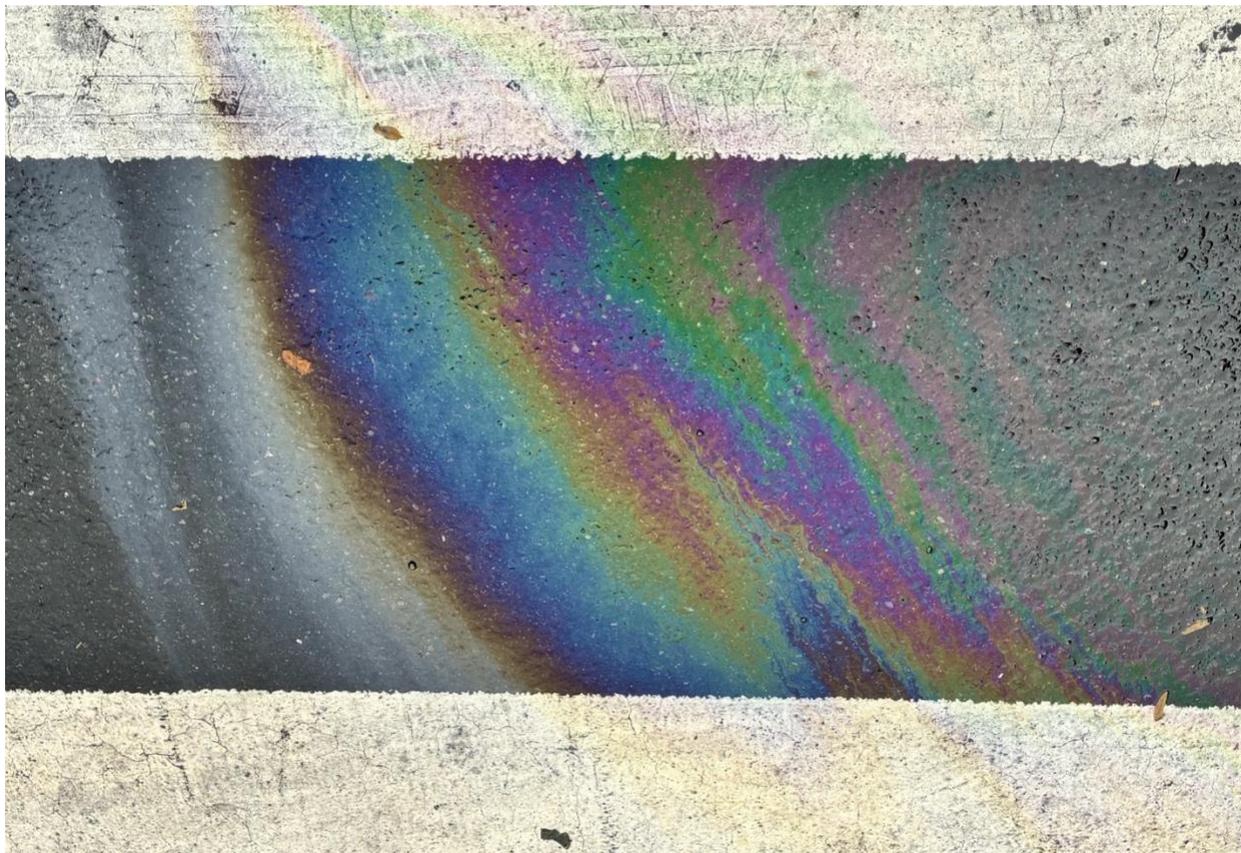# Desire On The Line:

Oral Histories of Absence and Return

By ekta shaikh

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Columbia University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

New York, New York   February 2026

To my sister, Damitra

my first and oldest companion in memory,

always on the other end.

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First Lines of Contact

"I don't know how to start this."

— Booth participant, *Voice Note 0025*

"In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation."

— Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* **(2006, 6)**

On April 26, 2025, I co-hosted an exhibit exploring entangled themes of home, disorientation, and belonging. The exhibit had two interconnected components: a listening website, *Humsafar*[1], and a speaking space, a phone booth. *Humsafar* brought together family oral histories recorded as voice notes and calls between my father in Karachi, Pakistan; our family cook Habul Chacha[2], who had lived with us for more than thirty years (1983–2021) in Feni, Bangladesh; and me in New York, United States, in conversation with each of them across distance, listening and responding as both daughter and researcher. The second component, speaking, centered on a phone booth that I built as part of the exhibit. Visitors stepped inside the small enclosed space, where a single prompt awaited them: "Invite the one you cannot touch." Picking up the receiver, they recorded a voice message addressed to someone distant, estranged, or deceased.

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[1] *Humsafar* (Urdu/Persian: ہم سفر, ham-safar) literally means "fellow traveler" or "companion." I draw the title from Naseer Turabi's 1971 ghazal, "vo hum-safar thā magar us se hum-navāʾī na thī" ("He was a fellow traveler, yet we were not of one voice")—widely noted as written in response to the Fall of Dhaka and read as mourning the separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In this project, *humsafar* functions as a leitmotif for companionship under asymmetry. It names co-journeying that persists across borders and discord, and it orients both the website's relational verbs (hear/see/read/invite) and the phone-booth prompt toward making new "desire lines" of address in the present.

[2] Throughout this thesis, I refer to both Papa and Habul Chacha by their given names, in keeping with academic convention. However, it is important to clarify, particularly at the first mention, that "Chacha" in Urdu refers specifically to one's father's younger brother. While this form of address for elders is common in South Asian lexical structures, my use of it here is not merely cultural—it is intentional. I invoke "Chacha" not as a generic honorific, but as a claim to a specific, resurrected kin tie whose contours this work seeks to trace. This thesis is, in part, an attempt to name and honor the uneasy inheritance of being Habul Chacha's daughter through waged labor.

Following Alessandro Portelli, I understand the oral-history interview as an "inter-view"[3]—a relational encounter rather than a unidirectional act of extraction. For Portelli, the "inter-view" is not simply a means of collecting "raw data" but a charged event in which two subjectivities meet, each bringing their own histories, expectations, and interpretive frameworks to the exchange. He describes the interview as a space of mutual sight and shared authorship, where what matters is not only *what* is said but *how*, *when*, and *to whom* it is said. Therefore, tone of voice, pauses, contradictions, and even factual "errors" all reveal how narrators make sense of their experiences. What oral history "gives," he argues, is the *form of narration*, capturing the emotional and temporal textures of memory, as linguistic and embodied gestures (Portelli 1991, 50–53). Framing the interview as an encounter grounds my approach in reciprocity and the co-construction of knowledge, foregrounding ethical and affective dynamics of listening.

The exhibit was thus designed to stage the oral history interview as an encounter between my family's oral-history subjectivities and those of visitors. By inviting visitors into the booth to leave their own messages, it sought to create a space of shared, reciprocal exchange that experiments with the *form of the oral-history interview[4]*—as a relational field in which stories meet, echo, and extend one another across difference. While the *Humsafar* website[5] positioned

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[3] I use the term "inter-view" to signal the interview as a situated encounter rather than a neutral technique. The hyphen marks the "between" as the site where knowledge is produced: in shared address, misrecognition, hesitation, and improvisation, rather than in detachable statements alone. In practical terms, I reserve "inter-view" for scenes in which I am present as listener and co-participant, to remind the reader that the material I analyze is shaped by this relational encounter and by the ethical obligations and asymmetries that structure who can ask, who can answer, and how listening takes place

[4] Experiments with the interview form align with work on oral history as a performative, intersubjective practice (Abrams 2010; Portelli 1991) and with public history debates on shared authority and collaborative meaning-making (Frisch 1990; Thomson 2003; Sitzia 2003), as well as with recent projects that foreground memory, narrative, and participatory formats in oral history's evolving attention to form (Nyhan, Flinn & Welsh 2015).

[5] The *Humsafar* website functions as an archive and digital field site - public, participatory, and multisensory - organized through four verbs: *hear*, *see*, *read*, and *invite*. *Hear* presents paired clips of Farukh and Habul speaking across distance; the segments analyzed in this thesis are drawn from that corpus. *See* assembles family images with Habul across decades, scans of his passports, and photographs of him in Pakistani cricket hats and jerseys. *Read* introduces the companions who co-developed the project and outlines its methods of kinship and care. The site's design, its typography, audio cues, and navigational verbs, serves as narrative form, extending oral history into a multisensory terrain that makes listening itself a bodily practice. https://humsafar.sandbox.library.columbia.edu/

visitors primarily as listeners to family oral histories, the booth[6] invited them to step into the scene of the interview itself, transforming them into interlocutors[7] who authored lines of relation in real time. In doing so, the project treats the interview as an encounter—a site of generativity, and ongoing memory work, rather than as a fixed archive of completed stories.

Fault Lines

"There are ways in which you can miss things you've never known."

— Booth participant, *Voice Note 0025*

Farukh and Habul's relationship is not a Partition story in any straightforward sense, yet it is shaped by its afterlives of legal documentation, migration routes, and border sensibilities that govern who can move, work, and belong. Booth participants—most were not from New York and already oriented toward both a "here" and an "elsewhere," habituated to inhabiting multiple homes or to living with the sense of having none—also spoke from within rupture, though of a different order.

From within this field of layered ruptures, I turn to Partition scholarship not to collapse disparate histories into a single event, but because its historiography and literary–visual archives offer a vocabulary to think through how world-reordering events are unevenly enacted, contested, and remembered. Crucially, it shows how fractured histories create the dense, uneasy,

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[6] The booth now exists digitally as an interactive archive and fieldsite. Visitors can hear excerpts from messages left in the original booth and contribute their own by responding to the prompt "Invite the one you cannot touch." These recordings form an evolving public archive of voices and routes-in-the-making, developed as the outward-facing component of my thesis and ongoing experiment in desire-based listening. https://www.invitetheoneyoucannottouch.com/

[7] Grounded in anthropological debates on the politics of representation—between the recognition of "partial truths" (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and the situated position of the feminist halfie (Abu-Lughod 1991)—as well as in gender-studies conversations about "bringing feminist theory home" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997) and insisting that "the personal is political" (hooks 1989), this work also situates itself within feminist anthropological traditions attentive to positionality, intimacy, and embodied knowledge.

ground in which *desire*[8]—for elsewhere, for otherwise, for one another—can take root and be voiced.

Rather than a single event in 1947, South Asia's Partition(s) are recurring ruptures and temporalities across 1905/1947/1971 and beyond. Work on bureaucratic afterlives of 1947 theorizes a "long partition" in which refugee management, documentary regimes, and everyday adjudications of belonging extend the Partition into routine governance (Zamindar 2007; Pandey 2001). Bengal studies anchor this plurality historically and regionally, tracing how 1905 and 1947 interlock and how 1971 refracts 1947 in distinctive ways (Chatterji 1994; Raychaudhuri 2019). Newer syntheses in policy and strategic studies underscore how partition's classificatory logics travel into contemporary insider/outsider debates and citizenship anxieties (Pattanaik 2024; Devji 2013). Ethnographic and historical accounts from East Bengal/Sylhet and Pakistan further show how caste, region, and minority politics re-center partitioned belonging and nationalism as hegemonic projects (Choudhury 2022; Asif 2020).

Claims of cartographic exactitude faltered at the precipice of everyday life, as borders that appeared fixed on the map came undone when traced across streets, fields, and kin networks. The Radcliffe boundary cut across infrastructures and social worlds, "paying no heed" to existing conduits of everyday life and thereby generating the uncertainty it purported to resolve (Khan 2007). Building on this, recent historical and political-geographic work argues that mapping practices and boundary commissions were themselves contested techniques, whose authority

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[8] Here I use desire in conversation with feminist and queer work that treats it not as a simple expression of want, but as an orientation and infrastructure of relation: an affective pull that organizes bodies toward and away from worlds, objects, and others (Ahmed 2006; Berlant 2011; Gopinath 2005). Ahmed's notion of "desire lines" names the unofficial paths worn into the ground when people repeatedly deviate from prescribed routes, making orientation itself a record of what is imaginable or allowed. Eve Tuck's account of "desire-based" frameworks shifts attention from cataloguing damage to tracing the complexity, longing, and futurity in people's stories, insisting that desire is both an analytic and an ethical method rather than a naïve optimism (Tuck 2009). Bringing these strands together, I use desire as a reading practice for the archive: following the routes people try to open or protect, the attachments they refuse to relinquish, and the off-map paths—literal and figurative—that their narratives trace across partitioned space.

rested on the labor of inscribing lines onto terrain and reorganizing everyday life around them (Fitzpatrick 2024). Contemporary border ethnography extends this into the present where sovereign (ir)resolutions along India's edges keep the border "alive" through permits, patrols, and improvisations that repeatedly make and unmake the line (Vijayan 2021). At once, theorists of cartographic irresolution[9] trace how representational lines fail to coincide with lived space (A. J. Kabir 2009). These accounts counter the fantasy of territorial and demographic control that never fully holds, continually producing new uncertainties, negotiations, and reconfigurations of who is allowed—or compelled—to desire mobility, stasis, or belonging.

In tracing the effects of infrastructural ruptures, gendered, embodied accounts show how Partition inscribes itself onto bodies and memories. Feminist Partition scholarship redefines the evidentiary field of mapping rupture, shifting attention from official archives and state files to the textures of flesh and feeling, living and remembering. Oral histories foreground memory as non-linear and recursive, such that silences, hesitations, and affect become part of what is said. Urvashi Butalia notes, in Partition testimony "no neat chronologies marked the telling; … the past flowed into the present" (1998, 19). Feminist historians demonstrate how "national honor" becomes fastened to women's bodies through inter-dominion "recovery" operations and legal instruments, making the gendered body a primary site for statecraft and kinship adjudication (Menon and Bhasin 1998). Deepti Misri's construction of Partition in the corporeal register theorizes the body itself as testimony and protest as embodied critique of the status quo, to show how injury and resistance become legible through form (Misri 2014). Aparna Kumar's reading of Zarina's *Dividing Line* (1976) shows how fragment, line, and history are held in tension, turning the map into an affective surface where the border itself becomes unstable—at once document, wound, and

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[9] Kabir uses "cartographic irresolution" to name Kashmir's LOC's built-in indeterminacy - neither a settled international border nor a merely temporary cease-fire line - and shows how that ambiguity seeps into everyday life and cultural representation.

memory (Kumar 2024). Across these texts, history's incursions are tracked at intimate scales—the temporal, the domestic, the bodily—tracing affective geographies that overlay official borders and make palpable what remains in their wake[10]. Boundary-making thus scrambles time and space in ways that are not merely cartographic but also literally embodied.

It is along these orientations that I turn to *desire lines* and to the literary and visual forms that trace them. Borrowing a term from landscape architecture, Sara Ahmed describes "desire lines" as the unofficial paths people carve by repeatedly deviating from the routes they are supposed to follow—marks on the ground left by "everyday comings and goings" that cut across planned walkways (2006, 20–21).

Literary and cinematic scholarship illuminates how the lines drawn during Partition enter affect, lived memory, and narrative form. Short fiction, in particular, serves as a critical counter-archive of desire lines against official state histories. Saadat Hasan Manto's *Cold Meat* and *Mozail* expose the intimate violence, moral ambiguity, and psychological disorientation wrought by freshly imposed borders, but they also map the unruly desires—sexual, ethical, communal—that refuse to align neatly with nationalist scripts (Manto 1997, 2004). Ismat Chughtai's *Roots* similarly explores how displacement penetrates the domestic sphere, disturbing kinship and belonging; in doing so, it tracks competing desires for stability, mobility, and self-definition within the home as a border-saturated space (Chughtai 1998). In the Bengal context, Altaf Fatima's *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?* captures lingering affective ties that defy the finality of Partition's severance, tracing desires that blow back across supposedly closed borders (Fatima 1998). Tarun K. Saint (2010) argues that writers like Manto, Chughtai, and Intizar Husain construct "fictive testimonies"—narrative modes that articulate the unspeakable while remaining grounded in

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[10] Christina Sharpe theorizes "wake work" as a praxis of attending to the ongoing afterlives of slavery—living in, with, and despite the "wake" of the slave ship, of racial terror, and of premature death—rather than treating these violences as past events.

regional specificity. These fictive testimonies can themselves be read as desire lines that follow the messy, often contradictory pulls of memory, trauma, and attachment.

Longer narrative forms, such as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1989) and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002), extend these desire lines across time, addressing Partition's elongated temporalities and its impact on childhood and intergenerational memory. Their child and adolescent protagonists navigate not only the physical borders of postcolonial states but also the affective borders of friendship, love, and betrayal, tracing desires that cross lines of religion, class, and community. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) also render the political rupture of Partition through allegory, magical realism, and personal trauma (Mallot 2012). Magical realism bends linear realism out of shape to follow the irrational, non-linear movement of desire, fantasy, and haunting that exceeds the map's clean divisions. Collectively, these texts function as "maps of memory," foregrounding emotional geographies that exceed official narratives and expose the invisible, intimate borders of identity and loss (Mallot 2012). They chart how desire continuously clings, falters, and redirects itself.

Visual culture, too, renders Partition's borders as felt histories, with loss, belonging, and desire entangled in motion. Bhaskar Sarkar (2009) reads post-1947 cinema as a form of unfinished grief that keeps Partition's wounds open; this unfinishedness is also a persistence of desire—for impossible returns, for justice, for alternative futures—that refuses closure. Contemporary art and film revisit these lines in ways that foreground affective and political yearning. Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi* (2018) reimagines 1971 through espionage and intimacy, staging desire as both patriotic duty and personal attachment, and showing how love and loyalty cut diagonally across national boundaries. Naeem Mohaiemen's *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) explores the long shadows of both 1947 and 1971, tracing the frustrated desires of the Non-Aligned Movement and unrealized

solidarities across the Global South. Subasri Krishnan's *What the Fields Remember* (2015) returns to Assam's 1983 massacres to ask how space itself remembers, following the desire to inscribe, to make legible, marginalized memories onto the landscape. These cultural forms refract Partition into its multiple afterlives, tracing and materializing desire lines that reveal how borders continue to structure what and whom subjects are permitted to want, remember, and claim.

Reading across origin stories, cartographies, embodied testimonies, literature, and visual culture, this scholarship renders partition(s) not as a concluded event but as an ongoing terrain of feelings, gestures, and repetitions that continually remake belonging. The literature attunes me to rupture not only as loss, but as the ground from which desire lines emerge. More specifically, these Partition archives help me think about speaking to absence and about the elongation of relation across time and distance—concepts that orient my reading of the recordings, even as the concrete methods I use to analyze them are drawn from feminist, postcolonial, and oral-history debates about listening and relational ethics. These companion texts[11] shape both my reading and the project's design, so that theory is lived through method and listening is treated as a relational act. In the archive I curate, the "impossible" relation or journey—between Farukh and Habul, between booth speakers and the ones they cannot touch—becomes a desire line toward particular orientations of time, space, and relationality, in which attachments reach across decades, across borders, and across normative genealogies of family and nation.

If the oral-history "inter-view" is a coauthored space where memories and affects are negotiated in real time, it is also a fecund site for tracing how such desires are spoken, withheld,

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[11] "A companion text is a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden. Such texts might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone." (Ahmed 2017, 17)

or rerouted in and through relation. In what follows, I develop what I call desire-based listening[12] as a methodology that holds these insights together, treating listening as a way of following desire lines across ruptured geographies and unequal intimacies.

Guide-lines for Listening

"Send me a pink sunset so I'll know you got my message."

— Booth participant, *Voice Note 0006*

Recent scholarship reframes listening from a neutral faculty to a historically situated, power-laden method. Jennifer Stoever (2016) theorizes the "sonic color line" and the "listening ear," showing how dominant U.S. listening practices have long racialized voices, sounds, and soundscapes—policing what counts as "proper" speech, "noise," or "quiet," and scripting whose feelings are heard as intelligible (and whose are not). Listening thereby becomes an organ of racial discernment and a site of resistance[13] (Hartman 2019). Dylan Robinson (2020) extends this critique through "hungry listening," naming settler colonial orientations that extract Indigenous song, sound, and knowledge, and calling for critical listening positionality attuned to protocol, relation, and sovereignty rather than "inclusionary" capture. Tina Campt (2017) pushes listening beyond the audible by asking us to "listen to images," tracing quiet, haptic, low-frequency registers—vibration, touch, and quotidian refusal—through which Black futurity and refusal become sensible in vernacular archives. Across these projects, listening is not mere reception; it organizes attention, calibrates proximity and distance, redistributes vulnerability and care, and can reproduce

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[12] I borrow the adjective "desire-based" from Eve Tuck's account of "desire-based frameworks" that foreground the complexity of longing, futurity, and resistance rather than only damage (Tuck 2009). I adapt it here into an explicitly sonic register to name my own listening practice; "desire-based listening" is not a pre-existing formal method in the literature but a term I coin for this project.

[13] Sadiya Hartman writes of waywardness as the "practice of possibility in the face of enclosure," (2019) desire-based listening, then, is its aural kin - an experiment in hearing the improvisations of survival and intimacy that refuse closure. It is a method that lingers, that stays with the unfinished and the off-record, tuning the ear not to mastery but to resonance, to the faint hum of relation still being made.

domination or sustain alternative worlds. Together, they open a methodological horizon in which tempo, timbre, texture, and address are evidence of social life.

If listening is a method, then the ear is not disembodied—it listens from somewhere, within a body and a life, never outside the scene it seeks to apprehend. Feminist ethnography has long insisted on this point. Ruth Behar's "vulnerable observer" argues that what happens within the observer must be made known if what has been observed is to be understood; self-exposure should be essential to the argument, not a flourish (1996). Lila Abu-Lughod (1991, 1993) extends this stance through the "feminist halfie," writing *with* rather than *about* and grounding authority in proximate, relational knowledge. Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges" (1988) reframes objectivity as accountable partial vision rather than view-from-nowhere. Kamala Visweswaran (1994) reads feminist ethnography as a practice of fragment, fiction, and self-implication— methods that reveal how power travels through our writing. Kirin Narayan's (1993) question— "How native is a 'native' anthropologist?" —underscores the shifting politics of proximity and identification that tune what we can hear. Dorinne Kondo (1990) shows how ethnographic selves are crafted in and through fieldwork's power/affect entanglements. Sherry Ortner and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995), differently, press an ethical reflexivity that links analysis to responsibility. Taken together, the feminist canon makes a clear methodological claim that because our bodies, histories, and allegiances inflect what we hear, the listening ear must be trained, disclosed, and ethically accountable.

Building on these insights, I propose desire-based listening as a specific mode of embodied listening that anchors this project. In the scenes I analyze, people address others who are distant, absent, or imagined—leaving a message at an exhibit, counting the years to someone, translating a kinship term, narrating a meal cooked for a loved one who is not there. These messages often

travel without an assured response. Yet they are weighted with a desire for recognition, for repair, for continuity, for some sign that the message has landed—whether through direct reply, delayed encounter, or an unexpected coincidence.

Desire-based listening asks: How are speakers working to remain in relation here? What do they do with time, edges, and address to make that possible? What forms of waiting, repetition, or reaching do their messages enact—and what kinds of answers do they anticipate or refuse? This method listens for how structural forces are folded into ordinary acts of remembering and narrating.

To operationalize desire-based listening, I develop an analytic triad—tempo, threshold, tether—derived from continuous re-listening to the corpus and tracing relationships across turns of talk, repairs, and address. This is not an exhaustive schema, nor even the edge of what could be permuted and recombined from the audio; it is an attentive disclosure of how I am listening to the material, and an invitation to acknowledge that a differently oriented ear could produce a different map. The triad is my own analytic distillation of the literatures outlined —on orientation, infrastructure, narrative, and indexicality—rather than a pre-existing schema drawn from any single author.

- Tempo: how speakers keep and repair time.

  Definition: Repairs, numerals, durations, and rhythmic repetition that convert absence into a shared clock (e.g., "since 2020… no, 2022"; counting together; laddered arithmetic).

- Threshold: where speech crosses a line, marks rupture and movement.

  Definition: Physical/affective/bureaucratic edges that activate relation—homes, phones, kitchens, IDs, departures/returns, "here/there."

- Tether: how voices bind and hold relations in place.

  Definition: Vocatives, blessings, sensory anchors, and micro-requests—speech acts that fasten people to one another (e.g., "chachu," "may God keep him," "send me a pink sunset").

These categories are procedural and emerged from repeated passes through the audio, aligning form (repair, address, rhythm) with social ties and infrastructures of separation. They clarify how I am reading the corpus (and its silences) while keeping open the possibility—and the value—of other listenings that would weight the signals differently or surface additional coordinates.

Empirically, the dataset includes four family interview sessions (about three hours) in English and Urdu, and thirty-two booth messages (about fifteen minutes total) in English, Urdu, French, Spanish, and Romanian. I conducted semi-structured remote interviews with two focal narrators linked to my household through longstanding kin and wage ties: my father, Farukh, and our cook, Habul; both gave written consent to be named and to use their voices. The walk-in phone booth invited visitors to leave a self-paced voice message addressed to an absent person; attendees formed a convenience sample of friends, colleagues, and their guests, who consented by recording after reading a posted notice describing recording, research use, and the option to abstain or withdraw.

Because intimate speech gathered in a public exhibit can circulate far beyond a reading room, dissemination risk is minimal but not trivial. Concretely, I removed personal names and uniquely identifying events, scrubbed embedded file metadata, randomized filenames, and redacted segments where combinatorial detail posed a re-identification risk. This approach follows

recent guidance to "slow down"[14] in the digital age, curating for listening and context rather than for frictionless click-through (Sheftel and Zembrzycki 2017, 94–112). To align with feminist and Indigenous digital protocols[15] that foreground community safety and consent, I also adopted controlled online access practices akin to those advocated in digital oral-history and digital humanities toolkits[16], which emphasize audience delimitation and layered permissions (Larson 2013). I implemented tiered access by placing project sites behind password protection and minimizing identifiability within the audio itself[17].

I first transcribed each interview in the language of delivery, retaining code-switching, repairs, vocatives, and audible hesitations. I then translated Urdu into English myself; for French, Spanish, and Romanian booth messages I prepared English translations with manual cross-checks for sense and register. To render cadence on the page, I used ethnopoetic conventions[18], treating the transcript as poetry rather than prose (Tedlock 1975). This approach follows Nyssa Chow's framing of oral history as spontaneous literature, where transcription visually carries orality and preserves the narrators' rhythm, breath, and self-repair as part of meaning, not noise (Chow 2018). In practice, this meant privileging lineation and timing over syntactic smoothness, keeping

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[14] This resonates with Kimberley Christen and Jane Anderson's notion of "slow archives," an ethic of pacing and reflection that resists the extractive speed of digital data practices. Slow archiving emphasizes reciprocity, relational consent, and the temporalities of care over immediacy or total accessibility (Christen and Anderson 2019). In conversations on this project, my longtime mentor Dr. Tamara Beauboeuf described the *Humsafar* website as existing in "hover time" - a suspended temporality that resists acceleration. Thinking with this idea situates the project within broader discussions of how digital design, experience, and archival practice mediate our sense of time, relation, and ethical attention.

[15] For web-based sharing, I follow community-driven digital-ethics frameworks that emphasize consent, access control, and relational design. *Mukurtu* - an open-source content-management system developed with Indigenous communities - models how to build archives with layered permissions and cultural protocols.

[16] Likewise, the Design Justice Network Principles (Costanza-Chock 2020) inform my workflow by foregrounding accessibility, community ownership, and the minimization of harm. Together, these frameworks guide my approach to curating oral histories online in ways that value consent, care, and situated context over openness for its own sake.

[17] Audio recordings and transcripts are maintained in encrypted folders with restricted access. Public dissemination on the website is limited to short, thematically curated excerpts rather than complete sessions, balancing engagement with confidentiality and ethical care. Long-term preservation and repository placement remain under review.

[18] I draw here on Dennis Tedlock's and Jerome Rothenberg's use of "ethnopoetics" to describe transcription practices that render the poetic form of oral performance visible on the page. I use the term for these formatting conventions rather than as an assertion of affiliation with a particular ethnopoetic school (Tedlock 1977, 1983).

repetitions and false starts, and resisting normalization that would erase the sonic labor of memory. Read alongside my desire-based method, these transcripts function as sensorial fields that make speech visible as desire lines on the page, enabling close analysis without severing form from feeling.

Tracing Desire Lines

"There are ways in which you can miss things that you've never known or felt or held in your hands…"

— Booth participant, *Voice Note 0025*

On Tempo: keeping/repairing time

Tempo names the interactional work through which speakers make time together. Time appears as something produced in talk through numerals, tense and aspect, temporal adverbs, age ratios, and, crucially, self-repair. I track this work in two scenes. In the family interview with Farukh, speakers use counting and repair to build a shared past through numbers. In the 0018 booth message to her deceased father, temporal adverbs and age ratios, again shaped by self-repair, negotiate the shock of a "stopped" clock. I use repair in two related senses: in the conversation-analytic sense, self-repair refers to speakers' stopping and restarting an utterance in order to revise wording, numerals, or tense (Jefferson 1974). In this chapter, because temporal relations are themselves constructed through those revisions, I also treat self-repair as a way of repairing time: narrators adjust their talk so that past and present can still be aligned after distance, death, or rupture. Across both scenes, desire-based listening treats these micro-temporal forms as traces of how attachment is kept, and sometimes repaired, in time.

In the family interview, time is assembled stepwise through Farukh's age "ladder":

"I think he is twen … twenties / early twenties / 21 … 22 / I am also around 26 / I'm

26… '84."

The utterance moves from a category estimate ("twenties"), to a narrowed range ("early

twenties"), to specific digits ("21… 22"), and finally to a calendar year ("'84"). Each restart marks

a local self-repair. Rather than treating these repairs as error, I follow Gail Jefferson's account of

self-repair as an interactional resource that organizes talk and solidifies a version of events

(Jefferson 1974). Here, each correction tightens the temporal frame until the year "'84" can stand

as a shared anchor for both interlocutors. The hesitations shrink as the utterance progresses, and

the cadence becomes more even, so that repair and "tightening" are audible as a shift from tentative

recollection to a ratified timeline. Tempo, in this sense, is the sounding out of a mutually

inhabitable past.

Farukh's later arithmetic makes this collaborative construction of time even more explicit:

"You can count the years… eighty four sixteen / and then sixteen / and then three /

almost thirty four years. We are together."

The phrase "you can count" invites the listener into the calculation, framing duration as

something the interlocutors build together rather than as a completed fact. The sequence "eighty

four sixteen / and then sixteen / and then three" has a chant-like quality, where "and then" functions

as a metrical link between each step. The tempo here is not only in the numbers themselves but in

their pacing and repetition. The utterance culminates in "almost thirty four years," which

retrospectively organizes the preceding counts into a single, meaningful span of shared time. In

Ochs and Capps' terms, this is a small narrative achievement: the speaker stitches historical time

("1984") to biographical duration ("almost thirty four years") to produce a coherent temporal

figure for the relationship (Ochs and Capps 2001). Self-repair and counting together thus operate

as techniques for keeping time across separation, making coevalness audible as collaborative numeracy.

In the booth, 0018's recording to her father reworks tempo under conditions of loss:

> "It's been a long time. We never talk. I already forgot your voice and oh we're just
>
> nine years apart now. I'm 30 and you are… you're gonna be forever 39." (0018)

The opening pair, "It's been a long time. We never talk," combines the perfect aspect ("has been") with negation ("never") to frame the relationship as a stretch of extended, silent duration. Time here is felt as absence. The next clause, "we're just nine years apart now," re-computes the age difference in the present tense. The ratio "nine years apart" becomes a living comparison that changes as the speaker ages. The adverb "now" carries this recalculation; and marks a present in which the age gap has narrowed and has become newly salient.

The final turn, "I'm 30 and you are… you're gonna be forever 39," introduces self-repair into the age ratio. The first version, "you are," grammatically places the father inside ongoing, present time. The repair, "you're gonna be forever 39," interrupts that grammar and replaces it with a frozen age that matches the fact of his death. Following Jefferson, the self-repair here is not a mere correction of wording but an interactional move that ratifies a different timeline, one in which the addressee's clock has stopped while the speaker's continues (Jefferson 1974). The repair has ethical weight. It aligns the tense and aspect of the utterance with the reality of loss, even as it keeps the father grammatically active in the future-oriented "gonna be."

0018's message also exemplifies what Ochs and Capps describe as multiple "temporalities of experience" coexisting within personal narrative (Ochs and Capps 2001). "It's been a long time" voices an iterative temporality of ongoing longing. The implied death at age 39 introduces a punctual temporal point that fixes a single, irreversible event. The "now" of "we're just nine years

apart now" marks a narrative present in which the speaker reviews and recalibrates this ratio. The self-repair that freezes the father at 39 negotiates among these temporalities in real time, adjusting the grammar of the utterance so that the relationship can continue to be spoken about, even as one party is no longer aging.

Across these scenes, desire-based listening treats tempo as the site where attachment becomes measurable. Rather than discarding hesitations, counts, and restarts as noise, it listens to age ladders, arithmetic sequences, temporal adverbs, and repairs as methods by which speakers keep and repair time with others—that is, as revisions that adjust not only the wording of a memory but the very timelines (before/after, still/anymore, forever) that make a shared chronology possible. For Farukh, tempo resides in the way numerals and repairs gradually settle on a shared "'84" and "almost thirty four years." For 0018, tempo resides in re-stated ratios and corrected tenses that manage the disjuncture between moving and stopped clocks. To listen in a desire-based way is to hear these micro-tempo shifts as the sound of wanting to remain in time together, even across distance and death.

On Threshold: where speech crosses lines

Thresholds name spatial and infrastructural edges where the footing of relationships shifts. Rather than treating kitchens, stairwells, and phone booths as neutral backdrops for feeling, I read them as material scenes where attachments are oriented, constrained, and re-routed. Following Sara Ahmed, thresholds are not simply doorways but points where bodies are directed along some lines and not others, such that certain relations come into view while others recede (Ahmed 2006, 14–16). Star and Ruhleder's account of infrastructure as relational and most visible at its edges and breakdowns further clarifies how fuel lines, stoves, and architectural remains shape what kinds of care can be enacted "here" (Star and Ruhleder 1996, 112–118).

In the family interviews, the kitchen is the primary threshold. Habul locates his present cooking life by repeatedly pointing to a constrained "here": "یہاں لکڑی کا چولہا ہے، یہاں گیس نہیں ہے" ("here there is a wood stove; there is no gas here"). The deictic "yahaan" ("here") works in tandem with the negative "gas nahi hai" to mark this location as structurally limited. Aspect and frequency terms such as "ایک دو دفعہ" ("once or twice") and "کبھی کبھار" ("sometimes") further characterize cooking as episodic: "دفعہ بریانی بنائی... کبھی کبھار اپنے لیے کھانے کے لیے بنا لیتا ہوں ایک دو" ("I made biryani once or twice… sometimes I make food for myself"). What infrastructure affords here is not daily provisioning but occasional, effortful acts, often keyed to others' requests. Star and Ruhleder's emphasis on breakdowns makes this scene legible where the absence of gas is not an abstract lack but an infrastructural edge at which routine practices of care falter and must be renegotiated (Star and Ruhleder 1996, 113–115).

Farukh's remembered Karachi kitchen provides a counterpoint organized by availability rather than lack. His menu of "lemon chicken, daal-chawal, tinday, fish head curry" presupposes a gas-equipped interior where such dishes could circulate as habitual rather than exceptional. The list presents the kitchen as a stable node of domestic infrastructure, a place where heat, ingredients, and time were reliably on tap. The contrast between Farukh's enumerative ease and Habul's hedged "once or twice" does not simply mark temporal differences between past and present but indexes two distinct infrastructural orientations. In Karachi, gas lines and employer kitchens direct his skill toward others' households; in Feni, a wood stove and the absence of gas reorient his cooking to the margins of the conjugal home, where he cooks "sometimes… for myself." The threshold here is at the level of material lines that decide where his labor "counts" as care and where it is framed as supplementary.

The booth recordings relocate threshold work to explicitly architectural imaginaries. In one message, a speaker addresses the dead by rebuilding a vanished childhood house in dream:

"Although it's gone now, I still have the same dream: you're going up those same storeys, the same stairs are in front of you, and you're still living in that same *haveli* where you grew up." (0019)

Lexical repetition structures the scene: "same dream / same storeys / same stairs / same *haveli*." Each "same" reinstates a spatial element, so that the dream becomes a rhythmic reconstruction of lost architecture. Tense and aspect do the remaining work. The house "is gone now," but "you're going up" and "you're still living" keep the addressee grammatically active within that space. Present progressive ("you're going up") and present progressive ("you're still living") locate the deceased in an ongoing, repeatable ascent. Earlier in the same recording, the deictic "that courtyard where you're sitting" and references to "that photo" extend the deictic field. Language keeps pointing to a courtyard, a set of stairs, a *haveli* that no longer exists in the present, making the dream itself into a threshold space where two incompatible spatial orders coexist: the absence of the building in waking life and its intactness in sleep.

Ahmed's language of orientation helps clarify what is at stake here. The dream does not simply "represent" the old *haveli* as a memory image. It orients the dreamer's body along specific lines: up the stairs, through the courtyard, toward the figure who is "still living" there (Ahmed 2006, 14–16). The repeated stairs and storeys are directional cues that rehearse the motion required to reach the dead. The dream functions as an architectural corridor, a threshold that permits approach without collapsing the fact that the house "is gone now." The booth itself, as a built installation, amplifies this logic. It offers a small, enclosed space from which speakers can address

distant or absent others, framing the act of speaking as a crossing from one side of a partition to another.

Taken together, these scenes show threshold as a spatial and infrastructural concept rather than a purely metaphorical one. Gas lines, wood stoves, doors, staircases, and phone booths are the edges along which relations are oriented and reoriented. Desire-based listening attends to the deictics, repetitions, and aspectual choices that reveal how speakers inhabit those edges: how they learn to cook "here," without gas; how they continue to climb "the same stairs" toward a house that only exists in dream; and how, in both cases, architecture and infrastructure quietly organize the conditions under which attachment can still be practiced.

On Tether: address across distance

Tethers are made by address through vocatives, kin titles, pet names, second-person pronouns, and sensorial "proofs of presence" which describe a relationship. They bring one into being and keep it active across separation. Following Asif Agha, I treat person-deictic forms ("you," kin terms, summons) as elements in an "indexical order" that acquire recognizable social value through repeated circulation, so that ways of speaking come to enregister ways of being with another (Agha 2007). J. L. Austin's account of performative utterances clarifies how certain formulations do relational work in the saying itself rather than reporting on a prior state of affairs (Austin 1962). Taken together, these lenses allow me to hear address as a technique for tethering people to one another in the absence of physical co-presence.

In the family interviews, this tethering work is clearest in Habul's sliding vocatives and renamings. Near the end of his carefully dated account of migration, he concludes:

"… دو ہزار بائیس کی بارہ، بارہ کو، تیسرے مہینے کی بارہ تاریخ کو آیا ہوں۔ سمجھا چچو؟ … تو پاپا تو …"

"میرے لئے پاپا ہی ہے… بیچارہ میرے لئے بہت کچھ کیا

("… on the 12th of the third month of 2022, I came. Samjha chachu? [Do you understand, uncle?] … So papa is, for me, still papa… the poor guy has done a lot for me.")

The address "samjha chachu?" inserts the interviewer into an "uncle" slot in real time. Grammatically, "chachu" is a vocative. Interactionally, it ratifies a position in which the interviewer can be treated as kin rather than as a neutral researcher. The form belongs to a recognizable register of intimate family talk ("chachu," "beta," "papa") that listeners will recognize as indexing warmth and asymmetrical care, not an employer–employee or stranger relation. In Agha's terms, this is enregisterment—a way of talking that has climbed the indexical order so that it reliably signals a particular social configuration when used (Agha 2007).

Within this, the formulation "papa to mere liye papa hi hai" ("papa is, for me, still papa") performs a second tethering move. The employer is categorized, in the very act of speaking, as father. The sentence does not merely comment on an already established kin tie. It is a performative categorization in Austin's sense, a declaration that changes the social status of the relationship by saying it (Austin 1962). That performative is reinforced by the evaluative "bechara" ("poor guy"), which places Habul Chacha in a position of concern and gratitude rather than dependence alone. Together, "chachu" and "papa is my papa" install the interviewer and the employer inside a kinship grid whose terms ("uncle," "papa," "beta") are themselves the medium of tethering. Desire-based listening here means treating these vocatives and kin terms as the primary site where family is being made.

The booth recordings transpose this tethering by address into a context of death and mourning. In one message, 0022 speaks to her deceased friend:

"Hi, ███ This is ███████," you died 11 months ago, yesterday… every time I brew a cup of tea, you're there. And every time I need to close the book and reach for a bookmark, you're there." (0022)

The opening formula, "Hi, ███ This is ███████," reproduces the basic scaffolding of a phone call, even though the addressee cannot respond. The second-person "you" and first-name vocative position ratifies the speaker in a recognizably conversational frame. Within that frame, the iterative constructions "every time I brew a cup of tea" and "every time I… reach for a bookmark" install her friend as grammatically and sensorially present in recurrent routines. The repeated clause "you're there… you're there" anchors the addressee to hot tea, paper, and the hand that reaches, so that everyday acts become occasions of co-presence.

Agha's notion of metapragmatic routines is helpful here. The pairing of "every time I brew / reach" with "you're there" forms a pattern of talk that indexes "ongoing attachment" as such, a repeatable script for keeping someone with you in ordinary life (Agha 2007). At the scale of the whole message, these repetitions build what Agha calls text-level indexicality—tea, bookmark, and "you" coalesce into a stable way of being with her friend that listeners can recognize and potentially emulate. Austin's framework makes visible the performative force of these lines. "Hi, ███████ and "every time I brew… you're there" do not simply narrate missing someone. They establish a scene in which her deceased friend is entitled to be addressed and to occupy the second-person slot, despite being dead. The utterances bring a relation into the present by virtue of being spoken, and they prescribe a future in which the same tethering act will be redone "every time" the kettle boils or the book is closed (Austin 1962).

These examples show that tethers in this archive are not abstract feelings of connection but practical, linguistic arrangements of pronouns, names, kin terms, and indexical routines. Address

across distance works by repeatedly slotting the absent into the position of "you" in specific, material scenes. Desire-based listening to tether, then, involves close attention to those scenes and to the forms of address that make attachment liveable when bodies are apart or gone.

Taken together, tempo, threshold, and tether are the desire lines of this archive. In each scene, speakers walk and re-walk improvised paths toward someone who is not, or not fully, available to them. That all three booth recordings are addressed to the dead is intentional. 0018's father, 0019's grandparent, and 0022's friend cannot answer back; the line is, in one sense, permanently severed. Yet the messages do not simply narrate that break but instead recalculate to make the addressee moving in grammar even when they are stopped in time. The interview as an encounter created through the booth, becomes the architecture through which the impossibility of contact and the persistence of address are held together.

The family interviews inhabit a parallel condition of near-impossibility. Habul and Farukh are both alive, but their ability to share space is constrained by the current political entanglements between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Borders, labor contracts, and visa regimes interrupt "being together" in any ordinary sense. What desire-based listening makes audible is that, in the face of these constraints, speakers still work to keep one another in view. Where physical routes are blocked or withdrawn, language draws alternate lines.

In this sense, the transcripts do not simply document damage—death, distance, state violence—but track the small, repeated routes by which people keep wanting and being wanted. Desire lines name the paths worn into grass when people refuse the official walkway. The desire lines I trace here are linguistic corridors that cut across geopolitical and mortal closures. Concluding this section, then, I understand desire-based listening as a method for mapping how

attachments persist when contact is structurally impossible by following the lines along which the distant and the dead are still carefully, stubbornly kept alive in speech.

Lines We Cannot Cross

"I don't think I've ever said this out loud before…"

— Booth participant, Voice Note 0013

Through this work, migrant memory appears not as a series of backward-facing glances but as a forward-facing orientation—a way of living now that keeps open the possibility of being together otherwise. Desire-based listening makes those orientations thinkable as method, not only as feeling, it cannot guarantee that such messages will find their destination, if there is any such destination at all. What it can do is honor the work of sending and narrating them—attend to the tempos, thresholds, and tethers by which people make absence inhabitable—and, in doing so, keep open the possibility that our own listening might become, however slightly, a line of relation in return.

As with any method, desire-based listening has edges and limits, some of these are empirical. The corpus is small and specific: four family interview sessions and thirty-two booth messages within a particular diasporic, linguistic, and institutional milieu. The relations I trace—wage-kinship in a Karachi household, post-Partition Bengali–Pakistani ties, graduate-student internationalisms in New York—cannot stand in for all migrant or Partitioned experiences. They are situated examples that open a conceptual frame.

Other limits are ethical and political. A desire-based approach risks romanticizing attachment or underplaying harm, especially in scenes where care and domination are entwined. Wage-kinship, for instance, is not an uncomplicated good; it can obscure exploitation even as it softens some of its edges. Some booth recordings hint at unsafe or unsanctioned relations that

cannot be named outright. Listening for desire must therefore be paired with attention to power and to the violences that shape what can be said safely at all. This thesis has gestured toward those tensions more than it has fully resolved them.

There are also methodological frictions. Desire-based listening is intensive and time-consuming. It requires repeated re-listening, close transcription, and a willingness to dwell in ambiguity and half-said things. In institutional settings that value scale, standardization, or quick turnaround, this orientation may seem impractical. Yet I would suggest that the slowness is not a flaw but part of the method's ethical claim: some forms of relation cannot be responsibly apprehended at speed. This slowing down, however, has its own costs: attention to the grain of a few stories can push other relations into the background—fleeting encounters that never become full narratives, broader patterns across many households or neighborhoods, or structural dynamics that only become visible at a different scale. Rather than denying this, desire-based listening treats such receding as a constitutive limit of the method, asking the researcher to remain accountable for what is brought into focus and what is left at the edges.

Archive and Online Afterlives

"Oh, see you when I see you, Dad."

— Booth participant, Voice Note 0018

The project now lives on in two small websites that continue to stage the work of speaking and listening: the Invite booth site and the Humsafar site. Both are built as instruments—things to be handled, tried, and used. They extend the project's central question—how to remain in relation across distance and rupture—into a digital environment in which new listeners and speakers can keep adding lines of contact.

The Humsafar website functions as an archive organized through four verbs: hear, see, read, invite[19]. In place of a stable catalog or comprehensive finding aid, navigation is routed through these verbs, so that visitors move by following a sensory thread—voice, room tone, the grain of a low-resolution photograph—rather than surveying a complete record. In Brent Hayes Edwards's terms, the site cultivates a "taste of the archive" (2012), organizing access around desire, delay, and partial contact rather than transparency or mastery[20]. The visual and sonic design—typography, page layout, hover and click sounds, the pacing of audio cues—thus operates as a narrative form in its own right. Humsafar extends oral history into a small, web-based environment where listening becomes a bodily practice: one must click, wait, adjust volume, replay, and move between hearing, seeing, and reading. In doing so, the site treats these digital traces not as settled documents but as ongoing encounters, in which visitors quite literally practice the partial, desiring relation to the archive that the project theorizes.

On the Invite site, visitors encounter a dial pad. Pressing a number triggers a ring tone; after a short delay, a booth recording from the exhibit "picks up" on the other side. The interface presents the exhibit messages not as stable objects to be selected and played in sequence but as calls that are still in flight. Listening itself becomes interactive and performative: one chooses a line, waits through the ring, and sits with whatever arrives. The slight lag and built-in randomness recall the physical phone booth, where you could not know who had spoken before you or who might listen after you. The site also invites visitors to leave new messages—selecting their own

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[19] Cvetkovich develops "archives of feeling" to name collections—of ephemera, performances, oral histories, activist videos—that hold the affective residues of trauma and political struggle rather than simply documenting events. She argues that such archives are often informal, intimate, and community-based, and that they reframe evidence as something felt and lived rather than only seen or read.

[20] Edwards uses the figure of taste to capture the haptic, temporal, and erotic dimensions of archival work: the thrill of discovery, the frustration of gaps, and the way desire is organized by delays, misfires, and partial glimpses. Working through a set of photographs from the Paris police archives, he shows how contact with archival objects is always mediated and incomplete—structured as much by what cannot be seen or known as by what appears in the file.

titles, images, and transcriptions—so that the collection remains dialogic, accretive, and deliberately unfinished. What is being archived, then, is not only audio but the ongoing desire to address someone who cannot be physically reached.

Finally, following Saidiya Hartman (2019), I understand these websites as "wayward" or fugitive archives, more committed to ongoing experiment than to closure. Hartman describes her own work as assembling an "album" that breaks open archival documents so they might yield a richer picture of ordinary lives and their "beautiful experiments" with freedom[21]. The Invite and Humsafar sites similarly refuse to resolve into a stable monument. They remain small, revisable infrastructures through which oral histories continue to circulate, gather responses, and change shape. Oral history here becomes a living form whose afterlives are not only academic but social— open to being heard, answered, and re-routed by future listeners.

Coda

This thesis began with a hesitation: "I don't know how to start this." It has moved through homes in Karachi and Feni, through a small phone booth in New York, through the long shadows of rupture, and through the minor acoustics of numerals, vocatives, and breaths. Along the way, desire-based listening has traced how people improvise paths toward one another when official routes falter—how they invent shared clocks, cross risky thresholds, and send messages that may or may not arrive.

To conclude is not to close those paths, but to acknowledge that they extend beyond the page. The recordings continue to exist on digital sites, in encrypted folders, in password-protected clips, and most sharply, in the muscle memory of those who spoke into the receiver. The relations

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[21] In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman describes her book as a "fugitive text" and an "album … an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise," built by elaborating, transposing, and breaking open state and social-scientific archives to recover the "beautiful experiments" of young Black women at the turn of the twentieth century (Hartman 2019, 7–8).

they enact continue to shift - some will deepen, some will wane, some will be re-read by new

listeners whose orientations do not match my own.

The desire lines I have mapped here are therefore

partial,

contingent,

and revisable,

like all maps.

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