Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive

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By speaking of female and male, subaltern and dominant, white and non-white sources, I am aware that I am not superseding the gendered and racialised categories used in historical records, but that I am reproducing them. In a post-colonial approach—informed by and intersectionally entangled with gender theory—, the dichotomising oppositions of coloniser-colonised, metropolis-periphery, dominance-resistance (and the list could go on) are inadequate when analysing colonial relationships and their trajectories, since these binaries are themselves products of hegemonic orders. How, then, can I deal with this difficulty of binary systems? How can I deal with the fact that self-imposed terms and positionalities cannot at all, or rarely, be found in historical archives?

Feminist scholar and writer Anne McClintock (among many others) pointed to gender as an important analytical category in postcolonial theory in order to analyse Western imperialism and its ramifications. In her book Imperial Leather (1995), McClintock set out to criticise “Western historicism and its entourage of binaries” (10). In her view, Eurocentric historiographical theories are not suited to apprehend the complex layers of power dynamics. “Drawn historically from the metaphysical Manicheanism of the imperial enlightenment itself,” McClintock stated, “binaries run the risk of simply inverting, rather than overturning, dominant notions of power” (15). In a similar vein, Ann L. Stoler reflected upon the discipline of anthropology and its relationship to binary thinking. In the introduction to her book Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power (2002b), Stoler contended: “students of colonialism, anthropologists in particular, have taken the politically constructed dichotomy colonizer/colonized as a given rather than as a historically shifting pair of social categories that needs to be explained” (13). Yet McClintock’s critique took the debate another step further when she argued that postcolonial theory
shifted from the binary axis of power (colonizer-colonized—itself inadequately nuanced, as in the case of women) to the binary axis of time, an axis even less productive of political nuance because it does not distinguish between the beneficiaries of colonialism (the ex-colonizers) and the casualties of colonialism (the ex-colonized). The postcolonial scene occurs in an entranced suspension of history, as if the definitive historical events have preceded our time and are not now in the making. If theory promises a decentering of history in hybridity, syncretism, multidimensional time and so forth, the singularity of the term effects a recentering of global history around a single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance. (1995: 10–11, emphasis in the original)

For the purpose of this chapter—that is, reading gender into my historical analysis and approaching the racialised dimensions in and of the Lautarchiv—McClintock’s elaborate critique is important in at least two aspects. For one thing, it urges me to problematise and contest the binaries that I continue to use when focusing on so-called female traces, as opposed to the dominance of male sources in the Lautarchiv. Wishing to shed light on the gendered notions ingrained in the applied scientific procedures and their implications for the archival order, I follow McClintock’s remark that “gender is not synonymous with women” (7). However, one might gather the impression that I am precisely keeping up with this ominous equivalence, if and when I divide archival material into, and in doing so denote it as, female and male, dominant and subaltern, white and non-white. My objective, therefore, is to carve out the complex dynamics and complicities between coloniser and colonised, thus acknowledging the fluidity and hybridity of heterogeneous identities. Secondly, an important analytical lens derived from McClintock’s account touches upon the notion of time. According to the feminist scholar, the question of time is fundamental for a perspective and theory that holds the temporal prefix ‘post’ in its name. McClintock brings forward the argument that singular and predominantly Eurocentric notions of time and history, past and present, are not suitable to describe the multiple histories and post/colonial situationS and effectS, that are isolatable neither in time nor in their alleged singularity. Again, I ask how I can grasp the complex temporalities and notions of power and resistance indicated in the material I am looking at (see Chapter 2 and 3). How can I grapple with the difficulty of trying to avoid ascribing colonial, Eurocentric, and hetero-normative categories to historical subjects? As one possible answer to these
obstacles, I believe that it is of utmost importance to frequently return to and problematise my perspective and position, reflect on my conceptual prospects and epistemic framework.

In what follows, I link my analytical approach to a detailed description of the location and the historical moment the sonic events, which I have chosen for this chapter, occurred. As in Chapter 3 and 6, this chapter takes single sound recordings and a particular mode of listening—that is the mode of a close listening—as the focal point of its analysis. As a rare exception in the Lautarchiv’s holdings, the sound documents stem from two female subjects: the performers Venkatamma and Rajamanikam. It was the linguist Friedrich Otto Schrader (1876–1961) who recorded the two women at the site of a so-called India Show at the Berlin Zoological Garden in 1926. My close listening to the acoustic testimonies of female colonial subjects is punctuated by a close reading of the personal memoirs of a male colonial impresario: John George Hagenbeck (1900–1959). But before I turn to the recordings themselves, I discuss the history of what Andrew Zimmerman (2001) has called ‘exotic spectacles,’ and how the history of sound reproduction is connected to this particular metropolitan phenomenon.

Völkerschauen and the Berlin Zoological Garden

The history of Völkerschauen in Berlin traces back not exclusively to the Zoological Garden but to different urban places of entertainment.¹ The history goes far back into the nineteenth century and witnesses Völkerschauen’s expansion, starting in the 1870s, not only in Berlin and Germany but throughout Central Europe and North America (e.g. Blanchard et al. 2008 [2002]; Bruckner 2003; Demski and Czarnecka 2021). While there is a need to account for the specific past of the colonial amusement industry of many Berlin (and German) institutions, the following section will nevertheless focus on aspects of the colonial legacies of the Berlin Zoo.²

In September 2014, a representative of the Pirate Party Germany³ and then member of the Berlin House of Parliament put out an official request to the ruling parties of the Berlin Senate. In his letter, he asked whether the Berlin government feels responsible for the process of coming to terms with the colonial history of the Berlin Zoological Garden.⁴ The answers provided by the ruling representatives of the Berlin Senate less than a month later were
neither particularly well-researched nor satisfactory to the inquirer. While the responses did provide an overview of the different Völkerschauen taking place at the zoo, of the number of participating performers (varying from less than ten to more than one hundred people), and of the hired organisers, the official paper did not imply that further action would be taken to reappraise the findings. It was rather the lack of information and the near absent negotiation of this chapter of Berlin history in public and political spheres at the time that resonated in the short and mostly poor answers.\footnote{The formal reply states that after the Zoological Garden was founded in 1844, a total of twenty-five Völkerschauen took place, over a period of almost seventy-five years, between 1878 and 1952. Most of the exhibitions were organised by employees of the Carl Hagenbeck Company, and by members of the Hagenbeck family in particular. However, a clear sense of who exactly was involved in the organisation of the numerous exhibitions (which had different themes and focused on different regions) is still hard to depict, as Hilke Thode-Arora (1996: 110–111) explains in her work on the history of Völkerschauen in Berlin and other parts of Germany. Thode-Arora is one of the few scholars and museum experts working extensively on this part of Germany’s colonial past. She has not only been examining plenty of archival material and media reports, but has also been looking at personal letters and journals, as well as further primary literature (e.g. 1996, 2001, 2008, 2014, 2021). For the first two exhibitions in 1878, six people from Greenland and seventeen people from Sudan and southern Egypt, together with a number of animals, were brought to Germany in order to be put on display. The troupes performed for what was a growing white, urban Berlin middle-class audience at the time. In the following years, people from northern Scandinavia, Libya, Somalia, Sri Lanka (former Ceylon) and India, among other places, came to Berlin to take part in these commercial exhibitions. The performers were temporarily living in Germany and touring throughout Central Europe. To what extent they were engaging in public life and the urban space and interacting with Berlin citizens is difficult to trace due to the paucity of sources.\footnote{Obviously, the interactions also varied over time, among the different communities, and from person to person.} Oftentimes, the artists were additionally hired for circus shows and film productions, by cabarets and other places of entertainment. As a result, they extended their stay in, or frequently returned to, Europe. From a conceptual point of view, Roslyn Poignant introduces the notion of a ‘show-space’ to describe the setting in which so-called ethnic shows and}
colonial spectacles took place in North America and Europe. For the anthropologist, the term ‘show space’

is more than a collective name for the actual show places; rather it defines a cultural space that is both a zone of displacement for the performers and a place of spectacle for the onlookers. It is a chronotopic space, that is to say, a conjunction of time and space, where certain stories can ‘take place’: where historically specific relations of power between colonisers and colonised were made visible. (2004: 7)

Poignant’s depiction of time and space also alludes to the notion of the ‘ethnographic present’ (Fabian 1983), which describes techniques of distancing the Other not only in spatial but particularly in temporal terms (see also Chapter 7). This form of denying Others access to and participation in Western historicity and modernity, and thus depriving them of the right to their own history, seems to be reflected in show spaces—and even more so in museum spaces—of that time. As Poignant highlights, in these spaces, (colonial) relations of power were in fact made visible and simultaneously construed as the normative order of the world. In this way, a colonial matrix of Others vis-à-vis ‘the West’ was naturalised, a phenomenon Gayatri C. Spivak called “the epistemic violence of the worlding of worlds” (1985: 267, my emphasis; see also Römhild 2019: 3).

The Berlin Senate’s reply furthermore states that, according to present knowledge, no relics of Völkerschauen can be found, neither in the possession of the city of Berlin nor in other institutional repositories. Even if one disregards the sound recordings I will be focusing on in this chapter, the substance of this statement by the political representatives seems rather evasive and imprecise, ignoring the political and ethical implication the existence of colonial remnants carries. It appears as a striking reminder of the fact that a more systematic investigation of the provenance of hundreds and thousands of relics and objects (or rather subjects) situated at Berlin museums and other German institutions has only just begun. It is thanks to the persistent efforts and extensive pressure by many activists and scholars that provenance research is now part of national political agendas. Not only is it important to grant access to what archives and depots hold. Provenance research should above all provide information on whether objects were acquired in unethical situations, or whether they indicate histories of problematic or violent circumstances regarding their production, appropriation, or circulation (e.g. Förster et al. 2018).
A similarly evasive answer was given with regard to the organising committees of the *Völkerschauen*. In the representative’s (official) opinion, it was not the public venue of the events—in this case the Zoological Garden—but the operating partners in charge who were responsible for recruiting, hiring, and terminating contracts with the performers, taking care of their travels and everyday needs. Given other ongoing struggles in dealing with problematic institutional legacies, this answer points tellingly to the grey areas of political and historical responsibility. It points to the issue of who can and who has to be made accountable for negotiating difficult histories. Who demands an accounting of the past, symbolic or material reparation, restitution and repatriation? Who acts on and reacts to these demands? Who does not take responsibility and for what reasons?

The Beginnings of the Berlin Phonogram Archive

The first sound artifacts compiled against the background of a colonial spectacle in Germany are six wax cylinders recorded by the psychologist, philosopher, and musicologist Carl Stumpf (1846–1936) and his colleague Otto Abraham (1872–1926). Recorded in September 1900, these wax cylinders contain music played by performers of a Siamese court theatre visiting Berlin. Today, the wax cylinders are considered to be the oldest set of sound objects of the Berlin Phonogram Archive (*Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv*). As the first of its kind in Germany, Stumpf officially founded the archive in 1904 following the Vienna model, established in 1899, together with his student and colleague Erich Moritz von Hornbostel (1877–1935). The archive was initially located at the Institute for Psychology of the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. It might not come as a surprise that quite a number of sound files stored in the Phonogram Archive today were produced in commercial entertainment settings. Nevertheless, I was rather stunned to find out that the archive contains tapes of Sami performers from northern Scandinavia compiled during a *Völkerschau* at the Zoological Garden as late as 1952. Becoming director of the archive in 1906, Hornbostel was responsible for the continuous development and expansion of the sound project. In the course of the fascist takeover in 1933, Hornbostel, whose mother was Jewish, was dismissed from all his posts at the university and was forced to leave Germany. After Hornbostel’s emigration,
the Phonogram Archive became part of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. Together with the ethnographic museum collections, the acoustic holdings are now part of the Humboldt Forum.

Stumpf and Hornbostel are considered important figures in the making and shaping of ethnomusicology and comparative musicology, known as the Berlin School. Both disciplinary strands evolved during the nineteenth century and are deeply connected to colonial history. Although neither Stumpf nor Hornbostel have ever had formal chairs in comparative musicology, they are nevertheless known for developing new, highly technical-oriented methodologies and comparative practices of collecting, transcribing, and listening to music. Nowadays, their effort to institutionalise their ‘achievements’ in the city of Berlin is regarded as a particularly impactful avenue not only for the history of (ethno)musicology but also for the history of sound archives (e.g. Meyer-Kalkus 2015; Simon 2000; Sterne 2003).

In his article “The Sound of Evolution” (2003), literary and media scholar Eric Ames shows how nineteenth-century evolutionist theories have strongly influenced German comparative musicology. The discipline was closely linked to the obsession with collecting, cataloguing, and categorising; the obsession with describing ostensibly linear developments and finding the alleged missing links in these lineages. For my approach to the colonial archive ‘at home,’ an even more crucial insight of Ames’ remarks is that Stumpf, Hornbostel, and Abraham would conduct most of their early research activities in Berlin and not ‘on location’ or ‘in the field.’ “Only from the viewpoint of the urban center,” Ames argues, “could one construct a comparative taxonomy of cultures or an evolutionary history of origins” (301). Accordingly, the urban centre played an important role: urban sites where music could be found, recorded, and compared; sites where mass-cultural, economic, and scientific interests met and circulated. Sound recordings made in these contexts thus not only illustrate an intersection between commercialised colonial spectacles and academic research agendas, but also between the so-called periphery and the metropolis.11

Between 1900 and 1912, they [Stumpf and Hornbostel] made their earliest and most important recordings not in the colonies—but in the metropolis. The music came to them. Live performances of non-Western music could be heard throughout Berlin, where they played a key role in the burgeoning industry of leisure and entertainment as stock features of cabaret programs, circus shows, and ethnographic exhibitions. Though the literature on nineteenth-cen-
tury visual culture maintains an awkward silence on issues of sound, music did not merely supplement these entertainments. On the contrary, live performances of foreign music were in at least one respect more sensational than the visual displays that they accompanied: Europeans were already familiar with images of cultural difference, brought to them through paintings and illustrations, but ethnographic entertainments made the sounds of non-European life available to mass audiences for the very first time. (301)

Here, Ames draws attention not only to developments in urban popular culture at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, but also to the asymmetrical division between visual and sound culture and the often merely one-sided exploration of it. Ames furthermore emphasises the tension between the showmen’s attempt to present the ‘authentic’ and ‘representative,’ and at the same time excite the audience with something ‘spectacular’ and ‘sensational.’ Especially after the turn of the century, shows increasingly consisted not only of magic and animal acts, but also of professional dance and music performances. By contrast, the (stereo)typical continued to be put on display through orchestrated insights into the everyday life of the performers. For instance, people involved in the shows prepared their food in public; and organisers shipped entire residential buildings to Germany or recreated them ‘authentically’ at the show place. From this, a significant tension resulted in the contradictory understanding of labour. In one of the few archived contracts, between a representative of the Carl Hagenbeck Company and Samson Dido from Cameroon from 1886, one of the agreements says: “Carl Hagenbeck does not demand any labour from the troupe but only the display of customs and practices” (cited in Thode-Arora 1996: 119, my emphasis). The idea that the contracting party did not work but simply attended to their daily practices contradicts both the deployment of Prince Dido and his family as well as of other professional cultural labourers. According to the historian Susann Lewerenz (2017: 40–48), with the growing commercialisation of the shows, theatrical elements became increasingly popular with the audiences. It is my opinion that most critical research on migration and social history has so far been unable to comprehensively address and fully understand the histories of this different sort of labour migration of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

In addition to these socio-economic factors, the close relationship between Völkerschauen and the academy is important to look at. Not only Stumpf but also anthropologists and physicians like Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) or Rudolf
Virchow (1821–1902) relied on the ‘authentic’ and thus scientific value of ethnographic displays. It almost seems like both sides, the entertainment and the academic enterprise, required confirmation and legitimation from one another. For his argument, Ames reconstructs in detail how Stumpf would proceed in his scientific endeavour, how he would orchestrate the performance for the recording in order to capture and then ‘objectively’ dissect sound and music. He concludes that a strict division between showman and scholar no longer seemed very clear: “acoustic objectivity was therefore a function not of the distance between science and entertainment, but of the power to choreograph. As ‘participant observer,’ the scientist became a kind of impresario in his own right” (2003: 308).

Yet another rather paradoxical discrepancy can be observed between colonialism as a general force of transformation, and the discipline of comparative musicology, which was mainly focused on the study of ‘original’ musical traditions not yet influenced by imperialist expansion (see also Chapter 7). With regard to the early years of the discipline of ethnomusicology, this tension seems contradictory in the sense that “comparative musicologists assailed the infrastructure that made possible not only the ethnographic exhibition—their initial source of data—but also their own still nascent discipline” (309). The musicologists’ aim was to collect, analyse, and preserve music traditions before further circulation of other musical styles would increase, and before mass culture and sound technologies would gain influence.

Whereas mass reproduction threatened to ‘homogenize’ non-European music, recording promised to ‘fix’ or ‘capture’ that music in all its particularity. Thus phonography offered a unique means of preserving the alterity of ‘exotic melodies,’ which is to say, a means of constructing it technologically and discursively. (311)

As has already been shown, both Volkschauen and scientific endeavours contributed a great deal to the discursive construction of alterity. In contrast to the Berlin Phonogram Archive, however, the holdings of the Lautarchiv include only one collection that was unmistakably compiled at the site of a Volkschau.\textsuperscript{15} In late September of 1926, the linguist Friedrich Otto Schrader from the University of Kiel recorded a total of nine individuals at the location of a so-called India Show.\textsuperscript{16} From the beginning of July until the end of September 1926, the Berlin Zoological Garden was the venue for this ‘show’—the largest up to that point and including more than one hundred people. In
the archival records housed at the zoo, I came across a legal document providing a detailed list of the people involved in the *India Show.* Apart from around seventy men, whose professions ranged from lathe workers and chefs, to acrobats, musicians, and dancers, the list reveals that the troupe also consisted of ten children (between the age of four and eight) and eleven women. Among the women were a weaver’s wife, one basket maker, two lace makers, two juggler’s wives, four dancers, and one “good-looking Tamil woman.” While most of the other people involved are listed with their or their husband’s profession, the designation “good-looking Tamil woman with two or three young children” stands out. It is likely that this woman’s part in the show was the performance of the exoticising and sexualised representation of a woman, wife, and mother of Colour.

Wilhelm Doegen, then head of the Prussian State Library’s Sound Department, invited the linguist Schrader to Berlin to take advantage of the presence of people from South India and today’s Sri Lanka who resided in Berlin during the summer. As the Sound Department was predominantly using the gramophone for its acoustic operations, the recordists would not use the phonograph like Stumpf and his colleagues (see Chapter 3). Instead, they installed technical apparatus of the gramophone in a storeroom at the zoo. At times, the merchant and co-organiser of the exhibition John George Hagenbeck was also present during the recording process. In his autobiographical writing about his journeys to South Asia as well as back to and through Europe, Hagenbeck highlights, if not boasts, that academics showed great interest in his work. Apart from Schrader and Doegen, Hagenbeck also mentions the anatomist Hans Virchow (1852–1940) who was particularly interested in the anatomy of acrobats and even X-rayed the body of one of them (1932: 150–152). Generally, it should be mentioned that Hagenbeck and his mercantile relatives had always sought to be in close contact with influential members of German academia and the growing museum landscape.

Among the *Lautarchiv’s* sound recordings—containing stories, songs, religious texts, and lists of words and numbers in Telugu, Tamil, Sinhalese, and Pali—one can find three recordings of two individuals designated as female in the historical scripts. As indicated at the outset of this chapter, this appears as a rare exception in an archive otherwise dominated by male presences—both among the recordists as well as the persons recorded. Until today, none of these sound objects—neither those which include women nor those of others—have been considered either as testimonies by individual historical subjects or as relics of *Völkerschauen.*
Venkatamma

Leaving aside the larger historical context, the following turns to the Lautarchiv and one of the sonic traces recorded at the zoo. What kind of materialities and voids, noises and voices, sounds and scripts can be found at the archive today? Visiting the Lautarchiv, I have a close look at the material entity itself, at one of the shellac discs. The record I examine comes in a light brown record envelope. In the upper right corner, the serial number LA (for Lautabteilung) 824 is stamped on the cover. Inspecting the inscribed rills of the black surface of the record, I detect four different sections interrupted by blank parts with no rills. This indicates that the record contains four pieces of sound. In the middle of the record, a label inscribed with three different pencils states the language (Telugu), the content of the recording (love song, numbers), as well as the serial number (LA 824). Underneath the label, engraved on the shellac, I can feel, once again, the serial number as well as Doegen’s signature. This signature can be found on several of the Lautarchiv’s records. Whereas well-known public figures recorded for the Darmstaedter collection were asked to leave their autographs on the record, other people recorded did not leave an engraved mark—at least not on bare wax. The personal information form (Personal-Bogen) attached to each record did include a designated rubric for the speaker or singer’s name as written in their first language. However, on most of the files compiled at the zoo, this section remains blank.

The archive holds three duplicate copies of the shellac disc LA 824. Often regarded as ‘the originals,’ the duplicate copies actually constitute the third carrier medium. As part of the disc manufacturing procedure, the initially recorded wax disc is destroyed. A copper master resulting from the matrixing process forms the positive for the shellac disc, which can then be duplicated as often as required. In the course of the digitisation process starting in 1999, the four pieces of sound were divided into four digital MP3 and WAV files, which I can listen to and play back and forth on my personal laptop. Even during my visits to the Lautarchiv, I did not listen to records on the record player but on the archive’s computer.

The personal information forms attached to the records are stored in acid-free cardboard boxes. Each box holds twenty-five files, containing the written documentation for each record. The forms comprise details about each person recorded, their biographical background, the recording location, and the recording’s content, among many other details. The amount of information in these forms varies, but
### Personal Information Form (Personal-Bogen), LA 824.

**September 9, 1926. LAHUB.**
the people in charge of the recording mostly completed the questionnaires meticulously and supplemented them with additional notes, transcripts, and translations. In the case of the recording at hand, however, there are only a few pieces of information about the person named Venkatamma and her biography (see figure 5-1). Did the recordists have no time to take down further details? Did they consider it unimportant? Or did the categories simply not fit the recording context?

On the form LA 824, it is mentioned that Venkatamma was approximately twenty years old at the time of the recording; she was born in the south of India, in a province called Tutur, her first language was Telugu, and she also knew a bit of Tamil. At the bottom of the form, it was noted that she—the printed “he” was crossed out and replaced by “she”—could not read or write. The category asking for the name as written in the person’s first language was not left blank, but it was noted in brackets: “Cannot write.” From the documents, one learns that it was another, literate Indian person, named Kovvali Viracaryalu (approx. 1896–?), who wrote down the accompanying transcription. Kovvali Viracaryalu, a goldsmith, had been recorded the day before.

The act of crossing out the predefined “he” can be read as one of the indicators of the gendered scientific practice and archival order. On the one hand, it shows that the personal information form and the whole scientific procedure had been envisaged only for men; they had been designed for male subjects, who generally counted, and in this way were again construed, as the scientific norm (e.g. Hanke 2007).

From the outset, women had been excluded from the scientific endeavour; they had been made invisible. In this case, they had neither been considered a deviation from the norm—which usually happened by denoting women as the Other. Nor were they regarded as valuable complementary subjects. On the other hand, the overwriting of the pronoun indicates that the recordists felt the need to assign a certain gender to the recorded person. In general, the recording process did not include the production of visual footage, which could have been an additional marker of the gender role, based on the external gender performance through gender-conforming hairstyles, clothes, or jewellery. Stating and codifying the visibility or audibility of gender and race in photographs or sound recordings always refers to a normative gender and racial dichotomy. A dichotomy in which people can be labelled as either male or female, white or non-white because of their appearance or voice quality and vocal timbre. Nina S. Eidsheim (2019: 49) makes a case for understanding voice and vocal categories as culturally-conditioned and performed material entities. For her, it is important to deconstruct how and why one associates a recorded voice with a certain gender, race, ethnicity, or age.
The comment in the questionnaire’s “occupation category” reveals the importance of the forms’ restrictive and gendered nature as an element of the systematised recording procedure. Venkatamma’s profession is described as “wife of a juggler whom she accompanies on drums during his performances.” Reading the archive today, this short note can be taken to imply an overlap between the gendered and archival logic of the time. Here, Venkatamma is understood as the companion of her husband. She is not considered a performer, singer, or artist in her own right. Hence, both the details given and the omission of several categories on the personal information form appear as an active production of gaps. The answer to the form’s last question, regarding Venkatamma’s occupation, symbolises the Eurocentric, patriarchal, and hetero-normative order of the underlying scientific practice. The questionnaire’s gaps thus indicate archival voids in two different ways: on the one hand, information was simply omitted and apparently not considered meaningful; on the other hand, the given details are indications of the gendered order of knowledge.

Venkatamma’s recording is one of five records made on September 29, 1926. At four in the afternoon, as it was noted on the form, Venkatamma started singing a song in Telugu in front of the gramophone horn. The musical piece, accompanied by a drum, forms the first of the four pieces on the record. The song’s historical translation into German, which can be found in the archive’s files, and a recent translation into English by G. Manoja, read as follows:

My translation into English of the historical German translation of the written file:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My translation into English</th>
<th>Translation in accordance with the voice record</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oh beloved! If you leave me, how shall I bear it?</td>
<td>Oh beau, your bereavement how could I forbear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicked Amor, in his cruelty, has made me mad!</td>
<td>Sinful cupid cruelly made me afflicted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it right to torture me as you listen to Evil’s whispering?</td>
<td>made fervent made me afflicted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often did he say ‘Stand up and come!’ and put patira on my neck.</td>
<td>Eared wicked inculcations made me tormented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even after a month it still smelled.</td>
<td>is it just to torment me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh beloved! If you leave me, how shall I bear it?</td>
<td>‘bal’ – torment me to extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elegant beau jocosed with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>where did that Charmer go</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Oh girl, the words he said.
My thoughts vanished.
My own kind would not exist in this world:
so I thought.
Oh beloved! If you leave me,
how shall I hear it?

Oh! Dame, what to do
his words mote my heart
bal → mote my heart
When in endearment
picking a peck
pitiless God separated us
bal – separated us
Assumed myself
unparalleled in this world
oh! DamSEL, his words
mote my heart
affront every word
wanted me to go close to
put sandal paste on neck
make demoiselle smell aromatic


Listening to the recording, one can hear a well-trained voice singing a love song in a quick tempo. The genre of the song is a simplified javali—a South Indian musical form usually associated with the practice of so-called devadāsīs. Instead of focusing on the content and a musicological analysis, the following draws attention to the sound object’s material and auditory qualities. In doing so, I concentrate on how I approach different kinds of source material, and whether and how I can establish a productive dialogue between different archival formats and auditory features.

Hearing and Seeing: ‘the Gaze’ and ‘the Listen’

What we hear is not necessarily an addition or completion of what we see. We do not necessarily want to extend what we see by something audible. But we—Central Europeans—want to connect what we hear to something visual, to the source of the sound, the knowledge of its origin. (Lange 2012: 61)
The quotation in the epigraph describes a telling contradiction for the sound recording at hand. Literature on colonial spectacles has often addressed visual archives that document the exoticising presentation of People of Colour (e.g. by focusing on commercial posters, postcards, photographs, and newspaper articles). Terms like *Völkerschau* or human zoo are likely to evoke immediate images of either violent and racist representations or no less drastic exoticising and romanticising images in many people’s heads. How does one relate these mental images to Venkatamma’s sound recording, which was most probably produced in a similar context? Might it be possible to approach the sound file detached from one’s own presuppositions and stereotypical thinking? Or does sound, indeed, always demand a form of visibility and embodiment, a connection to its source? Listening to the recording, I wondered whether the *Lautarchiv’s* acoustic testimonials might offer an alternative access to the past and such racist practice.

The hegemonic gaze always shapes the display of visual testimonies, which document the exoticising practice of ‘representing’ People of Colour. Accordingly, the hegemonic gaze always reproduces the racist practice to some extent. Again, I wondered how this critique relates to acoustic material. Does sound material not bear witness to hegemonic power imbalances in a similar way? To imbalances between the recorded persons and the Western entrepreneurs who would mainly be interested in the economic benefits of putting human beings on display; or the white academics who would pursue the scholarly goal of exploring what for them were foreign languages and unfamiliar musical traditions in order to collect, catalogue, and preserve them for posterity? Does the current approach to the sound recordings and the current practice of playing back the sound simply reproduce the asymmetrical structures of power, which enabled the production of the collections in the first place? Considering the fact that the archival material is still situated in a German institution and that it is still predominantly white scholars who investigate the sources, I believe this question has to be answered in the affirmative. But is there nevertheless a way to bypass this dilemma? How can I, and can I at all, as a white, female, and Western-trained scholar, approach this sensitive material (see also Chapter 3)?

During my search for additional sources in other archival institutions, I came across a press photo by an international photographic agency.\(^36\) Apparently, this photo was taken during the opening of the *India Show* at the Berlin Zoological Garden in July 1926. On the left side of the photograph, one can see a Woman of Colour sitting on the ground playing a drum. The woman is wearing a figured robe or a sari, which partially covers her long hair. Her gaze is
directed straight ahead to the camera lens, to my gaze. On a blanket next to her, covered with different tools and instruments, sits a male juggler, as one can read in the captions on the back of the photograph (see figure 5-2). The performer “is presenting his art of juggling a rotating spin top to the Berlin audience.” At the rear of the two performers, the picture shows the audience, seemingly white Berlin middle-class citizens of the Weimar era. They mostly seem to be paying attention to the juggler’s show and not to the photographer’s presence.

Might it be possible that the pictured woman sitting next to the juggler is the same woman who was recorded by Schrader in September 1926? Might it be the same woman who was described as “the wife of a juggler whom she accompanies on drums during his performances”? How does one relate this visual source to the archived sound? How do I deal with this colonial photograph; with the doubly effective colonial gaze—that of the historical Berlin audience on the one hand, and my own current gaze on the other? Do questions of the gaze, visuality, and the act of seeing equally apply to the practice of hearing and listening—to the listeners back then and my practice of listening, of
analysing and ascribing meaning to the sound document today? Problematising the distinction between studies of visual culture and popular sounds, Jonathan Sterne states:

> While ‘the gaze’, as an act of seeing, is a central trope in studies of visual culture, there is no central auditory trope equivalent to ‘the listen’. In its place, there are dozens of figures and figurations of audition, even though all structures of listening, whether interpersonal, institutional or mediatized are also configurations of power. (2012c: 19)

Since both the production of colonial imagery and photography and the creation of colonial sounds and records refer to problematic methods and epistemic violence, the question of whether the former or the latter are more or less contentious is, in my opinion, not the most pressing issue. In my analysis, I rather intend to focus on the configurations of power and practices of seeing, hearing, and listening.

Returning to the sound recording, the second sound piece on the record I have been discussing comprises a particularly important aspect of my account of the sound object’s form, its material and auditory dimensions. This second, fragmentary sound piece epitomises a significant difference between acoustic and visual or textual material. After twenty seconds, the recording ends; it is interrupted. Initially, and as was common practice, the recorded person was supposed to repeat the song. In this case, however, Venkatamma did not do so. In the written scripts, concerning the recording’s second part, it is noted: “same, beginning, interrupted through laughing” and “cancelled through laughing.”

In her research on sound recordings of prisoners of war recorded during the First World War in German and Austro-Hungarian internment camps, Britta Lange (2011a: 36) argues that moments of subversion or resistance can be found in instances of simple pauses, verbal errors, coughing—or laughing. Together with Anette Hoffmann, Lange developed the methodological approach of a close listening. The two scholars claim that a close listening to historical sound recordings allows for addressing the multi-faceted layers of the phonetic material (see also Hoffmann 2015: 75–77 and 2020: 28–39). According to Lange, the recordings provide more non-verbal information than can be reproduced in a written form. As the recordings are not cut or dubbed, they contain the sound of the technical apparatus itself, pauses, laughing, coughing and murmuring. A careful analysis could
help to develop questions about the specific meaning of the pauses and errors, about what we do not hear, but which is still there and significant. (2014: 376, emphasis in the original)

Elsewhere, she writes:

Sounds—not understood as humans’ ‘authentic’ articulations, but as acoustic productions—give the recorded or rather interrogated person, more than measured data, photography, and plaster casts, the chance to, briefly and only within narrow bounds, act as a subject and to shake off the scientifically attributed object status. While they provide a language sample that pleases the researchers, on the technical level they also have the opportunity to irritate by pausing, laughing, modifying the agreed text or omitting parts of it. (2011a: 36)

Following this view, the question for me is whether Venkatamma’s laughing can be understood as a moment of resistance, or even as a moment of empowerment. Can the disruption of the scientific procedure be read as a self-empowering act? Or does this interpretation represent a mere speculation and falsely attributes (subaltern) agency and subjectivity to the act?

In his take on the recording procedures in POW camps, media scholar Friedrich Balke (2009) argues that the recording act in front of the gramophone cannot be considered an (inter)active speech act. He holds the opinion that the internees did not speak but merely verbalised a script (70). Yet Balke considers laughing as an act of speaking. With reference to another instance of laughter that occurred among the recordings of Indian prisoners of war, Balke contends that the speaker rises to speak in and through laughter. According to him, laughing allows the speaker to create a distance to the object or meaning of the anticipated statement (71; see also Lange 2019: 315–334). Similarly, I could argue that Venkatamma only starts to express herself at the moment she interrupts her singing and rises to speak in and through her laughter. Whether or not Venkatamma planned or intended her interruption, whether it was supposed to be humourous or disruptive, whether it was a form of distancing or self-expression, it certainly had the effect of an interference. Venkatamma’s laughing disrupted, and maybe even subverted, the rigid scientific process of recording. Hence, I read this rupture—and the notion of error or, if you will, failure—on several levels: on a structural and on a material, technical level, but also on the level of the subject.
Taking this fragile interpretation to different levels also means reflecting on the ambiguous role of the subject recorded. Venkatamma can neither be seen as the exploited and marginalised object and victim. Nor can she be viewed as a subversive and cosmopolitan worker ‘from below.’ Rather, I argue that the acoustic trace tells us something about the ambivalence of subjective practices. It tells us something about the dialectics of processes of transnational mobility and migratory movements, about the dialectic between politics of control and practices of appropriation. On the one hand, the practice of recording Venkatamma as part of her employment in the *India Show* is clearly a reflection of an unequal and exploitative labour regime. On the other hand, it was the same system that offered Venkatamma the opportunity to be mobile, to escape (other) exploitative conditions, and to earn a living. For Manuela Bojadžijev (2011: 142), migration is always characterised by the ambivalence of exploitation and escape from exploitation. Although I doubt that the people recorded received any sort of expense allowance, not to mention signing a consent form, it is nevertheless possible that they perceived the recording project as yet another context for presenting their artistic practice. The recording system was supposed to avoid the unexpected, but it was in fact prone to error and sensitive to appropriation. Research on contemporary politics of migration attempts to account for and grasp these dialectics by drawing on the concept of the *autonomy of migration* (see also De Genova 2017; Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). This approach seeks to change the perspective on migration by adapting the perspective of migration, meaning to recognise migration as an essential component of any society both past and present (Bojadžijev 2011: 139). It seeks to shift the focus to the practices of subjects of migration, towards the heterogeneity of these practices, which always include (albeit limited) scopes of action, even under conditions of disenfranchisement. Sceptical voices criticise the concept as romanticising the figure of the migrant as a subversive and resistant subject, thereby losing sight of the dispositive of domination and exploitation. Proponents of the concept, in turn, say that by placing particular emphasis on subjective practices, the autonomy of migration approach does not merely focus on subjects, but rather establishes a complex understanding of subjects and societies in their global and entangled conditions. According to Bojadžijev, these dimensions characterise a substantial plurality of possible forms of agency (141).

What implications, then, derive from the sonic presence of a Woman of Colour in Germany? What does her presence reveal about transnational mobility and about Western systems of producing knowledge, collecting, and
archiving based upon (time-)specific and hierarchically-constructed ideas and ideologies? By examining the sound recording today as the trace of a subjective moment, I argue that it is possible to gain insight into the imaginations and configurations of Western hegemony. Venkatamma’s sound recording points to the possibility of investigating materialised forms of hegemonic knowledge production. Here, I showed that tensions between the material and epistemic formations that manifest in the archive’s gaps and silences, in its ruptures and in differently marginalised or hybrid figures, are particularly crucial for the approach of close reading and listening.

**John George Hagenbeck as a Hybrid Figure**

Throughout my research, I was confronted with the ostensibly certain fact that sources of and information about male and bourgeois figures dominate the holdings of official (not exclusively colonial) archives. I was confronted with the certainty that traces of female and subaltern subjects can only be detected by reading the archive against its grain or by focusing on the archive’s absences and silences. As plausible as they may sound, I nevertheless feel the urge to problematise, differentiate, and perhaps even revise these assumptions. Although this book intends to concentrate on the absent presences existent in and produced by the colonial archive, I am also inclined to account for seemingly dominant sources. It is not least the attempt to read the archive along its grain, to understand the texture of the archive, that drives this intention.

As I emphasised at the beginning of this chapter, students of colonialism today seem to agree on the notion that oppressors or colonisers, previously thought as fixed entities, can no longer be described in a homogenised manner. Stoler notes that a unifying view has been particularly applied to the colonisers, explaining that “colonizers and their communities are frequently treated as diverse but unproblematically viewed as unified in a fashion that would disturb ethnographic sensibilities if applied to ruling elites of the colonized” (2002b: 23). Further, she states:

The populations that fell within these contradictory colonial locations were subject to a frequently shifting set of criteria that allowed them privilege at certain moments and pointedly excluded them at
others. This is not to deny that sharp distinctions divided those who were ruled and those who did the ruling but to highlight the fact that these divisions were not as easily (or permanently) drawn as the official discourse might lead one to imagine. (40)

With regard to the India Show’s organisers and performers, making sharp distinctions is rather difficult. It is especially difficult when taking into consideration different colonial locations—meaning “disparate origins and circumstances” (39)—and relations of power. In this way, neither the dynamics among the many performers traveling to Europe nor the dynamics back home in South Asia can be unambiguously described. The performers often considered the opportunity to go to Europe as an appealing possibility to earn comparatively good money in a relatively short amount of time and to transfer the earnings back home. However, the accessible sources do not reveal a lot about the performers’ life histories and about their wants and needs. Little is known about their paths through life, whether they wished to stay in Germany, or what happened to them after returning to their homes.

At the end of his book With India’s Traveling People (Mit Indiens fahren-dem Volk), published in 1932, John George Hagenbeck recounts an anecdote about a group of performers he had toured with for one season. The impresario Hagenbeck recalls a scene at the train station, when the performers were about to leave the city of Munich by train. Mentioning a German woman, who worked in a pub at the station, Hagenbeck says that she would pity the troupe of artists because she assumed they could never afford to buy themselves a drink. She was surprised when, seemingly as a gesture of farewell, she saw them waving and throwing small coins out of the windows of the leaving train. Although Hagenbeck might have portrayed this story in a way that was slightly too glorifying, it still shows the misrepresentation or at least the abridged depiction of non-European people in Germany at that time. The description of the incident comes from a dominant, male, and written source. For my argument, I have to read between the lines. As the following will shows, analysing Hagenbeck’s writing in more detail means to examine the impresario and his relationships as ambivalent and contradictory. Hagenbeck himself was born to a Sinhalese mother and a German father. Despite being married to the mother, his father only accepted his son as adopted, and not as his birth child.

Throughout her compelling work on the colonial, Stoler follows her interests in ‘carnal knowledge,’ ‘genealogies of the intimate,’ and entanglements between the construction of race and colonial rule. Stoler explores notions of
the domestic, of sexual relationships, modes of reproductive and care work, and the status of white women as well as Women of Colour. Primarily, she is concerned with communities of the Dutch, but also French and British, empire ruling on the Asian continent. Her aim is “to identify the regimes of truth that underwrote [...] political discourse and a politics that made a racially coded notion of who could be intimate with whom—and in what way—a primary concern in colonial policy” (2002b: 2). By examining different Euro-Asian unions in the Dutch colonies, Stoler outlines the varying handling of these unions depending on the different social groups and locations among the Dutch colonial communities:

There were some Euro-Asian marriages among the colonial elite, but government regulations made concubinage a more attractive option by prohibiting European men from returning to the Netherlands with native wives and children. For the middling colonial staff, the East Indies Company firmly discouraged Euro-Asian marriages. Households based in Euro-Asian unions, by contrast, were seen to bear distinct advantages. Individual employees would bear the costs of dependents, mixed unions would produce healthier children, and Asian women would make fewer financial and affective demands. (47)

With regard to the Dutch government regulations, developed and adjusted in a shifting mode between theory and practice, my interest here is to explore the impact of John George Hagenbeck’s family history on his personal and professional life. The senior John Hagenbeck (1866–1940) had started his career as an animal dealer and recruiter of performers, working for his father’s half-brother, Carl Hagenbeck. In 1891, he settled in Sri Lanka for the first time, where he became a planter for globally-traded goods such as tea, coconuts, and gum. During the First World War, he had to flee from the British back to Germany, where he founded a production company for (exoticising) colonial films before, again, returning to Sri Lanka in the early 1920s. During this time, his son, John George Hagenbeck, became an important part of his business activities, as he was now also recruiting performers, escorting them on their sea voyages to the European continent, and accompanying them on their touring enterprises throughout Central Europe. As indicated above, and in comparison to his father and other showmen, John George Hagenbeck’s biographical background provides the entry point for locating inner ambivalences and their influence on his life and actions. Hagenbeck’s role thus points to unstable colo-
nial relationships. Underlining his distinctive character, Thode-Arora describes Hagenbeck in the following way:

Despite his European sense of superiority and the paternalistic attitude of a showman, no other impresario shows as much respect for people’s artistic abilities, and as much sympathy and compassion for the performers. At each show place, he would, most of the time, personally take care of the food for the performers bearing in mind all their different religious beliefs and dietary habits. Together with his wife, he would fulfil the children’s wishes for toys, special clothing, entertainment outings, or endearing cuddling. (1996: 114)\textsuperscript{43}

Similar notions can be found in Hagenbeck’s travelogue, which, however, has to be read with caution because of the glorifying picture he seems to have wanted to draw of himself. With regard to Stoler’s work on gender and morality, Hagenbeck’s remarks on (sexual) morality, in particular, are worth a closer look. In one of the chapters, Hagenbeck talks about the Sinhalese performer named Bodiya who became famous for his spectacular stunt, which entailed putting his head in an elephant’s mouth without getting hurt. Hagenbeck had known and worked with Bodiya for some time. He tells that Bodiya’s shows had been so impressive that a North American circus hired him, which he ended up touring with for more than two years. During this time, Bodiya got married to a “young, blonde woman” (Hagenbeck 1932: 67) and would, at some point, contact Hagenbeck to ask him for a pending salary in order to pay for his and his wife’s journey back to Sri Lanka. Hagenbeck refused to give the money to him—not least, as he explains, out of moral concerns.

I would like to point out that, as a European, I would never pay for the passage of a white woman who got married to an Indian, since this woman cannot anticipate what she would have to expect over there. The Europeans would not keep her company, and the man would only receive insults by his compatriots because they would not accept him being married to a white woman. An educated Indian would never ask a European woman to follow him to his home country and conform to the local rules and customs. (67–68, my emphasis)\textsuperscript{44}
Hagenbeck continues his moral reflection by elaborating more generally on the differences between Asia and Europe and their people:

The boundaries dividing Asia and Europe are still too strong, and it will probably take thousands of years to bring about the kind of fraternisation that many people imagine. To understand Asians, you have to be Asian yourself, to understand us Europeans, you have to be European. (68)\(^{45}\)

It is striking and, at the same time, not surprising that Hagenbeck feels the urge to judge Bodiya’s ‘immoral’ behaviour, while he might not have condemned a marriage between a white man and a Woman of Colour, like the one between his father and his mother. Hagenbeck’s confidence in claiming to know how and when boundaries between Asia and Europe would decrease derive from the fact that he, despite referring to himself as European, considered himself to be a ‘natural’ expert of the cultural differences between the two continents and their people. This notion resonates throughout his writing. The book consists of thirty-five illustrative photographs and sixteen chapters, in which Hagenbeck elaborates on his experiences as a merchant of animals and recruiter of performers, portraying the life of an impresario and showman. Essentially, the book comprises a compilation of different anecdotes Hagenbeck had witnessed while traveling with performers and animals from South Asia. Particularly when reading the first chapters of the book, I, as a contemporary reader, get the impression that Hagenbeck does not necessarily distinguish between the humans, goods, and animals he was doing business with. In objectifying terms, Hagenbeck refers to the colonial subjects he was recruiting overseas as ‘material’ and ‘attractions.’ He reduces them to their ‘suitability’ and ‘effort of performing.’

It is not always easy to find the right thing among the available material. Often, one has to be there in person in order to prove the candidate’s suitability. In most of the cases, one is disappointed when one sees a highly recommended attraction. Then, the candidate is stunned when he gets a negative answer because he cannot understand that his effort of performing was not enough although his compatriots were applauding him. Here, the obvious opposite taste between Europe and India is evident. (8, my emphasis)\(^{46}\)
Consequently, most of his narrating is not immune to generalising and pejorative, racialising and racist remarks on people from the Indian subcontinent. In some parts of the book, the author loses himself in details about how many snakes of a specific kind he shipped to which harbour on what day. Stereotypical comments about the performers’ alleged superstitious beliefs or their apparent penchant for alcohol and narcotics shape other parts of his writing. Against the backdrop of the historical moment in which he was writing down his memories, it does not come as a surprise that his descriptions and remarks are traversed by, at the same time, paternalistic and belittling, as well as stereotypical and rather romanticising statements.

Retelling these fragments of the life stories of male members of the Hagenbeck family, it is once again striking that the archives contain so much information about their biographies, either from their own published writing, or from other primary and secondary literature. Would the fact that there is so much existing information about the male Hagenbecks be reason enough for me to avoid recounting their stories altogether? Or would such an attempt to redress the colonial imbalance merely create new gaps and absences? In this book, I am allowing these dominant, male sources to take up space (see also Chapter 3 and 6). At the same time, I am careful not to silence and gloss over the marginalised or missing sources, but to seize them in contrasting, punctuating terms. In this way, I hope to fit into Stoler’s observation that “students of colonial histories now direct their archival energies to the instabilities and vulnerabilities of colonial regimes, to the internal conflicts among those who ruled, and to the divergent and diverse practices among them” (2002b: 10).

Rajamanikkam

Returning to the Lautarchiv’s files, LA 823 is one of two recordings of yet another person designated as female in the historical scripts. The personal information form belonging to her recording includes even less information than in Venkatamma’s case (see figure 5-3). It was noted that her name was Rajamanikkam, that she was approximately twenty-five years old at the time of the recording, that she was born in a province named Koviljalayan, and that her first language was Tamil. According to the form, Rajamanikkam’s sound recording was made only ten minutes before Venkatamma positioned herself
in front of the gramophone. Were the two women present during each other’s recordings? Who else was there? Who would listen to and actually understand or relate to what they heard? The first part of the record contains a story narrated by Rajamanikkam. The second, much longer part consists of Tamil sayings read out by the speaker Sanmuga Soragar (approx. 1894–?), a peasant and schoolteacher, who had transcribed the texts intended for the recordings. Sanmuga Soragar had already been recorded the day before, on September 28, 1926.48

Rajamanikkam, who, like Venkatamma, was illiterate, had told the allegorical story of the Judgment of Solomon—“without notes” (frei erzählt), as it is pointed out on the form. This remark indicates that all the other recorded people delivered their stories and texts with notes. However, many of the recorded people recited them by heart—ideally in the exact way they had practiced the texts beforehand, because a lot of them (especially among the many soldiers and civilian internees recorded in POW camps during the First World War) could barely read or write. This is one of the reasons why so many songs and poems were collected, since traditional folksongs and poetry could usually be sung or recited without notes. Many of the recorded people would be more willing and less shy singing a song, reciting a poem, or simply counting from one to twenty, than narrating a story or delivering something of one’s own composition.49

In the further remarks concerning Rajamanikkam’s recording it was noted that she felt timid during the recording process and that, as a consequence, she would not recite the story without alterations or interruptions. The typed annotation says:

Sound recording no. 823, part 1, transcription

of the document in Tamil writing = of the dictation of the speaker that was initially meant for the recording, not used. The dictation, recited without any interruptions or alterations, shows to what extent the speaker was feeling timid during the recording. (LAHUB, LA 823, my emphasis)50

What made Rajamanikkam timid? What or who caused her discomfort? Was it the studio situation or being in front of the technical apparatus? Was it being exposed to the scholars, becoming the focus of attention? One might think that the recorded people—as artists and performers—might have been used to being put on the spot, to performing songs, dances, and stunts in front of a predominantly white audience.
Figure 5-3: Personal information form (Personal-Bogen), LA 823. September 9, 1926. LAHUB.
Taking into account my interpretation of Venkatamma’s interruption through her laughing, how can one read Rajamanikkam’s behaviour? Did her behaviour not also—though in a completely different way—disturb the scientific procedure? A comment on one of the documents says that the phonogram—as the scholars called the records—would “strongly differ” from the text Rajamanikkam had dictated before. It was noted that the sound recording was “in many ways inarticulate” so that the scholars could not transcribe the sound properly, and had to leave blank spaces, which they intended to fill with the help of an “informed native” at some later point. My focus on different types of interruptions and discontinuities shows, on the one hand, how limited the applied scientific practices actually were; how easily deviations from the rule could occur. On the other hand, it demonstrates how possibilities of subverting these practices (whether conscious and intended or unwitting and unintended) could emerge.

We can neither completely know what the recording situation actually looked like, nor can we answer the question whether—or rather to what extent—personal, cultural, or even bodily boundaries were disregarded. What seems certain, however, is that the situation was influenced by or even made possible due to the use—or rather abuse—of a colonial and social position of power on the part of the academics as well as showmen. While it seems unlikely that the people recorded were actually (physically) forced to stand in front of the technical device in order to sing or speak into the gramophone’s horn, the recording situation has to be described in the light of Gayatri C. Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence. With reference to Michel Foucault, Spivak defines an instance of epistemic violence as “the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (1988: 280–281). Hence, epistemic violence describes forms of knowledge production of and about the Other that, at the same time, embody techniques of hegemony.

Looking at the acoustic project of the Lautarchiv, at the sound recordings’ production, the technical and practical circumstances, and not least the relationship between power and knowledge, the aim here is to approach the discursive order in which the recordings were made. How did they become epistemic objects—objects symbolising the gendered and racialised modes of knowledge production which, resting on the Other, guaranteed the self-assurance of the scholars and the scientific credibility of their academic disciplines? What kind of possibilities of agency remained for the person recorded, the subaltern woman? Once more with reference to Spivak, one has to be careful not to come up with speculative assumptions about the recording situation and the
actions and reactions by the recorded, not to mention the unreflective attempt to speak for or give voice to subalttern women today (Morris 2010). Again, I am wondering whether a certain intentionality can be observed and reconstructed from the sound recording itself, the accompanying scripts, or further archival material. What can be read into the recorded person being uncomfortable during the recording procedure? Or the academics trying to meticulously document everything that happened during the recording? The scholars’ aim was to create a sound object identical to the written words. This is also the reason why the texts were read out or recited, although, from a present point of view, this practice undermined the ‘natural’ flow or an alleged ‘authenticity’ of the speech act and language sample.

With respect to the content of the recording, another hardly answerable question for me is why the recordists or Rajamanikkam herself chose the Judgment of Solomon. Why did they pick this story, which, in most parts of the Western world today, is known as a parable of the Bible? While many consider the origin of the folktale uncertain, some argue that it has Indian roots and that, for a long time, it had just not been documented in writing (e.g. Gunkel 1987 [1917]). The historical translation in Tamil was written down by Sanmuga Soragar and was supposedly based on the dictation of the speaker, Rajamanikkam. The current translation, by Viswajith, is not based on the write up but on the recorded sound.

My translation into English of the historical German translation of the written file:

Someone had married two women: 
Both women had a child each. He died. Later, one of the children died too. Both women would breastfeed the other child and raise it. After getting into a fight with each other, both said: ‘The child is mine, it is mine!’ They went to the judge and said (the same). Because He (plur. maj.) did not know who was right, He said: ‘Cut the child into two pieces and give each person one piece!’

Translation in accordance with the voice record:

A man had married two women. He died after the marriage. The two women had, in all, two babies. One baby passed away. The other baby was taken care of by being breastfed by both women. Then a fight arose between them. ‘My baby, your baby’ fight ensued between them. They went to the judge. The judge was confused and so offered to slice the baby into two and give one half to each woman. One of them agreed. But the other
"Fine!" The other one said: "The child must not be cut! Give it to her!" Upon hearing that, He knew that the child was hers, He gave it to her and punished the other.

"I don't want that baby, give it to her." So the judge said, "The baby belongs to this (latter) woman and gave the baby to the actual mother. The judge punished the other woman for creating the problem.


This narration is the only acoustic trace of Rajamanikkam preserved in the archives today. A second acoustic source is registered as lost in the Lautarchiv's digital catalogue. Until now, it has not been rediscovered either at the archive or at another institution or private collection. This very first recording made at the zoo on September 28, 1926, at two in the afternoon, contained a performance of a so-called “temple dance,” including choral singing and instrumental accompaniment. On the front page of the personal information form concerning the recording LA 733, only one name, the name of Rajamanikkam, is mentioned (see figure 5-4). Who else might have been part of the ensemble? Who played the instruments? On the back of the form, under the rubric “special remarks,” six different names and three instruments were noted in looped cursive as well as in Tamil writing (see figure 5-5). From the remarks, it can be assumed that, apart from three people playing different musical instruments, four—including Rajamanikkam—“bayaderes” were part of the performance.

Even though there is documentation to suggest that more musicians and dancers were present, it cannot be known what the performance looked like. What did the limited radius of the gramophone’s horn capture? Usually, the technical apparatus could not catch background sounds or any kind of soundscape except for the sounds of musical instruments played directly in front of the device. However, not only the technological conditions determined what the medium would record. Sterne argues that the reproducibility of a live performance always remained an illusion and a fantasy.

The recording diaphragm and wax medium captured a specific performance, a performance designed and modified specifically for the purpose of reproducibility. The promise of mediation was made but not fulfilled: the mediation of the life music and the dissolution of that mediation into transparency are at best imagined. The
Figure 5-4: Personal information form (Personal-Bogen), LA 733. Front side. September 28, 1926. LAHUB.
BESONDERE BEMERKUNGEN:

1. Nadessaá solagar aus Alankúdi (Tanjore Pd).
   Spielt Talam.

2. Kirásami aus Tiruvóri
   Spielt Thetti (ein aus Gegenenden der Orte herkommendes, dem Tamborin ähnliches Instrument
   mit zwei Pfählen).

3. Sandínam aus Tanjore.
   Spielt Nagla (ein der Zauberflöte mit Fingerbläser zugehöriges Instrument: Pranam).

4. Vier Begleiter (s. Anfug Personalbogen):
   a) Kúmarímmál
   b) Prívarí
   c) Tènùrānāl
   d) Sandínam.

Figure 5-5: Personal information form (Personal-Bogen), LA 733. Back side.
September 28, 1926. LAHUB.
The notion of the recording as a mnemonic also refers to the other kinds of source fragments that give one hope to get closer to the moment of recording. When speaking of different kinds of sources, the collection of press reports housed at the Lautarchiv is a valuable additional source, even though the collection only covers a few years of the archive’s institutional history. In one of the folders, I found a short newspaper clipping of a daily newspaper located in the small German town of Braunschweig. Published on October 11, 1926, under the slightly exaggerated heading “Sound Recordings of Indian Language Monuments,” the short text reports that the head of the Prussian State Library’s Sound Department, Wilhelm Doegen, had been conducting sound recordings in Tamil and Telugu as part of the zoo’s India Show. Furthermore, it was written that apart from poetry, stories, and sayings, the recordists Doegen and Schrader would record musical pieces: the dance of the ‘bayaderes’ and the dance of the devil.56

In the accompanying scripts, the language expert Schrader commented neither on the dancing nor on the music. It was probably him who explained that one could only translate the monophonic beginning of the recording containing a performance of the ‘temple dance’ presented by Rajamanikkam. Schrader also claimed that the polyphonic rest—“even though maybe not completely justified”—could be described as “sheer onomatopoeia.”57 This remark indicates that the performance itself—on the textual level—defies the scholars and Western listeners, appearing as unapproachable. On another level, and in purely material terms, the sound recording remains inaccessible because it went missing. This circumstance symbolises yet a different kind of gap in the archive: the accompanying scripts still exist but the actual sound object is absent. What might have caused its loss? Who abstracted it from the archive? As this particular sound recording was also mentioned in the news report and differs from the other, mostly linguistically-motivated recordings, the sound file might have been considered as rather prominent and therefore used for public presentations. Earlier in the same year, Doegen would play some of the collection’s recordings (most probably from the collection of recordings of prisoners of war made during the First World War) at an event called an ‘Indian Evening’ organised by the German Foreign Association of Academics (Deutsch-ausländischer
Akademiker-Club, founded in 1923. Might Doegen have used this particular recording for similar occasions or lectures? Or did he trade the copies of the recording with other institutions? Since the exchange of records was a common practice, one can never be sure that the sound recording LA 733 will not reappear someday at some unexpected place.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by problematising the tendency of reproducing dichotomies and modes of binary thinking both in historical accounts and in gender and postcolonial theory. By still being, to some extent, tied to thinking in terms of hetero-normative and dichotomising categories, but at the same time also questioning those categories, my aim was to shed light on the gendered and racialised notions in and of the Lautarchiv’s collection. I showed that the applied scientific techniques were first and foremost construed to record, document, and categorise the gendered (male) norm. Why, then, did Schrader record the voices of two female individuals? How did the decision to include the two women come about, while still disproportionate to the seven men who were included in the same context? Whereas Thode-Arora (1996: 115), in her work on Völkerschauen, emphasises the attempt to include women and children in order to show a comprehensive and ‘authentic’ picture of the communities’ family lives, this was not a primary concern of the scientific aims pursued at the Lautarchiv. In their writing, neither Doegen nor other scholars involved expressed the opinion that the lack of female speech samples could be considered an incomplete part of their general research. Concerning his anthropometrical work in Austro-Hungarian POW camps during the First World War, the anthropologist Rudolf Pöch (1870–1921) argued that racial characteristics could be ‘diagnosed’ regardless of gender and that his research at the camps could not be regarded as imbalanced. Similarly to Pöch (1916: 989), who had called the war situation a one-of-a-kind opportunity for his scientific research, Doegen and his colleagues would consider Völkerschauen (among other occasions) an appealing possibility to explore and record foreign languages in Berlin—‘on location.’ In this chapter, I thus highlighted the interrelationship between Völkerschauen and academic research and its entanglements with commercial interests and the reproduction of racial and racist
stereotypes, reciprocally constructed both in public/popular spheres as well as in the scientific literature of that time. In 1973, Talal Asad observed that it was, and still is, the “colonial power structure [which] made the object of anthropological study accessible and safe” (1995 [1973]: 17)—not only in the colonies but in the metropolis, too. I regarded it as important to expand on the history of Völkerschauen at the Berlin Zoological Garden and discuss the history of sound artifacts compiled as part of, and actually made possible due to, the ethnographic event culture of the time. Further, my elaboration on the history of the Berlin Phonogram Archive and on the role of the musicologists Stumpf and Hornbostel, led me to my own approach to the two—or rather three—sound recordings of the Lautarchiv I focused on in this chapter.

Thinking in terms of dominant and subaltern sources, I tried to concentrate on marginalised and aberrant traces, which are nonetheless present in and constitutive of the colonial archive. The traces of the recorded subjects Venkatamma and Rajamanikkiam seem in many ways marginalised: on a structural level, the two women are impeded from being able to speak. As women, they form an exception both in the archive and in the scientific data compiled. As illiterates, they were unable to read everything the scholars would want them to recite. However, as I was able to show, the variations between what had been recorded and transcribed entailed a certain form of productivity and maybe even agency. Finally, as performers, they may not have been hired for their artistic abilities, but as companions of their husbands or as care providers for their children. 

At first glance, the historical subjects only emerge in mediated, and mere objectified, manners: mentioned in the scripts, pictured on a photograph, or recorded on wax. At a second glance, and with the help of a close listening, I demonstrated that the recorded subjects do not only appear as objects. On the contrary, I revealed that they play an important part in shaping—in terms of both enabling and unsettling—the scientific practice and the production of epistemic objects. In this regard, the notion and the division of the dominant and the subaltern no longer seemed to be attributed that easily. Thus, both the method of a close listening and the investigation of different kinds of sources helped me to negotiate the gendered and racialised modes of the archive and colonial knowledge production. By including a critical examination of the controversial figure of John George Hagenbeck, I negotiated the meaning of allegedly dominant, male, and written documents, as opposed to silenced, female, and acoustic sources. My focus on Hagenbeck’s writing and his role as a marginal and hybrid figure acted, on the one hand, as a counterbalance to the Lautarchiv’s archival material, its own order and logic. On the other hand, it was an attempt to show
unstable aspects of those assumed to be powerful. Referring to Stoler’s work on intimacy and sexuality in colonial rule, I showed that the Euro-Asian union of Hagenbeck’s mother and father and his relationships with the people he hired influenced his views on (sexual) morality and, more generally, his personal and professional life.

Throughout this book, it is crucial for me to bring into focus different notions of the archive’s gaps and silences. As mentioned before, one major gap addressed in this chapter stems from the fact that men and male sources dominate the Lautarchiv, like many other historical archives. Consequently, the material produced, collected, and archived for scientific purposes was based upon the notion of the male as the scientific norm. This notion also relates to epistemic violence as—to put it in Spivak’s words—“an account of how an explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (1988: 281). In addition, as Spivak makes clear: “the narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme” (287). In the context of the Lautarchiv and with regard to modes of knowledge production, this ‘general violence’ refers to the power of excluding and at the same time being in need of and constituting the Other.

On the level of materiality, I discussed further gaps emerging in the personal information forms and scripts. In most cases, it is the written rather than the sound material that provides the point of departure for my archival research. I make more sense of the collected data concerning the recorded person, as well as of the historical transcripts and translations than of the archived sound. Due to my lack of language expertise, which is a recurring issue in this book, I do not understand the sound recording’s content (see also Chapter 3 and 6). In the case of the missing recording LA 733 of the ‘temple dance,’ however, I was struck by the absence of the sound, combined with the fact that this recording probably contained the singing voices of more than one woman. Hence, the archival order is not just shaped by the decisions and selections of what is going to be archived, and by the categories chosen for documentation. It is also shaped by the omission and lack of consideration of certain categories and, ultimately, by what has and has not been preserved, and what can and cannot be accessed today.