something that gave the protagonist a "sense of security." I took this to mean that, when the protagonist muttered this under his breath, he was reassuring himself, ultimately, of his existential well-being. But, of course, in the novel the protagonist also actively seeks out recognition from people he meets on the street. He wants to be seen as a carrier of knowledge; he wants to be loved and wanted. The relative freedom of anonymous urban life was thus undercut by the atomizing effect of disconnection and loneliness.

As much as Ablikim identified with the story in the novel, reading it and telling his own story gave him a way of highlighting the differences between the suicidal trajectory of the fictional protagonist and his own life path. Without his friendships, Ablikim said, he would have become lost in the city. That was why he followed Batur across the country first to Beijing and then back to Ürümchi. Ablikim said that part of the reason he and Batur became so close was because they had both tried to opt out of the system of the productive economy and Uyghur social reproduction in certain ways:

> It is hard to find friends in the city. If you are a migrant without an official place, it is difficult to meet people. When I came there were fifty of us in the same class, we were all the same age, we all had the same status so it was easy to make friends. But after college, it became really hard to relate to my old classmates who gave up on being free and took government jobs as teachers and police back in the countryside. We don't have anything in common anymore. Now the first questions they ask are: Why aren't you married? Why don't you get a real job? Those of us who haven't found answers to those questions just hang out with each other. This is why Batur and I are such good friends.

But there is more to the closeness between Batur and Ablikim than simply this. Like many young Uyghurs from the countryside, Batur himself had experienced devastating loss. As a child his father was killed in a street fight with other Uyghur men. His father's murderer was never brought to justice and from his mother and siblings he learned how to keep on living. For him, there were lots of reasons not to give up. Growing up in a small town in Southern Xinjiang, he had developed a close bond with his elementary school classmate

Ablikim. They had shared everything. They had shared meals with each other every day for years. They had often discussed their dreams of moving to the city and pursuing fame and fortune. They imagined that they would be "life and liver" friends for the rest of their lives.

Once, when Batur stopped by while Ablikim and I were reading *The Backstreets* in our corner of the Turkish coffee shop, we started talking about Batur's relationship to the city. As was his habit, Batur spoke in an off-the-cuff monologue. He said:

> I like to think that life in the city is a joke, that everything about it is funny. If you approach it from this angle, there is no reason to get frustrated or angry in reaction to it. Of course, there are some things like sitting in a police station waiting for paperwork to be processed that can be infuriating. So that is why I just say, fuck it, and avoid those situations at all costs. I don't even have an official Ürümchi resident permit [Ch: *hukou*] even though it says I do on my ID card. I'm totally fine with this. If they don't know about me, why should I tell them? The less they know the better. And since it says Ürümchi on my ID, it is never a problem when I travel in the South. I run like this not in order to achieve something—just as a practice of living. If you keep moving, the meaninglessness of life can't get you down. There is no meaning in life, but what are you going to do, kill yourself? No. I have to believe that parts of life are fun. And that is why I keep on living.

At this point he paused and motioned to Ablikim who was sitting on the opposite side of the table. He said: "He tried to kill himself twice, or at least talked really seriously about it. But I always told him, why are you talking like this? You have to live your life. Work at it." Ablikim did not say anything in response. He just smiled. I turned to Batur and asked him what his friendships meant to him when he feels as though life is meaningless. He said:

> Friendships are important because they let you sympathize with other people and share each other's pain. Friendship is what helps you get through those times in life when nothing seems to make sense. Friendships don't drag you down, they build you up. They are different from the obligations you have to your families. Some friends will fuck you up, so you have to stop hanging out with them. You can't do this with family. I don't have to like everything my family does, but I have to accept it. And just let it go. This isn't the same as my relationships with my friends. Friends build each other up. They help each other learn how to better pace themselves when they run in the system. It's about rhythm and breath control.

For Batur and Ablikim, friendship was something that prevented them from panicking. It helped them to remember to keep breathing. Without it, life in the city often seemed impossible. Their families back in the countryside could not provide the support they needed. In the city they needed "life and liver" friends in order to figure out their lives.

When Batur talked Ablikim down from the ledge, he did it by making him think about how to keep moving forward. They talked about philosophy and argued about religion; they talked about living honestly and criticized Uyghur pop culture icons. They used illegalized VPNs to watch American movies and read unfiltered news. But mostly what Batur did was more concrete than that. As with many of the pairs of "life and liver" friends I met, they felt that sharing food was essential to their well-being. If a day passed without sharing a meal, both of them would begin to feel lonely. So Batur made Ablikim get out of the house and share a meal with him nearly every day. Their friendship often centered on the uncompensated labor of supporting each other's economic activities. On numerous occasions, Batur quit jobs himself so that he could help Ablikim find work. He said he "had to do it." It was what needed to be done and so he just did it. Ablikim's life was part of his own life, so he did not see it as some sort of major sacrifice. It was part of the logic of their friendship.

In many ways, Ablikim saw his life reflected in *The Backstreets*. Yet, unlike the protagonist in the novel, he and many of the other young Uyghur men I interviewed had friends around them who shared both their instability and their aggrievement. Their attachment to the sociality of the countryside had not been as deeply cut off as it had been for the figure in the novel. They knew that it was better to be vulnerable together than alone. The feelings of vulnerability that came from the control of the state, the policing of male migrant Uyghur bodies, and the shame that came from the lack of a stable social role in the city shaped how they cared for each other.

The closeness of their friendship gave their lives a sense of stability that would not have otherwise been there. There is a Uyghur saying that describes the sorts of obligations their relationship entailed: "A friend's friendship is revealed the day tragedy befalls you" (Uy: *dostning dostluqi bashqa kün chüshkende biliner*). One way of interpreting this is that friendship has the power to mitigate a failure in the present and sustain a horizon of possibility. What is particularly intriguing here is that it was the ongoing practice of friendship itself that gave weight and promise to the future of their intersubjective narrative; Batur himself did not have the power to give Ablikim's dreams possibility. But the obligations of friendship do have a certain agency. The subjective in-between was what gave them their will to live. Despite their collective dispossession, being

together in their predicament gave them more than the sum of their individual narratives. It allowed them to continue a palliative form of Uyghur communal social reproduction, in narrating their collective story, even as Uyghur sociality faced new forms of enclosure. As in others spaces of contemporary colonial domination, life under constant threat had the effect of bringing their ethical and experiential intracorporeality into sharper focus. The exposure of life to uncertainty was what allowed them to share each other's wounding and dispossession so directly. Violence, after all, hurts the most when it threatens those close to you and you are powerless to do anything about it (Jackson 2002, 39).

On June 29, 2017, back in the United States, I received a final message via email from Ablikim. He said: "It's been a long time since we last talked. I am sorry to say I had to delete all foreigners from my WeChat friends list for security reasons." He said he had returned to his village near Kashgar because his parents had arranged for him to marry a woman from his neighborhood. Several months later, Ablikim's "life and liver friend," Batur, who had remained in the city, said he had lost touch with him. He feared that Ablikim had been detained and taken to one of the many reeducation camps that were built in early 2017. It was likely that he had been deemed a preterrorist because he had used a VPN to download movies and read the news. Maybe the police also found out that he had fasted during Ramadan. Several months later Perhat Tursun, the author of the novel that had meant so much to Ablikim and dozens of other young migrants, was also taken. In the space of several months, many of the intimate homosocial friendships I had been tracking over the past seven years were shattered. Batur was terrified. Like many other young men who had lost their friends to the camps, he felt guilty because he was somehow still free. He felt emasculated and powerless. Many of my Uyghur friends had trouble sleeping at night as they worried for their friends. They saw them calling out to them in their dreams. The severing of their "life and liver" friendships simultaneously made them more vulnerable to state terror and more committed to the struggle against it.

Anthropology as the Work of Anticolonial Friendship

The anticolonial friendships I found among Uyghur migrant men are significant because they demonstrate that colonized men can define significant aspects of their subjectivity through friendships. Much popular press discussion of the devastating effects of Chinese counterterrorism and colonization in Uyghur society situates Uyghurs as largely passive victims of human rights abuse. My research with Uyghur young men taught me to think carefully about

the ways they actively contested their colonization. They showed me how storytelling opened up obligations of friendship, and over time, built rhythms of palliative care that drew them into bonds of attachment and intimacy. The stories inspired by moments of vulnerability and terror allowed listeners to attach themselves to the life story of another. This process recalls the beautiful image of intimate care described by Juan-David Nasio (2004 in Briggs 2014) of an ivy attaching itself to the cracks in a stone wall. The cracks in the masculine self allow the listener to attach themself to the spaces where the other needed them most, helping them to keep going. This is what Batur was alluding to when he said friendship was about helping the other to maintain rhythm and breath-control within the system.

Discussing stories of alienation with Ablikim and others drew me—a white, American, male anthropologist—into tight bonds of friendship and care with Ablikim and many other young men. Together we engaged in the palliative care of telling anticolonial stories of struggle. While reading *The Backstreets*, Ablikim began to merge his own story with the narrative of the novel. As he spoke he became the center of a narrative about colonial Ürümchi, a story about coming of age and a broken journey. Ablikim's story was about dispossession and the friendship it demanded. The anomie of city life, the way that it felt at times to be absolutely ignored and then suddenly to be noticed and predetermined as guilty, had made him feel as though he was nearing the unfreedom of social death. He felt emasculated and disempowered by his fellow teachers, students, passengers on the bus, the police, and society in general. It was only his male friends, his *jan-jiger dostlar*, who made him feel as though he could keep on living.

Ablikim's story, and the stories that dozens of other migrants shared with me, demonstrates that subjects also reproduce their subjectivity through intersubjective exchange with friends rather than being made a subject and realizing one's own subjectivity solely in relation to political power and economic productivity. This is more than a political or economic relationship of power. As Veena Das and Bhrigupati Singh argue, this is an ethical relationship of care: ethical relations that both escape and build political power relations (Das 2007; B. Singh 2015). These are relations that call into being the way one ought to care for the self and the other. They form the basis of the reproduction of society itself. As Scofield notes, in contemporary colonial situations, relations of care allow Indigenous men to find modes of being "which [they] can embody, which [they] can pull [themselves] into" (quoted in Innes and Anderson 2015, 253). They offer a processual response to colonial violence. If given space to flourish, decolonial masculinities can be regenerated to center not on vio-

lence toward women, or even toward colonizers, but toward protecting others through practices of care and listening. This chapter has demonstrated that decolonial masculinities are a processual practice of friendship and listening among Uyghur men. Other studies have shown that such a practice can simultaneously strive to produce egalitarian relationships between women and men (Allison Piché in Innes and Anderson 2015, 203; Messerschmidt 2012). This, in turn, has the potential to position peoples of all genders to embrace the role of protectors of traditional knowledge and of each other (Gregory Scofield in Innes and Anderson 2015, 251). It follows that the anticolonial friendships I found among Uyghur men were the beginnings of a decolonial practice—even as the flourishing of this practice was enclosed and subtracted.

Anticolonial friendships take on particular importance when confronting emergent colonial violence. As has been frequently noted in the literature on post-traumatic depression, language often breaks down when attempting to tell stories of violent experience (Das 2003). The numbness of trauma makes the emotional labor of putting words to feelings daunting, particularly in the presence of strangers. It was hard for Ablikim to say why he felt the way he did, and difficult for others to recognize it for what it was. Instead, people often noticed that his hands shook involuntarily and that he seemed withdrawn. By speaking his story in a narrative form and in dialogue with *The Backstreets*, he actively took "charge of his . . . memories" (Jackson 2002, 56). That is to say, Ablikim had called me into more than a mere empathetic or sympathetic understanding of his emotional pain; rather, he had asked me, as he had asked Batur, to listen to his pain and participate in it—a therapeutic comportment that Robert Stolorow refers to as "emotional dwelling" (2014, 80). In doing so, we entered into a dialogue that "dwelt" on his trauma, and attempted to articulate how unendurable it felt and thus moved forward in figuring out his own life path. By telling me his story, Ablikim was telling his story to someone other than Batur for the first time. His intersubjective framing of trust was thus expanding.

In *The Soul at Work*, Franco Berardi (2009) points out that one way to cope with depression is through friendship. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Berardi suggests that antimelancholic friendship means "sharing a sense, sharing a view and a common rhythm" (215). The dialectic of slowness and terror that comes with dispossession has the effect of intensifying these sorts of friendships, and if the stories that emerge are able to "re-focalize, to deterritorialize the mind and expressive flow," they can lead to new forms of care for the self (216). If depression is based on the "hardening of one's existential refrain" (216), then the therapy that responds to it is an opening up toward

the other. This approach resonates with Ivy Schweitzer's recent formulation of feminist friendship as a process of making selves vulnerable to each other while at the same time recognizing the difference of the other (Schweitzer 2016, 357–58). She argues that, through shared affection, people who may otherwise be alone can make life endurable. As Michel Foucault noted in his later work (1986), friendship becomes a way of life when people begin to think with another, frame their norms with respect to another, and allow another to shape their sense of self.

As I saw dozens of friends disappear along with an estimated 1.5 million others into the reeducation camps since 2017, the emotional labor of thinking about their lives and their futures has become increasingly difficult. What does anticolonial masculinity look and feel like in a time of mass disappearances and isolation of Uyghur men? How will Ablikim protect his future? These are open questions to which I have no satisfying responses, yet what Uyghur migrants taught me was that anticolonial practice begins with the obligation of listening to and protecting friends. As Charles Briggs (2014) has argued, in some contexts and in differential ways, "anthropology is the work of mourning" (335). He suggests that anthropologists can be interpellated by intersecting modes of knowledge production and the poetics and practices of the communities they engage. Anthropological contributions to the work of mourning, or in my case, the work of anticolonial friendship, are shaped from the start by the way participating in the community means being pulled into a struggle with larger social forces. Anthropology as the work of anticolonial friendship calls ethnographers toward ways of engaging with processes of dispossession, domination, and occupation. My interest here is less in practices that are reactive to colonial structures of oppression, and more on the productive action of intersubjective friendship practices themselves.

There is no single way of cultivating such friendships—different circumstances demand different responses—but I have found that listening to the stories and sharing the rhythms of colonized others can produce an intersubjective *being together* that fosters anticolonial practice. Importantly, such friendships cannot erase power differentials; they do not offer solutions. Instead, as Leela Gandhi (2006) has argued, anticolonial friendships produce a shared affective comportment and politics that invites the stranger to the self while at the same time refusing the colonial impulse to assimilation. That is to say, anticolonial friendships produce a self-reflexive methodology for engaging with the colonized others as an accomplice in their grief and rage. Framing anthropology as the work of anticolonial friendship evokes both the way that ethnographers can be caught up in webs of friendship and how they can be taught to be a friend:

how their work as storytellers and listeners can build relationships even as they are taught themselves how to build them. This can help anthropologists to think with more complexity about the way they participate in and observe a community, and the types of ethical obligations that are required by this involvement. By examining the specificities of how stories were told and care practices were enacted, this chapter has explored how retelling stories of trauma and dispossession allows marginalized people to rethink the value of their social position and maintain an intersubjective momentum even as the institutions of the colonial city continually repel them.

The work I was called to perform required me to rethink the value of stories and listening, and the obligations that friendships require. As in Renato Rosaldo's and Charles Briggs's work, I found that my research project pulled me at least partially out of the distance of scholarly knowledge production into a practice of friendship that produced its own forms of knowledge. When I began to develop a regular practice of meeting Uyghur friends on a daily basis I was pulled into a lifeworld that was not my own and exposed to the social powers that laid young men bare and interpellated by their strategies for coping with them. I was asked to listen to stories as part of their effort to hold their world together at least for a time. I was obligated to participate in creating a present that would challenge the inevitable disappearance of Ablikim and hundreds of thousands of other young men into the camps.

Writing this book is in its own partial way a practice of anticolonial friendship. The partiality and momentary successes of making presents and futures come alive with story and laughter built a cascade of images and memories of a lifeworld on the brink of erasure. In other words, there is also a role for ethnographic practice in the work of anticolonial friendship. This, also, is the work of anthropology: listening to and writing the stories of friends in order to stage them for readers to know that they matter.

Conclusion

By shifting the frame of the narrative of colonial-capitalist violence away from the authority of state capital-enabled institutions, surveillance systems, settlers, and police contractors toward the work it takes for the colonized to reproduce their existence, *The Backstreets* gave Ablikim a new way of speaking and being heard. He said, "I feel as though this book was written just for me." It resonated so strongly with him because the feelings in the narrative were his own feelings; the voice of the protagonist of the book felt like his own voice. Since public media was controlled by the state, there were very few public stag-

ings of the experience of terror capitalism available for young Uyghurs to think about. They knew the stories of trauma told by their friends, but they had not seen those stories in print or on television. Reading Perhat Tursun's *The Backstreets* was thus a breakthrough for Ablikim. He felt as though he had found a friend in the novel. Framed in this way, he felt as though his own life had been given cultural form and substance. He felt again as though his life counted, not just to Batur, but also to a listener and reader like me. In this sense, the positive ethics of homosocial friendships and storytelling enabled a new, if fleeting, anticolonial politics of friendship.

The story of Ablikim's life after 2009 was more than just his own. What I have tried to foreground here is the way Ablikim's story was not contained by his own singular experience but was also contingent on Batur's struggles to keep him alive. Perhat Tursun's narrative of Uyghur experiences of Chinese social violence also provided a way of highlighting and retelling his own story in a way that "counted" (Butler 2009) outside of the enclosures of the terror-capitalist system. By making his life and the violence he faced intelligible and grievable, reading *The Backstreets* made Ablikim's life feel "real" again. The co-constitutive ethical imperatives of storytelling and friendship thus gave him a way of both coping with aggrievement and finding a way forward in the ongoing saga of his life in the city. The larger point I am trying to make here, then, is that the work of reproducing anticolonial sociality under conditions of dispossession is not contained in a single life. In addition to this, Ablikim's life story also demonstrates how the particular form of Uyghur vulnerability in the "raging" (Uy: *dawalghup*) atmosphere of Ürümchi can be lived. For young Uyghurs who were living through a process of subtraction, storytelling and friendship could be a matter of life and death. The imminence of threat made them struggle for "life and liver" friends as though their dreams of tomorrow depended on it. As a result, the orientation of young Uyghur men toward male friendships was being intensified and an ethics of homosocial friendship was becoming a central focus of their lives in the city.