



A demolished residential complex along the New Market Main Road in Bhopal.

Even the most banal interviews make me take an interest. I am talking of Bollywood actors I loathe, politicians I despise, “motivational speakers” I mock. And no matter the subject of discussion, I sometimes imagine myself in the hot seat: giving the answers, gesticulating, making an effort. I guess I like to assume a character, plot the pauses and the sentimental breaks, the digressions. On other occasions though, I imagine myself face-to-face with some figure of the moment, asking them the polemical questions. On my way back home from New York to Bhopal, I imagined what my father would ask me upon my arrival: *So how was the flight? Any symptoms? They gave you food? Neck hurting yet? Coming back home from the grocery*

*store on my twenty-first birthday, I received an email from NYU about the closure of its residence halls, meaning that we were supposed to pack up our belongings and go home, wherever it is or is not, hopefully within forty-eight hours. Choosing what to leave behind to be shipped later or stored away was the hardest, particularly choosing from my books. I packed mostly just the essentials for the journey. And in my carry-ons, I only kept the books that wouldn't get me into trouble, books that wouldn't cause a stir or books that hadn't yet made the headlines in lapdog newspapers or books that did not clearly spell and exhibit my “urban naxal” politics. I felt as though I was sanitizing my personal archive, staging it and*

making it so neat that it wouldn't invite any questions, or should I say, interrogations. A lot had happened in India from mid-January to March; each time I'd read the news, I would feel estranged from India as though I were hearing about an unfamiliar country for the very first time—not the India of my childhood and adolescence, but the India that seemed to be lurking in the past too: silently slipping underneath its joys and memories, consuming them slowly. And leaving New York, being asked to "go home" on such short notice was yet another puzzle, another incomprehensible and sudden event that forced me to come to terms with the fact that the city where I felt at home could conveniently let me go. But I did end up where I came from: Bhopal. And I arrived there incomplete, vacuous without more than half of my library: all my Elena Ferrante books in Italian and English, some dear poetry collections and some autographed books as well were boxed away in cartons to be stored in other people's homes. And I arrived knowing that I would have to spend the next two and a half months working and attending classes according to New York time, which meant attending some of my classes online from 1:00 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. India time. I had prepared answers to tell my family about how I'd manage the time difference, when I'd join them for meals and which ones, how I'd keep the lights dim and any noise to a minimum. This time I wanted no more questions and no more puzzles. This time I was ready to provide only the answers to questions never articulated.

One of the classes I was taking this spring semester was a theory seminar centered around the archive, the

document, the documentary. It was a required course and while I was always mildly fascinated by some of the issues within its premise, I had never seriously thought about any of those terms or what they constitute until the issue of the Citizenship Amendment Act alongside the National Registry of Citizens and the National Population Register emerged in India around the months of December and January. Suddenly citizens were being asked to prove their legitimacy, to dive into their annals and show papers to the government so it could declare them lawful or unlawful, legitimate or illegitimate. The document, since then, has become for every Indian citizen nothing more than a tool to unarchive and delegitimize them; the document has become a tool for undocumenting, an oxymoron. It would be a lie to say that the very mention of the document, throughout the course of this semester, didn't elicit fear and apprehension and a palpable sense of rage and dissent. After all, my country has been forcing us to lose faith in whatever truth or humanity we've known, and its preservation can still be credited to the archive, the document. And so when our class visit to Bobst Library's Tamiment Archive was cancelled because of the pandemic, a part of me felt as though my idea of the archive or my relationship to it would remain in disrepair. I thought any chance at reconciliation or a different view of the archive would remain unfulfilled, betrayed even.

Within a few weeks of my arrival in Bhopal, the "finals season" of the semester began to set in. I was supposed to write my paper about the archive choosing from some of the

limited digital materials made accessible to us. In the meantime, the archive, or rather, the idea of it, had only continued to become more alienating for me. When we were instructed over Zoom by Danielle Nista, a reference associate at NYU's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, about searching and citing archival materials and understanding their organization, I confronted a different illegibility. As Ms. Nista explained the complications (as well as the joys) of the archive and archival research, I noticed that some of the digital files were too bulky to be downloaded in reasonable time owing to my modest Wi-Fi connection. And I was thinking, simultaneously, about what I would like to write on for my final paper. Illegibilities are not new to me as a student of comparative literature. If anything, in the course of my university education, I have confronted illegibility, succumbing to it or taking lessons from it or overcoming it. When Ms. Nista mentioned how much she likes teaching about Salaria Kea, the first African American nurse in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War, it was Salaria's smile that came to mind. I remembered it suddenly and vividly. I remembered her near-perfect posture, her playful but gently determined gaze slanting into the distance. I realized that in one of the folders Ms. Nista shared with our class, there was an interview of Salaria Kea with John Gerassi. And that, for me, was it. By the end of the class, around 4 a.m., I was reading the transcript of the interview while asking myself some questions. Again, I couldn't help but imagine what my response to some of Gerassi's questions would be. I wondered why he wasn't asking Salaria

this or that. And I couldn't help but wonder what was still left unarticulated. Here's another thing: I have a certain love for transcripts of interactions and interviews. As an editor for a literary magazine, I insist that all our interviews are accompanied by a transcript. I insist that all repetitions and hesitations of speech or sounds captured in audio or video forms are made explicit in the text through syntax, its visual arrangement, blanks and gaps between words. Reading the text of Salaria's interview was like reading a text in translation, a text where the losses have occurred, where there has been much to give and take. Salaria as an obvious and remembered "historical first" seemed to me, at that moment, something resonant. Everything around me seemed like a historical first, maybe not in the larger span of time or history but certainly within the span and scope of my life: I thought of the changes, confusions and displacements brought out by the COVID-19 pandemic as historical firsts, I thought of the ongoing process of the irreparable unmaking of Indian democracy under a Hindu-fascist regime as a historical first. There was so much to be said about the politics that comes from being named or referred to only as a "historical first" too. Salaria's interview seemed to be a start for me, a subject that evoked in me a balance between familiarity and unfamiliarity, some legibility accompanied by an illegibility.

I always wondered about the relationship between interviews and interpretations. Without the questions, the clarifications, any interview could become a constructed narrative, a study of a subject. In his interview of Salaria

Kea, John Gerassi adds a comment at the end of the interview's transcript where he describes "the strange sensation when [he and Salaria] walked through the lobby" (70), indicative of "tolerance," followed by some "[not] very kind" remarks (71). But Salaria's consciousness of the scene, her possible quotidian experience of the same sensation, was left unarticulated. That was a question Gerassi never asked. How much did Salaria know of that sensation, those glances and remarks, we may now never know. A transcript of an interview is a finite entity, a finite form, and as such, there will always be more collapses of questions than a proliferation of them, a repetition of their variables. In fact, Salaria's location of herself, her introduction of herself was so local that it startled me: "My name is Salaria Kea O'Reilly and I live at 1111 Independence Avenue, apartment 2315" (1), and Gerassi went on from there to create what seemed to be taking the form of an origin story, a story of early life and background, a story before Salaria became one of history's firsts. But what surprised me was how little time Salaria spent lingering in that arena; her narrative of herself began when she became the subject: a nurse, a black woman who often found herself alone, who found herself being seen as a different subject.

Soon after, one can notice the change in Gerassi's questions: they no longer focus on the narrative of Salaria that he wants to push, but focus, instead, on helping her enunciate her narrative, her story, and her difference as she sees them. They move into the zone of clarifying and rendering legible the facts of Salaria's narratives, not all of which

focus on her own self or life or difference. In fact, I love to see the questions of an interview in isolation. As an editor, even if an interview is going to be spontaneous, via an audio or video call, I like to have elaborate questions almost scripted before me. I like to avoid the uncomfortable silences, skim over the basics. Many of Gerassi's questions when seen in isolation become, well, small, remaining in the vicinity of Salaria's answers than in their own territory. Gerassi's questions seemed to me almost clinical—never asking Salaria how she felt, never asking her to recall the memory of her sentiments at the moment being talked about. Maybe the pause, the understanding, the slight sigh is in the audio tape or exchanged as a glance between them. But why was it left unuttered? I read the transcript over and over but I couldn't find an utterance that gave me some closure in this regard. It's hard to find a vocabulary, an expression for something unprecedented. Even in a narrative as populated as this one, it is hard to give and find a voice. After all, how does a history find and look at its own past? If I were in an archive, if I were at the Tamiment—less restricted, living twenty minutes away, able to see and touch and smell objects—my questions would have stood answered and maybe I wouldn't have gone looking for an interview, a form that is familiarly fascinating to me. I am sure I would have sought letters, posters, and postcards. I would have left my fascination for interviews to grow in my time outside of this project. Maybe, just maybe, as I would constantly be reading news from home, I'd ask when the prime minister of my country would allow himself to be questioned,

interrogated, not in non-political interviews by Bollywood actors, but by one of his dissenters. Asking questions of a subject is not only a challenge for the interviewer but a challenge for the subject as well. I often wonder what someone thinks after an interview. At least in my head, should-haves and should-not-haves pile up. Even after all the scripting, there is something about the immediacy of an interview that lets some truth slip by. Some part of the story remains unwritten, undocumented, undone. I wondered how many times Salaria stopped herself from saying a word, I wondered how many times I do that when I am asked the slightest, simplest of things. And

what was that introduction—that physical address where she resides? If I were asked to introduce myself through my address, what would I say? That place where all my books are, or that place where I sleep now and wake up every morning to the sound of the adhan, but without my books or music. I wonder where it's easier to stay alive, to sustain myself. I remember my grandfather asked me when I arrived in Bhopal whether I feel safer here. There are fewer cases, fewer responsibilities, a slower life. I said, "I don't know." I don't know. And when he asked me to clarify, I repeated: "I have no idea. I don't know how to tell you."

Salaria Kea O'Reilly, interview by John Gerassi, July 6, 1980. ALBA.018 Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, collection 18, box 5, folder 8. NYU Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, 70 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012, New York University Libraries.