

Partitioned listening: I hear (colonial) voices

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ENCOUNTERS

In every encounter with a photograph in an archive, an iconization protocol is enacted. It is that which enables one to file the photograph, and extract it. Sometimes the photographs yield easily to names or concepts attached to them, at others they remain a dim image that does not coagulate into a typical object, and the pointing-out gesture stating “This is X” needs much strength in order to be linked to the photograph. The photograph, any photograph, is produced within the framework of a shared world. Therefore, the claim “This is X” can play a practical role of identification of one by his or her name, but can also constitute and deconstruct communities, rule fates, contest certainties, sabotage, destroy, rescue, and challenge.

—Ariella Azoulay, “Archive”¹

According to standard English dictionaries, the word *encounter* denotes the facing or experiencing of something or someone unexpected. In contemporary India and Pakistan, the word—kept in English—is used specifically to describe an extrajudicial killing undertaken by the police or armed forces in self-defense. The person killed is usually a criminal suspect who dies in controversial circumstances, often a shootout.

When a suspect is injured (rather than killed) in such a situation, the event is called a *half encounter*. In occupied Kashmir in particular, encounters are a common occurrence. A third term, *fake encounter*, is also deployed in the subcontinent to describe an encounter where police have killed a suspect or suspects, but have lied about the defensive necessity to do so. The difference between the encounter and the fake encounter is not life or death—death occurs in both cases—but the obscuring of the truth about the circumstances of that death.

The encounter—noting its adaptation from a colonial language across a postcolonized landscape—brings up the question of perceived differences between determinism and contingency, between

accident and fate. The absurdity of the term *fake encounter*—which describes something that did happen, a death that did happen—is couched in violent unreality. The real encounter is, on the other hand, a foregone conclusion. The encounter in this case embodies a contradiction between state power and state responsibility—real or fake, it symbolizes a crisis of justice, a moment where the law, regardless of its purpose of schematizing justice and stopping violence, does not behave legally.

I HEAR (COLONIAL) VOICES

Subjugated peoples, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay argues, are burdened with the archive's institution of difference. Across empires, colonial classification systems prefigured the building of the archive as an institution, "which took shape a few centuries after millions of people in different places were already forced to embody imperial archival categories, part of a growing and unstoppable ruling operation of classification, tagging, and naming of different groups to form a human index."² Violence is embedded in the archive, a foregone conclusion initiated before its physical existence. The maintenance of the archive renders the unregulated power of the past regulated.

Noting that violent policing in South and Southeast Asia strengthened during times of anticolonial insurgency, I approach the colonial archive.³ My doctoral research into aural-archival legacies of the 1947 Partition led me to the British Empire & Commonwealth Collection (BECC), held at Bristol Archives in the UK. The collection contains audio recordings of interviews with, as well as photographs, letters, and ephemera belonging to, former "colonial servants"—officials, administrators, soldiers, police officers,

civil servants and their spouses—who were in British India at the time of Partition/independence. The mostly English voices speak of their own encounters there, as part of a (failed) project in the 1990s to launch a new "British Empire and Commonwealth Museum" in Bristol.⁴

The audio work presented here inquires into and reinterprets some of the BECC's archival material. In it, we hear the questions asked to the witnesses of Partition, but their answers are cut out, silenced, as much as possible. The removal of these voices—taken from eight hours of interview tape—protects the living descendants of the interviewees in accordance with the archive's protocols. This leaves only the questions asked, their narrative direction reconciling with and falling out from the archive's physical space. Other elements fill these silences: the re-performance of the collection's catalog index, the photographs and letters, and the noise, deteriorations, and fake replications of the digitized oral-history cassette tapes.

Following artist Dora García's performative interventions in voice hearing and her insistence on repetition as a political act, the repetition and bolstering of memory becomes an effort in restoring the possibility of past encounters determined by archival and imperial order.⁵ The public evocations of the irrationality of Partition are justifiable, indicating the scale of suffering and death inflicted at the time, for some marking an origin story of identitarian violence that continues in shifting forms today.⁶ Yet, the amplification of Partition as a singular event, almost as a natural disaster, muffles the violence—ideological, epistemological, and actual—that preceded it, and which also lingers. Mainstream narratives of the 1947 Partition, including oral histories, stamp the event as bereft of morality,

discipline, and sense, a kind of collective madness from which the individual—in this case the "colonial servant"—as witness has escaped. The voices (not heard in this work are a testament to the archive's rationalization and erasure of colonial pasts and presents through the institution of timelines and categorized difference. If we enter the archive to learn about the event of Partition—a frustrating endeavor as it is—through listening, a dual quality appears in the dialogic, partitioned story—an encounter of accident and fate.

Following Yasmin Khan, the reading of Partition as a uniquely devastating event "works to place it beyond the bounds of comparative accounts and, perhaps, to silence its echoes in contemporary global politics."⁷ As certain chronological narratives have colonized the public memory of Partition, its ontological nature as an event is carved out—partitioned, even—from the rest of history.

00:40

INDIA (SEE ALSO PAKISTAN)
ARMY
ASSAM
BENGALI REFUGEES
CASTE SYSTEM
COLONIAL WIFE
CORRUPTION
FAMINE
INDEPENDENCE
INDIAN MUTINY
MAPPING
MUTINY
PARTITION
RACE ISSUES
RACE RELATIONS
RELIGION
RIOTS
TEA
THUGEEES

02:45

PAKISTAN (SEE ALSO INDIA)
ANGLO INDIAN
ARMY
BLUEBIRDS
CHILDHOOD
CIVIL SERVICE
COLONIAL WIFE
CORRUPTION
CULTURE
EDUCATION
FAMINE
INDEPENDENCE
PARTITION
PATHANS
POLICE
POLITICAL AGENT
RACE ISSUE
REFUGEES

04:35

I have been told not to waste my time listening to the oral histories while in the archive, because I have limited time here. Better to look through the physical artifacts, the papers, photographs, and ephemera. I have been suggested and given certain folders to leaf through.

I have an overwhelming urge to steal some of these photographs. It would be easy. I like their size, small, the black-and-whiteness, their clean white margins. My parents met in this city. Here [in the photograph], its streets are empty of people.

I scan the handwritten pages for the words *partition*, *riot*, *independence*, *conflict*.

06:03

2005/044/2/216-244
Peshawar, Thursday, 26 June 1947.
"Strange things are happening, and rumours are flying around. I will try to give you an idea of the chaos in which I am living now, with all the hopes and fears."

07:10

2005/044/1/2

Photographs, or snaps, of Kashmir, 1946.

Some of a “big Sikh.”

Others of a “converted Brahmin.”

Another of Ahamdoo, his cook-guide-servant.

2005/044/3/5

A letter detailing the SPS Museum, Srinagar.

“I have never seen such a heap of junk in one place at one time in all my life. I did not honour the exhibition by wasting a snap on it.”

“There are two kinds of kingfishers, herons, bitterns and moorhen in Dal Lake.”

09:30

I’m finding these interviews really difficult to listen to. These files have been in my hard drive for nearly a year. Every time I promise myself I’ll get through them—eight hours in total, and then I’ll get to receive some more—I stop in the first few minutes, feeling unmoored, confused about the details of the lives of people who talk about everything except what I want to know. Maybe the archivist, or the archive’s catalog, has lied to me. Or maybe an index is just more intriguing than a story.

10:23

It’s clear that this particular tape is decaying, becoming warped. As soon as the people on it begin to speak about the differences between Indians and British, between Hindus and Muslims, the innate differences between them—the differences, so we are told, that led to partition—I stop being able to understand.

11:58

2005/044/2/224

Kohat, NWFP, Pakistan, Independence Day, August 15, 1947.

“This is the end of our rule. They played the retreat while the Union Jack is lowered. Leader of MLA speaking, shame the speech is not translated.

A feeble exhibition of tribesmen doing a Khottack performance. They are uncertain of their steps.”

Acknowledgments

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The previous two works in the Partitioned Listening series can be read/heard by visiting *The Contemporary Journal*.

Endnotes

- 1 Ariella Azoulay, “Archive,” *Political Concepts*, July 21, 2017, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/archive-ariella-azoulay>.
- 2 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 164–65.
- 3 On the transformation of policing in and across former British colonies and domains see Kristine Eck, “The Origins of Policing Institutions: Legacies of Colonial Insurgency,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 2 (2018): 147–60.
- 4 Katherine Prior, “Museum of the British Empire and Commonwealth,” *History Today* 52, no. 10 (October 2002): 2–3.
- 5 See, for example, García’s ongoing project The Hearing Voices Café, <http://thehearingvoicescafe.doragarcia.org>. On the politics of repetition see Dora García, *Second Time Around, which is in fact the first* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2018), 144–53.
- 6 See Arundhati Roy, “Silence is the Loudest Sound,” in *Azadi: Freedom, Fiction, Fascism* (London: Penguin, 2020), 91–106.
- 7 Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, new ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), iii.