

ERAM ALAM*

Citing the Unsaid

I landed in a ghetto in 1971. The hospital was a safe haven in the ghetto. The scenario outside of the hospital was boarded homes and broken windows. At night, there was darkness except for a few small lights. Those were the ends of people's cigarettes. That's the only way you knew that there were people there. The attendings were all white and had these nice homes, and the patients were all black. I don't know if I should be saying this.

*switch to Urdu

اس کام میں بہت کچھ ہے۔
کیا بہت کچھ؟
حیرت وہ لوگ ہم سے بہت الگ ہیں۔ آپ سمجھ گئے کہ¹ میرا کیا مطلب ہے۔

There's a lot of this in the work.

A lot of what?

Shock. Those people are very different from us... Oh, you understand what I mean...¹

I don't understand exactly what he means, although he assumes I do. I think I have a pretty good idea; maybe, in a sense, I do understand. So, then, here is my dilemma: What does the shift in linguistic register signify? Can I and should I translate this "understanding" into my scholarly production? If yes, how do I cite the unsaid?

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1. ?

I experienced variations of this conversation over the course of my research on physician migration from postcolonial Asian nations to the United States. Catalyzed by the passage of the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, US policymakers invited immigrant physicians to provide care in resource-poor communities largely left vacant by their US-trained counterparts. Since then, there has been a continuous flow of foreign physicians providing care to America's most vulnerable, with India as the largest sending country.² The majority of those who arrived during the first wave of this migration have remained in the United States. A few agreed to sit with me, functioning as a living archive. I conducted and recorded long-form life histories, usually spanning several hours over multiple days, toggling back and forth between English and Urdu or Hindi.

As I replayed the recordings, I noticed an unexpected linguistic division. When speaking about their professional lives, informants spoke in English. When speaking about personal topics or in the register of social commentary, they switched to Hindi or Urdu. This likely unconscious split—English/public, Hindi or Urdu/private—reveals the deep entrenchment of colonial legacies in psychic and institutional structures, what Albert Memmi calls the “tortures of colonial bilingualism.”³ On the Indian subcontinent, the British established English as the desired language of educational instruction, notable scholarly production, and bureaucratic management; English was the official language of record.⁴ All else was relegated to the margins, *off the record*. Following this logic, should I adopt a different ethical practice to the experiences shared in English versus Hindi/Urdu? If language creates life-worlds, was I granted access to both registers of experience? Is my role here as translator or one who preserves the private, a keeper of a kind of secret? If I accept the position of confidant, did I betray the narrator's trust by reproducing his speech?

If I choose to translate, how do I contend with the ellipsis, the unspoken exchange filled with the assumption of a shared understanding that seeks acknowledgment? In our conversation, the informant narrated their scene of arrival. Raised and educated in a socially homogenous environment in Ludhiana, India, they never encountered a black person, and were shocked by the level of disinvestment in America's segregated communities. Once

2. Eram Alam, “Cold War Crises: Foreign Medical Graduates Respond to US Doctor Shortages, 1965–1975,” *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 1 (2020): 132–51.

3. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfield (New York: Orion, 1965), 106.

4. Thomas Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education,” in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 428–30.

arrived, they were asked to manage the most intimate aspects of life and death for people who, thus far, had existed for them only in two-dimensional racialized tropes. This is how I interpreted their shock and chose to fill in the pause...this is how *I understood what they meant*. If meaning is made in relation, and citational practices demand clear attribution, should the blank citation after the exchange read: Informant *and Eram Alam, Conversation with Eram Alam, translated by Eram Alam, Potomac, MD, February 17, 2019?*

Oral history forces a direct confrontation with the living, in contrast to conventional archives, which rest “on a fundamental event: death.” In these spaces of immortal accumulation, the author of the document is considered deceased, and the archive awaits a public resurrection. During this interim, archival remains are dispossessed, tamed, and ordered, even if forever haunted by spectral traces.⁵ With the living, however—without the respite of the interim—the sentimental, ethical, interpersonal, improvisational, and gestural are produced in the immediate and demand swift address. As a method, oral history reminds us that all sources are forever marked by these dimensions and dilemmas, even when spatial and temporal distance try to persuade otherwise. But surely if you’re reading this, oh, you understand what I mean...

5. Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh, and Jane Taylor (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19–27.