

[Deep Breath] Witnessing beyond Discourse in Colonial Sound Archives

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I take my glasses off, pull my chair closer to the desk, and adjust the slightly uncomfortable headphones over my ears. The sounds of the other bodies in the archive's reading room fade away; I click on the 'play' arrow on my screen and close my eyes. After a few seconds of soft crackling, the sound of old radio programs washes over me. Sometimes I can barely hear the voices through the thick fuzz of time and distance.

Typing away on my laptop, I transcribe not only the words I hear but the sounds that accompany them (sighs, stutters, giggles). As I encounter elements that exceed textuality, I bend my ear to a world I am reconstructing through archived sounds: the world of colonial domesticity shaped by radio programs emitted from Europe to the colonies between 1945 and 1950. Through these archival snippets of radio shows, I witness the sounds that organized the domestic sphere of colonizers.

SOURCE : Tetau Paul JOU « Il faut connaître l'Indochine en guerre », 20.03.1945, INA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Translated by the author.

In practice, my experience of the archive is heavily mediated. Before I can sit down and press play, I must submit myself to a series of disciplinary measures. Some are bureaucratic (showing an ID, applying for a pass...), others are physical (passing through a metal detector, showing the contents of my bag...). To find the right recordings, I must familiarize myself with the archival catalogues and interfaces mediating my access to the sounds. These are all elements I am a witness to, elements I am meant to set aside when producing academic work, to focus on the materials instead.

Witnessing is intertwined with knowing. *Witness*, from the Old English *gewitnes*, compares to the Middle Dutch *wetenisse*: knowledge (OED). The genealogy of witness in knowledge still haunts our current understanding of witnessing, although witness today seems distinct from knowledge. I account for the historicity of these terms to render underlying power matrixes audible: witnessing is not only a matter of having seen or heard, but also of being sanctioned to tell the event again. While certain bodies are considered knowledgeable, others are displayed as objects of knowledge. Not all bodies are afforded the privilege of telling their own stories, of determining the terms in which their stories will be told.

How can I, as someone whose heritage is entangled with histories of colonialism due to my European whiteness, and as someone whose queerness inflects their attunement to the archive, ethically share this position as witness without feeding into a culture that amplifies my voice at the expense of others and normalizes the consumption of media depicting racial violence?

This entails witnessing and being careful with my own emotions: using them as guiding hands while remaining careful of how they might be molded by white supremacy. As I write, I seek a balance between imposing my reading of the archival materials and inviting readers to reflect on the terms of their empathy.

*"Here is radio Brazzaville [...]
For me, who doesn't know Santa Claus, I have still received, before the little whites, a beautiful present, as I've found my daddy again. My daddy had gone a long time ago to wage war. But the daddies of many other little blacks died in the war. They will never find them again. They are very sad, and me, I don't dare to show my joy"*

SOURCE : Le quart d'heure colonial, Madagascar et les lettres, 01.01.1945, INA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Translated by the author.

"... He who is talking to you at the moment, with an emotion all the more intense because he can believe his voice to be well known and heard over there [strong emotion in his voice] in the beautiful country where he had the honor to speak and act in the name of France, never believed for his part that Indochina, transformed by our national engineering after so many happy creations, could be lost forever, and indefinitely subjugated to the yoke of an invader without scruples and ideals. With all French people, he awaits the hour, that everything announces to be near, of deliverance for this last piece of our Empire. He asserts his conviction that the metropole will, by new benefits, by a liberal politics of large cooperation inspired by its own traditions and in accordance with the best of our Indochinese associates, know to reinforce the ties which unite their country and ours for their common good and general progress. This is why he feels entitled to call... [stutters - due to emotion?] ...to appeal to France in its entirety, to [inaudible] overseas, so that as of now we unite all of ourselves to provide those over there who await the end of their trials with a blazing mark of our confidence, our solidarity. Friends of Indochina, see you soon. France will come. More affectionate, more loyal than ever [voice falters, from emotion] and together we will resume, with ardor and a new faith, this work of human regeneration, which we had undertaken together and which, in recovered peace, we will achieve together [music]..."

46 On the next two pages, below and alongside my writing, are excerpts from my transcripts of three radio programs. Two are in French from 1945 and one is in Dutch from 1949—my English translations of the two French programs appear in the previous pages (see above for an example). The original speech is in light grey italics, and I have highlighted in bold and dark grey the mention of emotions by the speakers and my annotations of non-speech sounds that attest to the presence of emotions. In juxtaposing these excerpts with my own writing, I extend my care to the emotions encountered in the archives, prioritizing them as sources of knowledge over the supposedly rational speech they appear in.

« Celui qui vous parle en ce moment avec une **émotion** d'autant plus intense qu'il peut croire sa voix bien connue et entendue là-bas [**strong emotion in his voice**] dans le beau pays où il eut l'honneur de parler et d'agir au nom de la France, n'a jamais cru pour sa part que l'Indochine, transformée par notre génie national après tant de créations heureuses, pouvait être per... The care I extend to the emotions I witness in the archives is conditional because of the materials I listen to (white Europeans talking on the radio to white Europeans in the colonies). Emotions by people in dominant positions within hierarchies of class, race, and gender have been—and continue to be—prioritized over emotions of marginalized people. I am thus weary of the emotions that are tolerated in radiophonic archives while others are disciplined. *dochinois, renforcer les liens qui unissent leur pays et le notre pour leur bien commun et le progrès général. C'est pourquoi il se croit autorisé à appel [stutters – due to emotion ?]... à faire appel à la France entière pour [inaudible] White men tearing up on air, as in the transcript below this text (see first page for translation), are a surprisingly common currency. Often, they yearn for colonialism's continuation or praise the glory of colonialism: [is d'Indochine, à bientôt. La France va venir. Plus affectueuse, plus loyale que jamais [voice falters, from emotion] et ensemble nous reprendrons, avec une ardeur et une fois nouvelle cette œuvre de régénération humaine, qu'ensemble nous avons entreprise et qu'ensemble dans la paix retrouvée, nous achèverons [music]. » Men on the radio expressed a wide range of emotions, two of which I found to be recurring: anger over decolonial uprisings and melancholy for imminent decolonization. I focus on the emotions transpiring through their speech to challenge the portrayal of colonialists as benevolent, rational white men.*

SOURCE : Tetau Paul JOU, Il faut connaître l'Indochine en guerre, 20.03.1945, INA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

I am careful to situate these emotions in the frame of white innocence (Wekker 17), and I read them as instances of violence rather than care for them as moments of vulnerability.

In comparison to white subjects, colonized subjects' emotional expressions were only recognized and engaged with if they corresponded to a very narrow palette of emotions, mainly happiness or thankfulness for colonialism. The transcribed radio talk below is by a Congolese child (see previous page for English). Musing on his joyous Christmas, he comments about his friends whose fathers died fighting for France in World War II: ...]

« Pour moi, qui ne connais pas le père Noël, j'ai reçu quand-même, avant les petits blancs, un très beau cadeau, puisque j'ai retrouvé mon papa. Mon papa qui était parti il y a longtemps pour faire la guerre. Mais les papas de beaucoup d'autres petits noirs sont morts dans la guerre. Ils ne les retrouveront jamais. **Ils sont très tristes et je n'ose pas, moi, montrer ma joie.** »

“They are very sad, and me, I don't dare to show my joy.”

I am practicing tuning in to his agency as a witness of colonialism, to make his intervention audible for my readers. Here I like to think with Saidiya Hartman that caring for this child from Bacongo implies being careful not to reproduce harm when introducing his speech into academic texts (34–36).

SOURCE : Le quart d'heure colonial, Madagascar et les lettres, 01.01.1945, INA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

By attuning to this child's emotional repertoire, I turn away from his scripted radiophonic speech and focus instead on traces of emotions exceeding the colonial narrative: sadness erupting where joy was expected for instance.

In the transcripts below, pain resonates in the undertones of supposedly cheerful radio messages by Dutch mothers to their sons fighting in the Indonesian War of Independence.

“Opgelet dus, hier komen de groeten uit het vaderland. ¶ In recordings of this show, undertones upstaged the joy, and one can hear the host chide speakers for the audibility of their grief (Kuitenbrouwer 54). In uninterrupted interviews like the one transcribed here, emotions are audible in the sounds surrounding the messages: sorrow, heartache, and worry sound in labored breaths and veiled voices. AT. *Tinus opletten, hier komt moeder, en je jongste broertje Koenie. Je moeder: 'Lieve*

47 *jonge, met ons alles goed. Ali is niet erg prettig, [deep breath] kan nu niet spreken. Vele zoenen van moeder [deep breath] Ali, Ri, Cori en kinderen, [deep breath] Annie, Hennie [voice slightly veiled from emotion] een stevige handdruk van vader en Wim en groet van de familie. Dag schat! [Broertje komt, spreekt veel te luid] DAG...TINNIE en dit is een... goeie dag [singsong]” – Not These interviewees bear witness to the violent underbelly of colonialism. Bearing evokes the act of carrying, supporting, enduring... it is a formative practice, as the image of bearing a child: an always already transformative act of molding and carrying along before releasing into the world. *djes joh, wat is gebeurd hoor! Graag zou ik nu even bij je een kijkje willen nemen, miep. Hoe is het daar, goed? Liefste ik moet eindigen met een gemeente welterusten zoen van mij – van Weep. Dag [voice (barely audible) breaks a little] ... [sniffles – crying?].” Dan is hier Mieke “Dag Pappie kom je gouv naar huis, enne... zoen op u neus... [inaudible], Lieke” [nervous?] Goed afvegen die natte zoen, ik heb trouwens nog een vergissing vergaan, het was uw vrouwtje moest ik speciaal zeggen, dat doe ik achteraf nog maar een keer, en ze verlangt toch wel erg naar uw thuiskomst. The care involved in the process of bearing a child is continuous and diffuse—it is care both for the entity being carried and for one's own vessel. It is an ethical act that I too come into as**

SOURCE : Koninginnedag Programma PROGRAMMA_VOO-AEN560400NC, Beeld & Geluid

Finally, I am careful with the emotions I invite in my readers as I ask them to participate in the act of becoming witnesses, making them accomplices in the undoing of the colonial pretense to rationalism. I hope to find community with my readers in the absurdity of colonial rhetoric by eliciting laughter in the face of a discourse fueled by hate and filled with gaps, inconsistencies, and absurdities. In this, too, I need to be careful to distinguish when laughter is harmful from when it is necessary.

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ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

In order of appearance

Tetau Paul JOU « Il faut connaître l'Indochine en guerre », 20.03.1945, INA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Translation by the author.

Le quart d'heure colonial, Madagascar et les lettres, 01.01.1945, INA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Translation by the author.

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LUC MARRAFFA is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (University of Amsterdam). They research French and Dutch colonial radio archives from circa. 1945 and develop transcription methods that challenge colonial narratives. Their current work interrogates the queerness of glitches and sound parasites. Previously they taught philosophy at CUNY and attended NYU as Fulbright bursar, after a philosophy MA at Paris VIII Vincennes/Saint-Denis. At the UvA, they teach classes in sound studies and decolonial approaches to archiving. ■