

# “...the table was set, and we were never dead”: On the Persistence of Colonial Listening in Germany

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*A Series of Gaps Rather Than a Presence* (2019) is a sound piece that critically inquires upon the persistence of modern/colonial listening practices in the recording and assessment of language, and more specifically of accent. The work is part of a long-term artistic and academic research project oriented at the use of so-called “accent recognition software” (sometimes “dialect recognition”) by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, hereafter BAMF) in asylum seeking processes of undocumented migrants since late 2017 (*Drucksache 19/190*). The introduction of automated evaluation, as of this writing exclusive to Germany, replaces other, similarly questionable sociolinguistic methods for determining the origins of people without papers—a common procedure for asylum processes both in the European Union and the UK.<sup>1</sup> The use of software

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<sup>1</sup> The most common procedure for language tests in asylum cases is called Language Analysis for Determination of Origin (LADO), in which linguists and trained “native speaker experts” work with recordings from asylum hearings and interviews to produce an evaluation of the dialects spoken versus the applicant’s claimed country of origin. For more information on LADO and its implications, see Nick and Cambier-Langeveld.

comes to aid and speed up decision-making processes that can—and often do—determine the course of one’s life.

Similar attempts of tying “origin” to the voice can be found in the history of sound recording in Germany, in particular the efforts of the Prussian Phonographic Commission (Preussische Phonographische Kommission, hereafter PK). In the early twentieth century, the PK produced an extensive collection of language and accent/dialect recordings of prisoners of war in Germany, together with personal assessment files, phonetic transcriptions, and palatograms (Dögen 16). The PK, like the BAMF, was concerned with finding and assessing “scientific” links between language and origin, though each program pursued this work to different ends: research for the PK, asylum processing for the BAMF. Yet, stories about “home” emerge in both cases as constituents and assets to these historical and contemporary processes. Thus, modern/colonial forms of listening enact and reinforce displacement on the discursive level—home is always an elsewhere—while at the same time attempting to find said home (i.e., citizenship) in the voice on a purportedly “scientific” and analytical level.

Just as an interest in recording and evaluating accents or dialects is the impetus that drives both institutions, it is the persistence of finding home, both in the archives of the PK as well as in the elicitation cues of the BAMF, that sediments the discursive ground from which their stories might be connected. *A Series of Gaps Rather Than a Presence*, a performance and radio piece commissioned by the CTM Festival Berlin and Deutschlandfunk Kultur and produced by the author of this essay, probes these historical, spatial, and temporal connections. In what follows, I do not seek to merely provide an exegesis of this work but instead to extend an invitation to dwell on the questions that it leaves open, or merely rehearses.

By focusing its efforts on *listening*, as both a sense and set of techniques, sound art can reveal the persistence of modernity/coloniality in the migration industry's unstoppable desire to find "truth" in the body. Listening to the German dialect recognition apparatus—the software but also case workers, telephones, forms, the border regime, and the long history of dialect recording in Germany—a case can be made as to how the boundaries between the "objective" and "subjective" are not only contingent on but also reinforced by technologies within a juridical and economic infrastructure whose goal is, across a century, to sustain otherness. Yet, through works like *A Series...*, I argue that the performance of stories about home holds the potential not to find said home in the voice but rather to complicate the boundaries between body, accent, citizenship, and belonging, thus parting ways with the idea of home altogether.

### **Working With(in) the Gaps**

First presented as a forty-five minute live performance at HAU2 Berlin on January 30, 2019, featuring electronics, spoken word and singing (see fig. 1), *A Series...* was later re-recorded in studio, edited, and mixed for radio broadcast; it premiered on May 31, 2019 as part of the *Klangkunst* program of Deutschlandfunk Kultur.<sup>2</sup> The piece was composed as a mixture of essay and theatre, with heavy use of poetic and historical narrative interspersed not only with archival recordings of the PK (available at the *Lautarchiv* of the Humboldt-University in Berlin) and short, freely available snippets from the speech database used by the BAMF to train its software, but also blues, freestyle hip-hop, and electroacoustic composition. Its narrative draws connections between the König Friedrich-August Kaserne, a former prisoner of

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<sup>2</sup> *A Series...* features electronics and narration by the author and spoken word and singing by Enana Alassar, Lio D.I.C., and Mariana Bahia.

war camp in Chemnitz (1914–19), and the Ebersdorf field office of the BAMF, inaugurated in October 2005 and located near the abandoned camp buildings. By weaving in and out of both places and their practices, *A Series...* stays within the gaps of these temporally and spatially connected places, guided by one main concern: how the idea of home is elicited.



Fig. 1. Performance at HAU2 Berlin on January 30, 2019. Photo by the author.

In speech and language assessment, an “elicitation cue” is the device with which speakers allegedly produce speech without necessarily having to think of its semantic value. A key example might be the so-called “Harvard Sentences,” designed to elicit variations of English speech with seemingly trivial phrases: e.g., “The harder he tried the less he got done”

or “Schools for ladies teach charm and grace” (“IEEE” 16–7). The supposed “neutrality” of elicitation cues stays at odds with sociolinguistic research methods, in which one finds an informed concern with provoking “natural” speech from speakers of a given language or dialect, which might approximate an unmediated prosody and articulation of “true” speech (Meyerhoff et al.). Nevertheless, to assume that the choice of elicitation cues is always already neutral, or at least consciously so, is only half the story.

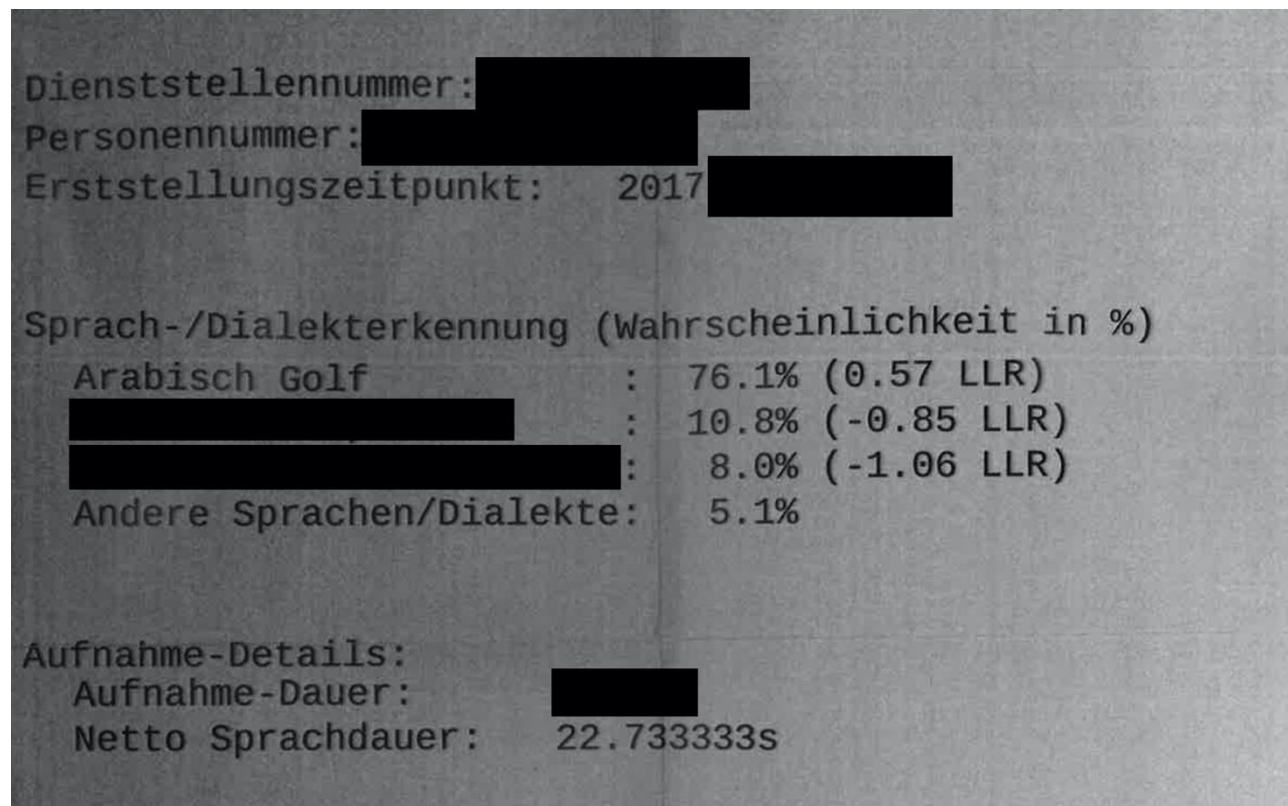
The BAMF has been allegedly using “culturally appropriate” images as elicitation cues for their so-called accent recognition software since 2017. While it does not officially disclose the content of these images on the grounds of a “threat to national security” (“Bilder für sprachbiometrische Tests”), reports from anonymous sources maintain that the images are often of a family eating a meal at home or other social scenes. A 2018 photo published by the BAMF on Facebook, illustrating a (probably staged) dialect test, includes one such image that allegedly depicts *Bozkashe*, an Afghan ball game (“Automatische Dialekterkennung”). Images like these are often chosen because they are assumed to be cross-cultural, evoking a sense of a shared familiarity. It is by describing these images over the telephone in “free, natural speech” (BAMF, *Benutzerhandbuch “Sprachbiometrie”*) that the accent test is performed and a list of probabilities of a certain dialect being spoken is retrieved (see fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

The PK, on the other hand, did not use images as elicitation cues but nevertheless resorted to methods that could be easily replicated by different prisoners, from written word or memory, to elicit a natural, informal speech that would then be assessed, described, transcribed, and “scientifically” evaluated. Linguists and phoneticians often requested

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<sup>3</sup> I have written previously about the affective infrastructures of the “dialect test” and the telephone, in particular the evocative power of image and story into eliciting an accent. See “On the Endless Infrastructural Reach of a Phoneme.”

prisoners of war to recount stories or religious texts; among European soldiers, the most popular story conveyed was that of the “Prodigal Son,” comprising almost one-sixth of all the recordings. Non-Christian French and British colonial soldiers were often asked to recite parts of the Quran or other religious texts, or to sing folk songs and tell tales specific to their countries. While many European soldiers familiar with the “Prodigal Son” were Christian and often able to recount the parable from memory, one finds in the PK archive two instances of the story recorded by colonial soldiers: Gangaram, from Nepal, of Hindu religion and imprisoned in Wünsdorf (PK271), and François Joachim-Arnould, from Martinique, imprisoned in Münster (PK744), religion unknown.



Dienststellenummer: [REDACTED]  
Personennummer: [REDACTED]  
Erststellungszeitpunkt: 2017 [REDACTED]

Sprach-/Dialekterkennung (Wahrscheinlichkeit in %)

Arabisch Golf	:	76.1%	(0.57 LLR)
[REDACTED]	:	10.8%	(-0.85 LLR)
[REDACTED]	:	8.0%	(-1.06 LLR)
Andere Sprachen/Dialekte:		5.1%	

Aufnahme-Details:  
Aufnahme-Dauer: [REDACTED]  
Netto Sprachdauer: 22.733333s

Fig. 2. Example (modified for privacy reasons) of a test result file. See appendix for English translation.

## Finding “Home”

Much like depictions of family meals and ball games, the parable of the Prodigal Son manifests a feeling of home; yet it also provides a moral lesson of repentance, of finding unconditional acceptance and forgiveness by *returning* home, provided this home is always *elsewhere*. Frantz Fanon has brilliantly demonstrated how language underscores the “shift and split” in consciousness that takes place when a colonial subject returns home (9). He argued that the opening of a “rift” (19) between colonial othering and self-identification troubles the psyche of the colonized and turns “home” into an elusive concept, never fully realized, ever contradictory and ambiguous.

Such complexity is reflected in *A Series...*, in which none of the performers speak German as their native tongue, and yet all use different articulations, inflections, and pronunciations, mixing and mashing their own native languages, for a largely German audience.<sup>4</sup> The three singers begin by outlining key information from the test subjects’ stories: where they took place, what was revealed, what was concealed. Later, they disconnect from this idea to fabulate and improvise freely on the Prodigal Son’s motto—“he was lost but now he’s found; he was dead, but now he lives again”—while also adding references to the accent test imagery (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Snippet from “A Series of Gaps Rather Than a Presence.” Copyright by the author.

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<sup>4</sup> For an English translation of the German voiceovers, see [oliveira.work/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ASeriesofGaps-EN.pdf](https://oliveira.work/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ASeriesofGaps-EN.pdf). Accessed 17 Jun. 2021.



Fig. 4. The grounds of the former König Friedrich-August Kaserne in October 2018. Photo by the author.

The complicated (and often violent) history of language recording—here as forced labor for German linguists—is presented to the listener as inherently implicated in the continuation of Germany’s political project of borders, nationhood, and citizenship. The piece carefully reintroduces Joachim-Arnould’s recording, this time speaking over a computerized, allegedly “neutral” German text-to-speech voice reading from a BAMF memorandum (see fig. 5). The simultaneity of these audio tracks reveals how both work as “nodes of state, social, and cultural formation,” extending their reach from the past to present and future engagements (Campt 72).





Fig. 5. Snippet from “A Series of Gaps Rather Than a Presence.” Copyright by the author.

Reintroduction and juxtaposition also seek to uncover how “scientific” listening is, in fact, *colonial* listening, whereby the PK and the BAMF partake in “a rich linguistic tradition of thinking difference as a problem located . . . in the relation between spoken and written language” (Ochoa Gautier 140). Both institutions sustain a modern/colonial desire for resolution, conclusion, and “objective truth” (Robinson). More importantly, their ethos relies on the belief that *listening*, as it were, can reveal said “truth,” through separation, sequencing, assessment, and determination (Ferreira da Silva). Because of this, the connection they attempt to find between citizenship and voice is not a feature of the body, but rather remains “between the ear, the mechanics of articulation and the actual sound of pronunciation” (Ochoa Gautier 140). In other words, it is a question of *listening*—a listening that while presenting itself as “objective” remains, in fact, very much teleological.

*A Series...* articulates how “home” (i.e., citizenship and nationality) is ultimately contingent, while presenting ways in which it might be possible to complicate and refuse it altogether. By focusing on the idea of home as a prerequisite for storytelling, *A Series...* asks how and where home is defined but also, more importantly, *by whom*. It puts the audience in charge of determining how these institutional bodies attempt to listen to citizenship and why it

has been so for the past hundred years. To do so, it demands a situated, aesthetic, and relational listening (Vieira de Oliveira) to these voices—*now*.

Free-form improvisations in many tongues and the Creole recording of the Prodigal Son story are not merely retellings but rather refusals—a complete desacralization of the home that both the PK and the BAMF try to find. Through these documents, languages are made into “wild tongues” (Anzaldúa 75) and extricated from any idea of “citizenship” insofar as Arabic, Kurdish, Portuguese, Creole, German, and English seamlessly flow into one another, bold and overperformed. This creates a multi-lingual, multi-accented sound journey that connects both institutions in their desire to find “truth” in language and accent, an effort that constantly refuses, at the same time, to define people by the languages or accents they speak with.

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#### Appendix: English Translation of Figure 2

Office code: (blacked out)  
 Personal code: (blacked out)  
 Issue date: 2017-(blacked out)

#### Language/Dialect recognition (Probabilities in %)

Gulf Arabic:	76.1% (0.57 LLR)
(blacked out):	10.8% (-0.85 LLR)
(blacked out):	8.0% (-1.06 LLR)
Other Languages or Dialects:	5.1%

#### Recording details:

Duration of recording:	(blacked out)
Net Speech duration:	22.733333s

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