Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive

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Failed Listening

From my Interview Transcripts

There was this one person who was singing a song and that song is actually, it’s still in work. [...] That song is something, I have heard it in my lifetime, it is still common. And I was like: ‘Oh my god, I know this song. And this person back then is singing the same song.’ And that was really, it was fun. [...] It’s about women. [...] It’s a very popular song in the sense, OK, it has just been there through the test of time. (Armita [name changed], 20 January 2018, New Delhi)

This snippet of my conversation with a doctoral student in New Delhi resonated with me profoundly. I had asked my interlocutor to describe the experience she had when listening to a set of Bengali sound files from the Lautarchiv. The files had been recorded in a German POW camp during the First World War in February 1918. Today, they belong to a collection of sound recordings of prisoners of war from South Asia housed at Humboldt University’s sound archive. This chapter outlines my efforts to trace the story behind the sound document mentioned in the epigraph, to get closer to the story of its content and creation.

I had met Armita at a public lecture at Jawaharlal Nehru University’s School for Arts and Aesthetics, which I attended during a research stay at Delhi University’s Department of Sociology. She was one of several people I met with, informally talked to, or conducted semi-structured interviews with during my research stay in late 2017 and early 2018. Most of the people I interacted with were, in one way or the other, professionally concerned with the histories and memories of the First World War in South Asian contexts. My interlocutor had heard about the Berlin sound collections in her undergraduate studies. She was familiar with the literature available in English on Indian prisoners of war held captive in German POW camps during the First World War. But it was
only after our first encounter, when I sent her a selection of recordings, that she would listen to the Bengali files of three so-called *lascars.*\(^1\) The comparatively small set of ten records belongs to the otherwise ample collection consisting of almost three hundred sound documents of colonial soldiers from South Asia—so-called *sepoys.*\(^2\)

On the one hand, I was intrigued by the fact that my interview partner recognised one of the recorded songs, which is still in use—withstanding the ‘test of time.’ On the other hand, I was fascinated by the (commonly made) observation that many of the archived songs and stories are about women—irrespective of whether they were recounted by interned soldiers or seamen. Disclosing her thoughts on the situation of prisoners of war, Armita said:

> *They were talking about, they were singing songs, the very typical folk songs back home. And then, it kind of got me into this feeling that being a soldier does not always mean soliery. It’s not all about the Army. So when you are in the front, when you are fighting, or in this case you are prisoner of war, you still think about, the prominent thought in your head is your home. You think about the songs that you would have sung back home, or people you miss, or lots of people are talking about women. [...] It kind of feels like singing about women was their way of dealing with it. And, I mean, they were missing the women that they had left back home.* (20 January 2018, New Delhi)

My interlocutor’s observation and the listening experience she shared were the reasons to embark on a mission to learn more about this particular sound file. Impelled by the acousmatic questions—*Who is this? Who is singing?*—I wished to overcome the division between the mediated sound and its source (Eidsheim 2019: 1–2). I wanted to know more about the recorded person, named Keramat Ali. From the archived files, I learned that Ali was born in Mymensingh, a city in what is now northeastern Bangladesh. On February 7, 1918, he had sung the folk song in one of the barracks of the so-called Half Moon Camp in Wünsdorf, a special POW camp situated on the outskirts of Berlin. I sought to find out more about the song—its use and circulation, find someone to translate it, and try to situate the acoustic trace against the backdrop of the present. I meant to tell the story of this particular song and its singer, of how the digital file travelled to present-day India—and thus, in a way, also withstood the *test of time.*

As it turned out, my intended goal to gain insights about the specific historical subject and the traditional folk song was not meant to be the crux of
this chapter. I did not find an answer to the acousmatic question. I did not find out much about who was singing—about the historical figure of Keramat Ali. According to musicologist Nina S. Eidsheim, the acousmatic question tells you, the listener, “only who is listening: who you are” (24; see also Chapter 7). Consequently, my research led me to discover more about my own subject position and my role in this endeavour: about what it means to conduct historical research concerning a temporal, geographical, and cultural frame I am neither particularly adept in nor familiar with. This is one of the reasons this chapter turned out to be a chapter of failure(s). I do, however, refuse to understand the notion of failure in a purely negative sense. Rather, this chapter aims at fleshing out its illuminating and productive aspects. Moments of failure in ethnographic research sometimes turn out to be serendipitous, allowing for prolific juxtapositions and new research questions (e.g. Martínez 2018; Rivoal and Salazar 2013). Moreover, this chapter introduces approaches in and of feminist ethnography, discussing the question of the politics of location (Rich 1987; Braidotti 1994). In particular, I go back to the notion of feminist ethnography as failure (1994), as developed by anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran.

In this first of my three case studies, I wish to carve out the importance of acknowledging one’s situated, limited, and contextual points of reference when engaging with colonial archives (see Chapter 2). Here, I ask what might emerge from my research experiences and feelings of failure. Rejecting the expectation to understand failure as a dead end, I argue that failure can function as a lens of productive reflection and a form of critique in order to engage with the politics of location and my subject position as a white, female, Western-trained, and institutionally privileged researcher. I proceed to show how pondering over failure and failing helped me to establish a nuanced theoretical and methodological framework, which turned out to be valuable also for the approaches exercised in other sections of this study (see Chapter 5 and 6).

After a second glimpse into my ethnographic archive, this chapter recounts an ethnographic anecdote by Kamala Visweswaran. I draw on her theory of ethnographic failure in order to discuss what my own failures might provide for a postcolonial engagement with the Lautarchiv’s colonial histories. This chapter is thus to be understood as a first appeal to the future handling of the Lautarchiv at its new location, the Humboldt Forum. In addition, the chapter offers detailed (re)contextualisations of four historical figures I encountered in the archive, before bringing my failed—albeit productively failed—journey of tracing the subjects behind the Lautarchiv’s historical sound recordings full circle.
From my Field Journal

Soon after I arrived in New Delhi and made myself familiar with the university grounds, I had the opportunity to meet a group of young undergraduate students at Delhi University’s Department of Germanic and Romance Studies. One of the department’s lecturers invited me to visit a course she taught during that semester, focused on German translation. My attendance provided me with the opportunity to introduce the history of the *Lautarchiv*'s collection of sound recordings of South Asian prisoners of war to an Indian audience. When I visited the class for the first time, I concentrated on giving an overview of the archive, my project, and my research questions. The second time, I presented a selection of Hindi sound recordings and their accompanying scripts. My aim was to listen to and discuss the recordings in a collective and possibly multidirectional setting.

*After one of the students helped me to set up the provisional technical sound equipment, two groups of four clustered around the two small loudspeakers. The sound quality was poor. All heads gathered closely around the small sound capsules in order to grasp the sound. I started the play back of a religious song in Hindi chanted by the prisoner of war Baldeo Singh in January 1917. The students listened mesmerised.*

*The singer’s voice sounded strong and ardent, hitting even the high-pitched tones. For I knew the melody from another recording, it sounded somehow familiar to me. However, as ever so often, and in contrast to the Indian students lending their ears, my listening experience was limited to the melody, the quality of the recording, and the texture of the singing voice. I thought that this is the experience to which Wilhelm Doegen was bound. As the recording commissioner, Doegen managed the technical set up on the campsites and supervised the sound technician Mr. Goile. Doegen made notes on the attached personal information form concerning the phonetic quality of the respective speaker or singer’s voice. Yet he never referred to the music or content.*

*Listening to the repeating lines, the students, in turn, understood the song and the narration; they could relate to the names of the gods mentioned. Had they heard the song before? Did they know the tale? Listening closely, and in due consideration of the written transcripts, they were able to apprehend the recited lines on the recording. Yet deciphering*
parts of the written texts in Devnagari script turned out to be a bit more difficult. One of the students explained that the person who wrote the text did not leave clear spaces between the words. It was another student who showed the most interest for the recording’s content. When I asked about the meaning(s) of the song and possible connections to the war or camp situation in Europe, she was always the first to respond. Her fellow students did not seem to disagree with her, but also did not add to her interpretations. (Field note, 23 October 2017, New Delhi)

This episode from my field journal conveys a comprehensive picture of the situation I found myself in as a researcher in India. While I was welcomed as a guest and interlocutor, appreciating the opportunity to exchange ideas with local researchers, experts, and students, my field note also indicates a sense of unease. Never before had the discrepancy between ‘my’ material and myself been so obvious. Never before had I compared myself to Wilhelm Doegen (1877–1967) in such drastic terms. This was a discomforting experience since Doegen is one of the most controversial figures associated with the *Lautarchiv*’s history. Contemporaries accused him of having always been more concerned with the commercial innovation and success of ‘his’ archive project than with scientific achievements in linguistics (Lange 2017c: 338–340). Initially trained as an English teacher, he became interested in technical sound innovations at an early stage. Prior to the First World War, he produced Anglophone gramophone recordings for Alois Brandl (1855–1940), a professor of English at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Doegen played a decisive part in compiling the archive’s initial and largest collection during the First World War. I will come back to Doegen’s role during the emergence of the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission and its aftermath leading to the establishment of the Sound Department at the Prussian State Library (see also Chapter 5).

What I would like to further pursue in this section are notions of continuity and discontinuity, connection and disconnection. I do so by drawing on two distinct listening acts, which differ in temporal, spatial, and epistemological terms. On the one hand, there is the moment of recording and listening in the past, which happened almost exactly one hundred years ago in a POW camp located close to Berlin, Germany. On the other hand, there is the listening experience today, taking place in a university classroom in New Delhi, India. In equal measure, connected and disconnected across time and space, each of these two moments indicate selective hearing and a plurality of listening positions. Hence, not only are the politics of location at stake here, but also the politics of
listening: who is recording and recorded, who is hearing and heard, who is listening and listening in? When thinking in terms of continuity and discontinuity, it is important to understand listening as a sense formation (Lacey 2013) and to grasp the nuanced sonic skills (Bijsterveld 2019) that include different practices of hearing and listening, interpreting and assessing sound. The emphasis on different, yet interrelated, temporal levels also leads back to the notion of a multitemporal challenge, which I discussed in the previous chapter. I argued for shifting one’s attention to the interplay between pasts and presents, introducing Macdonald’s conceptualisation of a multidirectional temporal practice.

But what characterises the notion of a failed listening? What unfolds when depicting a failed listening from a conceptual and epistemological standpoint? When it comes to the failed listening I alluded to in my field journal, it is neither that I did not hear anything nor that I did not listen. Naturally, I tried to interpret and make sense of the things I heard. However, and as stressed above, my listening remains limited and the same holds true for Doegen. What Doegen heard phonetically was a “very silvery falsetto voice,” as one can read on the personal information form (Personal-Bogen) referring to Baldeo Singh’s recordings. Concerning the sound files of Keramat Ali introduced at the beginning of this chapter, Doegen’s judgment reads as follows: “silvery inner voice with sufficiently clear consonance and nasalized sounds.” As it becomes obvious in these ‘commissioner’s judgments’ (Urteile des Fachmanns) one can find on each of the forms filed at the Lautarchiv, the phonetician Doegen was not interested in the recordings’ contents. Equally, there is no evidence that he interpreted the spoken or sung pieces against the backdrop of either their cultural meaning or in connection to war, captivity, or homesickness. It is precisely this blank space that leads me to the imperative necessity to revisit the recordings through the lens of a postcolonial and cultural history that aims at shedding light on these hitherto largely unacknowledged matters. On that note, Britta Lange (2012: 73) made a strong case for understanding the sound recordings of prisoners of war as testimonies of a subaltern historiography of the First World War that has not been considered yet.

What other notions of failure am I pointing to by drawing on the episode from my field journal and recalling my interactions with the group of undergraduate students? Initially, I was positive about the idea of engaging with a group of people and not just with one single expert counterpart. In this way, different people could share, exchange, and discuss their possibly divergent knowledges, perceptions, and interpretations (see also Chapter 6). Sound in general and sonic practices of listening and hearing in particular spawn a wide
array of associations. In addition, I thought that a course focusing on German translation would be a particularly convenient space in which to engage with the Lautarchiv's recordings. The question of translation applies to the historical transcriptions, but also to the way in which one would (re)translate and (re)interpret the recordings today. However, when presenting my research project to the students, I faced two methodological constraints. For one thing, I felt it was counterproductive to be the only person who was able to properly contextualise and historicise the material. I clearly influenced the students and the discussion due to the selected background information I deemed relevant. In retrospect, I believe it would have been helpful to let the students read up on the topic first and give them time to think about their own views on it. Most of the students did not know much about the involvement of Indian soldiers in the First World War, not to mention their time in captivity in Germany and repatriation back to India. In addition, the students understandably perceived me as an authority, since it was their professor who had invited me to visit the class. Consequently, I had to acknowledge that the uneven distribution of contextual knowledge and status interfered with the creation of a collaborative space in which to exchange ideas and discuss personal impressions.

Feminist Ethnography as Failure

Kamala Visweswaran (2003 [1994]) begins her essay with an anecdote she experienced while ‘being there’—on a research trip in southern India. She narrates how she, as a young US-trained anthropologist, embarked on a trip to carry out ethnographic research on women and Indian nationalism. She recounts her plan to conduct an interview with an elderly woman from Madras (present-day Chennai) in the southeastern state of Tamil Nadu, who was jailed during India’s freedom movement. Showing up at the family’s doorstep accompanied by a colleague from New Delhi, Visweswaran felt insecure starting the interview right away. When they visited the home a second time, there was some confusion between the family and the two researchers. Visweswaran got the impression of having fallen short of the hosts’ expectations. One son showed visible irritation upon realising that the two women were particularly interested in female participation and, especially, in his mother’s involvement in the liberation movement. Instead, the son wished to focus on his father and his right to a freedom
fighter pension. When the anthropologists finally started talking to their aimed interviewee, the woman insisted that she went to jail because her husband wanted her to follow him. Yet another misunderstanding occurred because the daughters expected the two visitors to be working for a TV station and not for a research institution. They did not seem to understand why the scholars would be technically equipped when not employed by a news service. Visweswaran ends her short anecdote by saying: “Leaving the house, we concluded that the whole thing had been a disaster, a complete failure” (97).

Following this episode, Visweswaran explains how this field experience sparked her interest in failure, and more precisely, in failed feminist intentions. Opening up a discussion about the epistemological position of ethnographic fieldwork from a feminist perspective, she contends that it is feminist research in particular that is characterised by historically embedded and intrinsic difficulties and negotiations. Visweswaran argues that it might be a specifically feminist stand “that we [feminist ethnographers] use our ‘fields’ of failure as a means of pointing up the difficulties in our own epistemological assumptions and representational strategies” (98).

On an ethnographic level, Visweswaran’s desire to capture the voice of a female person in order to shed a different light on the histories and memories of India’s freedom movement was predestined to fail. Compared to the husband and father, neither the chosen female interlocutor nor her children seemed to see much relevance in her story. Too divergent expectations and incomprehensible intentions—or simply too many people in the room—kept the researchers from gathering the ethnographic data they had hoped for. Hence, in Visweswaran’s view, the recounted anecdote implicated a failure of (feminist) ethnography in methodological but also epistemological terms. The approach had to fail, Visweswaran recapitulates, because the researchers neglected, or at least underestimated, the divergent effects of geography, history, and epistemology. In other words, they underestimated intersecting axes of nation, colonialism, class, age, and gender. In this way, Visweswaran points to the failures of Western feminism(s) and feminist theory. Notably originating in the 1980s, critique of Western feminism was put forward vociferously by transnational and postcolonial feminist ethnographers, such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Chandra T. Mohanty, to name but a few. In broader terms, and beyond the scope of anthropology, Visweswaran’s assessment also alludes to, now widespread, conceptions of the simultaneity of oppressions (Lorde 1984), the politics of location (Rich 1987; Braidotti 1994), as well as intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).
In her concluding remarks, Visweswaran states that her opening account and the further framing and discussion of her ethnographic practice revealed at least two important lessons. First, she showed that, from an intersectional standpoint, gender alone—not to mention the alleged universal category of woman—is not meant to form the core of feminist theory and research. Second, Visweswaran suggests that ‘being there’ in the field is not the only and pivotal point in anthropology. Ultimately, Visweswaran argues that these two “epistemological shifts” (2003 [1994]: 113), as she terms them, imply two moments of failure, both of which point to the project of decolonisation. To put it in Visweswaran’s words, they “mark decolonization as an active, ongoing process—incomplete, and certainly not one to be memorialized as past historical moment” (113).

In my opinion, Visweswaran’s observations appear as timely as ever, even decades after the publication of her volume of essays. More than anything, my engagement with the Lautarchiv epitomises the significance of the ongoing and incomplete process of decolonising the archive. Without wanting to neglect crucial battles already fought and won, I follow Visweswaran in her view that the decolonial project remains in a provisional and unfinished state. In this sense, the demand to decolonise anthropology (and/or the archive) is a perpetual necessity and apparently always in some state of flux. The same can be said about the attempt to decentre rigid conceptions of gender and the ethnographic field as constitutive categories in anthropology and gender studies (Binder and Hess 2011: 17). Thus, processes of decolonising often imply an impossible notion. And yet recognising impossibility invites us—as feminist and queer anthropologists—to persevere. To Visweswaran, acknowledging the impossible, or the fact that one might fail, is important for a feminist practice invested in decolonising anthropology. Her views on decolonial thinking are one of the key points in her writing. Another crucial aspect is Visweswaran’s reference to Gayatri C. Spivak, who influentially demanded to “question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing her, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility” (2003 [1994]: 100, referencing Spivak 2006 [1987]: 201). Accordingly, recognising modes of failure and limitation as constitutive parts of knowledge-making processes engenders new possibilities. Depicting failure as both “a sign of epistemological crisis [...], but also [...] an epistemological construct” (Visweswaran 2003 [1994]: 99–100) helps to understand failure not as a negative outcome or a paralysing condition, but rather as allowing for an accountable positioning.

An accountable positioning demands manoeuvring vectors of similarity, continuity, and difference. My schooling in colonial history, postcolonial
studies, and intersectional feminism taught me to locate myself in discourses of race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality, among other variables. It taught me to recognise and scrutinise my privileges. The privilege of my institutional position, to give but one example, has different layers to it. Understood in a rather practical sense, my position allows me easy access to the Lautarchiv’s historical material.\textsuperscript{11} It offers the possibility to disclose the material for critical contestation and sensitive examination, which is, however, as I was forced to realise early on, hardly possible if not in a collaborative manner. As emphasised previously, I soon came across certain obstacles as a consequence of my lack of language expertise and contextual historical/cultural knowledge. This evolved to be a frustrating, albeit eye-opening, experience, pointing me towards my distinct limitations and possibilities of unlearning. It exposed the experience of not knowing it all: of not being able to understand or translate the recordings at once, of not being able to follow the life stories of the colonial subjects beyond the limited sources available, of not being able to detach the sources from their hegemonic ballast. “Respect the limits of what cannot be known” (2008: 4) is a statement by Saidiya Hartman I was reminded of in this regard. To me, this form of disclosure also includes acknowledging the fact that the past is always only partially accessible. Each engagement with and assessment of the archive will be incomplete in different ways, depending on the location one is looking from—in my case, the location from which one is listening (in). In her Notes Towards a Politics of Location (1987), Adrienne Rich urges her readers to discuss and take responsibility for the point of location one inhabits while speaking, “the geography closest in” (212)—the body one is thinking, writing, and listening in from.

It is not just a fragmented past I am dealing with, but an entangled one too. It is a past deeply intertwined with global and local histories, with the (colonial) knowledge regime of the metropolis, with transnational complexities and conundrums. According to Shalini Randeria, the (modern) world we live in is constituted by histories that are both shared and divided. As mentioned in my introduction, Randeria coined the German term geteilte Geschichten (entangled histories), which captures the ambiguity of the German verb teilen, referring to both division and/or reciprocity, to something that encapsulates the act of both dividing and/or sharing (1999a; see also Conrad and Randeria 2013 [2002]: 39–44).\textsuperscript{12}

Both notions of the entangled—the shared and the divided—become manifest when we address the histories related to the Lautarchiv’s sound recordings of non-European people. The recordings refer to shared histories insofar as
one must acknowledge the *global* dimensions of the First World War. For a long time, established national narratives restricted these dimensions in favour of telling a single story of the Great War, as though it was an exclusively European war fought exclusively by European powers on European battlefields. The sound recordings provide physical evidence of the involvement of non-European subjects in the war, as well as the (unequal) interactions between recordists and people recorded. At the same time, one has to consider the notion of divided histories. Here, the sound files compiled by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission tell a story of an imperial and racial project. Seen in this light, the recordings mark the alleged supremacy of imperial Germany as a modern and progressive Empire. They illustrate the overarching project of modernity—a project based on maintaining cultural difference and division (see also Chapter 7).

Returning to the question of the politics of location, I am thinking of at least two significant effects. Drastically speaking, being born and brought up in a *white* West-German middle-class family, I am the product of a mainstream society of former colonisers and fascists. Schooled and trained in cultural anthropology at a German university, my academic background is the product of a colonial discipline, of a classist and racist institution. By engaging with the archival material up to the point at which I seem to fail, I aim to acknowledge, but simultaneously also contest, the essentialising notions of these subject positions. I argue that, in this way, it becomes possible to negotiate the difficult enmeshment of these social, institutional, and personal trajectories. It is my hope that my engagement sets a cornerstone for further accountable research, for telling entangled histories. At the same time, my account both complements and complicates already existing research, unveiling both the shared *and* the divided. In this vein, I also call into question fixed binaries between perpetrator and victim, coloniser and colonised, privileges and precariousness (Binder and Hess 2011: 39). I argue that considering nuanced notions of failures and failing refuses a thinking in these normative binaries. Showing that it is possible to tell alternative stories with the available sources, my account oscillates between thick descriptions of the material and a contextualisation against the background of global and structural entanglements. This chapter moves between the concrete and the abstract, between ethnographic and archival situations and more conceptual and epistemological ideas. Before diving into my readings of the archival material, I will recall a selection of already completed accounts of histories associated with sound recordings of prisoners of war from South Asia.
Shifting Paradigms

Without any doubt, there already exists a variety of (‘successful’) approaches to and engagements with a number of (subaltern) sonic testimonies from the First World War POW camps housed at the Lautarchiv. This is another and rather simple reason why I decided to shift the chapter’s focus. During the last decade especially, a range of studies have dealt with the involvement of non-white participants in the First World War in general, and the wealth of sound recordings of prisoners of war from South Asia recorded at the Half Moon Camp in particular. I am greatly indebted to the groundbreaking work carried out from different disciplinary angles and positionalities, and in different formats. It is not my aim to provide a comprehensive account but, rather, to highlight some of the approaches to sound recordings of South Asian prisoners that have been and continue to be important for my own work.

In his outline of the most recent history of the Lautarchiv, Jochen Hennig (2016: 359–360) proclaims the format of an experimental documentary film as the catalyst for a paradigm shift. To him, the film, The Halfmoon Files (2007) by filmmaker Philip Scheffner, set in motion a crucial shift towards a critical awareness and postcolonial appropriation of the Lautarchiv’s material. On the one hand, the film considered the recorded speakers and singers as historical subjects and not as mere representatives of a certain language or dialect. On the other hand, the film prompted a growing awareness of the fact that the sound collection should be located within current postcolonial discourses in Germany and beyond. In Scheffner’s film, the director does not appear on screen. His voice remains off-camera as he tries to trace a soldier from the Punjab named Mall Singh (approx. 1892–?). Filed at the Lautarchiv, it was the recording’s content in particular that struck the director. Under the title Thoughts about himself (Gedanken über sich selbst), Mall Singh’s voice was recorded at the Half Moon Camp in Wünsdorf in December 1916. Referring to himself in the third person, Singh relates to the war situation. In Punjabi, he narrates that a “man came to the European war,” that “Germany captured this man,” that the man “wishes to go back to India” (Das 2011: 1). This man became the protagonist of Scheffner’s film and was thus recognised as a historical subject. Representing only one piece of a larger puzzle, Mall Singh’s sonic imprint was the starting point for Scheffner’s cinematic journey. Scheffner introduces the black screen as well as evocative, fuzzy visuals to convey an understanding for the fragmented condition of Singh’s acoustic trace, and that of other South
Asian soldiers featured in the film. By means of an experimental documentary film, *The Halfmoon Files* not only blurs boundaries between different film genres but more importantly between allegedly authentic historical sources.¹⁵

Inspired by the film, Santanu Das followed the story of Mall Singh from a literary studies perspective. His academic interest, broadly concerned with the presence of non-*white* soldiers and labourers in the First World War, is driven by the wish to carve out the war’s social and emotional implications for non-*white* agents (Das 2005, 2011a/b, 2018). Among the letters, songs, oral testimonies, and literature that Das takes into consideration, Mall Singh’s sonic trace appears as a particularly striking testament. “As I listened to it,” Das writes, “the body and emotion of the speaker seemed palpable, filling in, flowing out, lending physicality to an encounter with a disembodied voice from a hundred years ago. In some indefinable way, Mall Singh was present in it” (2018: 6). In his earlier article “The Singing Subaltern” (2011a), Das conceptualises the recording as a sign of the failure of communication and subaltern speech. With reference to Spivak’s eminent essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), he concludes that there is no actual transaction between singer and listeners (Das 2011a: 5). Therefore, the attempted speech act was destined to fail. Considered as subalterns, the recorded prisoners of war spoke but were—for structural reasons—not heard. Thus, they were “muted in the very act of speaking” (4).

Britta Lange was involved in the intensive research process that preceded Scheffner’s work, the final version of the film, as well as a joint exhibition project.¹⁶ As part of her own extensive academic research on the linguistic and anthropological studies on prisoners of war in both German and Austro-Hungarian POW camps, Lange examined the various anthropological and ethnographic methods, data, and media in an impressive number of publications (Lange 2011a/b/c, 2012, 2013a/b, 2014, 2015a/b, 2017b, 2019). Her focus laid on both phonographic recordings as well as practices of visualisation (see also Chapter 7). On the one hand, Lange directed her interest towards a (cultural) history of science perspective and located this emphasis within a history of knowledge and the historicity of academic paradigms. On the other hand, she dealt with the question of how to frame methodical approaches to sonic and visual material. Together with Anette Hoffmann, she developed the concept of a close reading of, or rather close listening to, sonic testimonies. What motivated both scholars was the search for a methodology that would make it possible to handle the complex layers of textual and visual material, but above all one that would respond to acoustic data (Lange 2013a; Hoffmann 2015; see also Chapter 5). Lange (2013a: 40–42) has always been concerned with
the potentiality of moments of resistance and subversion in sonic material. Consistently, she touches on questions of identity, subjectivity, and the political status of the recorded people.

In an essay from 2015, Lange introduces two motifs in order to explore two separate sound recordings of soldiers from the British Indian Army imprisoned in the Wünsdorf camp. She conceptualises the sonic traces as *poste restante*\(^\text{17}\), and messages in bottles reaching their recipients almost one hundred years after their creation. By alluding to messages in bottles, the image of a sealed sound box (*Schalldose*) comes to mind; a box capturing someone’s voice, to be opened some time in the future. In her essay, Lange closely studies a self-authored song recorded by the Gurkha soldier Jasbahadur Rai (approx. 1893–?) in June 1916.\(^\text{18}\) In the music piece, the singer poetically refers to his body, which “has become like a string” (2015a: 95). He laments that he does not want “to stay in a European country,” pleading “please reach me to India” (86). The recurring refrain—“listen, listen”—prompts Lange to imagine an audience to which the singer addresses his heart-rending verses. In her concluding thoughts, she asks, “are we, am I the recipient, when I listen to these messages, of which I—without knowledge and competence regarding country, literature or language—only understand a fraction” (95). The second recording examined by Lange contains a text recited by the Sikh soldier Sundar Singh (approx. 1885–?) in January 1917.\(^\text{19}\) In his text, the speaker refers to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the principal scripture of Sikhism. He complains, though very implicitly, about the fact that the Sikh soldiers’ book is lacking a special blanket to wrap it in in the camp. Lange understands the text as a kind of petition, as a request directed towards the Germans to respect and enable the religious habits of the Sikh. It is not known whether the camp authorities complied with the speaker’s request, or whether the petition was deposited in the archive to be received much later—*poste restante*.

In the form of a more conventional historiographical account, Heike Liebau (2018) traces the life story of yet another colonial soldier by means of exploring visual, auditory, and textual evidence. Liebau follows the Gurkha soldier Gangaram Gurung (approx. 1881–?). In the archives, the historian came across not only an acoustic testimony but also three drawings and a portrait photograph.\(^\text{20}\) Liebau understands her investigation as being in line with the growing interest for the social lives of members of the colonial troops, shifting scholarly attention to the global and entangled dimensions of war.\(^\text{21}\) Gangaram Gurung’s sound file was recorded in English and not in his first language or a local dialect. He read out the biblical story of the prodigal son, which was con-
considered a standard text in comparative linguistics at the time. Because of his English skills, Liebau assumes that Gangaram Gurung acted as a translator and mediator between different languages and camp hierarchies (11). In her essay, she argues that tracing the individual life story of the Gurkha soldier allows us to draw conclusions about the social and cultural ramifications of military interactions, which have implications far beyond combat operations.

Following Das, Lange, and Scheffner, what motivated my own initial engagement with the POW recordings was the ambivalent condition of the sonic sources. I was interested in the tensions between the recordings’ objectifying status and moments of articulating political subjectivity (Hilden 2015, 2018a). In previous research, I too investigated sound testimonies of Gurkha soldiers imprisoned in the Half Moon Camp in Wünsdorf. Together with the ethnomusicologist and visual anthropologist Ranav Adhikari, we closely examined songs of the sepoys Motilal (approx. 1885–?) and Him Bahadur (approx. 1885–?). In June 1916, the soldiers sang about the war, their longing for home and loved ones, the wish to end the fighting. By concentrating on the songs’ contents, we proved that the singers adapted their music pieces to the war situation they found themselves in on European soil. The songs’ titles, Tidings from Germany (Kunde aus Deutschland), Lament of a Prisoner (Gefangenenklage), and Sepoy’s Life (Sepoy Leben) are revealing of the unsettling, yet deeply poetic contents the song lines revolve around. In my work, I grappled with the discrepancy between the recordists’ intentions and the poetic qualities of the recordings. On the one hand, the recordists reduced the contents to a representation of language samples. On the other hand, the recordings contained political statements addressed to an undefined audience. The songs reveal a political subject position muted for structural reasons. The voices, questioning the benefits of war and lamenting over the tragic conditions, percolated in the archive’s shallows. However, almost one hundred years later, the soldiers’ voices bear witness and help to convey new perspectives from within and on the First World War.

The following pages return to the historical protagonists introduced at the outset of this chapter. I take up the thread from the beginning in order to convey why I decided against tagging along with (my) previous work, and decided to shift the analytical attention. It is not that I do not trust the historiographical importance and value of the accounts invoked above. Yet I strongly believe in the recognition of failure as a form of critique, as advocated by Jack Halberstam (2011: 88). Nonetheless, the above-mentioned scholars and I might share similar post- and/or decolonial agendas. In this way, it becomes clear that the attempt at decolonising the Lautarchiv has to emerge from different directions.
I base the following portrayals on my points of access to the acoustic and written material from the archive. By bringing together my archival research with secondary literature, only a vague impression of the historical subjects emerges. But even if the portrayals remain incomplete, they outline one possible reading of the archive—my own—and the personal histories it entails. I deal with the historical figures of Keramat Ali and Baldeo Singh—as the ones being recorded—as well as the recordists Heinrich Lüders and Helmuth von Glasenapp. It is my aim to correlate historical contexts with archival traces and information about these four individuals, thereby also drawing on the notion of alleged ‘subaltern’ and ‘dominant’ traces. I move between the individuals’ tangible traces and broader contexts and concepts. Although the sources and my access are limited, I believe that a nuanced recontextualisation of ‘dominant’ and hitherto marginalised histories matters, not least in order to identify moments of limitation and failure.

Ali and Singh

Keramat Ali was not a soldier. He was an Indian civilian. His trajectory leading to the Half Moon Camp is different from the one of the sepoys recruited and shipped to the theatres of war, first in Europe and later Mesopotamia and other places. In 1914 and 1915, a large number of soldiers of the British Indian Army fought on the Western Front in France and Belgium, before being deployed on other battlefields. Yet, for many members of the colonial troops, the combat operations on the Western Front were followed by German captivity. By early 1915, many of the sepoys ended up in different internment camps on German soil—including the Half Moon Camp in Wünsdorf. However, Keramat Ali did not belong to the group of colonial soldiers. He was one of five Indian lascars that the Orientalist Heinrich Lüders recorded in February 1918. The Germans detained Ali and other lascars at the so-called India Camp (Inderlager), which was part of the Half Moon Camp. Between the recordings Lüders had been in charge of since early 1916 and the recordings of the seamen that he compiled two years later, one can thus notice a clear temporal gap. Today, Lüders’ intentions and the question of what it was that he expected from this new set of sound samples remain rather unclear (a point to which I will return below).

Seen from a present point of view, one of the sound documents in the collection of recordings of lascars sticks out. Divided into three separate record-
ings, the lascar Mohammed Hossin (approx. 1868–?) recalls the story of his capture. It is the story of the Möwe (seagull), as one can read in the archive’s neatly kept recording journal (Aufnahmejournal). The story of the Möwe refers to the SMS Möwe—a German raider, also known as the ‘Kaiser’s pirate.’ Between 1915 and 1918, the German ship captured a number of ‘enemy ships’ belonging to the British Empire. In the archived sound recordings, Hossin recounts the day of the capture. At the time, he was a steward of the SS Clan MacTavish, a ship requisitioned by the British government and belonging to the British cargo shipping company Clan Line. Built in 1912, the vessel operated between ports in Britain and Australia. In January 1916, the SMS Möwe shelled and sank the Clan MacTavish off the Portuguese island of Madeira in the Atlantic Ocean. The hostile take-over cost the lives of eighteen people. Hossin narrates how he boarded the SMS Möwe. As it says in the translation, both groups of crew members—‘the English and Muslims’—entered the ship raider. Bringing them to the mainland, the Germans allocated the crew to different internment facilities—among them the Half Moon Camp at Wünsdorf.

Almost one hundred years later, literary scholar Santanu Das transcribed and translated Hossin’s story. Britta Lange published it in a volume about South Asian prisoners of war in World War One Germany (2011c; see also Lange 2015b, 2019: 277–302). It is thanks to Das and Lange that this story, told from a steward’s—and, if you will, subaltern—point of view, became known to an international public. “His story,” Lange writes, “which he [Mohammed Hossin] describes in such detail and which bears testimony hitherto unknown in Europe to an event in the First World War, has not been printed prior to the publication of this book” (2011c: 182).

The lascar Hossin was fifty years old at the time of the recording. He went to sea at the young age of ten, as one learns from his personal file. I imagine that he must have stood out among the sepoys and other lascars who were mostly in their early twenties and thirties when taken as prisoners of war. It is not known whether Hossin and Ali shared employment on the Clan MacTavish. Less than half Hossin’s age, Ali was only twenty-one years old when Lüders captured his voice on altogether five different records (see figure 3-1). According to the personal files, Hossin and the other three lascars recorded were all born in Kolkata and were sailors or “captain’s boys.” Only Ali was born in Mymengsingh and his occupation was noted as “Signeller [sic] of Railway Line.” His personal file says that he went to a “Minor School” in Bajitpur, a city, like Mymengsingh, in what is today East Bangladesh. At the age of sixteen, he moved to Rangoon (today’s Yangon) in then British Burma (today’s Myanmar). Besides Bengali, he also knew a bit of Hindustani.
Lfd. Nr.

PERSONAL-BOGEN

Lautliche Aufnahme Nr.: E.K. 158 Ort: Würzburg
Datum: 7. 2. 1918.
Zeitangabe: 6 Uhr
Dauer der Aufnahme: 3 Min. Durchmesser der Platte: 27 cm.
Raum der Aufnahme: Baracke 7.
Art der Aufnahme (Sprachaufnahme, Gesangsaufnahme, Choraufnahme, Instrumentenaufnahme, Orchesteraufnahme):

2 Volkslieder.

Name (in der Muttersprache geschrieben):
Keramat Ali

Name (lateinisch geschrieben):

Vorname:

Wann geboren (oder ungefähres Alter)?

Wo geboren (Heimat)?

Welche größere Stadt liegt in der Nähe des Geburtsortes?

Kanton — Kreis (Ujeđe):

Departement — Gouvernement (Gubernija) — Grafschaft (County):

Wo gelebt in den ersten 6 Jahren?

Wo gelebt vom 7. bis 20. Lebensjahr?

Was für Schulbildung?

Wo die Schule besucht?

Wo gelebt vom 20. Lebensjahr?

Aus welchem Ort (Ort und Kreis angeben) stammt der Vater?

Aus welchem Ort (Ort und Kreis angeben) stammt die Mutter?

Welchem Volksstamm angehört?

Welche Sprache als Muttersprache?

Welche Sprachen spricht er außerdem?

Kann er lesen? ja

Welche Sprachen?

Kann er schreiben? ja

Welche Sprachen?

Spielt er ein im Lager vorhandenes Instrument aus der Heimat?

Singt oder spielt er moderne europäische Musikweisen?

Religion:

Vorgeschlagen von: 1. Dr. Luders.
2. Dr. Filb-Bogen.

Beschaffenheit der Stimme:

1. Urteil des Fachmannes (des Assistenten):


Figure 3-1: Personal information form (Personal-Bogen), PK 1158. February 7, 1918. LAHUB.
It seems remarkable, yet not surprising, that the histories of *lascars* in general, but particularly the life stories that fragmentarily derive from the *Lautarchiv*’s documents are characterised by this high degree of mobility. Especially from the late eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, European ships increasingly employed *lascars*. The sailors originated from many places, namely from Southeast Asia, but also the Arab world. Particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British East India Company recruited many Bengali Muslims. Accordingly, migration and movement between South Asia and Europe had been ongoing for centuries. However, the First World War marks a new quality of mobility and labour migration, not only between South Asia and Europe, but also in other translocations, such as between European and French colonies on the African continent, as well as other British dominions (Roy and Liebau 2011).

But the recordings of the group of Indian *lascars* also point to the discontinuities of the archive for other reasons. Although the histories of non-white combatant soldiers have long been neglected in historiographical accounts of the First World War in general, the presence of *lascars*, not to mention of thousands of non-combatant soldiers and labourers, is an even more unrecognised chapter in global history (e.g. Diengdoh 2017; Roy 2011). Under the condition of labour regimes, a vast number of workers, labour and porter corps, were transferred to the theatres of war in Europe and elsewhere from many parts of the world (e.g. Singha 2010). It was Das who pointed out that the recruitment of Indian combatant and non-combatant labour during the First World War has not only long been absent from historical research, but also from elitist (nationalist-inclined) memories in India and the West (2011a; see also Roy and Liebau 2011). With regard to India, Das (2005, 2011b, 2018) has been concerned with the overlooked aspects of the military conflict of the First World War for many years. His academic inquiries focus on the war’s global, social, cultural, and emotional ramifications. In regards to the paucity of sources, he emphasises:

In a context when the sepoys did not leave behind the thousands of diaries, poems and memoirs that form the corner-stone of European war memory and when the colonial archives are remarkably silent, a dialogue between different kinds of sources—archival, oral and the literary—become all the more important. (2011a: 8)

Set against the backdrop of the methodological aspiration of ‘creating a dialogue between different kinds of sources,’ what I offer in this study is a dialogue
Lfd. Nr.

PERSONAL-BOGEN

Lautliche Aufnahme Nr.: PH.647    Kriegsgefangenenlager: Anscqendorf
Datum: 3.1.1917
Zeitangabe: 12 Uhr

Dauer der Aufnahme: Durchmesser der Platte: 12 cm

Raum der Aufnahme:
Art der Aufnahme: Sprecheraufnahme, Zügelaufnahme,
Choriaufnahme, Instrumentenaufnahme, Orchesteraufnahme:

Name (in der Muttersprache geschrieben):
Name (lateinisch geschrieben):
Vorname:

Wann geboren (oder ungefähres Alter)? 30 Jahre
Wo geboren (Heimat)? Kisa
Welche größere Stadt liegt in der Nähe des Geburtsortes?
Kanton – Kreis (Ujedz): Utara
Departement – Gouvernement (Gubernija) – Grafschaft (Country): Upper Yaha
Wo gelebt in den ersten 6 Jahren?
Wo gelebt vom 7. bis 20. Lebensjahr?
Was für Schuldankunde? Dorfschule
Wo die Schule besucht?
Wo gelebt vom 20. Lebensjahr?
Aus welchem Ort (Ort und Kreis angeben) stammt der Vater?
Aus welchem Ort (Ort und Kreis angeben) stammt die Mutter?
Welchen Volksstamm angehörig?
Welche Sprache als Muttersprache?
Welche Sprachen spricht er außerdem?
Kann er lesen? ja
Welche Sprachen?
Kann er schreiben? ja
Welche Sprachen?
Spielte er ein im Lager vorhandenes Instrument aus der Heimat?
Singt oder spielt er modern europäische Musikweisen?
Religion: hindu
 Beruf: Zander

Beschaffenheit der Stimme:

1. Urteil des Fachmannes (des Assistenten):
2. Urteil des Kommissars:
3. Urteil des Technikers:

Figure 3-2: Personal information form (Personal-Bogen), PK 647. January 3, 1917. LAHUB.
between different material, sensory, and temporal dimensions attached to the acoustic documents (see also Chapter 5 and 6). Following Das, the recordings of the sepoy Baldeo Singh are significant, not least in the sense that they seem to cut across all three notions of the archival, the oral, and the literary.

Baldeo Singh’s recordings belong to the comparatively large collection of songs and narratives from northern India stored in the Lautarchiv. From the archival scripts, one learns that Singh was born in Kera (Etawah District) in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (see figure 3-2). He received his basic education at a rural school in Faizabad, where he would also join the British Indian Army. At the age of eighteen, he became a member of the Regiment of the Ninth Bhopal Infantry. In September 1914, the Regiment arrived at the Mediterranean Coast in Marseille in order to support the British battalions that had suffered heavy losses during the first months of the war. It is likely that Baldeo Singh was among the Indian soldiers who fought in the battles of Neuve Chappelle or Ypres—attacks which cost the lives of many soldiers on both sides of the front lines. Contrary to many of his fallen comrades, Singh survived the trench warfare. Together with hundreds of other soldiers, he was held captive as a prisoner of war. Ultimately, he ended up in a POW camp in Germany and was not able to follow his regiment to the battles of the Mesopotamian campaign. Archived at the Lautarchiv, his recordings bear witness to his survival, though it is not known whether and when he was repatriated to India. It is not known what happened to him during and after his time of captivity, as is the case for so many of the (colonial) internees. 32

Compared to the lascar recordings, Baldeo Singh’s acoustic testimony stands out from the archive in different ways—in part also alluding to notions of failure. For one thing, it seems striking that Singh was recorded on three different days: on January 2, 3, and 5 in 1917. 33 When looking through the recording journals, one usually reads the same name only in conjunction with one single date. Might Singh have been of particular scholarly interest for the recordists, Helmuth von Glasenapp and Wilhelm Doegen? Or did he distinguish himself from the other soldiers for different reasons? On day three, Doegen noted on the back side of the personal file, regarding the sound recording with the serial number PK 673: “At the end, Baldeo Singh shouts ‘Guten Abend’ [‘good evening’] without being asked.” 34 I understand this as one striking example of the discontinuities and failures of the archive (see figure 3-3). “The unforeseen is not desired,” says the off-screen voice of Philip Scheffner (2007) in his documentary film. “It endangers the scientific comparability and creates additional work,” the narrator continues. The sound document PK 673 did not conform
BESONDERE BEMERKUNGEN:

[Handwritten text: 'Beforderte auf der Kriegsmarine.']
to what the recordists intended to record, as the accordance between the written and the sonic file was one of the main objectives of the archival enterprise. Ideally, the targeted procedure allowed for the production of a sound piece with a corresponding transliteration, transcription, and German translation. From my point of view, the notion of failure has a practical as much as an epistemological layer to it. “Without being asked,” Baldeo Singh neglected the rigid recording procedure by the simplest act, for the briefest moment. Since the recordist felt the urge to list the ‘misbehaviour’, I read it as a rupture of the scientific practice (see also Chapter 5)—performed by the ‘unruly’ object of study that was Singh. It was a minor and modest gesture. At the same time, it appears humane and almost a bit humorous. Lange (2019: 331) even sees the appropriation of the German language as a way of taking control of the situation.

It is the presence of migrant labour and moments of subaltern agency that is manifest in the recordings of Keramat Ali and Baldeo Singh. It is here that the colonial archives are not silent (to recall Santanu Das), but literally sounding and resounding. The recordings referred to, resonate with the attempt to shift dominant historical narratives and memories of the First World War.

**Lüders and Glasenapp**

If one reads the colonial archive along its grain, it appears natural to follow the official records of dominant figures in history—usually white and male (see also Chapter 5 and 6). Considering the points of reference in this chapter—sound recordings of Keramat Ali and Baldeo Singh—, one needs to take a closer look at Heinrich Lüders and Helmuth von Glasenapp. The two Orientalists differ from each other significantly, despite sharing certain characteristics. They differ with regard to their age, educational training, and career prospects, but also their research focus and findings in the POW camps. The ominous, yet influential, academic discipline of Oriental studies was launched as an academic field of research concerned with societies, languages, and histories of the ‘Eastern world’ and the ‘Orient.’ In his groundbreaking book, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said famously deconstructed the political and academic discourse pervaded by the Eurocentric gaze that legitimised and perpetuated the racist ideology of European superiority.35
As a renowned philologist at Berlin University, Heinrich Lüders was one of the leading members of the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission. In December 1915, the Prussian Ministry of Science, Art, and National Culture approved and (largely) funded the activities of the Phonographic Commission. Doegen acted as the Commission’s technical and logistic director, whereas the influential musicologist, professor of psychology, and founder of the Berlin Phonogram Archive, Carl Stumpf (1846–1936), was appointed first chair of the board. The Phonographic Commission consisted of altogether thirty members divided into seven teams, composed of (mostly) well-established linguists with expertise in different Western and non-Western languages. In addition, there were two groups focusing on anthropological and musicological research. For the first, Felix von Luschan (1854–1924)—then director of the Berlin Ethnological Museum—was in control. For the latter, Stumpf and his student Erich Moritz von Hornbostel (1877–1935) were initially in charge. However, as things developed, Georg Schünemann (1884–1945) would conduct most of the music recordings.

The musicologists used an Edison phonograph for their practice, which meant saving songs and instrumental music exclusively on wax cylinders. In 1877, Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) had invented the phonograph. It did not take long for anthropologists to introduce the technical device to ethnographic research, commissioning missionaries, travellers, and colonial administrative staff to record voices with the portable apparatus (e.g. Stangl 2000). To contemporary ears, the sound quality of recordings made on wax cylinders is substantially lower than that of shellac records. The cylinders were fragile, quickly wore out, and thus not well-suited to long-term preservation. However, back then, the well-tested and easily transportable phonograph still seemed most convincing to the group of musicologists. Unlike the gramophone, the phonograph operated with a mechanical crank and did not require electricity in the form of heavy batteries. Moreover, one could play back the recorded sound immediately after the moment of recording. Nevertheless, the linguistically- and phonetically-oriented researchers used the far more elaborate device of the gramophone, which promised the production and (commercial) distribution of easily duplicable recordings. Ten years after Edison had introduced the phonograph in the US, German-born Emile Berliner (1851–1929) developed the gramophone. The technical requirements of the gramophone meant setting up a provisional sound studio each time a group of linguists set out on a trip to one of the camps. Depending on their field of expertise, the language experts belonged to different subgroups, traveling to different internment camps.
installed throughout Germany. Among the exclusively male members were professors of English and Romance languages, Orientalists and Africanists, and a number of Indo-Germanic philologists.

Lüders was head of the group for Indian and Mongolian languages, working in close collaboration with his colleague, Wilhelm Schulze (1863–1935). The young Helmuth von Glasenapp also became a member of his team. In 1908, Lüders became professor of ancient Indian languages and literature at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. His research focused on the analysis of ancient Indian and Nepali handwritings and inscriptions, as well as ancient Buddhist narratives. For his studies in the POW camps, he slightly shifted his interest to historical linguistics, wishing to trace the genealogies and divisions of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages. As part of his camp studies, Lüders mainly concentrated on soldiers of so-called Gurkha regiments. He was particularly interested in studying Nepali speakers who, in some cases, also knew non-Indo-Aryan languages (Lüders 1925: 137). After several trips to the Wünsdorf camp, Lüders and Schulze followed some of the soldiers they had worked with to camps in southern Romania.39

As I have shown elsewhere, Lüders did not seem entirely convinced of the sonic scientific enterprise—despite his efforts (Hilden 2015). For him and many other Commission members, the sound recordings represented a by-product of the transliteration, which scholars continued to build their analyses on (Hennig 2016; Kaplan 2013; Meyer-Kalkus 2015). Moreover, Lüders’ attitude and actions suggest that he had ethical concerns regarding the anthropometric studies of Felix von Luschan and his student Egon von Eickstedt (1892–1965). Lüders believed that the two anthropologists were disrespectful towards the religious beliefs of, for instance, Sikh soldiers. Lüders was in support of a protest letter by members of the India Independence Committee (IIC) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.40 While Lüders’ research had a linguistic (rather than a racist, albeit racialising) focus, the work of Eickstedt provides strong evidence of his scientific stance towards racial theories gaining ground at the time. Eickstedt became one of the leading advocates of racial theory under National Socialism, occupying a professorship in anthropology at the University of Breslau (today’s University of Wroclaw) since 1933.41 At this point, I would not be able to do justice to a nuanced description of the development of racial science in Germany and the complicity between linguistic and anthropological research. Andrew D. Evans (among others) notably analysed the wartime and camp studies as turning points for the discipline of (physical) anthropology in Germany. Evans (2002, 2003, 2010) claims that a new generation of anthropologists moved away from its alleg-
edly ‘liberal’ roots, paving the way for further racial studies under eugenic auspices (see also Penny and Bunzl 2003; Zimmerman 2001). Andre Gingrich and Britta Lange disagree with Evans, insofar as they argue that the proclaimed liberal roots in German-speaking anthropology were not necessarily innocent, but had already manifested chauvinist, orientalist, racist, and anti-Semitic tendencies long before the First World War (Lange 2013a: 27, referencing Gingrich 2010: 372).

Between a New Ethnology and an Archival Project

Edited by Wilhelm Doegen in 1925, the volume Among Foreign Peoples (Unter Fremden Völkern) assembles a range of linguistic and ethnological contributions by members of the Phonographic Commission, but also by other scholars. Most of the contributors do not directly address the studies in the camps, but concentrate on general anthropological remarks concerning their respective area of expertise. Heinrich Lüders is one of the few people who refer to the insights derived from the camp studies in detail. His contribution concerns “the Gurkhas,” whereas he does not mention his studies on Bengali speakers at all. In the following quote, Lüders addresses “the Gurkhas” as a homogenous group, while, in fact, they were very heterogeneous in terms of identity and belonging, as the Orientalist himself points out (1925: 129 and 136). Characterising the soldiers he interacted with, Lüders writes:

When Professor Wilhelm Schulze and I allocated our attention to the study of Khas [Nepali] in the prison camps, we could of course not make our loyal Gurkhas understand the actual purpose of our quest for knowledge. But that did not stop them from willingly helping us. They seemed to feel a certain pride that we were paying so much attention to their language. Many, perhaps most, were literate in reading and writing; however, they had not learnt the script used for their language as children, but only during their service. Some were also able to write down longer stories from their memory. [...] Most of them, however, did not dare to tell a coherent tale. They preferred to recite a song, either alone or in a group. Among the songs, there are certainly some sounding at festivals since ancient times [...] (135–136, my emphasis)
Analysing this paragraph in light of the context of the time, the discrepancy between researcher and ‘research object’ and the vilification of the soldiers’ subject positions seem manifest. By describing the soldiers as ‘loyal’ and ‘willing,’ Lüders infantilises the singers and speakers. Consequently, he denies them their own volition as well as their own understanding of the sound recordings’ potential purpose and meaning. Instead, this passage suggests difference and alterity between the white and modern academics, on the one hand, and traditional, unmodern non-academics on the other. It also implies a sense of nostalgia for ‘indigenous culture’ embodying elements of the past in the modern present (a point I will come back to in Chapter 7).

Driven by a positivistic and unilineal understanding of history and ‘cultural progress,’ Lüders intended to trace the genealogies and changes in the use of different languages and vocabulary. In line with the paradigm of ‘salvage ethnography,’ he pointed out that non-Indo-Aryan languages among the Gurkha regiments were on the brink of extinction because of labour migration and global transformations (see also Chapter 7). I argue that Lüders’ attitude is a striking example of what prompted anthropologist Johannes Fabian to explore Western techniques of time-related dissociation and racialised forms of othering. In *Time and the Other* (1983), Fabian observes that anthropology’s distancing practices produce and reproduce the constructed dichotomy between the Self and the Other by constituting different temporal zones. In this way, Lüders located ‘his’ research objects in a separate and preceding temporal stage in order to deny a possible synchronicity and coeval existence. In fact, Lüders points out that Tibeto-Burman languages are on a ‘lower cultural stage’ compared to the Indo-Aryan language of Nepali, which he refers to as the language of a “herrenvolk” (1925: 135).

As mentioned earlier, it is not known what motivated Lüders to compile the set of Bengali speech samples. What prompted him to study the linguistic repertoires of the highly mobile seamen? Was it for practical reasons and the relocation of the Gurkha soldiers who initially mattered most to him? Or did Lüders actually show an interest in the diverse linguistic influences on and skills of the Indian sailors? Even if the archival files do not indicate the initial scientific interest that led to the compilation of the Bengali recordings, they do, as emphasised before, bear witness to the situation of Indian lascars detained as civilian internees in German POW camps.

In view of his overall published work, the output based on Lüders’ extensive camp studies seems rather limited. Yet his colleague Glasenapp appears to have extracted even fewer findings from his studies in the camps. Glasenapp
was only at the early stages of his academic career when the war broke out. Back then, he wished to become a military volunteer. Because of an injured knee, however, he had to withdraw from service. By December 1914, his regiment in Berlin had discharged him from his duties. Later, Glasenapp (1964: 70–71) would write in his memoirs that he sought employment that was essential to the war effort. Consequently, he not only became a member of the Phonographic Commission, but he also started working for the Intelligence Bureau for the East (Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient). Founded by the law graduate and Orientalist Max von Oppenheim (1860–1946) on the eve of the First World War, the Intelligence Bureau was attached to the German Foreign Office.44 Through the recommendation of a state secretary at the Imperial Colonial Office (Reichskolonialamt), Oppenheim had hired Glasenapp for his academic expertise in ‘Indology.’

In his autobiography, published one year after his death in 1963, Glasenapp (1964: 90–91) addresses his camp studies only in one single paragraph. In his further published work, there is no mention of his linguistic research and experiences in the POW camp (see also Lange 2011b: 126). It is, however, noteworthy that Glasenapp contributed three essays to Doegen’s 1925 volume. Unlike Lüders, he did not once mention whether his strongly ethnocised characterisations of “Hinduism,” “the Rajputs,” and “the Sikhs” stem from, or were complemented by, his encounters with Hindu, Rajput, or Sikh soldiers in the POW camp (Glasenapp 1925a/b/c). Concerning his studies during the war, he explains in his memoirs:

The main task was to have the Indians first write down the text of a story or a song, which I then discussed with them and Professor Doegen recorded. Performing this task was often difficult because the prisoners of course could not speak English, so I could only communicate with them in Hindi; there were also those who were illiterate, whose texts I could only listen to and transcribe. Although the results of these studies had, by their very nature, to involve some potential errors, a large collection was assembled, which unfortunately was not published in a book as planned. (1964: 90–91)45

Even though one can sense a certain reservation towards the camp studies in these lines, Glasenapp still admires the size of the collected data. He considers it a pity that Doegen did not manage to publish the findings as planned. However, one has to keep in mind that Glasenapp wrote these words decades after work-
ing for the Phonographic Commission. At this point, he was looking back on an eminent academic career in comparative theology. While Lüders’ working papers and files full of notes and transcriptions are stored at the Archives of the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Science, the scripts of Glasenapp’s recordings are filed at the Lautarchiv. This suggests that, ultimately, neither Glasenapp nor, presumably, any other researcher had used the transliterations, transcriptions, and translations for further scholarly research and editing. It depends on the historical moment and epistemological position whether this circumstance is considered a failure of the Commission’s linguistic enterprise. With regard to the recordings’ scientific relevance, Britta Lange writes:

These recordings had no scientific ‘afterlife’—until their rediscovery as historical holdings of the archive through the archive itself. Thus in the case of recordings of prisoners of war, it also seems justified to speak of an ‘archival’ project, a collection project (Scheer 2010), which owed much of its existence to the interests of the archive itself and was accordingly not fully compatible with any of the scientific disciplines involved—anthropology, ethnography, oriental studies, linguistics, comparative musicology. (2013a: 139, emphasis in the original)36

The outcomes of the linguistic research may have been minor; Doegen’s ‘collection project’ and his encyclopaedic vision, however, succeeded. Doegen’s vision of collecting, studying, and archiving languages of all nations of the world, appears as the very basis for legitimising the Commission’s project and its ‘archival afterlife.’

Doegen gives plenty of reasons why the opportunity to carry out phonetic recordings ‘among foreign peoples’ in German POW camps was so unique. No less than A New Ethnology (Eine neue Völkerkunde) is what Doegen promises in the rather presumptuous subheading to the aforementioned anthology.47 In the preface, he emphasises that the book offers more than mere travelogues. Doegen highlights the fact that the volume turned out to be an anthropological companion grown out of ‘lively’ linguistic research. To him, the archival documents form ‘a historical museum of sounds.’ In his often overstated manner, Doegen furthermore describes the archival venture as “the creation of living cultural testimonies that will last for thousands of years” (1925: 6, emphasis in the original).48 Contemplating the question of how these claims relate to other strands in German anthropology of the time, I argue that Doegen’s publica-
tion stands for Germany’s status quo after the First World War; after the former Empire had lost control over its colonies and German academic as well as political landscapes were rendered weak. For me, Doegen’s tendency to exaggerate reads as an attempt to compensate for Germany’s diminished position after the Treaty of Versailles.49

In this section, I focused on the people on the other side of the recording device, the recordists Lüders and Glasenapp. It was my intention to consider their role in and for the Phonographic Commission, not least in order to account for the scientific and archival logics behind the camp studies. It became evident that the scientific outcome was limited, if not a failure. However, for the archival project, the POW recordings laid the foundation of what is today considered the Lautarchiv. In the next section, I return to my attempt to follow the acousmatic voices behind the sound documents.

From my Mailbox

On 21 January 2018 at 10:37 AM, Irene wrote:

Thanks again for your time and sharing your thoughts and observations. [...] May I ask you again for the serial number of the song you were mentioning?

On 21 January 2018 at 11:58 AM, Armita wrote:

I haven’t had the chance to go through the audio records yet, once I do, I will send you the serial number of the song that I was talking about.

As is sometimes the case in our busy and fleeting digital times, Armita never replied to the inquiry I had sent her shortly after the interview. For my part, I was probably not persistent enough and missed the opportunity to get in touch with her again. Instead, I decided to reach out to other Bengali speakers I met during and after my research trip to India. What this kind of ethnographic detour reveals is that my initial interlocutor may simply not have had the time or interest to learn more about the recorded song and to invest in a joint study of the acoustic file. Rather, it was my assumption and ascription that an Indian
researcher, like her, who was working on the effects of the (military) history of the First and Second World Wars on the Indian subcontinent, would be keen to collaboratively investigate Keramat Ali’s sonic testament. Looking back, I understand that thinking in terms of an entangled history does not necessarily mean a shared interest and commitment. Although this may seem obvious, my ethnographic approach in a way unveiled my naively assumed and rightly disappointed prejudices.

On my further path to track down the recorded song, I received a couple of responses similar to the first reaction. I would ask people whether they knew the song and where from. I would ask for their thoughts on the woman addressed in the lyrics. One of the answers I received came from yet another person who had graduated from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

On 13 April 2018 at 2:58 AM, Oeendrila wrote:

*I have heard this song before when I was a child—the refrain is familiar. I don’t remember from whom but I suppose a lot of people from the older generation know this song—as well as a lot of Bangladeshis would know this song. [...] The man in the song is inquisitive about the identity of this woman who he sees fetching water from the Yamuna—*Kader kul-er bou*—which family is she married into? He is intrigued by the fact that she is unaccompanied at the riverbank. This is the crux of the song. Clearly, this is an aberration on part of the woman, and I am not sure if he is excited by it or disapproves it. There are a couple of lines I do not understand. I’ll have to ask my mother or someone [else] to listen to it.*

At the time of my research, Oeendrila was a Melbourne-based researcher, with a PhD from JNU’s English Department. I was introduced to her and her husband (a German anthropologist) through Wanphrang K. Diengdoh—a musician and filmmaker from Shillong in Northeast India. I had met Diengdoh after one of his screenings at a cultural centre in New Delhi in 2017, where he showed his documentary film *Because We Did Not Choose* (2017). In the experimental film, Diengdoh draws on historical traces of indigenous Khasi labourers from northeastern India who were recruited by Welsh missionaries during the First World War. The film is an important contribution to the engagement with the histories of the war’s direct and indirect effect on different (indigenous) communities in India.
Oeendrila did indeed send the sound file to her mother and aunt in order to add to or correct her first assumptions regarding Ali’s song. As she had suspected, both relatives were familiar with the song. They identified it as belonging to the popular traditions of the Bengali folk theatrical forms of jatra and/or tappa. However, neither Oeendrila nor her mother and aunt commented on the role of the female character, which had initially sparked my interest. Attached to an e-mail, the recorded file continued its digital journey to Melbourne, Australia, and back to Oeendrila’s family in West Bengal, India. However, its interpretation remained incomplete and situational, depending on the connections people would establish to the historic sound object.

Some of my readers may find it disappointing or inconsistent that I leave them with these fragments from my ethnographic work, and that I am content not to include the recordings’ transcriptions. Others may agree that this abrupt ending marks the logical consequence of my line of reasoning throughout this chapter. The unaccomplished wish to follow the two individual speakers, Keramat Ali and Baldeo Singh, to somehow grasp their personalities and the meaning of their sonic testaments, taught me to acknowledge my limitations and the boundaries of the archive rather than perpetuating problematic representational regimes. Instead, I learned to respect archival gaps and, in a way, unlearn the consistent and urgent desire to fill them. For me, this perspective marks both a form of critique and a possible counter-history, as suggested by Halberstam and Hartman. In a compelling way, I was yet again reminded of Hartman, who recalls how she failed to narrate the “romance of resistance” (2008: 9) when drawing on the archives of slavery and the topos of the captive and enslaved Black woman. As for me, I failed to do justice to the acoustic traces of Ali and Singh, to recover their status as historical subjects, to retrieve them from the archival project. In the next part of this book, I will come back to the notion of why an archival recovery seems neither particularly advisable nor actually possible (see Chapter 4).

Conclusion

In the final remarks of her essay, Kamala Visweswaran understands that her “opening account of ‘being there’ has been displaced by an emerging narrative of ‘getting there’” (2003 [1994]: 112). Something similar happened to the narrative that unfolded in this chapter. I set out to describe two experiences of
‘being there’—at sites where I imagined I would gather important insights for my research. As it turned out, neither my speaking/listening position nor that of my ethnographic acquaintances seemed capable of grasping the many layers of the sonic material. As a result, I portrayed my personal journey of ‘getting there,’ arriving at a point where the recognition and implementation of an accountable positioning seemed more important than the attempt at a detailed reconstruction of the historical data. In her essay, Visweswaran describes how she turned away from her field site in order to return home to do her homework. For her, a crucial aspect of doing one’s homework means destabilising the “epistemological weight” (102) fieldwork carries for the discipline of anthropology. In a similar vein, I see an epistemological burden associated with not only the notion of fieldwork but also with the situated colonial legacies of my disciplinary position. As indicated earlier, I saw and continue to see myself as confronted with a certain notion of continuity, raising the question of what exactly it is that distinguishes my listening position from the one of the researchers back then. In this first of my three attempts at dealing with specific sound recordings from the Lautarchiv, I intended to carve out and draw on this unsettling and destabilising moment of discomfort, irritation, and not least, failure—the failure to answer certain questions that initially seemed most important. It was my wish to show that the sense of failure can be an opportunity to re-think and re-position. Failure is a constitutive part of not only feminist ethnography, but really any form of knowledge production. It is constitutive to the making of situated knowledges.

Thinking in terms of ‘getting there,’ of my evolving research process, also meant acknowledging the recordings’ existence against the backdrop of entangled histories marking both the shared and the divided. In this way, the failures I described at the outset of this chapter turned out to be serendipitous moments of my ethnographic work, directing me to reflexively reconceive the heterogeneity of modes of listening. These modes of listening seem both connected and disconnected through time and space. Going back to Hartman once again, I understand this chapter as “written with and against the archive” (2008: 12). I addressed the archive, I responded to the desire to engage with the past, I wished to tell counter-histories, yet I refused to fill the gaps.

Investigating and simultaneously correlating two single sound recordings from the Lautarchiv—one of a Bengali lascar and one of a Hindu sepoy—was the chapter’s initial aim. In the end, I primarily analysed my situated, and thus limited, subject and knowledge position. I contextualised the sonic testimonies by studying primary written documents and secondary literature. By drawing on the recordists, I followed and went along with the archive. Yet the acous-
tic data—the actual sound—only emerged more thoroughly through my ethnographic encounters. In the rest of this book, the notion of the acoustic will occupy a more detailed role (in Chapter 5, 6, and 7). Yet I do not quite see the following approaches of a close listening (Chapter 5) and a collective listening (Chapter 6) as counterpoints to the approach of a failed listening. Similarly, I do not see them as opposed to it, and thus as successful approaches. Rather, these different attempts mirror the complexity and ambiguity of the material I study.

In Chapter 4 and 5, I draw in more detail on the ethnographic experiences of ‘being here’—in Berlin, in the colonial archive ‘at home.’ At the beginning of this chapter, I raised the question of what qualifies as the notion of a failed listening and how this notion shapes my analytical and methodological standpoint. In what followed, I described my way of dealing with the material and the open questions, unavailable, or fragmentary information I was confronted with. With these tools, I negotiated the relationship between subject positions and structural formations. One additional answer to the question of failure stems from Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure (2011), which I have been alluding to at different points in this chapter. In the book, Halberstam claims to explore “what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success” (92). It was my intention to build this chapter on these linkages, and it remains my aspiration to return to them in the course of this book.