



speaking in silences

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Abstract I should say, abstractly, that this is about racism, if only I knew what races I should tattoo on my transnational post-colonial narcissistic subaltern brown body that so enjoys being white. I should rather say this is about silences invoked in my body during moments of misconstrued identity, silences between belonging and betrayal, if only I did not love dancing in the tensions between boring and exotic. I am saying much now, but I said little then, while so much was said by me in me for me. So all I have for you here are maddening silences.

Introduction (getting to know (me) beyond 100 words)

I should say this is about racism, if only I knew what conveniently available hyphenated races I should tattoo on my transnational/transreligious post-colonial (but all too willingly colonized) stubbornly narcissistic subversive subaltern body. I should say this is about racism, if only I did not suspect that a brown foreign man speaking about race in America today is expected to say certain things about racism. I should say this is about racism, if only I could perform an elegantly colonizing socioeconohistophilosophideologically constructed academic knowledge about racism that goes beyond the expected discourses of victim-speaking-out.

I should rather say something about subaltern performance of race that nonchalantly intertwines my brown subaltern body with more respected scholarly bodies, if only I knew Gayatri and Antonio on the kind of first-name¹ terms that I know Claudio, who now has a respectable scholarly body of his own that I do not know if I know as well or as little as I know him. I should, for example, say that this is about white hegemony, if only I did not so enjoy being white when I speak. I should say this is about 'them,' if only I owned a 'them' that let me belong to 'them' without whispering in my ear: "you were never really one of 'us,' you always wanted to be one of 'them,' you are even married to one of 'them,' so why do you pretend to defend us?"

I should rather say this is about belonging and betrayal and *being*² in between the

two, but my addiction to dynamic irreverence keeps me dancing around, always somewhere in between the boring you and your favorite exotic other. Now I become close to you, but when you think I am just as **boring** as you I dance

maddeningly away, warning you that I am
 unknowably **exotic**.

Now I speak like you,
 but when you give me a space
 for the subaltern to speak
 before the professor speaks,
 I speak in exotic accents to make a performance point that,
 unintentionally,
 shames the professor's bad English in front of undergraduate students.
 (Sorry Claudio...)

I know you do not like to dance, but
 thank you for showing me how.)

I should rather say this is about moments of misconstruction of identity and ethnicity, about silences invoked in my body rather than evoked by my body, if only I did not know how obnoxiously loud my inner silences really are in the daily tensions between boring and exotic. I should say much about those silent moments, but I said very little then, while so much was said by me in me for me. So all I have for you here are maddening silences.

Introduction (take 2 / double take)

Mike: Did you grow up here?

Bob: Were you born here?

Ahmed: You born here?

Janet: Are you from around here? Really?

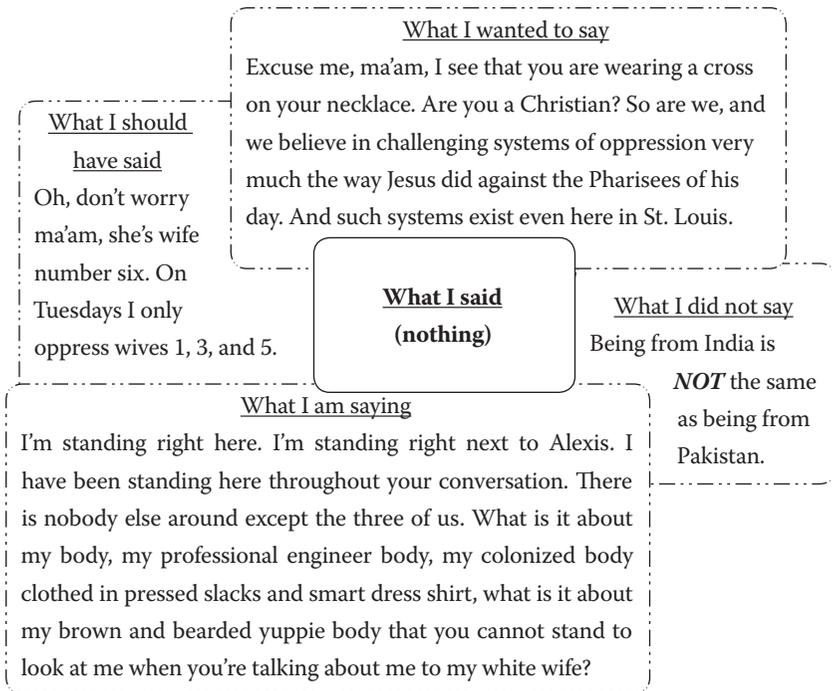
Bill: Did you ... are you ... that is, you didn't grow up here, right?

Tom: Did your parents raise you here?

The Minivan Woman in St. Louis (2006)

Summer evening sun. Soft shadows. Empty parking lot of an office building in suburban St. Louis. Alexis is about to get into our rental car and I'm holding the door open for her. A minivan pulls up alongside, and a middle-aged white woman leans out the driver's window...

- Woman: Are you *married* to that man?
 Alexis: Yes, why?
 Woman: Isn't he from Pakistan or some place like that?
 Alexis: Uhm, he's from India actually.
 Woman: It's the same thing... you are in for a world of trouble!
 Alexis: Why?
 Woman: Well... they *oppress* women where he comes from!



Pastoral Relations (2003)

Three people relaxing around a kitchen table one Sunday afternoon after church. My pastor's wife has fed us a simple family meal fit for a feast. I am a single but content Christian man loved by my pastor and his family to whom I have become like a son ...

- Pastor's wife: So, Hari, I hear you've found a new friend?
 Me: Yes! Her name is Erica.
 Pastor's wife: That's wonderful! Where is she from?

- Me: New Hampshire, I think ...
- Pastor: That reminds me, honey, do you remember Ayesha?
- Pastor's wife: Yes! She was so sweet!
- Pastor: I saw Ayesha in New Hampshire last weekend.
- Pastor's wife: Oh!! ... Oh? Oh! ... For Hari?
- Pastor: Yes! Hari, you should meet Ayesha. She's from Pakistan, like you!
- Me: Uhm ... really?
- Pastor: Yes, and she's so sweet, and beautiful, and really loves God. She's a little older than you, but Pakistani women age so well!

What I should have said

After knowing me for three years, two Christmases, serving in ministry together, having me over for dinner countless times, and welcoming me as almost a son into your family, after hearing me tell my Hindu-to-Christian conversion story numerous times to others in your living room, in your dining room, from your colonizing pulpit, you still think I'm from Pakistan?

What I wanted to say

Yum, I love well-aged Pakistani women. Especially 1969 — I hear that is a good vintage for Pakistani women.

**What I said
(nothing)**

What I dared not say

No thanks, I prefer younger white American women. Like your daughter. But not your daughter, of course. She's too white. And too young. But mostly too white.

What I am saying

Why do you keep mentioning Pakistani or Arab women when I talk about white American dates? Do you think I would not date well with white American women? Or is it because, no matter how hard I try to colonize myself into performing a blonde-loving red-blooded American Christian male identity for you, I will still never be quite as eligible as the white all-American guitar-playing godly Christian bachelors in your church? Is it because I am a traitorous convert and you'd rather pair me up with another such traitor instead of exposing godly white middle-class American women to the risk of my world?

Introduction

Me: No. I was born in India but I left when I was seven and I grew up in the Middle East. I have been living in Massachusetts for twelve winters.

I remember (1999—2000)

mem•ber³:

noun

- 1 an individual belonging to a group such as a society or team.
- 2 a constituent piece of a complex structure.
- 3 (archaic) a part or organ of the body, esp. a limb. (also **male member**) the penis.

re•mem•ber:

verb

have in or be able to bring to one's mind an awareness of (someone or something that one has seen, known, or experienced in the past).

[with infinitive] do something that one has undertaken to do or that is necessary or advisable.

[with clause] used to emphasize the importance of what is asserted.

bear (someone) in mind by making them a gift or making provision for them.

(**remember someone to**) convey greetings from one person to (another).

pray for the success or well-being of.

(**remember oneself**) recover one's manners after a lapse.

ORIGIN: Middle English : from Old French *remembrer*, from late Latin *rememorari* 'call to mind,' from *re-* (expressing intensive force) + Latin *memor* 'mindful.'

{{+}}

expressing {{-}} (Claudio, see, I am *doing* and *being* a metaphor

intensive {{?}} moaning and groaning and pushing against

force {{!}} this relentlessly bracketing academic wall.)

{{ }}

I remember dating a young white undergraduate from South Carolina, long before I met Alexis, when I was in graduate school in Boston.

I remember her white middle-aged middle-class single mother complaining to me about how "those lazy blacks are always saying they are so tired!"

- I remember* the mother working long hours as a nurse in Charleston, and every evening she had fresh stories about her black colleagues.
- I remember* her **telling** stories that only got worse as she began **drinking** her fatigue away over the course of the night.
- I remember* watching TV with the mother one lazy summer evening in Charleston as the news reported an armed robbery at a local convenience store.
- I remember* the mother **saying**, “Oh just watch now. They’re gonna show the suspect and it’ll be one of them!”
- I re-member* both mother and daughter **crowing** in delight when the video clip of the arrested criminal began **revealing** him to, indeed, be “one of them.”
- I re-member* wondering why the white mother felt comfortable **sharing** her racism with me, the brown foreign guy **fucking** her racist white daughter at the new millennium.
- I remember* **saying** nothing.

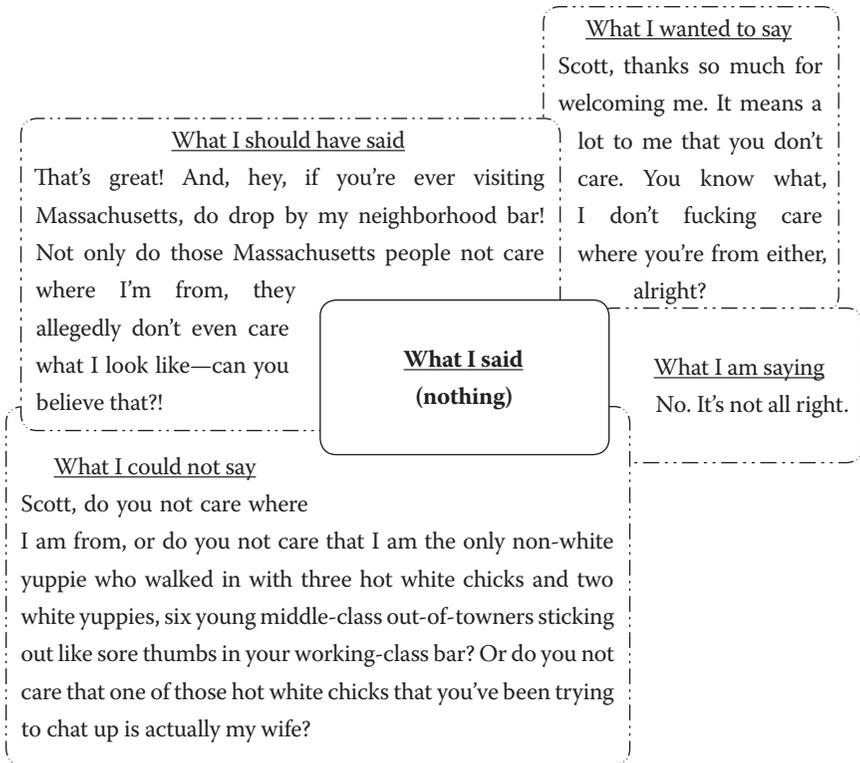
I don’t care. Alright? (2008)

It’s a Thursday night. Late. A smoky bar in downtown Scranton, Pennsylvania. It’s not very crowded in here. A few pool tables, a dartboard. Some regulars playing pool want us to join them, but we out-of-town visitors seem more interested in the dartboard...

- Scott: Hey, listen, I just wanna tell you something.
- Me: Yeah, sure man, what’s up?
- Scott: I jus’ wanna tell ya, I’ve been everywhere, alright? I’ve been to Germany, and Hong Kong, and uhh ... and ... to Serbia, alright? And, I just want you to know, I’ve never had a problem, alright?
- Me: Sure, man.
- Scott: No, you donnunderstan’, I mean, we got along great, yaknowhaddimean? It doesn’t matter to me, you know? Look, just look into my eyes, right—hey, look into my eyes, I wanna tell you something—I don’t care where you come from, alright? You could be from fucking anywhere, alright? I don’t have a problem with that. We’re just here hanging out at this bar and having fun and playing pool, alright?

(a pause)

Me: Dude. I'm from Massachusetts.
 Scott: I don't care! I don't fucking care! You could be from fucking Washington, D.C., alright? You could be right from the President's fucking ASS, alright? I don't care! We're just here to hang out and have some fun and play some pool, alright?

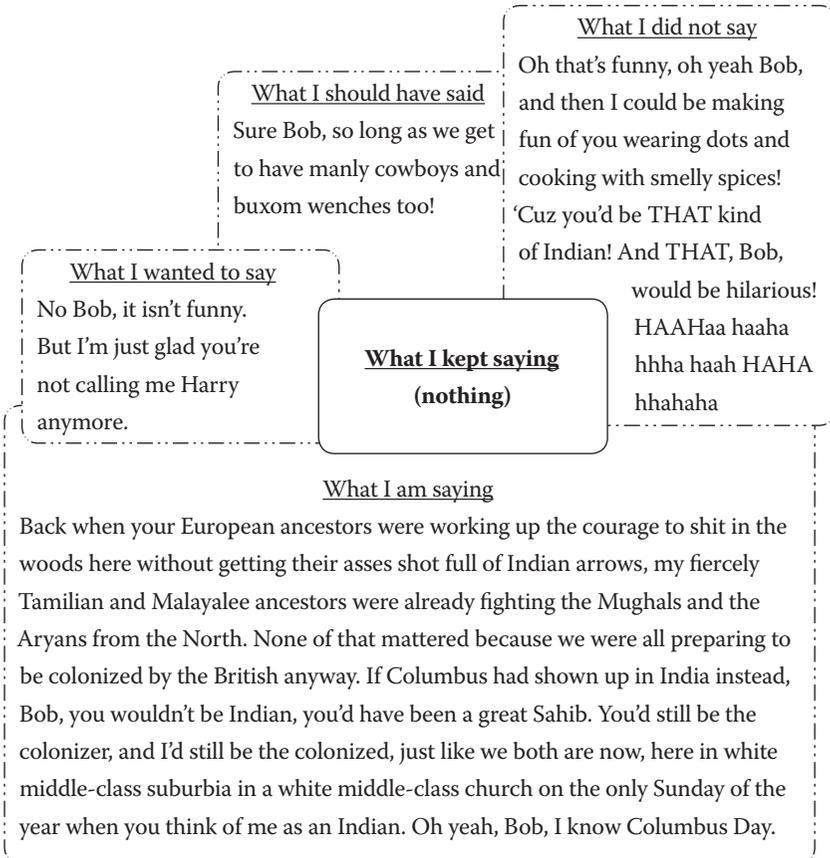


Columbus Day (2004)

After church services one Sunday, as I'm cleaning up trash during my walk-through of the middle-school auditorium and chatting with various congregants, here come Bob and Marge...

Bob: Har-ri!
 Me: Hey Bob!
 Bob: Hey you know what day it is tomorrow, right?

- Me: Oh, right, yeah Bob—Columbus Day.
- Bob: You know Columbus Day, right?
- Me: Yeah Bob.
- Bob: You know what I always say?
- Me: What do you say, Bob? [*Having heard this for four straight years from Bob.*]
- Bob: What I say is, if Columbus had taken a left instead of a right, WE would be Indians and YOU would be American! HAAAHAA HAAHAHAAAHA HAAHA!
- Me: Ha ha Bob.
- Bob: HAAHAAA, I know, isn't that funny? I say that every Columbus Day, it's a hoot to think about, isn't it? Hey Marge, c'mere, I was just telling Har-ri that joke, and he's Indian! Isn't that funny?! HAHAAHAAHahaahaa...



Dirty Indian (1987, 1990, 1991, 2006)

Yemen, circa 1987...

- Kid 1: Hey! Hey Hindi!
 Me: (silent)
 Kid 1: Hey, Hindi wulla Bakistani?!
 Me: Hindi.
 Kid 1: Hindi! Amitabh Bachchan! INDIA!
 Me: (silent)

What I did not know to say

You want to know if I'm Muslim, that's why you're asking me if I'm Indian (Hindi) or Pakistani. If I'm Pakistani I am probably Muslim, but now that you know I'm Indian, you know that I am probably an idol-worshipping Hindu, and you're right. I'm just eleven years old, but I'm the kind of Hindu foreigner that your Imam told you in mosque this week to cleanse out of your Muslim country. What would you say if I had replied "Pakistani"? Would you invite me to mosque to pray with you? What do you know about my South Indian Tamilian family's struggle against Hindi, the language of North Indian oppression? What do you know of the dominance of Amitabh Bachchan and liberal Bollywood over my conservative South?

Yemen, circa 1990...

Kid 2: Shall I tell you a joke?

Me: Yes?

Kid 2: There was this Indian husband and wife at a party. Somebody asked the wife, "how old are you?" She said, "Oh, I am dirty, and my husband is dirty too!" Thirty, and thirty-two!

Me: (silent)

Kid 3: Dirty Indians.

Me: (silent)

What I could not say

Do you not already have a dagger in your belt and a gun in your bag? A gun that your military father gave you in the eighth grade when all my worker father could give me then was a weak hope that intelligence is mightier than might? Are you not already a pure Muslim assured of salvation and me a filthy Hindu who constantly faces the threat of deportation (or worse) because of my smuggled idols? *Am I not already a powerless foreigner at your mercy in your country, in your town, in your school, learning your language and your slang and your stories and your jokes?* Are you not already three years older than me, taller than me, bigger than me, even though we are in the same class? Have you not already established that your beefy muscles are more powerful than my vegetarian scrawniness? Have you not already kicked me enough times over the years to establish that I will never fight back, that I cannot fight back, that I do not know how to fight back, that I am more likely to cry than resist? And yet do I pose that much of a threat to you that you have to colonize yourself, that you went to the trouble of learning enough English to tell me a British joke?

Yemen, circa 1991...

Kid 4 (*in Arabic*): Hey, you Hindi!

Me: (silent)

Kid 4 (*in Arabic*): I own your father! He works for my father!

Me: (silent)

Kid 4 (*in Arabic*): I can have him fired! I can make you poor!

Me: (silent)

Kid 4 (*in Arabic*): I can send you and your whole family back to India!

Me: (silent)

Kid 4 (*in Arabic*): By Allah, you shitty Indians get the fuck out of our country!

My dad (*in Tamil*): Get in the car son! It's raining, let's go.

Cairo, Egypt, circa 2006...

Hawker: Hey! Hey Hindi!

Me: (silent)

Hawker: Hey, Hindi wulla Bakistani?!

Me: (silent)

Hawker: Hindi! Amitabh Bachchan! INDIA!

Me: Masri? Omar Sharif!! EGYPT!

My dad (*in Tamil*): Get Alexis in the car, son, let's go.

Introduction

Joe: *Cuz your English is really good.*

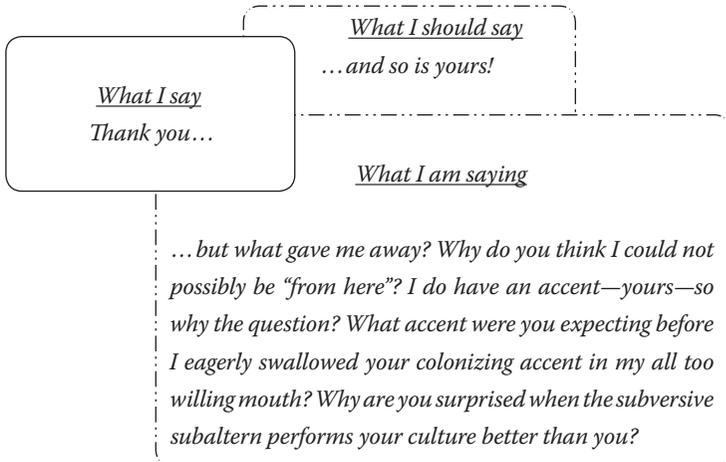
Gary: *Your English is so well-spoken.*

Scott: *Man, your English is perfect!*

Chang: *Ah, that is why your English is better than mine.*

John: *Wow, you don't even have an accent!*

Melissa: *Well your English is excellent.*



Acknowledgments

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Reference

Moreira, Claudio. (2008). Life in So Many Acts. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 590–612.

Notes

1. Respectively: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Antonio Gramsci, and Claudio Moreira.
2. The emphasis on *-ing* is a reference to Claudio Moreira’s words from his *Life in So Many Acts*, p. 609: “...I did so many shit jobs in my life, but for me to live in academia, I need to believe, I need to love And Trust What I Am Doing And Being. I am obsessed with *-ING*.” My continual learning of performance autoethnography would not have begun without conversations with Claudio about becoming *beings*. Thank you, Claudio, for your *obsessing* humanity.
3. Definitions for “member” and “remember” are from the *New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition*, as published on Apple’s Mac OS X operating system’s “Dictionary” application, version 2.0.2 (51.4), © 2005–2007, Apple Inc.

About the Author

hari stephen kumar retired from a life in the engineering sciences at 32 to begin a life in the humanities and the liberal arts. He is a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he lives decolonizing narratives in-between performance studies, ethnography, rhetoric and cultural studies. He married in Massachusetts in 2005, left South India when he was seven, spent his childhood in North Yemen, and changed his name in 2006. He has been living/enjoying Massachusetts winters since 1997.