

*Toward a New Object, Method, and Practice*

THINKING

WITH AN

ACCENT

EDITED BY

POOJA RANGAN · AKSHYA SAXENA

RAGINI THAROOR SRINIVASAN · PAVITRA SUNDAR

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# Thinking with an Accent

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## FOREWORD

### *Accent Matters*

John Baugh

One of my first childhood memories was of my mother changing her speech during telephone conversations. As I grew older, it became fairly easy to tell if Mom was talking to someone black or someone white, based on her speech alone.

—JOHN BAUGH, *BLACK STREET SPEECH* (1983)

Voice recognition is not unique to the human species. Many living creatures on land and in the sea communicate through recognizable vocalizations. Whales sing songs with unique regional accents, and penguins have been shown to identify their mates through mutual voice recognition. It should therefore come as no surprise that people interpret the voices they hear in various ways.

Each chapter in this volume allows readers to reinterpret, redefine, and reformulate human invocations of accent—in speech, reading, writing, and signing—as well as the corresponding perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations that are triggered by accentual variability. Moreover, the vivid attestations of accent depicted herein represent the fullest range of contexts in which accents occur. Readers of this highly creative book will be treated to novel ways of contemplating and defining the term *accent*, which is less well understood than it should be. While the accentual foci described throughout this book are human-centric, the importance of accent—the ability to hear, listen, and interpret the sounds of many different species—exceeds humanity in important ways that biological evolution has made possible.

The differential studies and the facts they share provide empirical foundations for thinking about accents in ways that have been previously unattested. As such, the authors collectively challenge more narrow, purely linguistic, orthodoxies that have heretofore been the phonetic and phonological bases through which accents—when spoken—were routinely defined. *Thinking with an Accent* introduces accentual definitions and diagnostics with conceptual elasticity that is inherently intersectional, thereby exposing limitations of prior research and, at the

same time, exploring the ways in which accentual perceptions, classifications, and interpretations impact the lives of language users.

The contextual relevance of accent research is brought to the fore in each article, explicitly by some authors, less so by others. For example, accentual dimensions of sexuality are deftly described in terms of queer love in one instance, and critical conversation assessment of characterizations of gay-sounding speech in film, on another. Accentual invocation, depiction, and perception are carefully described and analyzed, as are the people and circumstances where accent matters.

The editors of this volume share a foundational edict for this book, highlighting the primacy of accent in everyday life. It is partially for this reason that I open this dialogue with one of my earliest childhood memories. I am the son of well-educated African American parents, both of whom hold doctoral degrees, and my parents were keenly aware of pervasive linguistic stereotypes about United States slave descendants of African origin. They were skillful style shifters—so much so that I soon learned the accentual difference that my mother adopted for family and friends (which sounded distinctively Black), as well as her linguistic demeanor when speaking to her colleagues (fellow teachers) or white people our family might meet outside the cultural cocoon of our predominantly lower-working-class African American neighborhood.

Depending upon your own life experience, you too are likely to recall circumstances where accent mattered. If you are someone living in the United States who is not a native speaker of English, you will know well that Americans react variously to the voices of those who have learned English as a secondary language. If you are deaf, or have profound hearing loss, you may decry the fact that I have thus far devoted primary attention to hearing populations. Moreover, if you are a fluent user of sign language, you know well that the accentual differences that are associated with speech find analogous accentual differences among sign language users in their respective language communities.

Awareness of accentual differences, whether in speech or sign language, often occurs early in life. The ability to identify those who sound like “us” (or sign like “us”), in contrast to others within the same language community whose accents differ from “us,” may be more or less significant depending upon the circumstances under which these language differences are detected and perpetuated. Under the best of circumstances, these accentual differences—while noteworthy—may be socially benign, having little impact on those who may differ in ways that do not evoke divisive interpersonal reactions. By contrast, some accentual differences expose social, political, regional, religious, educational, and economic differences that can become contentious, or worse, depending upon the sociohistorical circumstances impacting the groups in question, and their residential proximity.

It is not mere hyperbole to acknowledge that linguistic differences are readily found among combatants throughout history. The original definition of *shibboleth*

owes its existence to matters of linguistic discrimination, based on accentual differences in speech production, with fatal consequences for more than forty-two thousand Gileadites who were slain at the river Jordan because their pronunciation began with /sIb-/ rather than /ʃIb-/. Many of my fellow African Americans know well that Black speech has long been characterized based on differences between the speech of inner-city residents, in contrast to rural Black speakers who are often described as “talking country.” While African American accentual differences in either urban or rural communities contrast sharply with the mortal consequences imposed on Gileadites who said “s(h)ibboleth,” both cases reflect differences among groups that—in terms of visual appearance—are often so similar that speech alone serves as the barometer by which one group of speakers can be distinguished from another.

The intersectionality of which I speak exceeds behavior or the confines of social science orthodoxy to include observations about technological advances, including text messages and wiretaps, and captures accentual nuance that is embedded within diverse modalities of human expression. Readers will also discover that the scientific merits of this book are often shared as stories or parables, where characters are depicted in circumstances where accentual matters are either paramount or subdued. The pliable nature of accent—at different times, in different places, across various languages, employing multifarious modalities—represents the strength and innovative manifestations of *Thinking with an Accent*. As such, the editors and authors examine and reexamine the significance of accentual details in ways that are conceptually transformative. In so doing, the methodological liberation that is on display throughout this book is likely to change the ways in which accent research will be conducted henceforth.





## ON EDITORSHIP AND AUTHORSHIP

We conceived of and edited this book together, and we have chosen to list editorship and authorship of the introduction alphabetically. This order represents neither a hierarchy nor a division of labor.

This statement is modeled on the note “On Authorship” by Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Hefernan in *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (2021).



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*Thinking with an Accent* is a labor of love that has taken form despite, and in many ways because of, catastrophe. Our collaboration began at the MLA conference in 2018, which very few people attended because of a massive winter storm. Akshya had organized the conference session “Sound and Postcoloniality,” which she had to join via Skype from a Greyhound station in Pittsburgh. Pooja was one of the speakers, and Pavitra and Ragini were two of just a handful of people in attendance in the vast conference hall. As we wrapped our tongues and jackets around a new phrase that weekend—“bomb cyclone”—we also began wrapping our heads around the shared contours of our individual questions about sound and post-coloniality, literature and film, identity and world. A keyword emerged: *accent*. Inspired by our conversation, we made plans to continue it.

That conversation blossomed into a conference, a series of interlinked undergraduate and graduate seminars, an anthology, and a global network of collaborators. Playfully and seriously, we dubbed ourselves the Accent Research Collaborative and set to work crafting a research agenda over the course of many Skype and Zoom meetings and shared Google documents. The University of Arizona generously funded a four-day workshop in Tucson in 2019, during which we generated a shared understanding of the extant literature related to accent, a plan for a conference, and a syllabus for a course on accent that we have each since taught at our respective or former institutions (Akshya at Vanderbilt University, Pavitra at Hamilton College, Pooja at Amherst College, and Ragini at the University of Arizona). Beth Stahmer and Jane Zavisca of Arizona’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute helped us to hone our research into a proposal for a conference that was eventually funded by Amherst College. We are grateful to the dean’s office at Amherst College and the Amherst English Department’s Language



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None of us knew what to expect when we went virtual with the Thinking with an Accent conference, which was originally scheduled to take place at Amherst College in May 2020. To our immense delight, about three hundred people logged in for the conference from as far afield as Australia, India, and the United Kingdom, and to this day we receive emails from academics and nonacademics alike who are interested in pursuing the dialogue we began then. Many of them have become trusted interlocutors, and we have continued reading, listening, and thinking together at various panels and workshops since. Special thanks to John Baugh and Rey Chow, who were so gracious as to mold their keynote speeches to the constraints of our virtual conference. Thank you also to the students enrolled in the first iteration of the accent seminar at Amherst, Arizona, and Hamilton in spring 2020. Not only did they assist with conference planning (at Amherst), Amherst and Hamilton students gamely agreed to present their work in progress despite all the "scary professors" in the audience (who in fact offered them a generous reception)!

Indeed, we ourselves have been the beneficiaries of kindness and intellectual generosity at every stage of our project. As we expanded our scope, we reached out to colleagues outside our usual disciplinary circuits. To our fabulous contributors, *thank you* for inspiring us with your ideas and for your willingness to engage with ours! We are so grateful for all you gave to this project in the midst of a global pandemic. We also owe a round of thanks to those who graciously declined our invitations to contribute but pointed us to others and widened our bibliographies and networks. Jean Ma offered sage advice at a crucial moment in the life of this book, helping us deepen our understanding of the epistemological terrain we are traversing as well as our position in it. We thank her as well as Jim Buhler for welcoming our project into the series they co-edit, California Studies in Music, Sound, and Media. Raina Polivka has been a staunch supporter of this project from the very beginning, cheering us on with warmth and encouragement at every stage. We are grateful to her and to Madison Wetzell at the University of California Press for helping us to realize this book in physical form as well as in glorious open access. Thanks to Michael Curtin for sharing his experience and advice on creative commons licenses. Sameer Farooq's image *Affections*—from his and Jared Stanley's installation *Terma, Images from the Ear or Groin or Somewhere*—inspired us with its evocation of sound waves, and missed and mixed messages. We are grateful to Sameer for permission to use it on our cover. Sarah Osment helped us finesse our manuscript with her expert editorial eye and created an index par excellence. Our gratitude to Amherst College, Hamilton College, the University of Arizona, and

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As editors, the four of us have forged a tight bond. Co-editing an anthology and writing together, we have learned, is an exercise in trust. But trust, it turns out, is not the only outcome of exchanging thousands of text messages, emails, drafts, comments, and Zoom meetings; friendship is as well. From “accented” jumpsuits to academic advice, from parental woes to pet tales, we have shared much and held each other through myriad transitions over the last four years. We have learned so much from each other that it is sometimes hard to tell where one person’s idea ends and another’s begins. We have come to be comfortable with this intellectual porosity, grateful for the reminder to question the neoliberal market of ideas even as we navigate it. Perhaps most of all, we created a space for ourselves as four South Asian women in the U.S. academy that is both rare and hard-fought, one that is as intellectually sharp and generative as it is nourishing, inspiring, and supportive.



# Introduction

## *Thinking with an Accent*

Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Pavitra Sundar

### THREE SCENES OF ACCENT

I. Driving in southern Arizona, with Google Maps on high volume, you hear the racial stratification of the foothills before you reach the entrance to the gated community: “Calle sin Controversia.” “Corta dei Fiori.” “Camino sin Puente.” Do the residents here know how to pronounce these street names, intended by some zealous neighborhood planner to signal regional authenticity? Siri can’t say them, at least not in her default, American accent. She can “voice” Australian, British, Indian, Irish, or South African English, she can “be” male or female, but you realize, playing around with these settings, that it is harder to change *your* settings. You’re always going to listen for what Siri doesn’t say, for the “j” that doesn’t massage her double “ll,” for the mis-stressed syllable.

II. “Hello, is this Somalia Gelatin?” Philadelphia-based filmmaker Sonali Gulati was accustomed to hearing her name butchered at the coffee shop, at the doctor’s office, and by the salesperson phoning predictably at dinnertime. One day she received a call from a telemarketer who called herself “Nancy Smith” but then, improbably, pronounced her name perfectly. She was actually Nalini and lived in Gulati’s hometown, New Delhi. Bay Area-based novelist Bharati Mukherjee had similar experiences of surprise telephonic recognition. She felt deep kinship with these customer service representatives, whom she heard as fellow Indians attempting to accommodate American listeners, as she had, in her writing, accommodated American readers.<sup>1</sup> With the advent of business process outsourcing (BPO) in the early 2000s, many South Asians in America began to have aural encounters with agents calling from India, who knew perfectly well how to say their names and who reset the terms of the call from the first word, “Hallo.”

III. Matt Maxey performs American Sign Language (ASL) translations of popular songs on his YouTube channel, Deafinitely Dope. Maxey is a Deaf Black man.

If you peruse the comments posted after his rendition of DMX's "How's It Goin' Down," you notice a certain rhetorical pattern amid the praise: visitors to the site repeatedly liken Maxey's signing style to gang signs. One commenter writes, "I'm surprised gangs aren't recruiting you just for your signing skills." Black ASL, an accented mode of manual-visual communication, is often described as "thuggish" or "street."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as one Twitter user noted in a much-retweeted thread during the Black Lives Matter protests of June 2020, Deaf Black people are routinely violently targeted by police who misrecognize their gestures as gang signs.<sup>3</sup>

The event of accent happens through us, by us, and between us, but how do we describe what accents are, and what they do?<sup>4</sup> In the above examples, accents set scenes, direct attention, and hail audiences. An accent emerges initially as a lingual trace or evidence of difference, but then persists as the registration of the receiver's situated knowledges and convictions. A key feature of languaging in the era of neoliberal capital, accent has never been more audible, visible, and perceptible. Precisely because of that, it has never been so vigilantly policed. Accent discrimination is rampant and well documented, in and beyond the U.S. context from which the above examples are drawn.<sup>5</sup> Accent reduction programs tacitly accept and reinforce racism by framing the accented voice as deficient.<sup>6</sup> Accented speakers are not protected equally or consistently under the law.<sup>7</sup> On TV and film screens, they are turned into humorous punchlines, rendered as noisemakers as opposed to signifying meaning-making subjects.<sup>8</sup> At the level of literary representation, accents are typographically marked, serving to racialize speakers and turn language into "eye dialect."<sup>9</sup>

Ethnic and racialized subjects are thus called out of the woodwork through the accenting of their accents. They are made to lubricate the wheels of capitalism even as aspects of their own identities, itineraries, and biographies are smudged out, sanitized, or amplified in the process.<sup>10</sup> And yet, there is a paucity of received analytical vocabulary for dealing with the manner in which accent, that slippery entity, precedes and informs their—our—every communicative exchange. For instance, the call center is by now the most familiar example of a global industry devoted to accent modification, commodification, taxonomization, and standardization. Scholarship to date has tended to focus on the accented performance of the call center agent and on accent as a site of discrimination, to the exclusion of the accented perception of the listener.<sup>11</sup>

Perception is central to communication. Learning to speak English at age six, poet Li-Young Lee was hyperconscious of how his accent was heard by "the dominant population of American English speakers." Lee writes, "Each foreigner's spoken English, determined by a mother tongue, each person's noise, fell on a coloring ear, which bent the listener's eye and, consequently, the speaker's countenance; it was a kind of narrowing, and unconscious on the part of the listener, who listens in judgment, judging the speaker even before the meaning or its soundness were attended to."<sup>12</sup> Lee's description, inverting as it does conventional

understandings of the functions of ear and eye, captures the workings of accent not only across senses but as that which crosses senses, which gives skin “tones,” to use Rey Chow’s term.<sup>13</sup> The ear does not simply receive sound; it is a “coloring ear” that shades and racially encodes the voice. Importantly, too, Lee hones in on accent as that which inflects encounters “even before” meaning, irrespective of the speaker’s identity, and prior to the act of interpretation.

When we focus on accent almost exclusively as an index of identity, we leave unresolved questions of accent’s non-indexicality. That’s where this volume steps in. We enter an emerging interdisciplinary conversation on accent by pursuing accent’s elusiveness and susceptibility to misapprehension. Indeed, it is because of the ways that accent has been enlisted in the assignment and disciplining of identities that we need to reorient our thinking on—and, as we elaborate in the following pages, thinking *with*—the subject. Accent, we propose, is the capacity of listeners to imagine vocalic bodies that exceed the control and the calculations of the speaker. Equally, accent is the capacity of communicating bodies to upend what beholders and listeners (think they) see, hear, or know. What we hear as the accented voice of the other—which is also to say, as a sign of alterity—emerges in perception. If accent indexes anything, it is the eminently embodied character of any communicative encounter, crisscrossed as it is by libidinal and economic power relations.

#### REFRAMING ACCENT

Colloquially, an accent is a phonological index of one’s identity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines accent as “a way of pronouncing a language that is distinctive to a country, area, social class, or individual.”<sup>14</sup> In linguist Rosina Lippi-Green’s much-cited definition, accent is “a way of speaking,” tethered, of course, to the body that speaks.<sup>15</sup> Accent names a geographically and socially grounded manner of speaking while acting as a set of punctuation marks. Accent, in other words, is supposed to signify to some “us” some “them,” to some “me” some “you.”

Definitions like these miss the polysemic and inherently comparative character of accent. Accent does more than denote; it calls out modes of relation, of speaking and listening, laying bare the very logics of representation, identity, and interpretation. Vocal and visual stresses are typically understood to distinguish particular bodies when, in fact, difference only emerges through comparison. An accent is an accent precisely because it stands apart from what surrounds it.<sup>16</sup> By the same token, its relations to those surrounds are often misrecognized. Accents can signal many things at once. They can be global and local; racialized, gendered, ethnic, and national; cosmopolitan and provincial; unconscious and performative; visual, audial, gestural, and intertextual—and these are not mutually exclusive. Accents prompt questions that are not just about sound. They also raise questions about power, hierarchy, and difference. (“[A]n accent isn’t sound,”

writes poet Kaveh Akbar. “Only those to whom it seems alien/would flatten an accent to sound.”<sup>17</sup>

Accent is a universal category masquerading as particular; it is an ineluctable feature of collective expression trafficked as a sign of individual identitarian difference. The concept eludes definition because it can only work if and when it is falsely restricted to some group of people (“She has an accent but I do not”; “We can’t understand them because of their accent”; “He can lose his accent if he tries hard enough”). All acts of speaking, listening, writing, and reading, for that matter, are couched in “paralanguage,” ensconced in a “sonic envelope,” dressed and marked.<sup>18</sup> And yet, only some are thought to have the excess of an accent. The “call center accent” that has become the lingua franca of global corporate communications—a “neutral” or “global” accent that merges and thereby sidesteps provincial pronunciations and phrases associated with one of any number of Englishes—is an ideological invention.<sup>19</sup> To borrow a phrase from Mladen Dolar, a neutral accent is a “vanishing mediator,” one that effaces its own sonic materiality.<sup>20</sup> A mutant descendant of Queen’s English, the neutral accent has become a neoliberal proxy for racism. It is a particular masquerading as a universal—a mechanism for redrawing false binaries (people with accents/people without accents) based on the sounds of ethnic, regional, and/or class difference.

Accent also is (and feels) inadequate and deceptive as a marker of identity because it doesn’t really *tell* us anything—or rather, it doesn’t say anything precise about the speaker’s social location or locution. Consider this excerpt from artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s 2012 audio documentary *The Freedom of Speech Itself*, a convoluted answer by a London-based migrant to the simple question, “Where are you from?”

So, where are you from?

What do you mean, I’m from Hackney.

Yeah Hackney, but . . . you’re Danish, aren’t you?

No, I’m Palestinian. Well, I grew up in Denmark.

I see, so you’re from where in Palestine?

I’m not from Palestine.

So, where are you from?

Well, we’re Palestinians from a refugee camp in Lebanon, Al-Hilweh.

Ah ok, so you were born in Lebanon?

No, I was born in Dubai.

Ok. So how come you have an American accent?

What do you mean?

Well, you have this like American twang to your English.

Oh it's just . . . you know . . . Eddie Murphy and uh, Stallone and all these guys y'know?

So you're from Hollywood?

Nah, nah, I'm from Hackney.<sup>21</sup>

Accent, Abu Hamdan proposes, is less “an immediately distinguishable sound that avows its unshakable roots neatly within the confines of a nation-state” than “a biography of migration,” an irregular and itinerant concoction of contagiously accumulated voices.<sup>22</sup> Writing on the accented ventriloquy of the plurilingual post-colonial subject, Divya Victor similarly describes speech in terms of “an imagined geography”: “My tongue is read in public by strangers who run their hands over it as if it were a subway map. . . . I allow these hands to search inside my mouth—thrum at my uvula, prod at my molars, press against the spongy fungiform—an oral tourism.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, if accent is a “tell” then the information it betrays is less about the individual speaker or listener than about the conditions of possibility of their colloquy. The particular itineraries and experiences that shape our tongues—and ears—have everything to do with long, often conflict-ridden histories of “oral tourism,” of language, identity, and community.

A common complaint is that some accents are “hard to hear,” whether because they grate on our ears or because they render what is spoken unintelligible.<sup>24</sup> The casting of some accents as “difficult” or “weird” or “musical,” we insist, requires a host of a priori assumptions and practices. As a marker of difference, accent relies upon listeners, readers, and recipients to bring their situated and provisional knowledges—ways of speaking and listening and reading derived from their histories—to the act of perception. Accent emerges in relations of listening, what Lisbeth Lipari calls “interlistening.” Lipari writes, “To study dialogue as interlistening is to see how every speaking is at the same time a listening (and vice versa) and how even innermost thoughts require words from outside.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, what accent tells “us” is actually “us.” It calls into crisis not only modes of collective meaning making, but the very grounds on which we stage and sound and read collectivity.

Accent emerges in the pages that follow as an object untethered to the subjects it names, as experience with and without history, as practice and horizon, as epistemology, device, *techne*, and site. What is at stake in our effort at respecification is moving from a conceptualization of accent as defect or stigma to accent as skill, currency, or enactment of expertise; from accent as uttered, spoken, and read to accent as *also* received, interpreted, and perceived; and from accent as racializing and disciplining identitarian marker to accent as desire, aspiration, or



mode of affinity. In addition to elaborating what accent *is*, the chapters that follow investigate what accent *does*. Suspending at the outset any expectation that accent means this or that, we pursue the projects of meaning making that are trafficked in its name.

#### LINES OF INFLUENCE: ACCENTED GENEALOGIES

Heir to three decades of scholarship on accent, this volume follows its routes across a vast and generatively amorphous terrain. The conceptual “fuzziness” (to use Lippi-Green’s word) of the term *accent* has made it too restless and labile for any one disciplinary confine; that said, its fuzziness is its strength.<sup>26</sup> As an object, as a method, and as a practice, accent makes pathways between the humanities and social sciences. It finds lines of flight from sociology, linguistics, and legal studies, as well as through the domains of music, media, literature, performance, protest, and artificial intelligence. Accent has been, we argue, immanent as a concern in this range of fields—but it has not yet been excavated and identified as such.

There are numerous threads to pull on in narrating the emergence of what we in this volume identify as interdisciplinary accent studies. For instance, accent has been a keyword in legal studies and critical race theory for almost three decades. Mari Matsuda’s 1991 work on accent and antidiscrimination law set the terms of later inquiry.<sup>27</sup> Another vital thread takes us through the disciplines of linguistics, sociolinguistics, educational linguistics, and linguistic anthropology. Lippi-Green’s 1997 *English with an Accent* is a landmark sociolinguistic study of how accents come to be embedded in rites of institution; it consolidates research across domains including language policy, education, and law. Lippi-Green’s influence is felt in many of the chapters of this book, as is that of John Baugh, who coined the term “linguistic profiling” in 2003 in his groundbreaking research on accent discrimination in domains including healthcare access and housing rights.<sup>28</sup> It is no coincidence that Baugh’s elaboration of linguistic profiling appeared first in a volume titled *Black Linguistics*. It should be underscored that research on accent as a phonological event has to date primarily been undertaken in fields that are already by definition interdisciplinary and, as in the case of Black linguistics, adjacent to (if not directly situated in) ethnic studies, area studies, and other identity studies fields. We also build on the work of the field-clearing 2016 volume *Raciolinguistics*, which brings together scholars from across the above disciplines to theorize ideologies that turn speech and language into a proxy for race, and vice versa. The volume demonstrates that language studies, exemplified by the research of editors H. Samy Alim, John R. Rickford, and Arnetta F. Ball, each of whom is cross-appointed in numerous departments, has always already been interdisciplinary. The 2018 volume *Feeling It: Language, Race, and Affect in Latinx Youth Learning* similarly marshals the interdisciplinary knowledges of editors Mary Bucholtz, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee, who hold appointments

in linguistics, Chicano studies, and education, respectively. To cite another recent example, Jonathan Rosa works at the interstices of anthropology, education, and linguistics; his 2019 *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* draws on all of these fields for its theorization of Latinidad as in part a product of raciolinguistic ideologies.

Theorizing race and language as co-constituted and co-naturalized categories (constructs that appear so self-evident and imbricated as to stand in for each other), raciolinguistics is a critical springboard for this book. Raciolinguistic concepts such as dialect, register, style, and code-switching keep our attention on dominant language ideologies that constitute the racialized and classed hierarchies of regional dialects and ethnic speech varieties within the nation and its diasporas. Accent, however, calls up myriad other identity categories as well, such as citizenship, gender, disability, and sexuality. These constructs intersect with race in many ways and in many contexts, but not others. Our contributors are alert to how accentual differences are perceived as charged indexes of unbelonging through the filters not only of racism and regionalism but also of ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. Accent as a critical category thus allows us to deal with sonic differences that register foreignness on scales other than, or in addition to, those prioritized in U.S.-centric linguistic frameworks. Accent also calls attention to the materiality of language itself—its status as something heard, seen, sung, spoken.<sup>29</sup> Accent takes form in (and permeates) not just speech but also text exchanges, cinematic and literary forms, and voice recognition and transcription algorithms.<sup>30</sup> Accent does not demarcate mappable social or regional locations; rather, accented speech and listening muddy and proliferate geopolitical space. Tracing its itineraries, we find, demands not a cartographic approach to language and place but a critical geographer's attention to the social production of space: we do not ask *what* accent is but rather *how, why, when, and where* accents are mediated, and with *what effects*. How, for instance, have interactions among forensic language analysts, immigration agencies, and undocumented asylum seekers enabled modern European states to designate the lingual space of citizenship, and to thereby identify those who sound “illegal”? What role have Hollywood and Disney tropes played in commodifying the acquired speech habits widely recognized as “gay sounding” (“nasal,” “witty,” “aristocratic,” “upspeak”) as an attribute of white, metropolitan, upper-class homosexuals? Multiplying thus the places where we might locate accent, as well as the interpretive registers that it awakens and activates, we expand and complicate our object of study. In pursuing accent across media formations and geopolitical conjunctures, we leverage our collective interdisciplinary expertise to rearticulate the relationship between accent and identity.

Our interest in materiality and media leads us to draw a second key thread through the fields of sound studies and auditory cultural studies, broadly defined. Here, we refer to the work of scholars variously trained and situated in media archaeology, comparative literature, communication, music, ethnomusicology,

science and technology studies, disability studies, and visual culture who theorize sounding and listening, and orality and aurality as mediatized phenomena. In monographs as diverse as Mara Mills's forthcoming *On the Phone: Hearing Loss and Communication*, Tina Campt's 2017 *Listening to Images*, and Julie Beth Napolin's 2020 *The Fact of Resonance*, sonic concepts drive computational, art historical, and literary inquiry, amplifying the convergences among the visual, the aural, the written, and the haptic. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's 2016 *The Sonic Color Line* draws on a multimedia archive, ranging from opera to early sound cinema, to the novel and radio, for its theorization of "the cultural politics of listening" in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Likewise, Ana María Ochoa Gautier's 2014 *Aurality* mines philological and ethnographic documents from nineteenth-century Colombia to demonstrate how conceptions of personhood and national belonging turned on questions of language, literacy, and voice.

Ochoa Gautier is among a host of influential theorists—from Derrida to Dolar to Nina Sun Eidsheim, a contributor to this volume—who query the assumption that voice is "stable and knowable."<sup>31</sup> In her 2019 *The Race of Sound*, Eidsheim writes, "We assume that when we ask the acousmatic question ["Who is speaking?"] we will learn something about an individual. We assume that when we ask the acousmatic question we inquire about the essential nature of a person."<sup>32</sup> As Eidsheim and others do for voice, we respecify accent as a quantity that is valuable precisely because it is unable to "yield precise answers." Part of our task, to this end, has been to unstitch accent from sound, since, we argue, accents are neither necessarily nor exclusively conveyed aurally. At the same time, we build on the work of sound studies scholars who have already defamiliarized what sound is and does, including from where and to whom it might issue.

A third genealogical thread wends its way through cinema and media scholarship emerging from postcolonial studies and U.S. ethnic studies, related interdisciplinary in which the editors of this volume are trained. For example, Shilpa Dave's 2013 *Indian Accents* is a work of South Asian American media studies that theorizes the cultural construction of "brown voice" in relation to histories of brownface performance in U.S. film and television. Hamid Naficy's 2001 *An Accented Cinema* identifies accent as a style that indexes exilic, diasporic, and ethnic filmmakers' dislocation in film. John Mowitt's 2005 *Retakes: Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages* argues that in Hollywood films, a foreign character's accent—itsself encoded in "incorrect" English—suggests illiteracy and constructs the idea of foreignness. Rey Chow, a contributor to this volume, elaborates the postcolonial contours of "linguaging" across medial forms as wide-ranging as film, radio, theater, literature, and photography; her 2014 *Not Like a Native Speaker* has been influential in and beyond the field.

Chow's work is part of a broader conversation in cultural studies about the social character of language. We trace a fourth line of influence through this work and its more medium-specific iterations in literary studies. If what accent tells us

is us—how we interpret the accent—then, what does attention to accent in literature reveal? Literary scholars have used the idea of accent to trace and mark difference, broadly construed across identitarian categories. Some are concerned straightforwardly with a text's representation of accents, and some enlist accent as a metaphor in service of the theorization of concepts like plurality, multiculturalism, and the global. At the same time, accent has also named the excess of language as it materializes in interlingual and intralingual translation.<sup>33</sup> Accent and other phonic aspects of language appear in discussions of vernacular aesthetics and speech but are often subsumed within categories of code-switching and dialect.

In the same way, accent has indexed social particularity for philosophers thinking about language. For instance, for Valentin Voloshinov, language has psychic, physiological, and physical dimensions.<sup>34</sup> Language as a system emerges in the normativity of individual speech. It is in acknowledging the physiological making of language before it becomes a linguistic object that Voloshinov acknowledges something like a phonic accent. But an individual phonic accent can only be registered as a social accent when it slips away before language can be made an object.

Across these disparate threads, accent appears as an index of and metaphor for difference to then map political notions of otherness. Postcolonial literary writers have long thematized accent as an index of colonialism and the enabling condition of literary reimagination. For instance, Tsitsi Dangarembga examines accent as part of the psychosocial effects of colonialism in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), as her characters turn progressively aphasic. Following Frantz Fanon, who in *Black Skin, White Masks* offered a critical reflection on language acquisition and racialization, Dangarembga reads accentedness as the debilitation of the gendered and raced body in colonial modernity. By contrast, the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa turns to accent to negotiate the now well-known language debate between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe at the 1962 Makerere Conference. In this context, Saro-Wiwa, without a significant literary tradition to fall back on in his language of Khana, was reluctant to embellish his English prose with African proverbs and figures in a way that would "museumize" English. Instead, in *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), he chooses a spoken, *accented* (not only linguistically hybrid) register of a made-up Nigerian pidgin to imagine a new African Anglophone literature. He turns to the moment of lingual enunciation to imagine a rival politics of the English language in postcolonial Nigeria and Anglophone Africa.

Scholarship on Anglophone literatures—by, for example, Tejumola Olaniyan, Emily Apter, Lital Levy, Vicente Rafael, and Rebecca Walkowitz—reflects both this longstanding postcolonial investment in hybridity and language politics, and broader public and cross-disciplinary conversations on identitarian difference.<sup>35</sup> But accent, even when named, as in Joshua Miller's 2011 *Accented America* and Steven Yao's 2010 *Foreign Accents*, has generally not itself been theorized as distinct from and complicating literary voice.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, this volume thinks accent both medially and linguistically in order to first interrogate what accent names. Very often accent emerges in literary texts or criticism as a concept-metaphor that is intended to speak for itself rather than as something lived, embodied, and mediated that must be made to speak. The chapters that follow interrogate the politics of accentedness and the recognizability of accent. We move away from accent as an index of identity, whether of authors, characters, or languages, and approach accent more dialogically. We identify accentedness as something more and other than a reference to nonstandard English or multilingual texts, or a mark of deviation from what is considered the standard. In many places, we dislodge its indexicality of difference. Moreover, we pay attention to practices of reading, writing, and teaching in order to do so rather than emphasizing the self-evident accentedness of the text.

Charting the intellectual landscape of accent studies in this manner clarifies that although scholars of language, literature, media, and culture have implicitly theorized accent, they—we—have not consistently or explicitly recognized it as a key term. The work of this volume is thus both genealogical and archeological. We seek to dis/locate the adjacency—as well as the excess—of accented modes of perception, cognition, and articulation in relation to a range of neologisms invented by colleagues in sound studies and literary studies to name the social, psychic, and medial registers of auditory discernment, such as the audit (Mowitt, *Sounds*), the sonic color line (Stoever), the xenophone (Chow), the aural imaginary (Kheshti), acousmatic blackness (Obadike), sonic blackness (Eidsheim), schizophonic mimesis (Feld), and sonic monstrosity (Rafael). We recognize that the many dimensions of accent may not always be aligned. The accent we search for may not live where we expect it to; it may not be an accent at all. Beginning from this more complex understanding of accent keeps alive accent's multiplicity and, it follows, its ability to confound static notions of identity.

#### THINKING WITH AN ACCENT—OR ACCENT AS METHOD AND COUNTEREPISTEMOLOGY

How can we conceptualize accent outside of all the ways in which it has been defined, circumscribed, confined, and pinned down? What does accent do, know, tell us? How and when does it happen? And furthermore, what might accent yet become? In pursuing these questions, we approach accent as what contributor Ani Maitra might call a meaning-laden supplement that moves across media forms and disciplinary formations; a practice of sounding, performing, sensing, and interpreting lingual difference; and a method of situated and embodied inquiry. We name this approach “thinking with an accent.” The unexpected placement of the verb and preposition is deliberate. Having been accused of, even admired for, speaking with an accent, we set out to *think* with accent instead. To think *with* something that has been simultaneously undervalued and overvalued—not just

against it or beyond it, not just about it—is a decolonial attitude we have learned from Gloria Anzaldúa, Walter D. Mignolo, and Trinh T. Minh-ha.<sup>37</sup> To think with *an* accent is to acknowledge that there are many accents, and thus many ways of thinking-with. Further, we aim to examine how the very forms and modalities of interdisciplinary scholarship are themselves accented. That is to say, how is our thinking itself emergent from, and through, epistemologies of accent? Indeed, the point of our inquiry is not to pin accent down, but rather to name the discursive stakes of those fields of thought that have crystallized around its very evanescence.

Accent is produced as much in the movement of tongues, mouths, and hands as in the embodied acts of reading, watching, performing, and listening. We therefore propose thinking with an accent as a mode of *accented perception*, understood as a practice that is multimodal, multisensorial, and thoroughly mediated.<sup>38</sup> Accented perception tunes into what Stoeber terms the “listening ear,” which deems only some speech as accented and some speakers as aural/oral foreigners, and calls its bluff.<sup>39</sup> It points up the fact that accent is not just spoken or written; it is also heard and read. And then: the accent that is “heard” or “read” is often also marked visually and textually. Even more: the accent we hear or read may not be the accent marked on the screen or on the page, whether through italics, diacritics, or the subversion of orthographic and semantic conventions.

In underscoring nonspoken registers in which one can locate accent, thinking with an accent diverts attention from the figure of the L2 speaker, forever doomed to speak with an accent, and emphasizes instead the roles of the listener, translator, interpreter, reader, viewer, and eavesdropper.<sup>40</sup> These audiences are pivotal to understanding accent, for they are the ones who conjure and remediate accents as such. It is their encounters with, and responses to, particular modes of communication or presentation that cast accents as accents.

Thinking with an accent puts pressure on the notion that accent is a “thing,” a coherent, commodified, identifiable entity. Extant discussions of accent are bound together by an investment in specifying accent as something that is knowable, that is to say, as something that can be used to identify certain speakers; something that can mark, brand, or stigmatize them; and as something that characterizes a type of utterance. These approaches are limiting precisely because they produce modes of knowing that confirm the stability of their object, accent, as a material fact. To think and know this way is to miss how accentedness shapes *how* we know, as a coded and commodified source of value, as a practice of formal and informal schooling, and as a mode of perception that we may exercise without knowing.

In the elusiveness of accent to knowing, we argue, lies a path to another mode of knowing, *a counterepistemology*, and furthermore, as several of our contributors propose, a counterpedagogy and a counterpractice. To think with an accent is to trace the latencies of expertise, perception, and desire that manifest and assume the solidity of stigma, utterance, and identity. As a method, then, accent unfolds forms of knowing that allow us to understand how accent can remain a site of

leverage, opposition, enjoyment, or wounded attachment even though—or perhaps precisely because—it has been deployed to mark some people as lesser than or defective. In leveraging accent as a critical concept, we confront our imbrication in its complex libidinal economies, as well as our disagreements regarding its prospects. For some of our contributors, accented subjects are trapped in a double bind of expertise and nativism; others see openings to new modes of listening to their fugitive testimony. Our distinct approaches to thinking with an accent are not so much better or fuller than the sum of their parts, but different, reitinerant, or tracing different paths to knowledge, and rhythmic in a way that returns us to the question: how do we know what we know?

To think with an accent is to think dialogically, to think toward new horizons of criticism that aim not at diagnosis or taxonomy, but rather at unfolding the tensions of address within every utterance. In the chapters that follow, we marshal the necessary critique of the politics of accent reduction in service of a critique of the conceptual reduction of accent. We think from, and through, the identification of linguistic discrimination toward the theorization of accent as also nonlinguistic. Against the xenophobic dictates of linguistic profiling, we propose what Akshya Saxena calls a xenophilic and xenophonic politics of attunement. We listen for pasts, futures, and presents, as well as absences and presences. Phonology becomes a point of departure that allows us to consider a range of expressive registers; it demands the investigation of communication as an embodied, comparative, relational act with textual, visual, sonic, gestural, and conceptual dimensions. To think with an accent, we argue, is to think with the *nongiveness* of accent.

#### INTERDISCIPLINES, OR THE POLYPHONY OF ACCENT

As the four of us editors, all trained in the humanities, experimented with thinking with an accent, it became clear that we had to venture beyond our respective fields. To inscribe accent as a keyword of our times, we had to summon institutionally sundered methods and rubrics. In foundational ways, then, the interdisciplinarity of accent studies seemed both immanent and inevitable, on the one hand, and a critical challenge, on the other, a horizon toward which to move. As editors, our work was cut out for us.

Yet, while this interdisciplinary volume of essays came together—by bridging the worlds of practice and metaphor, and by forging a critical vocabulary of accent—it also illuminated the nature of interdisciplinary scholarship itself. A profound corollary of thinking with an accent has been thinking with the awareness of one's relation to and reception of the (disciplinary) interlocutor. In the essays here and the conversations that seeded them, interdisciplinary work happened not simply as a crossing over, marked by mutual acts of borrowing and contribution. Instead, the proverbial dialogism of cross-disciplinary conversations crystallized in the polyphonic resonances between the different essays and authors.



We have organized the chapters in this volume to convey how they resound and hear each other, and to stage accent as a method of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarship. Our contributors turn accent into a multivalent term that shines a light on institutional contexts, media infrastructures, and material practices of accented *thought*, in the most capacious sense of the term. Their interventions span different media forms, cultural industries, interpretive practices, disciplinary frameworks, and scales of analysis. They demonstrate that accent—as a skill, literacy, style, and expertise—is acquired through movement across social axes. They share a desire to think *with* the kinds of stabilizing, stultifying, taxonomizing, commodifying dynamics to which accent is subject, while attending to its affective, material, and mediatised conditions of attunement.

For us, there are three major epistemological shifts at stake in thinking with an accent, each of which forms a scaffold in our attempt to situate accent as object, method, and practice:

- 1) From accent as stigma to accent as stigma *and* expertise;
- 2) From accent as utterance to accent as utterance *and* perception;
- 3) From accent as identity to accent as identity *and* desire.

The book is therefore organized into three sections: “Accent as Expertise,” “Accented Perception,” and “A Desire Called Accent.” In each section the authors write under the “same” twinned sign (expertise and stigma, perception and utterance, desire and identity) while respecifying that sign through interdisciplinary and intermedial differences in approach and method.

The first section, “Accent as Expertise,” contests the coding of accent as a “handicap,” professional liability, linguistic deficiency, or site of discriminatory profiling and instead explores accent as an inflection of minoritarian expertise. In the first chapter, Rey Chow proposes moving away from familiar tactics of theorizing accents by way of identity contestations and affirmations that invariably center a politics of injury. Drawing on two culturally distinct examples, an ancient Chinese poem and a modern English play, Chow proposes that it may be more generative to turn to the twinned emergence of institutionalized sentimentalism and professionalism as theoretical paradigms for accent. In chapter 2, Vijay A. Ramjattan studies accent reduction programs marketed to skilled migrants in Canada and the United States, arguing that their framing of L2 accents as a professional liability functions as a form of public raciolinguistic pedagogy that normalizes white supremacy. His intervention frames accent as *skill*—as something one does rather than something one has, and a type of doing that can be used to reinforce as well as dismantle racist systems of oppression. Rather than subjecting job seekers to the racist pedagogy of accent reduction, he argues, employers and policy makers should be trained in antiracist counterpedagogies of institutional listening. Surveying the tendency among accent scholars to frame nonstandard or nonnative accents as a “handicap,” Pooja Rangan (chapter 3) asks how accent and



disability can be understood as political vectors rather than individual discrediting differences or stigma. Rangan moves away from the prevailing “melancholic” mode of mobilizing disability as a metaphor for discrediting accents and explores other forms of frictional leverage afforded by thinking accent justice alongside disability justice, from demanding accommodations to coalitional movement building. In her study of language choices and innovative shortcuts used by bilingual Spanish-English media users in short message service (SMS) messages, Sara Veronica Hinojos (chapter 4) reframes the violent mainstream rhetoric of Latinos as linguistically and technologically deficient. Her analysis of “accented Latinx textese” shows this visual vocabulary of familial sounds to be a diverse, innovative, and multigenerational mode of digital literacy. In chapter 5, Anita Starosta asks whether it is even possible to “think with an accent” without resorting to the idea of unaccented speech. She finds one answer in accent’s mediations of the international division of labor; the accented subject, like the temporary laborer, is always one who is removable and displaced.

Our second set of essays, titled “Accented Perception,” centers the move from accented utterance to accented perception in a range of interpretive practices across geopolitical contexts. In chapter 6, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan reflects on a series of abortive attempts to specify “Call Center Literature” as an accented rejoinder to the universalizing rubric of world literature. Her chapter formally plays with the conventions of the partially automated call center call and invites the reader to navigate a menu of options and artifacts that unfold accent as a biography of thought. Nina Sun Eidsheim (chapter 7) studies how vocal synthesis, voice recognition, and voice-to-text technologies are algorithmically calibrated for, against, and in nonrecognition of certain accents. Eidsheim describes these automated practices of accented listening as a transcoding of discriminatory real estate and lending-practice redlining, or “digital aural redlining.” Her chapter explores counterpractices that “jam” these technologies by cultivating listening capacities that justly recognize accents rendered inaudible or hyperaudible by “digital acoustic shadows” in their multiple, complex humanity. In chapter 8, Lynn Hou and Rezenet Moges examine accent as it happens across lines of race and gender when Deaf scholars of color work with white translators. They show that the prevailing understanding of accent as phonological does not encapsulate the complexity of Deaf signers whose signing practices may be perceived as accented, and whose signing accents may, furthermore, be “written over” (but not erased) by interpreters who “sound white.” Leonardo Cardoso (chapter 9) defines “accenting” as a mechanical and discursive process of acoustic filtering and selection that imbues sonic evidence with an impression of ontological stability. His analysis of the technological, legal, discursive, and political dimensions of accenting in Brazil’s largest criminal investigation of political leaders, which relied heavily on phone wiretaps and electronic eavesdrop-

ping, reveals how acoustic events emerge from the unexpected interactions and (mis)hearings among a heterogeneous network of human and nonhuman agents. Michelle Pfeifer (chapter 10) develops the concept of the “native ear” to question naturalized assumptions about body, origin, and identity that pervade biometric linguistic analyses in asylum proceedings in Europe. Pfeifer reframes our central concept by foregrounding the “accented testimonial desire” of the modern state, which seeks not to neutralize accent but to localize it, pinning people to specific places by way of their tongues.

Our final section, “A Desire Called Accent,” examines different desiring economies of nostalgia, expertise, abjection, and enjoyment. Akshya Saxena (chapter 11) attends to accent on the page and centers as the source of accent the reader, who must hear and sound out lingual differences by giving her breath to another (textual, characterological) body. Such an accented reading interrupts silent reading and enacts a xenophilic attunement that fosters intimacy between the reader, the text, and the character. She uses Tsitsi Jaji’s discussion of the stereo—as a metaphor for political solidarity in pan-Africanism—to imagine affiliative political relations made possible by listening for accent in literary criticism. Slava Greenberg (chapter 12) develops an analysis of the accented trans voice through a reading of the film *Third Body*. Comparing the experience of dysphoric telephonic disembodiment with the film’s depiction of a safe and joyful karaoke sing-along, Greenberg theorizes “audio-euphoria,” existing with and despite dysphoria, as a conduit of trans experience. In an experimental two-tone text, in interlocution with Derrida’s *The Monolingualism of the Other*, Naomi Waltham-Smith (chapter 13) moves between two demonstrative senses of accent: as a political event in the streets (a *manif*) and a bodily gesture of manifesting or making public. Waltham-Smith builds on this observation to deconstruct accent, showing that the increasingly mediatized manifestation of *manifs* in the Parisian *banlieues* captures, reappropriates, and neuters the accent of the other in its very demonstration. Ani Maitra (chapter 14) explores accents as a source of pleasure and enjoyment through David Thorpe’s 2014 documentary *Do I Sound Gay?*, in which Thorpe identifies with an emulation of the culturally denigrated, but still commodified, feminine—and implicitly white—voice known as the “gay voice,” even as the film questions the essentialism behind its titular question. Maitra proposes that instead of claiming the accent as a property of the subject, we hear it as a racialized, gendered, and classed partial object or value-laden prosthesis that is simultaneously enjoyed and derided as the surplus value that drives commodity capitalism. Finally, Pavitra Sundar (chapter 11) theorizes “listening with an accent” as a queer kind of listening through a reading of poet Aracelis Girmay’s “For Estefani Lora, Third Grade, Who Made Me a Card.” The poem enacts an aural orientation to the world that refuses to reify difference, even as it waits for and fosters a dynamic, unbounded mode of listening to and with others.

In the face of the nongiveness of accent as an object of study, interdisciplinarity itself emerges as an accented counterepistemology. If an accent is only “audible” in address, then interdisciplinary dialogues are as much a way of hearing and responding to the other as they are of hearing the self.<sup>41</sup> We do not *know* what we are saying until we say it to the other. This multidisciplinary array of essays offers us scenes in which to hear our thinking anew. Accent offers a practice of listening to the other and of listening to ourselves through the sounds of others. The inherent comparatism of accent, we argue, favors parity, respect, mutual intelligibility, self-reflexivity, and attention—all of which remain critical concerns of interdisciplinary scholarship. *Thinking with an Accent* unfolds new epistemologies, tactics, and interventions for theorizing the manifold ways in which accent is performed, read, sounded, exploited, used, and leveraged. Writing, reading, listening, and thinking together, we claim accent as a critical term that cuts across disciplines, medialities, and geopolitical sites.

## NOTES

The order of the authors of this chapter is alphabetical.

1. The Mukherjee anecdote is elaborated further in Srinivasan, “Call Center Agents and Expatriate Writers.” The Gulati anecdote is elaborated in Rangan, “Auditing the Call Center Voice.”

2. The Maxey incident is elaborated further in Ajao, “‘Definitely.’” We would like to thank Eniola Ajao, who graduated from Amherst College in 2021, for bringing Maxey to our attention through the research she did during one of the three courses we concurrently taught in Spring 2020 as part of the Accent Research Collaborative research and pedagogy project.

3. @HESBIANS, Account Suspended.

4. The idea of accent as an event is inspired in part by the work of self-described “blk disabled animal, stutterer, and artist” JJJJerome Ellis, who describes stutter as a “happening” between speaker and listener (rather than a quality of an individual’s speech). See *This American Life*, “Time Bandit.”

5. Baugh, “Linguistic Profiling.”

6. See chapter 2 of this volume. See also Shoichet, “These former Stanford students are building an app to change your accent,” which discusses the automated accent reduction efforts of Silicon Valley start-up Sanas. Sanas is using artificial intelligence—specifically the algorithmic training of a neural network—in order to modify accents in real time: “Rather than learning to pronounce words differently, technology could do that for you. There’d no longer be a need for costly or time-consuming accent reduction training. And understanding would be nearly instantaneous.”

7. Matsuda, “Voices of America.”

8. Casillas, Ferrada, and Hinojos, “The Accent on Modern Family.” For more on the significances of “noise” and the unrepresentable, illegible experiences it also indexes, see Melillo, *The Poetics of Noise from Dada to Punk*, a recent entrant into the emergent field of noise studies. In *Remapping Sound Studies* (2019), Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes also discuss “noise” and “loudness” as part of the “multiple liminologies” of human audition in colonial and neocolonial encounters in the Global South, where audition is “overwhelmed, exceeded, or repelled” (18).

9. *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*, s.v. “eye dialect.”

10. “Sanitization” of accent reconstructs the ethnic and racialized body to eliminate the sensory perception of difference. See Ameeriar, “The Sanitized Sensorium.”

11. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*; Carillo Rowe, Malhotra, and Pérez, *Answer the Call*; Nadeem, *Dead Ringers*; Kiran Mirchandani, *Phone Clones*.

12. Lee, *The Winged Seed*, 76. This passage is analyzed further in chapter 15 of this volume.
13. Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, 8.
14. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “accent.”
15. Lippi-Green defines accents technically as “loose bundles of prosodic [intonation, pitch contours, stress patterns, tempo, upswings and downswings, etc.] and segmental features [how vowels and consonants are pronounced] distributed over geographic and/or social space,” and more colloquially as a specific “way of speaking.” See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 42.
16. Davé, *Indian Accents*, 3.
17. Akbar, *Pilgrim Bell*, 27.
18. Karpf, *The Human Voice*, 33–48; Pettman, *Sonic Intimacy*, 5.
19. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*, 4–8, 59. For a transatlantic history of neutral voice in British and American radio, including the construction of “nowhere voice” and “grey diction,” see Agha, “The Social Life of Cultural Value” and McEnany, “This American Voice.”
20. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 15.
21. Abu Hamdan, *The Freedom of Speech Itself*.
22. Abu Hamdan, “Aural Contract,” 73.
23. Victor, “Cicadas in the Mouth,” 31.
24. Here is Li-Young Lee on “discordant” accents: “While some sounds were tolerated, some even granting the speaker a certain status in the instances of, say, French or British, other inflections condemned one to immediate alien, as though our gods were toys, our names disheveled silverware, and the gamelan just gonging backward. And I could clearly hear each time I opened my mouth the discord there, the wrong sounds, the strange, unmanageable sharps and flats of my vowels and my chewed-up consonants. What an uncomely noise.” Lee, *The Winged Seed*, 76.
25. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 5. See also Safran’s discussion of “empathetic and antipathetic modes of listening” in “The Troubled Frame Narrative,” 559.
26. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 42.
27. Matsuda, “Voices of America.”
28. Baugh, “Linguistic Profiling.”
29. Cavanaugh and Shankar, *Language and Materiality*.
30. This is a dynamic new area of study; see, for example, Setsuko Yokoyama’s research on accent, queer syntax, and the ableist legacies of speech visualization technologies, “Dispelling of Ableist Ghosts.”
31. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 3. See also Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*; Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*.
32. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 2.
33. Apter, *The Translation Zone*; Walkowitz, *Born Translated*.
34. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.
35. Apter, *Against World Literature*; Levy, “Accent and Silence”; Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*; Walkowitz, *Born Translated*.
36. Miller, *Accented America*; Yao, *Foreign Accents*.
37. See, for instance, Trinh Minh-Ha’s interview with Chen in Chen, “Speaking Nearby”; Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; and Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*.
38. See Rangan, “Auditing the Call Center Voice,” and chapter 7 of this volume.
39. Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7.
40. For linguists, L1 and L2 designate native and nonnative speakers of a given language. For instance, Lippi-Green distinguishes between L1 accent (the native variety of any given language, marked by the speaker’s region and/or clusters of features shaped by other elements of social identity such as ethnicity, gender, class, or religion) and L2 accent (the detectable presence of native language phonology in a second, acquired language). See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 42–43.
41. Kramer, *The Hum of the World*.

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PART ONE

# Accent as Expertise





# Taking Accents beyond Identity Politics?

## *Thinking Through Two Paradigms*

Rey Chow

Only foreigners who have been taught to speak [English] speak it well.

—THE HUNGARIAN LINGUIST NEPOMMUCK  
IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, *PYGMALION*

Accents have always been a palpable feature of human social existence. Dictionary entries for “accent” usually offer two distinct definitions, among others. For example, in Merriam-Webster we find “accent” defined using this typical division:

- 1) an effort in speech to stress one syllable over adjacent syllables; and
- 2) a distinctive manner of expression: such as a: a way of speaking typical of a particular group of people and especially of the natives or residents of a region; b: an individual’s distinctive or characteristic inflection, tone, or choice of words—usually used in plural.

These simple distinctions are important in any consideration of the topic. Whereas the first definition refers to an emphasis on a syllable in the physical act of pronouncing a word, the second highlights the manner of expression, physical or otherwise, characteristic of a group or an individual, a manner of expression that, implicitly, makes such a group or individual identifiable and recognizable by speech—that is to say, aurally marked to someone listening. These definitions of accent are obviously related, yet their relation is potentially contentious, as the transition from physically making vocal sounds to *being heard* in specific ways, whether collectively or individually, is often an association and an abstraction, and at best an approximation. That being said, let us keep these definitions in mind for the sake of clarifying various points in our discussion. Alongside them, I’d like to

draw on two literary-cultural paradigms as additional signposts for how accents are typically narrativized and dramatized.

PARADIGM ONE: THE SOJOURNER'S  
SENTIMENTAL HOMECOMING

I begin with the famous poem “回鄉偶書/Homecoming (1),” by the Chinese Tang Dynasty poet 賀知章 He Zhizhang (659–744):

少小離家老大回， Left home when young, returning in [my] old age,  
鄉音無改鬢毛衰。 Native voice [has] not changed; hair [has] thinned.  
兒童相見不相識， Children seeing [me] don't know [me].  
笑問客從何處來。 With a smile, [they] ask where the guest is from.  
(my translation)

These brief lines tell the story of an old man returning to his home village after an absence of several decades. When he left for official duty, history tells us, he was still relatively young. When he returns home in his eighties, his hair has thinned but his accent—literally, his 鄉音/*xiangyin*, or native voice—has not changed. The children in the village, not having met him before, smile and ask where he came from. In this scene of homecoming tinged with a mild sadness—an emotion caused by the sojourner's awareness that he is a mere stranger to those in his hometown—the poet's accent is the one feature that, we are told, has remained the same. Whether this is actually the case would be impossible to verify. Similarly intriguing is how far the reference to 鄉音/*xiangyin* in the poem corresponds to the notion of accent: Does not the Chinese term refer, as it typically does, to a region-specific way of speaking (as in definition 2a, above)—that is to say, the timbre and cadence of pronunciation characteristic of speakers from that region? Does that mean that the children, presumably also from the region, actually do recognize the old man's speech?

A more thought-provoking point, meanwhile, is that the *lyricism* here stems from what may be called an auditorily reflexive process, an acoustic mirror, so to speak, whereby the poet *hears himself*, or so he tells us, as speaking with exactly the same voice as always, even though his countenance appears much older (a visible difference that, in the context of the scene depicted, only he knows).<sup>1</sup> But what exactly is this *himself* that the poet hears? As we know by common experience, the way we sound to others is often different from the way we sound to ourselves, which is why hearing our own voices on a recording can be jarring at first. In the case of this poet, could his voice, too, have already changed in its externalized sonicity, even to those from his native region, because he has been away for so long, while he continues to hear himself—that is, imagine himself—as sounding the same as decades before? And how might such discrepancy between the two loops of vocal recognizability—one through one's own head and the other through other people's hearing—be accounted for, if not resolved?

Presented as the indigenous part of a person that stays constant despite distances traveled in space and time, accent seems in these brief moments to stand in for a certain essential identity. Accordingly, the poem may be read as a prefiguring of the modern, neoliberal attachment to identity defined as such, that is, as essential and unchanging. The self-consciousness that accompanies such an identity, however, is sentimentally narrativized in the form of a split, as an event of separation: henceforth, the self's affective awareness of itself is audiovisually disjointed. The feeling that one (or one's accent) has remained the same is now mediated by an inescapable sense of alterity and loss, both because of one's changed looks and, as I suggest, possibly also because of one's changed way of speaking, even if the latter is not audible to oneself. Above all, this sentimental self-consciousness is entangled with other people's mis- or non-recognition.

PARADIGM TWO: THE NOBLE SAVAGE REDEEMED,  
YET FEELING WOUNDED

If this tendency to approach identity through loss and irreversible change is inherent to a certain lyricism with its subjective modes of articulation, in the hands of a dramatist accents can be handled quite differently. I think here of George Bernard Shaw's famous play *Pygmalion*, a modern-day adaptation of the Greek myth of the sculptor Pygmalion, who creates the beautiful statue Galatea, with whom he falls in love and whom he eventually marries. Shaw's play was adapted into at least three films, as well as the popular musical *My Fair Lady* (1956) and the Hollywood blockbuster film based on the musical (1964). In this chapter I will be referring mainly to the original play and the 1964 Hollywood film version, directed by George Cukor. Briefly, it is the story of Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl making her living around Piccadilly Circus and Covent Garden in London, who is transformed by a professor of linguistics, Henry Higgins, into a duchess.<sup>2</sup> Few who have watched the film *My Fair Lady* would forget the arduous and exhausting exercises Higgins imposes on Eliza, who is both in awe of him and resents him as a tyrannical authority figure. In the film version, their hard work finally pays off one evening when they notice that Eliza is for the first time able to pronounce correctly the vowels, diphthongs, and aspirated consonants with which she has been struggling day after day for weeks. Eliza, Higgins, and his friend Colonel Pickering happily sing and dance along to the catchy tune that serves to wrap up this early part of their teamwork: "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain / In Hartford, Hereford, and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly happen."

The coupling of Eliza and Higgins is clearly part of a long tradition of philosophical and literary attempts to address the fraught relationship between a creature and her creator. In the Western canon, at least, in addition to the Greek myth about Pygmalion and Galatea, to which much critical attention has been devoted, numerous variants of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's noble savage come to mind: the

wild child of Avignon, Kaspar Hauser, Tarzan and the Greystokes, and comparable tales, including perhaps Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.<sup>3</sup> What makes Shaw's *Pygmalion* stand out, however, is that accents are the pivot around which the rescue of the savage occurs. Rather than centering on an acquisition of the human capacity for language and sociality, as in some other renditions of the creator-creature relationship, Shaw has, I believe, taken the question of what civilization means to a new and controversial level. He is able to do so because he does not draw on the familiar divide conventionally inserted between nature and culture; instead, he focuses on accents as strictly cultural phenomena. That he does this during what is still the heyday of the British Empire—the early twentieth century—makes his play all the more refreshing to contemplate in retrospect, even more than a century later.<sup>4</sup>

When Eliza Doolittle first appears, not only does she come across as an uneducated female who does not know how to speak English properly; she is also presented as subhuman because of her pronunciation. The noises she makes are so unacceptable that she might as well have been a howling animal. Early in the play, Eliza is depicted in this manner, replete with an apologetic aside in the stage directions to the reader:

*The Flower Girl.* Ow, eex, ye-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' d-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them? [*Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London*].<sup>5</sup>

To the ears of Professor Higgins, who boasts of being able, simply by listening to the way someone speaks, to “place any man within six miles,” “within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets,”<sup>6</sup> Eliza is a specimen of a form of low life that cannot yet find proper representation. Speech, in other words, has acquired the objectified—and objectifying—status of a biosocial compass, a kind of GPS in today's terms: it is a pointer (for the trained ear) to where one has been or is, both physically (in terms of the district in which one lives) and socially (in terms of the class in which one belongs and the company one keeps).

As Nicholas Grene writes in his introduction to the play, “Shaw . . . reworks the Ovidian legend into a feminist fable.”<sup>7</sup> Grene's comments are corroborated by this description on the back cover of the Penguin paperback edition of *Pygmalion*: “Shaw radically reworks Ovid's tale to give it a feminist slant: while Higgins teaches Eliza to speak and act like a duchess, she also asserts her independence, adamantly refusing to be his creation.” In accordance with the logic of this analysis, scholars such as Julie Wosk, Marcie Ray, and Janine Utell have offered perceptive feminist readings elaborating the meanings of Eliza's capture, normalization, and escape.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the details of Eliza's life as a captive readily furnish germane material for our contemporary academic investments in class, gender, bare life, disability, and animality. From her origins in a community of manual laborers (including her drunk of a father), flower sellers, baristas, and street cleaners, all speaking a vulgar

cockney accent, Eliza boldly delivers herself to Higgins's residence on Wimpole Street because she has overheard him say that, with a corrected way of speaking, she would be able to have a higher-end job, such as one at a florist's shop. Little does she realize what physical and emotional hardships await her as she embarks on her course of upward mobility. In Higgins's house she is bathed and cleansed by force, made to dress like a lady, and strapped to a harsh daily routine of oral drills and speech lessons. Her initial resistance and resentment notwithstanding, she makes excellent progress—so excellent that Higgins and Pickering decide to try showing her off at some upper-class social gatherings. Although she botches her performance at the garden party by chattering about unseemly details (and, in the film, at the Royal Ascot horse race by yelling obscenities), she pulls herself together and manages to charm everyone at the embassy ball. With flying colors, Eliza passes even the aural surveillance of Nepommuck (Aristid Karpthy in *My Fair Lady*), the formidable Hungarian linguistics specialist, who, after checking her out, declares that she is of Hungarian noble stock. Despite her spectacular triumph, and despite winning not only elite society's approval but also the hearts of those around her (including Colonel Pickering, Higgins's mother, and Freddy Eynsford Hill, a suitor), Eliza grows increasingly despondent, longing at once for the autonomy and independence she once had, and above all for personal recognition from the man who has turned her into a duchess. If she has acquired the perfect English accent, she also feels deeply hurt and humiliated, replete with a litany of complaints about not being noticed, cared for, respected, and loved that rings interestingly familiar to twenty-first-century ears accustomed to the plaintive tones of neoliberal identity politics.<sup>9</sup>

#### EXPERT KNOWLEDGE VERSUS THE RISE OF FEELINGS

From the perspective of social justice, Eliza is without question a sympathetic character whose radical transformation serves only to underscore the plight of a woman in her class. The feminist sympathies bestowed on Eliza are thus in alignment with a familiar conceptual frame that understands identity by way of ownership: a person's identity is deemed an inalienable possession, a permanent private property that no one can or should take away. Like the aging process of the sojourner in He Zhizhang's poem, Eliza's metamorphosis gestures (back) toward this presumed unchanging something that is supposedly *hers*. In the case of the sojourner, we are told, it is his accent (which, as I indicate, may be taken as a stand-in for his identity) that has remained constant. But what about Eliza, whose accent *has* changed, even to her own hearing? How are we to understand the emergence of her sense of alienation and dispossession precisely at the time when she has so successfully achieved the transformation that she desires? What exactly has been taken away from Eliza?

At this juncture, I find the character of Higgins noteworthy from a dramatic perspective. As a learned British male chauvinist, Higgins personifies in the form

of caricature the historical rise of what is called expert knowledge—in this case, the relatively new sciences of linguistics and phonetics. Through Higgins and Pickering (a Sanskrit specialist who recently returned from India), Shaw is staging nothing less than the systemic cultivation and specialization of learning that has, in the modern Western world, become increasingly compartmentalized and fine-tuned over the recent centuries, and that is given public recognition in Western liberal society as professional expertise. In the midst of a lighthearted musical comedy, then, what is presented in the film *My Fair Lady* is a purportedly scientific procedure of training and disciplining that has as its objective the extreme make-over of a lower-class female. To this extent, the technologies available to Higgins are part and parcel of a dramatization of an enlightened process of knowledge production—the objectification and standardization of human speech—aimed at socioeconomic uplift. As Higgins confidently announces in an early moment, referring to Eliza the flower girl, “You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. . . . [I]n three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador’s garden party. I could even get her a place as lady’s maid or shop assistant, which requires better English.”<sup>10</sup>

To emphasize this process of knowledge production, Shaw introduces Higgins first as a kind of ethnographer, a “note taker” quietly jotting down what he is hearing of Eliza’s speech.<sup>11</sup> In ways that prefigure twenty-first-century vocal biometrics and forensics and accent training programs, Shaw also meticulously describes, among the props, the curious instruments that are used to measure and analyze vocality, that help capture living speech through graphic and sonic recording, amplification, and replay. As Colonel Pickering explains to Higgins’s mother, “We keep records of every stage—dozens of gramophone disks and photographs.”<sup>12</sup> Shaw’s stage directions about Higgins’s drawing room include the following specifics:

In this corner stands a flat writing-table, on which are a phonograph, a laryngoscope, a row of tiny organ pipes with a bellows, a set of lamp chimneys for singing flames with burners attached to a gas plug in the wall by an Indiarubber tube, several tuning-forks of different sizes, a life-size image of half a human head, shewing in section the vocal organs, and a box containing a supply of wax cylinders for the phonograph.<sup>13</sup>

As Jennifer Buckley comments, bridging her feminist reading with careful attention to the modernity of the technical equipment featured, “This vision of the masculine authorial intellect controlling the feminized (if not always female) body of the actor, and her speaking voice, is indisputably a gendered one. What makes this vision recognizably modern is the extent to which it is shaped by the media.” According to Buckley, “understanding Shaw’s interest and investment in the manual and mechanical inscriptive technologies with which he hoped to record the

acoustic details of his own ‘music-drama’ also enables us to better understand his modernity, and his modernism.”<sup>14</sup> Or, as Tim J. Anderson observes, underscoring the relationship between sound technology and existential self-fashioning and refashioning, “Capturing and returning the voice to oneself, the phonograph repeatedly defines Eliza to herself in order to redefine her. She is forced to listen, pick out her ‘mistakes,’ extract the cockney from her English, and render forth a new, uplifted Eliza. With Higgins’s methods based in phonetics, Eliza’s transformation is dictated by *an essential anti-essentialism*: the belief that the autopoetic powers of self-becoming can literalize our most ideal fantasy into corporeal reality.”<sup>15</sup>

In an illuminating study of the emergence and decline of expert knowledge as a form of social power in modern Western society, the political economist William Davies argues for making an analytic correlation between the noticeable demise of authority once granted to expert knowledge and the ubiquitous phenomenon of what he names “the rise of feelings” in late twentieth-century Anglo-American world politics.<sup>16</sup> “Journalists, judges, experts, and various other ‘elites’ are under fire today,” Davies writes. “Fewer and fewer people believe they are independent. Their capacity to reflect the truth in a neutral fashion, whether as scientists, professionals, journalists or policy advisers, is now attacked on the grounds that it is more self-interested and emotional than the protagonists are willing to let on.”<sup>17</sup> He summarizes the dilemma “faced by many experts and professionals as they confront their contemporary foes” succinctly: “retain a demeanor of rationality and get accused of being ‘cold,’ ‘arrogant,’ or ‘distant,’ or show some passion and then be accused of being no better than your critics.”<sup>18</sup> These provocative reflections about the expert are vivified by Shaw in his good-humored characterization of Higgins:

Higgins . . . is of the energetic scientific type, heartily, even violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject, and careless about himself and other people, including their feelings. He is, in fact, but for his years and size, rather like a very impetuous baby “taking notice” eagerly and loudly, and requiring almost as much watching to keep him out of unintended mischief.<sup>19</sup>

Davies traces this fairly recent deadlock between the supposedly neutral values of reason and objectivity on the one hand and an emotion-driven politics of conspiracy, insinuation, and allegation on the other to a long history of tensions among various philosophical thought systems in modern England and France—propelled by figures such as Hobbes, Descartes, Boyle, and others—regarding the means to achieve collective agreement about governance without physical violence. While the Hobbesian system favors mathematical rules as the immutable basis for epistemic certitude and social peace, the Boylean system favors establishing rules of observation and witnessing as ways of arriving at evidence, even as philosophical disputes may continue unresolved.<sup>20</sup> According to Davies, expert knowledge’s ascendancy since the seventeenth century is the result of the mutually reinforced



advances of statecraft, science, and liberal institutions that were created to generate, consolidate, and safeguard such knowledge and their bases. (A key example of these institutions was the Royal Society of England, founded in 1660 to institutionalize experimental methods of natural science.)

During this significant period, especially with colossal geopolitical and commercial enterprises around the world that included colonies, treaty ports, concession zones, dependent territories, leased lands, protectorates, and waterways, a venerably authoritative status has come to be bestowed on Western expert knowledge by social consensus. In a globalized public sphere maneuvered discursively with the values of enlightenment, including compassion and benevolence toward less developed populations, such expert knowledge has functioned strategically both to supply concrete contents (in the form of discoveries, inventions, experiments, and various types of patented applications of ideas) *and* to normalize procedures for epistemic progress. But as the values of enlightenment and their claim to universal validity become contested with revelations of the records of exploitation and bloodshed that undergird them, various forms of expert knowledge—indeed, experts themselves—have increasingly come under fire, their aura of credibility assailed with skepticism or scorn. Davies's remarks in the section of his book titled "The Violence of Experts" are worth citing at length, not least because of their reminders of some of the practices and personalities typically associated with expert knowledge:

The history of expertise . . . is closely entwined with the history of colonialism and of slavery. For while states and experts may have an interest in creating maps and portraits of their own society for purposes of tax collection or social improvement, they have an even greater need to gather knowledge for foreign lands and peoples they seek to dominate. The application of geometry to cartography was an indispensable tool in the discovery and genocidal colonization of the New World.<sup>21</sup>

The privileged section of society, for whom social and economic progress is still a realistic expectation, includes many people who make their living from the production of expert knowledge, including public-sector professions, academics, consultants, financiers, and business advisers. The scientific perspective on society . . . continues to provide a plausible picture of reality for most of these people. . . . But what of the others? What kinds of perspectives and analyses are suppressed or sidelined by the expert view of aggregates and averages? And can we understand it as something other than just *false*?

Among those not included in this "knowledge economy" vision of progress, an individual is more likely to be an object of expert scrutiny than an agent of it. As cultural and economic advantage becomes increasingly concentrated around big cities and universities, expert knowledge is something the privileged *do to* the less privileged.<sup>22</sup>

If Shaw's play is approached from this perspective of expert knowledge as a sociohistorical power aggregate, what the caricature of the linguistics professor

foregrounds is precisely an encounter in the metropolis between expert knowledge and the wretched of the earth. In staging that encounter not only in the optimistic, forward-looking imperial form of social progress (with the goal of speech sanitization and augmentation) but also in the form of an intense emotional confrontation between a resentful Eliza and a complacent (because clueless) Higgins, Shaw is remarkably prescient, his story an elegant foreboding of the sociopolitical conflicts and wars to come in Western liberal democracy.<sup>23</sup>

The ultimate challenge posed by *Pygmalion* (together with its culture industry spinoffs) lies in this deceptively simple question the audience must address: whose side are we on? This question is all the more difficult for those of us who are academics—who, in other words, are “experts” whose social position is much closer to Higgins’s than to Eliza’s. Do we, in the neoliberal climate of endorsing multiculturalism and diversity, take Eliza’s side, for all the compelling humanitarian reasons of class and gender equity? Along the grain of the conceptual frame of identity-as-possession, is there not an obvious obligation to empathize with Eliza on account of her being stripped of her indigenous voice, her cockney accent?<sup>24</sup> Should we not discredit Higgins as an expert and reject his arrogant claim that he can improve someone else’s life by subjecting her to a horrendous training program without considering the consequences of his own experiment? As Eliza puts it to Higgins in a moment of desperation, “You know I cant go back to the gutter, as you call it, and that I have no real friends in the world but you and the Colonel. You know well *I couldnt bear to live with a low common man after you two.*”<sup>25</sup> By presenting voices and accents as the very medium—indeed, the social milieu, at once personally embodied and perceived *and* mechanically objectifiable and manipulable—through which to come to terms with these questions, Shaw paves the way to the crystallization of a conundrum, an impasse perhaps, in liberal socioeconomic logic, in which those of us making our livelihoods in contemporary academe are inevitably implicated.

#### ACCENTS BEYOND IDENTITY POLITICS?

Running alongside the sentimental popular story of a woman being compromised not only by her own class status but also by an educated elite’s attempt to refashion her into someone else is, I contend, a fascinating probe into the increasingly volatile relationship between expert knowledge—as transmitted, empowered, and hegemonized by universities, industries, scientific research institutes, and multinational corporations—and the rest of global society. A professor of language and linguistics, together with biologists, zoologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, and other higher-education specialists, belongs in a knowledge class for whom the world exists as a vast laboratory, from which knowledge values can be extracted, refined, codified, and instrumentalized. As Davies puts it, “expert knowledge is something the privileged *do to* the less privileged.” Accents are, in the instance of

Shaw's story, a kind of raw material, literally salvaged from the gutter. With the aid of an expert procedure of systemizing—that is, gathering, sampling, transcribing, examining, and adjusting—vocal data, which is then put through iterative tests and trials, such raw material can eventually lead to the normalization of speech (hence the charge, made by some feminist critics, of a “normative femininity” being foisted on Eliza).<sup>26</sup> Pursued methodically in a progressive spirit, Higgins's experiment is shown to yield miracles, lifting Eliza from destitution. It is *this material process of norming*—this lab procedure with its scientific protocols and daily drills, diligently adhered to by its practitioners for a duration of time—that constitutes, I propose, the core of a possible, definitively alternative reading of this story from the identity politics–driven approach that consistently sees Eliza as a victim. If the historical backdrop to this story is the British Empire, Shaw reminds us that the empire's work is eminently *empirical*: Higgins's efforts place him squarely among the ascending classes of professionals, and academics in particular, whose erudition and expertise contribute in no uncertain terms to the empire's consolidation and long-lasting legacy.

As the norm is not something that preexists practice but rather comes into being in the repeated process of being worked through, exercises—in this case, pronunciation exercises—are indispensable.<sup>27</sup> (Thus, for instance, contemporary call center workers in South and Southeast Asia must go through American accent training in order to qualify as aurally acceptable service providers to their prospective phone-in customers in the United States, Britain, Europe, and Australia.) Unlike the subjective way an accent is imagined as immutable over time, as in the poem by He Zhizhang, Higgins's exercises, conducted on the basis of regular evaluations of vocal data assembled by techniques of sonic transcription and quantification, suggest that accents can be changed and are, by the accrued evidence of his experiment, changeable. Supplementing the explicitly practical purpose he mentions—to help Eliza qualify for a better job, or even to pass for royalty—Higgins's experiment carries with it a class open-mindedness, indeed a democratic vision: *anyone* can be *made* into person who sounds upper-class through a process of learning under the right tutelage, and there is in fact nothing intrinsic about the so-called standard, normal English accent, which can be acquired and perfected as a skill. It is in this sense of equitable potentiality and protodemocracy that expert knowledge and expert guidance become defensible. As Shaw puts it in his preface, “A Professor of Phonetics,” a lesson from this story may well be the necessity, the justification, for expert knowledge as a means of intervention in existing social stratification:

Finally, and for the encouragement of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment, I may add that the change wrought by Professor Higgins in the flower-girl is neither impossible nor uncommon. . . . Our West End shop assistants and domestic servants are bi-lingual. But the thing has to be done scientifically,

or the last state of the aspirant may be worse than the first. An honest slum dialect is more tolerable than the attempts of phonetically untaught persons to imitate the plutocracy. Ambitious flower-girls who read this play must not imagine that they can pass themselves off as fine ladies by untutored imitation. They must learn their alphabet over again, and different, from a phonetic expert. Imitation will only make them ridiculous.<sup>28</sup>

The likelihood that some of us may feel uneasy or at least incredulous about Shaw's remarks defending phonetic expertise is, I believe, symptomatic of the decline of (the authority of) reason that Davies depicts as the predicament of our twenty-first-century, post-truth society. The prevailing populist tendency these days to privilege personal feelings—in particular feelings of injury, humiliation, and anger, much like Eliza's—as tenable grounds for critical discernment, judgment, and, in some cases, political action makes it virtually impossible to question Eliza's profound sense of alienation and dispossession even as she has succeeded in moving up the social ladder exactly as she had wished. Reading her situation in the light of the sentiments of contemporary identity politics, we tend to dwell on it as the vulnerable situation of a victim in captivity who is rightly yearning for liberation from oppression and for self-fulfillment.<sup>29</sup> But what if we were to shift our focus from Eliza's feelings as Higgins's prey to the irreversibility of her social transformation—as signaled (in the film) by the fact that, on a return visit to the flower market, her old stomping grounds, she has become unrecognizable to her former friends and co-workers?

Turning to Eliza's irreversible social transformation—a condition Shaw interestingly describes as being “disclassed”—would mean returning to the definitions of accent mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, and asking how accents are historically heard, objectified, evaluated, used, and reproduced for various purposes.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps more importantly, it would mean installing accents in a new dynamic of epistemic and medial categorization, whereby accents can be differentiated in accordance with the types of knowledge and values they generate and regenerate. Such a dynamic would allow us to raise a different type of question altogether about the academic study of accents. For instance, as an object of knowledge, should accents belong in scientific inquiry (involving labs, experiments, tests, and trials), in artistic creativity (involving skills and talents of verbal mimicry, acting, and performance), or in both, even as each of these realms is anchored in its own set of compound market logics? Should accents be linked epistemically and medially to investigations of disability (under a rubric such as speech “impediment” or “challenge”), class, gender, or race—all examples of the notion of “a group” as mentioned in the second definition of accent? Or should they be linked epistemically and medially to an ever-expanding horizon of individual vocal acts, all of which are to be understood as singular occurrences, as what may be called *idiolects*?

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## NOTES

1. I borrow this phrase from Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*.
2. For a breakdown of scenes of the play in relation to questions of passing, assimilation, and accent, as well as a discussion of relationships among the various characters, see Crompton, "Improving *Pygmalion*." Crompton argues that it is manners, not speech patterns or accent, that differentiate characters in the play. He suggests that all accent evaluations are associative, depending on the listener's own ear and orientation. See also Bauschatz, "The Uneasy Evolution," which discusses changes and adaptations from the play to the musical, as for instance in plot development across scenes and cross-references between the two works.
3. See, for instance, Wosk, "Simulated Women and the Pygmalion Myth," in *My Fair Ladies*, 9–30. As well as arguing that Shaw's work is part of a lineage in which men attempt to forge the physical images of women to satisfy their own desires, Wosk brings up contemporary examples of this lineage in the form of female robots and automatons. She puts Shaw's work specifically in conversation with E. E. Kellett's story "The Lady Automaton," which coincides with the rise of lifelike clockwork automatons in Europe and America. Wosk concludes that "the outlines of the Pygmalion story and the longing for idealized synthetic females would play out in the years ahead, modifying as technologies changed" (30).
4. *Pygmalion* was first published in German translation and presented in Vienna in 1913, and first presented in English in London in 1914.
5. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 16–17.
6. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 26.
7. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, x.
8. See Wosk, "Simulated Women and the Pygmalion Myth," and Ray, "My Fair Lady: A Voice for Change." Ray investigates the ways in which the plot and music of *My Fair Lady*'s cinematic adaptation contribute to a construction of an embodied "normative femininity" for midcentury white Americans. See also Utell, "Adaptation and Sound in *Pygmalion*," in which she discusses the extent to which accent has the potential to be a social performance: when Eliza adjusts her accent, she is socially considered to be more "ladylike." On the basis that our accents are integral to our own self-perception, Utell asserts that this attempt at passing into high society compromises Eliza's subjecthood and that she will be able to reclaim her sense of self only when she escapes from Higgins.
9. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 122–33.
10. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 27. For an informative article about the sociolinguistic context in which Shaw conceived of the story and wrote his play, see Mugglestone, "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in *Pygmalion*." According to Mugglestone, "Class consciousness, first recorded in 1887, is, in effect, the issue which was to dominate *Pygmalion*, mirrored most obviously in the linguistic signals of social identity which provide the key to Eliza's transformation" (374). She further notes that the role of accent in this play is reflective of how social inequality had come to be marked by signifiers of linguistic inequality. She alludes to the interesting biographical information, given in Shaw's preface, "A Professor of Phonetics" (see Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 5–9), of Shaw's acquaintance with the world-class phonetician Henry Sweet at Oxford, when phonetics was still considered a new science. That relationship influenced Shaw's interest in linguistics and led him to pay attention

to accent and dialect in his daily life. Ultimately, Mugglestone argues, *Pygmalion* reveals the extent to which Shaw views accent as a condition not only of social status but also of social acceptability.

11. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 19–28.

12. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 82.

13. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 33.

14. See Buckley, “Talking Machines: Shaw, Phonography, and *Pygmalion*.” Buckley describes the extent to which Shaw identified with the character of Higgins: “In the same way, he was obsessed with accent and sought to manipulate the sonic (yet also social) identities of those around him.” (No individual page numbers are available in the online version of this article.)

15. Anderson, “Listening to My *My Fair Lady*,” in *Making Easy Listening*, 78. With reminders of how music and sound were coded during the time period of Shaw’s work, Anderson discusses this “makeover” process as a primarily modern phenomenon, which tended to appeal to many women.

16. Davies, *Nervous States* (first published in Great Britain in 2018 under the title *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*).

17. Davies, *Nervous States*, 26.

18. Davies, *Nervous States*, 27.

19. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 34.

20. See details in chapter 2 of Davies, *Nervous States*.

21. Davies, *Nervous States*, 59.

22. Davies, *Nervous States*, 85–86 (italics in the original).

23. It is the dustman Alfred Doolittle, Eliza’s father, who serves as Shaw’s comical mouthpiece for some of these sociopolitical conflicts and wars. Having inherited a sizable fortune from an American philanthropist who took some casual advice from Higgins, Doolittle speaks of his own delivery into middle-class morality as a tragedy: being made a “gentleman” has completely destroyed his happiness. See Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 113–19.

24. As I have been trying to suggest, this is by far the most prevalent type of reading generated by Shaw’s story. For an admirably informative account of the behind-the-scenes production of Eliza’s voice in *My Fair Lady*, see Anderson, “Which Voice Best Becomes the Property? Stitching the Intertext of *My Fair Lady*,” in *Making Easy Listening*, 51–76. In addition to making references to various soundscapes and special effects, Anderson also draws attention to the “dubbing over” of the actress Audrey Hepburn’s singing voice in the film. Although Hepburn spent a lot of time taking singing lessons and practicing, she could not prevent her voice from being edited out of the film. This detail added another layer to the critically generative logic of focusing on Eliza Doolittle’s voice: even the actress playing Eliza was forced to change her voice to fit a stereotypical idea of female singing, only to have her contributions removed in the end. Anderson comments, “Much like Eliza herself, whose voice and character are simultaneously uplifted through Higgins’s regimented application of phonetic expertise, Hepburn, much to her chagrin, was left technologically affected by engineering processes beyond her control” (55). One could also add the showbiz tidbit that in giving Hepburn the role in *My Fair Lady* for box office reasons, the film’s producers had notoriously sidelined Julie Andrews, the actress who had performed the musical with her own singing in the late 1950s and early 1960s but who was deemed insufficiently famous as a screen figure at the time.

25. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 131 (italics added).

26. See Ray, “*My Fair Lady*: A Voice for Change.”

27. For related interest, see my discussion of the significance of norming in the work of Michel Foucault in “Introduction: Rearticulating ‘Outside,’” in *A Face Drawn in Sand*, 23–31.

28. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 9.

29. Shaw expresses his incredulity at this narrative of Eliza’s victimhood in the play’s sequel. See Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 134–48. In the sequel, Eliza is married to Freddy; the couple have constant money problems but eventually become successful in running a florist and greengrocer business despite

their incompetence. Eliza remains friends with Pickering and continues to nag Higgins, who remains emotionally indifferent. Shaw concludes, "When it comes to business, to the life that she really leads as distinguished from the life of dreams and fancies, she likes Freddy and she likes the Colonel; and she does not like Higgins and Mr. Doolittle. Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable." See Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 148. The film *My Fair Lady*, on the other hand, suggests a happy romantic ending in accordance with Hollywood conventions: Higgins realizes that he has grown accustomed to Eliza's face and, despite Freddy's pursuit, Eliza returns to Higgins's residence, picking up his slippers and placing them where he expects to find them.

30. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 139.

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# Accent Reduction as Raciolinguistic Pedagogy

Vijay A. Ramjattan

## INTRODUCTION: FROM ACCENT-AS-DOING TO ACCENT REDUCTION

Under neoliberal capitalism, notions of personhood are defined in accordance with the market. Indeed, people may see themselves as an amalgam of skills that can be readily deployed and commodified as labor.<sup>1</sup> One specific instance of this point concerns language. Rather than simply being an aspect of one's identity, language is also treated as a skill needed to perform work in an increasing range of knowledge- and service-based industries, which consider communication a central component of working life.<sup>2</sup> What is important to emphasize here is that all features of language can be converted into skills, including something as minute as a speech accent.<sup>3</sup> For example, in transnational call centers, where agents either receive calls from international customers looking for help with tasks such as banking transactions or make calls for telemarketing purposes, these workers are required to "neutralize" components of their accents reflecting their national/ethnoracial/class backgrounds in an alleged attempt to effectively communicate with interlocutors from around the world.<sup>4</sup> Such sites as call center work highlight that accent is not simply something one has, but also something one does. An accent can be a site of workplace training and the means through which to engage in professional communication. However, it is worthwhile to recognize that this idea of accent-as-doing is not divorced from accent-as-identity.

In other words, speaking with an accent, as a type of doing, *accents* a person. This is not only in the sense of an accent highlighting broad social information about individuals, whether it be their place of birth, first language, or ethnoracial background. It is also about an accent drawing attention to character traits stereotypically tied to a person's social identity.<sup>5</sup> Depending on how one sounds, one might be stereotyped as sexually attractive or unappealing, intelligent or unintelligent, trustworthy or suspicious, and so on. In the context of late capitalism, where



language is a skill, accent can even accent one's employability or professional competence. The obvious problem with this connection is that if one has the "wrong type of accent," it can lead to reduced employment prospects. This scenario is a reality for skilled migrants who seek to establish or further their careers in "native-English-speaking" nations like Canada and the United States, the specific geopolitical context of this chapter.

These migrants are positioned as skilled by the immigration policies of these nations, which perceive their advanced degrees and/or work experience in high-status fields like science, business, or medicine as indicators of their ability to bolster economic growth.<sup>6</sup> While skilled migrants may be highly proficient in the English language, which allows them to work in their host nations, the "foreignness" of their accents is deemed a professional liability. Because their accents are perceived as lacking intelligibility, skilled migrants are typically deemed unable to complete work tasks that require extensive oral communication.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as these migrants become skilled through their credentials, they are simultaneously deskilled through the sound of their voices. This issue has spurred the creation of the so-called accent reduction industry, a type of "reskilling" industry.

Indeed, privatized accent reduction programs, taking the form of either face-to-face or online classes, are essentially employment programs. They operate on the premise that if skilled migrants' accents make them unemployable or underemployed, then "reducing" their accents will rectify the situation. That is, a reduced accent will reskill migrants by allowing them to verbally display their existing knowledge and experience to prospective employers in the Canadian or U.S. job market.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as will be detailed in the next section, this reskilling can even be understood as a medical procedure given how an accent can be framed as a personal affliction to overcome. Returning to the notion of an accent being able to accent, speaking with a reduced accent accents one's employability. Here, the use of *accent* as a verb refers to setting oneself apart from the crowd. Within groups of migrant job seekers who have similar credentials and work experience, professionals with reduced accents gain an additional skill to highlight during a job interview, for example. While accent reduction allegedly allows skilled migrants to accent their worth in the labor market, it is important to ask who or what else is being accented, or even "de-accented," in this practice. If the mandate of the accent reduction industry is to convince clients that a reduced accent increases intelligibility, what linguistic qualities of particular groups must it (de-)emphasize to make its case? Also, if the industry propagates the narrative that a reduced accent is the means to professional success, what ideologies and power structures must it rely on or underplay to present a convincing story?

Acknowledging the fact that racism and its supporting structure of white supremacy (along with other interlocking structures such as capitalism and [settler] colonialism) pervade society, this chapter aims to grapple with the above questions by arguing that accent reduction is not simply about teaching migrants how to speak, but also about teaching them how to speak in accordance with the

racial ordering of society, thereby accenting or reinforcing its power. Thus, accent reduction can be considered a type of raciolinguistic pedagogy, a pedagogy that uses language as a means to normalize racism in its various manifestations. However, accent reduction as raciolinguistic pedagogy does not necessarily happen within the actual learning of how to reduce an accent. Instead, I explore how this pedagogy manifests in accent reduction advertising. Mainly through their websites, accent reduction programs teach prospective clients about what constitutes (ab)normal speech as well as how to vocally exist in relation to racist structures and ideologies.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. After providing further background information on accent reduction by noting some of its pedagogical flaws, I then offer a brief theorization of raciolinguistic pedagogy. This theorizing leads to a discussion of three raciolinguistic lessons that the online advertising of U.S. and Canadian accent reduction programs teach prospective customers. To conclude, I consider what a counterpedagogy to accent reduction might look like.

#### AN INITIAL PROBLEMATIZATION OF ACCENT REDUCTION AS PEDAGOGY

Accent reduction is actually a misnomer. Likely because of the common understanding that there is a “thinginess” to language, accent is often conceived as having “physical properties.”<sup>9</sup> For example, one may have a *thick* or *heavy* accent, which might create a desire to *lose it* altogether. When thinking about accent reduction, then, this practice is akin to getting a haircut: just as people need to trim their hair to make it more manageable to style, they may also “trim” their speech to better manage communication. However, given that accents are (re)created through the interaction of speaker and interlocutor and may change over time, the entire notion of accent reduction is misleading as there is no such thing as a static accent to reduce.<sup>10</sup>

This conceptual problem of accent reduction also makes it pedagogically suspect. If providers of accent reduction services label them as such, then this already highlights that they lack an understanding of how accent works. The fact that *accent reduction* persists as a term speaks to how almost anyone can be an accent reduction provider. Indeed, the accent reduction industry continues to be unregulated and rarely scrutinized, meaning that providers are under no obligation to acquire “necessary” qualifications to teach accent.<sup>11</sup> An expected outcome of this lack of regulation is that there are ample examples of the outrageousness of accent reduction. For instance, programs may claim that they can reduce an accent in a brief period of time while providing no empirical proof, offer pronunciation advice that contradicts research in (applied) linguistics, or be invested in changing an accent simply for the sake of change.<sup>12</sup>

While accent reduction programs are typically characterized by a lack of formal standards regarding pedagogical goals and procedures, the large influx of speech

language pathologists (SLPs) that have entered the industry would suggest that there are also some attempts at professionalization. On the surface, this point is evidenced by SLPs' advanced knowledge of articulatory phonetics, which could prove useful in identifying pronunciation issues, and the tendency of many SLPs to label their services as accent *modification* rather than reduction, demonstrating a recognition of the conceptual inaccuracy of the latter term.<sup>13</sup> Yet there are also problems with SLPs being accent reduction providers. To begin, although they may be able to *diagnose* problems with pronunciation, SLPs generally do not have language teaching credentials and thus may not know how to rectify these problems.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the premise that SLPs can diagnose the alleged deficiencies of an accent in the first place speaks to how they may frame accent as an abnormality.<sup>15</sup> In fact, if SLPs are responsible for treating speech disorders and include accent reduction as one of their specialties, then it becomes difficult not to perceive accent as some sort of pathology.

One reason SLPs have entered the accent reduction industry is money. Due to government funding cuts in healthcare and the increased migration of "foreign-accented" workers to the Global North, SLPs have discovered that accent reduction is an effective means to generate income.<sup>16</sup> This leads to yet another problem with accent reduction as pedagogy: its elitist nature. Accent reduction is not cheap. Depending on the program, clients may have to spend hundreds to thousands of dollars to have their accents reduced.<sup>17</sup> These steep prices reflect the target clientele of accent reduction. This service is not directed toward low-paid care and service workers, but rather migrants situated in elite professions such as business and engineering, or those who "truly" enhance the U.S. and Canadian economies.<sup>18</sup> For these migrants, accent reduction is a means to further enhance their professional worth in the globalized marketplace.

At this point, it is tempting to end the discussion on the pedagogical problems of accent reduction with a simple acknowledgment that it sustains class hierarchies among migrants. But this is not the end of the story. Returning to the earlier point about the pervasiveness of racism and white supremacy in society, accent reduction is not an exception. According to Ibram X. Kendi, when it comes to any idea, action, or policy there is no such thing as being race-neutral; it is either racist or antiracist.<sup>19</sup> Racist ideas, actions, and policies promote the superiority or inferiority of ethnoracial groups and/or sustain material inequities between these groups, while antiracist ideas, actions, and policies do the opposite.<sup>20</sup> What needs to be emphasized here is that when something is labeled as racist, it is not always about intent but rather, inaction or a failure to recognize. The tendency of accent reduction programs to treat accent as a disorder is useful to explain this point. Given that there is ample evidence highlighting how accent discrimination acts as a proxy for racism, the framing of accent as needing "treatment" reinforces the idea that those who experience racism on account of their accents should expect such oppression since they are "unwell" linguistically.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, at least in this

sense, accent reduction programs are racist enterprises because they fail to consider how their medicalization of accent can be used to justify racism. How or if accent reduction can become antiracist will be addressed later in the chapter. For now, its racist nature is further explored with a description of it being a type of raciolinguistic pedagogy.

### THEORIZING RACIOLINGUISTIC PEDAGOGY

Raciolinguistic pedagogy uses language as a means to normalize racism. To appreciate this point, it is first necessary to recognize how language has been interconnected with race and racism, which entails looking at colonial and nationalist histories and presents.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in the settler colonial context of Canada, for instance, the racial hierarchies in the nation, with the British and French at the top and Indigenous and racially minoritized people at the bottom, was and is sustained through the hierarchization of language: English and French have been the dominant languages of Canadian public life, while those of Indigenous and racially minoritized people have been relegated to the private realm.<sup>23</sup> With regard to the construction of the “Standard American accent” in the United States as another example, this accent was and is believed to reside within the voices of people in the mostly white Midwest rather than those living in the ethnoracially heterogeneous parts of the country.<sup>24</sup>

What makes this intertwining of language and race possible are raciolinguistic ideologies. A term coined by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa, raciolinguistic ideologies represent the language practices of racially minoritized groups as forever deviant based on their racialization in society instead of according to any sort of objective assessment of these practices.<sup>25</sup> These ideologies are products of European colonialism, which deemed the “inferiority” of colonized peoples’ language practices proof of their racial inferiority, and, moreover, are typically embodied in a white listening subject.<sup>26</sup> Being part of a larger white perceiving subject that frames the different modalities of racially minoritized people’s language practices as deficient, the white listening subject, as Flores and Rosa argue, “should be understood not as a biographical individual but as an ideological position and mode of perception that shapes our racialized society.”<sup>27</sup> This means that it can reside within the cognition of racially minoritized individuals as well as manifest on the meso/macro level with such things as institutional policies and practices.<sup>28</sup> For instance, as numerous studies on accent discrimination in the workplace would suggest, hiring practices can adopt a white-listening-subject position by “hearing” the accents of white applicants as better sounding or more employable than those of their nonwhite peers.<sup>29</sup> Such an example highlights how raciolinguistic ideologies have material consequences.

To connect the above discussion to raciolinguistic pedagogy, some refinements must be made with regard to defining this pedagogy. First, raciolinguistic

pedagogy teaches raciolinguistic ideologies. Specifically, it transforms people into white listening subjects who hear the speech of the racial Other, which might include themselves, as automatically flawed. Second, given that there are real costs when racially minoritized people do not “sound right,” this pedagogy reinforces the notion that the alleged linguistic deficiencies of these people are the main factor determining the material inequalities that they face. Thus, returning to employment once again, unemployment is not attributed to racist hiring practices, for example, but rather to speech that sounds “unprofessional.” As can be gleaned, the purpose of raciolinguistic pedagogy is to maintain the status quo. It is about normalizing racist, white supremacist structures and practices by focusing on the “faults” of those who experience oppression from these forces. Another important point to note here is that raciolinguistic pedagogy operates in tandem with other systems of oppression. For instance, the idea that racially minoritized people need to correct their language practices to find work relates to neoliberal ideologies of self-improvement in which job seekers must continually “upgrade” themselves to satisfy the demands of capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

While raciolinguistic pedagogy certainly happens in formal schooling, where racially minoritized youth come to learn that their language practices are seemingly inadequate for academic study, it occurs outside the classroom as well.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, raciolinguistic pedagogy is a type of public pedagogy. Manifesting in a range of sites, including popular culture, trips to museums, and witnessing or participating in social movements, public pedagogy acknowledges how we all engage in daily informal learning through which we come to understand ourselves and the world around us.<sup>32</sup> Recognizing public pedagogy as being raciolinguistic in nature means that our informal learning can further normalize hegemonic understandings of language as it relates to race and racism. In the classic book *English with an Accent*, for example, Rosina Lippi-Green details how the accent portrayals of animated characters in Disney movies particularly reinforce stereotypes of African Americans by associating “Black accents” with aggression and danger.<sup>33</sup> When one is repeatedly exposed to such sonic representations without developing any sort of critical media literacy, it becomes very difficult not to engage in racial stereotyping on the basis of speech.

Understanding accent reduction as a particular site of public raciolinguistic pedagogy entails examining the specific hegemonic power of advertising. Looking at the U.S. context, Shalini Shankar notes that advertising has always served as a medium for white supremacy as exemplified by multinational corporations’ most recent promotion of “diversity,” which converts race and ethnicity into apolitical differences and upholds middle-class whiteness as a universal norm and consumer goal.<sup>34</sup> What makes advertising a particularly useful vehicle for perpetuating white supremacy or any other oppressive system is its creation of desire. The purpose of advertising is to make consumers feel inadequate without possessing a certain product, which creates a need to purchase it. This longing for a product then creates the opportunity for consumers to *buy into* certain ideologies of

oppression associated with the product. Regarding accent reduction advertising, then, the appeal of having a reduced accent involves an identification with the various language ideologies tied to the service, some of which are raciolinguistic. For example, racially minoritized migrants who experience accent discrimination at work may perceive stock images of ethnoracially similar customers on accent reduction websites as evidence that 1) their particular type of accent is inherently flawed for work, and (2) it is possible for them to achieve the accent that they have always wanted.<sup>35</sup>

The remainder of this chapter details how accent reduction programs in Canada and the United States teach prospective clients to buy into raciolinguistic ideologies while promoting their services. Such teaching is largely a result of how these programs advertise themselves on their websites, which can range from generic descriptions of services or owner biographies to detailed blog posts providing pronunciation advice or justifications for accent reduction. In these advertisements, raciolinguistic pedagogy takes the form of three interrelated lessons for prospective clients as well as readers seeking to understand the racism of accent reduction: there are racialized contradictions when it comes to accent advice; accent justifies and obscures racism; and, finally, professional success depends on accent. Because I draw on examples from select accent reduction companies to explain these lessons, an argument could be made that this essay does not represent the views or practices of the entire accent reduction industry. However, if one remembers that there is no such thing as being race-neutral, it becomes clear that the programs' inaction in combatting raciolinguistic pedagogy makes them complicit in perpetuating racism, even if they do not explicitly teach these lessons. Indeed, although speaking of language teaching in general, Suhanthie Motha, drawing on the insights of Ibram X. Kendi, outlines the problem when an accent reduction company states that its services have nothing to do with race and racism: "The words [they] are speaking are (1) not anti-racist, because they do not confront racial inequality; (2) not racially neutral, because racial neutrality does not exist; which leaves only the last option: (3) racist, that is through their denial they perpetuate racial inequality."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the accent reduction industry cannot disidentify with the arguments of this essay unless it can explicitly prove that it has countered each of the raciolinguistic lessons that are described below.

#### LESSON ONE: THE RACIALIZED CONTRADICTIONS OF ACCENT ADVICE

To stay in business, accent reduction programs need to create insecurities among their potential clients. This means convincing them that their seemingly normal manner of speech is deficient. This can occur in blog posts, which allow companies to target specific clientele by providing extended descriptions of their pronunciation problems. From a raciolinguistic perspective, a byproduct of these blog posts

is that the accents of racially minoritized people can be deemed deviant in spite of evidence showing otherwise. Consider this blog post by Packard Communications, which gives advice for Chinese speakers of English regarding their problem with pronouncing multisyllabic words: “Monosyllabic words, or words consisting of only one syllable, are the norm for Chinese speakers. However, in English, there are longer words with more syllables. Because of this difference, Chinese speakers of English might ‘reduce’ English words with multiple syllables.”<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the irony of an accent reduction company being concerned about people *reducing* their pronunciation of certain words, which is actually about the deletion of syllables in multisyllabic English words, the primary issue with Packard Communications’ linguistic assessment of Chinese speakers is that this deletion is not unique to these speakers. All speakers of English, including those whom we might call “native speakers,” delete syllables in longer words on a daily basis. For example, in U.S. English, which Packard Communications teaches, a word like “comfortable” is often heard without the “-or” or, at the very least, with a weak-sounding “-or.” The point to emphasize here is that if Chinese speakers of English engage in an identical phonological practice as white native speakers of U.S. English, then it is necessary to question the very need to change such a practice in the first place.

First, it is worth considering how the specific raciolinguistic pedagogy that Packard Communications is teaching its prospective Chinese customers relates to the perception of Chinese people in the U.S. context. Specifically, due to the stereotypical understanding of Chinese and other Asian people being “perpetual foreigners” in the United States, even if they were born and raised in the country, they are simultaneously seen as “foreign” to the ostensible national language, English.<sup>38</sup> If Chinese speakers are always thought to be “nonnative” to English, which then carries assumptions about their “deficiency” in the language, it is likely that the white listening subject, as located in Packard Communications’ advice, will never acknowledge the existing phonological competence of these speakers. What is further noteworthy about this advice is how it refutes the notion of English nativeness as being a neutral skill to master. By being able to delete syllables in longer words, for example, Chinese migrants can accent their employability, that is, that they are already skilled because they display an element of “native-like” speech. Yet Packard Communications’ advice highlights that nativeness is racially determined. Depending on one’s racial categorization, “sounding native” is not something that can be easily attained.

Aside from ignoring how racially minoritized English speakers might already sound the same as their privileged white counterparts (as seen with Packard Communications), another instance of the racialized contradictions of accent advice concerns the erasure of different varieties of English around the world. This is notably seen in the frequent highlighting of the English *th* sounds as being a pronunciation issue for those needing accent reduction. The /θ/ phoneme, as in the



word *think*, and /ð/, as in the word *there*, are typically deemed problematic for clients who do not have these sounds in their first languages. Regarding the first *th* phoneme, the owner of Accent Reduction Now provides an example of this point in a blog post giving advice on pronouncing the phoneme: “The last way that I find people mispronouncing this sound would be pronouncing it as a ‘T’ so we would have ‘tink’ instead of ‘think’ and ‘tum’ instead of ‘thumb.’”<sup>39</sup>

Even though many who read this observation will perceive it as benign, the framing of *tink* as a *mispronunciation* of *think*, for instance, becomes a way to delegitimize varieties of English that do use the former pronunciation. Because Accent Reduction Now is based in the United States, where many may believe that /θ/ is the expected phoneme to use when pronouncing *think*, it uses its geographical location to dismiss the English pronunciation of areas such as the Caribbean. Indeed, a range of Caribbean Englishes are known to not use either /θ/ or /ð/ in everyday speech, and communication does not suffer as a result. This erasure of pronunciation variation found in Caribbean Englishes has to be understood in relation to race and colonialism.

Caribbean Englishes did not emerge out of nowhere. They are products of British colonialism in which Black and brown people were forced to use English and view it as superior to their own languages in the context of formal schooling. Yet since these Englishes were and are believed to be “corrupted” versions of British English, their speakers are often seen as illegitimate users of English and, furthermore, are not even recognized as native speakers.<sup>40</sup> Due to this historical and contemporary dismissal of the English language competence of people from the Caribbean, it should not be surprising that companies like Accent Reduction Now fail to consider them when giving advice about *th* sounds.

## LESSON TWO: ACCENT JUSTIFIES AND OBSCURES RACISM

While the raciolinguistic pedagogy of accent reduction naturalizes racialized notions of right and wrong pronunciation, it also naturalizes racism itself by understanding accent as the sole problem of un(der)employment. In other words, while this raciolinguistic lesson accents or gives prominence to accent as the prime issue of employment, it simultaneously de-accent the role of racism, which means underplaying its role in employment discrimination. What is particularly brazen about the lesson concerns how accent reduction programs will openly acknowledge the existence of accent discrimination while teaching the lesson. For instance, in the following blog post offering commentary on a study showing employer bias against certain accents, which is likely geared toward potential clients who may have reservations about accent reduction, Canadian company Change Your Accent underplays this bias by focusing on the allegedly dire professional consequences of having an unintelligible accent:



Recent research indicates that an ethnic or foreign accent might work against people, and that an unconscious bias against accents may exist when companies hire. . . . In this day and age, it should be a given that HR professionals should be aware that unconscious bias—including bias against accents—exists and is a real problem. But what happens if a brilliant doctor can't be understood because of an accent? Should a hospital hire the doctor if their communication skills are not strong enough to convey critical information?<sup>41</sup>

How can *Change Your Accent* decry accent bias and dismiss it at the same time? One way to understand this contradiction is to consider that the company views “bias” and “miscommunication” as separate from one another. In other words, if a doctor's accent prevents them from being understood or from conveying vital information to a patient, this is the result of genuine misunderstandings rather than biased perceptions of the doctor. Yet there is ample evidence supporting the idea that when an interlocutor knows the ethnoracial identity of a speaker, this knowledge will inform the former's perception of the latter's speech.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, *Change Your Accent* never acknowledges the possibility that failures in professional communication are not due to the acoustic qualities of an accent but are rather a result of the racist perceptions of its speaker.

Moreover, the company's mention of bias quickly returning to fearmongering about having an “ethnic” or “foreign” accent at work once again speaks of the need to create linguistic insecurity among its prospective customers. The juxtaposition of the concern about bias with a series of rhetorical questions about the potentially devastating effects of not reducing one's accent tells clients that even if their experiences of professional miscommunication are due to bias, it is nevertheless up to them to resolve the situation through accent reduction. In the end, then, *Change Your Accent* justifies perceptual, interpersonal racism by entangling it within the seemingly practical need to communicate clearly in the workplace.

Of course, racism does not operate solely on the micro level in terms of perceptions and interactions. It additionally forms the foundation of institutional and structural processes that materially disadvantage racially minoritized people. Accent reduction programs are culpable in obscuring this fact through linking migrants' employment prospects to their accents. In fact, this is exemplified by the central premise of accent reduction as noted by *Accent Clear*, which prominently describes its clientele for those landing on the home page of its website: “Foreign-born Professionals needing to improve their pronunciation so they can work successfully in Canada or advance in their careers.”<sup>43</sup>

The fundamental problem with this statement lies in what is unsaid: that securing or advancing a career in Canada is not guaranteed through a simple change in accent. Instead, migrant professionals also have to navigate a series of structural barriers to find work. For example, they might have to deal with their employers' dismissal of their prior work experience because it was not based in Canada, or

they might need to fight a series of regulatory bodies to have their credentials recognized in the country. Furthermore, these employment barriers are clearly racialized since they tend to specifically disadvantage racially minoritized professionals coming from the Global South.<sup>44</sup> By framing (a lack of) employability as located in the accented voice, companies like Accent Clear help to mask and ultimately uphold the institutional and structural racism that truly hinders many migrants in their employment journeys.

This example from Accent Clear also reflects the influence of neoliberalism in preserving racism at the structural level. Specifically, it reinforces the neoliberal notion that professional obstacles can be overcome with active measures to improve oneself, whether that means improving one's accent or some other individual trait, rather than questioning the racist structures that create these obstacles in the first place.<sup>45</sup> In its seemingly apolitical statement about its target customers, then, Accent Clear retells the familiar narrative of hard work becoming the means to make racism structurally irrelevant in the realm of work and beyond. But this narrative is not only neoliberal in nature; it is also a manifestation of the ideology of meritocracy, which further cements the power of racism and white supremacy and is the subject of the following section.

### LESSON THREE: PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS DEPENDS ON ACCENT

The final raciolinguistic lesson that accent reduction advertising teaches the potential client echoes the previous lesson but takes on a more positive tone. It is not simply about stating how an accent may negatively affect employment, but rather how it may act as a tool for achieving success in one's professional life. This is exemplified in the personal story of Yao, the Chinese owner of Accent Ready, who credits his accent for the global opportunities he has had and whose biography on the company website seems to be meant as a source of inspiration for potential customers looking to investigate Yao's "credentials" as an accent reduction provider:

Yao was frustrated at being singled-out [at school] just because of the way he spoke, and began to carefully study the accents of his tormentors. . . . News anchors were particularly inspiring, and after hours of practice Yao found himself able to replicate an educated Chinese accent. This skill paid off handsomely, and Yao was hired as a newscaster on a local radio station. . . . After obtaining a degree in English literature, Yao was hired by the Canadian Consulate as a linguistics specialist. This led to a stint in France, where he achieved accent-free fluency in the language in just ten months. . . . Yao now attended Parisian parties and smiled as his native hosts asked which part of the city he'd grown up in. . . . The human voice box is an instrument unlike any other, and one that can unlock an entire world of opportunities for those who wish to master it.<sup>46</sup>

While Yao should certainly feel proud of his achievements, the final statement that the voice box can be mastered is problematic. Even if we accept the assertion that accent is a trainable instrument, this does not escape the fact that manipulating an accent is constrained by an audience. For example, Yao's careful observation of his bullies' accents highlights that there are limits to mastering an accent, that is, it has to conform to what an audience considers acceptable speech, which might be its own. Therefore, one does not have as much agency in manipulating an accent as Accent Ready would like their potential customers to believe.

The social constraints of mastering the voice box are further highlighted when one examines the notion that accent is the key to opportunity, especially in a white supremacist world. Indeed, from a critical race perspective, the notion that opportunity is simply created vocally upholds the myth of meritocracy. As the notion that one's success or failure in life is dependent on the amount of effort that one is willing to exert rather than the power of societal institutions and structures, meritocracy is yet another means to uphold white supremacy since it promulgates the narrative that race is irrelevant in forging paths in either the personal or professional realm.<sup>47</sup> As someone who is racialized as Chinese yet has managed to work internationally and even open his own accent reduction business, Yao serves as an example of the reality of meritocracy.

However, upon thinking more carefully about Yao's biography, one cannot ignore how his success involved emulating whiteness. As whiteness is not simply about white bodies but also about language and culture, it is important to note that Yao's professional success entailed him learning English and French, two languages that have come to dominate the world through the political influence of white people.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, as seen in his reference to his time in France, where his "accent-free" French allowed him to attend Parisian parties, which connote sophistication and opulence, Yao's access to such elite spaces seemingly relied on him "sounding native," thereby highlighting how he needed to aurally match the other native/white speakers of the metropole. Therefore, if Yao's social mobility is tied to his accent, this accent is supposed to align with a cultural whiteness that permeates professional and other social spaces.

The mention of Yao's ability to be in elite spaces also speaks to the dismissal of social class in a meritocracy. Although Yao's agency in advancing his own career cannot be denied, it is hard not to speculate about whether his socioeconomic background helped him along the way. For instance, did Yao's parents have the money to give him an elite education, and thus ample opportunities to practice the English language? Also, while working as a newscaster or linguistics specialist, did Yao network with prominent people who might have opened up additional opportunities for him to further his career? These questions are meant to point out that it becomes easier to believe the irrelevance of race and racism in a meritocracy when one has the socioeconomic means to do so. Given that the potential clients of Accent Ready would be those who have a background similar to Yao's and also

just need a phonological boost to jump-start their careers in a new country, they are a likely audience to buy into this argument.

### CONCLUSION: ARTICULATING A COUNTERPEDAGOGY

As this chapter has detailed, accent reduction as raciolinguistic pedagogy teaches skilled migrants that in accenting their employability through a reduced accent, they also have to accept how accent remains an auditory means to uphold racism in its various forms. This requires understanding that the accents of racially minoritized people are perpetually deficient sounding, interpersonal and structural racism are permitted and disappear through accent, and accent is a means to socioeconomic success. While there are likely additional raciolinguistic lessons to explore, an articulation of a counterpedagogy to accent reduction is needed. Imagining a counterpedagogy does not mean envisioning how accent reduction providers can reform their industry. Rather, it involves all other actors who interact with migrant job seekers, ranging from migrant-serving organizations to employers, working together to expose how accent sustains racism. Finally, while speculative and by no means exhaustive, the following ideas for a counterpedagogy are meant to open up thinking about the different forms this pedagogy should take in order to combat the raciolinguistic messaging of accent reduction.

One such form of a counterpedagogy is antiracist activism. This activism is not about changing hearts and minds, but rather about changing policies and power at the meso and macro level.<sup>49</sup> This means that a counterpedagogy to accent reduction is less interested in changing individual perceptions of accents and more interested in changing institutionally mediated perceptions that materially disadvantage particular types of accented workers. This counterpedagogy is not for skilled migrants struggling to find employment, but instead it is for places of employment that must be taught new ways of institutional listening. Whether it is through community organizing and protests started by migrant-serving organizations or members of these organizations providing antiracist workplace training, places of employment must come to recognize how individual listening practices are determined through institutional processes. For instance, regarding racist hiring practices on the basis of accent, it is necessary to go beyond the personal prejudice of interviewers by considering that their decisions are shaped by the nature of the work for which they are assessing applicants. In other words, a position requiring “excellent communication skills” is an invitation to draw on ideological criteria because the conceptualization of “excellence” is inherently subjective. What is needed, then, is for employers to engage in a critical imaginative listening in which they consider how different types of accented voices can be either privileged or disadvantaged in their conceptions of how work is defined, who should be able to do it, and so forth. Additionally, this listening, as a type of antiracist

practice, is always a work in progress. Because being racist and antiracist are not fixed but rather fluctuating positions, employers must remain constantly vigilant when it comes to the development of hiring and other policies, which can signal a return to racism.<sup>50</sup>

While a counterpedagogy can be concerned with reform, as noted above with regard to changing institutional practices, it must also be committed to dismantling. As this chapter has shown, accent is utilized to obscure the structural racism that can truly hinder the job prospects of skilled migrants. Even when accent is understood in relation to the formation of racial hierarchies of speakers, it can become an audible distraction from other racialized barriers such as professional associations not recognizing one's credentials. Through public awareness campaigns delinking accent from employability combined with lobbying government officials to do away with certain regulations pertaining to skilled migration, which can be led by migrant-serving organizations once again or even professional associations themselves, a counterpedagogy has to identify and eliminate institutional barriers that actually obstruct migrant employment.

Finally, a counterpedagogy to accent reduction must directly challenge accent reduction itself. Because accent reduction might be considered a type of language teaching, language teachers in other sectors, such as migrant settlement programs, need to warn migrants about the inherent problems of this predatory industry. This means actively questioning the tenets of accent reduction. For instance, if a migrant is swayed by the message that a reduced accent enhances intelligibility, their language teacher might highlight that such a message does not account for how one's racialization can affect perceptions of intelligibility. Rather than attempting to reform accent reduction programs, however, a counterpedagogy will question the need for their existence. Given that accent reduction is a product of and reproduces neoliberal understandings of workers needing to "improve" themselves and (settler) colonial white supremacy that requires all to conform to white cultural and political power, is it truly worthwhile to reimagine the industry, especially if it still commits to treating accent, with its intimate ties to race and racism, as a problem? Perhaps abolishing accent reduction is the best way to work toward an antiracist, anticolonial, and anticapitalist agenda with regard to accent. This is a point that should be accented.

## NOTES

1. Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," 211.
2. Heller, "The Commodification of Language," 106–7.
3. Although the focus of this chapter concerns speech accents, this is not to say that all accents are produced through speech.
4. See, for example, Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*.
5. Agha, "The Social Life of Cultural Value," 232–33.
6. Boucher, "How 'Skill' Definition Affects the Diversity of Skilled Immigration Policies," 2538–42.

7. Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business," 528.
8. While this chapter is situated in the U.S./Canadian context, accent reduction programs also exist in other English-speaking and migrant-receiving countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia.
9. Silverstein, "Monoglot 'Standard' in America," 290–91.
10. Bhatia, "Accent, Intelligibility, Mental Health, and Trauma," 425.
11. Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business," 535 ; Thomson, "Myth 6," 175.
12. Derwing and Munro, *Pronunciation Fundamentals*, 154–58.
13. Thomson, "Myth 6," 178.
14. Thomson, "Myth 6," 176.
15. Derwing and Munro, *Pronunciation Fundamentals*, 161–64.
16. Newman, "Accent," 61.
17. Thomson, "Myth 6," 171–72.
18. Blommaert, "A Market of Accents," 252.
19. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 18–20.
20. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 18–20.
21. See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*.
22. Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language," 623–27.
23. See Haque, *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework*.
24. See Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American*.
25. Flores and Rosa, "Undoing Appropriateness," 150; Rosa and Flores, "Raciolinguistic Perspective," 623.
26. Rosa and Flores, "Raciolinguistic Perspective," 623–28.
27. Flores and Rosa, "Undoing Appropriateness," 151. The white listening subject is similar to the "listening ear" in Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, which describes how sonic information is interpreted through aural perceptions shaped by ideologies of whiteness (13).
28. Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language," 630.
29. See Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business."
30. Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," 212.
31. See Flores and Rosa, "Undoing Appropriateness," for examples of how raciolinguistic ideologies permeate the (language) classroom.
32. Sandlin, Redmon Wright, and Clark, "Reexamining Theories of Adult Learning and Adult Development through the Lenses of Public Pedagogy," 4–7.
33. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 122.
34. See Shankar, "Nothing Sells Like Whiteness."
35. See Blommaert, "A Market of Accents."
36. Motha, "Is an Antiracist and Decolonizing Applied Linguistics Possible?," 130.
37. Packard Communications, "Most Common Pronunciation Errors for Chinese Speakers Learning English."
38. Reyes, "The Voicing of Asian American Figures," 311.
39. Accent Reduction Now, "How to Pronounce 'TH' Sounds."
40. Nero, "The Changing Faces of English," 486.
41. Change Your Accent, "Foreign Accents, Bias and Jobs."
42. See Rubin, "Nonlanguage Factors Affecting Undergraduates' Judgments of Nonnative English-Speaking Teaching Assistants," for a well-cited example of how when an Asian person speaks with the same "native English accent" as a white person, the former is perceived as "foreign sounding" and hard to understand.
43. Accent Clear, "Effective Accent Reduction Training in Toronto and Across Ontario."
44. See Ku et al., "'Canadian Experience' Discourse and Anti-racialism in a 'Post-racial' Society"; Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business."

45. Ku et al., “‘Canadian Experience’ Discourse and Anti-racialism in a ‘Post-racial’ Society,” 304.
46. Accent Clear, “About Me.”
47. Miller, “Meritocracy and the Maintenance of Order,” 78.
48. See, for example, Haque, *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework*.
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## From “Handicap” to Crip Curb Cut

### *Thinking Accent with Disability*

Pooja Rangan

While reading Rosina Lippi-Green’s classic book *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* in its most recent edition, from 2012, I began to take stock of every occurrence of the word “handicap.” The word seemed to be designed to stand out; indeed, for Lippi-Green, “handicap” serves a rhetorical function, of emphasizing, highlighting, or calling out aspects of the experience of speaking with an accent.<sup>1</sup> I soon realized this was a common trend: accent scholars persistently rely on disability as a metaphor for impairment but they rarely think about why. While “speaking with an accent” is not universally understood as a linguistic “handicap,” it is in much of the Anglophone world, and that is how it is framed in much contemporary U.S. ethnic studies and postcolonial accent scholarship. I also realized that the metalinguistic exercise of indexing where and in what form disability appears in a few field-shaping examples of accent studies could teach us something about disability’s role in navigating the experience of accent.

Accent and disability share important epistemological ground. Both serve as sites of dis/identification for collectivities whose defining feature is heterogeneity. Scholars of accent and disability share an investment in theorizing the survival strategies employed by stigmatized people caught between compromised sites of identification. They make a case, respectively, for accentedness and disability as ordinary rather than exceptional, and they reveal the phantasmatic and discriminatory logics of compulsory language standards (or what linguists call “standard language ideologies”) and compulsory able-bodiedness.<sup>2</sup> The ableist use of disability metaphors in accent studies misses the opportunity to understand the complexly entangled, mutually constituted, and sometimes simultaneous experiences of becoming accented and becoming disabled in a manner that is more affirming and capacious of difference.

Thinking accent alongside disability scholars and activists, I trace a spectrum of conservative and radical apprehensions, *melancholic*, *accommodational*, and *coalitional*, not only of accent but also of the social world. I do not view these modes of thinking accent through disability as mutually exclusive or as evolutionary stages in a progress narrative so much as tendencies preoccupied with distinct psychological, infrastructural, and political economies. The exercise of mapping their differences moves us toward an understanding of disability as framed by feminist-of-color disability scholars: as a social system and relationship to power that intersects with and is mutually constituted by other social identities (like accent) in ways that can be capacitating or debilitating. Accent, like disability, represents minoritarian noncompliance and expertise from this vantage, and a demand for a world in which embodied difference is valuable—a world that minoritized and multiply minoritized people can only build in coalition.

#### ACCENT AS "HANDICAP," OR, THINKING MELANCHOLICALLY

First published in 1997 between two other pioneering interventions (Mari Matsuda's 1991 study of accent and antidiscrimination law and John Baugh's 2003 work on Black English and linguistic profiling), Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* was the first monograph to theorize accent as a site of discrimination in U.S. courtrooms, workplaces, classrooms, and the housing market.<sup>3</sup> It is worth spending some time with this book not only because Lippi-Green's definition of accent is one of the most-cited reference points in sociological studies of language practices, but also because it lays the foundation for a prevailing *melancholic* mode of understanding of accent as an individual impairment to which a number of accent scholars across the humanities and social sciences still subscribe.

Accents, for Lippi-Green, are "loose bundles" of phonological features, whether prosodic (intonation, pitch contours, stress patterns, tempo, upswings and downswings, etc.) or segmental (how vowels and consonants are pronounced), that convey meaning about the speaker's geographic and social status.<sup>4</sup> Lippi-Green argues that every English speaker has an accent. "Native" English speakers have what linguists call an L1 accent that is typically "marked" by clusters of features associated with the speaker's region as well as with other elements of social identity such as "gender, race, ethnicity, income, religion" (disability is not mentioned in this list). What is commonly called a "foreign" accent is an L2 accent, that is, the audible trace of native language phonology when a native speaker of one language or language variety (dialect) acquires another.<sup>5</sup> Lippi-Green's phonological definition of accent has so thoroughly infiltrated contemporary scholarship on accent across a range of fields and media forms that it is now regarded as axiomatic that accent is

phonological, as opposed to visual, textual, gestural, or otherwise multimodal, as several contributors to this volume argue.

Lippi-Green employs disability as a metaphor for the ontological and ideological violence of standard language ideologies (or what she calls the myth of “non-accent”) that give rise to discrimination against nonstandard and nonnative accents, even as disability as an actual sociopolitical experience is not discussed in her book. Following are three symptomatic examples of how she uses “handicap” as a metaphor for nonstandard or nonnative English accents:

- 1) First, a speculative scenario: On the very first page of her book Lippi-Green asks us to imagine a fictional United States in which all adults of a given gender are physically identical in height and weight. A law is proposed to prosecute deviations from this norm such that anyone who is taller or heavier than the dictated standards “must be labeled handicapped” or else face charges for violating the law.<sup>6</sup> Standards for spoken or written language, Lippi-Green argues, are equally absurd and equally discriminatory.
- 2) Second, a piece of testimonial evidence: Lippi-Green quotes a speech pathologist who testified on behalf of a radio station that denied a promotion to a bilingual speaker of English and Hawai’ian Creole English who sued his employer and lost: “I urgently recommend [Mr. Kahakua] seek professional help in striving to lessen this handicap . . . *Pidgin can be controlled*. And if an individual is totally committed to improving, professional help on a long-term basis can produce results.”<sup>7</sup> The notion that everyone can, if they try hard enough, acquire a clean, pure, and variation-free language, Lippi-Green argues, is both scientifically untrue and ideologically pernicious.
- 3) Third, an analogy: “Think of all the sounds which can be produced and perceived by the human vocal apparatus as a set of building materials,” writes Lippi-Green.<sup>8</sup> “There is a finite set of potentially meaning-bearing sounds (vowels, consonants, tones) which can be produced by [the] human vocal apparatus. The set in its entirety is universal, available to all human beings without physical handicap.”<sup>9</sup> She continues, “Now think of the language acquisition process as a newborn child begins to build a *Sound House*. The Sound House is the “home” of the language, or what we have been calling *accent*—the phonology of the child’s native tongue. At birth, the child is in the Sound House warehouse, where a full inventory of possible materials is available to her.”<sup>10</sup> Over time, however, the inventory—blueprints, tools, bricks, wood, and so on—begins to dwindle. A twenty-year-old English speaker may struggle to build a second Spanish Sound House while her little sister does so perfectly with no apparent effort. “Adult language learners,” Lippi-Green explains, “all have the same handicap in learning a second language: the blueprints have faded to near illegibility, and the tools are rusted.”<sup>11</sup> The author concludes that there is a *physiological* reason why some people cannot speak mainstream English.

In each of these instances "handicap," understood as an individual embodied deficit or impairment, functions as a rhetorical device (speculation, evidence, or analogy) in support of the book's central claim. That claim is that we have a limited degree of control over language, so demanding that someone lose their native phonology—their accent—or acquire a new one, is akin to an order that they "grow four inches, or, and more controversially, change the color of their skin."<sup>12</sup> Lippi-Green repeatedly employs such rhetorical moves to dramatize the obstacles and disadvantages faced by accented English speakers in a variety of institutional contexts.<sup>13</sup> Her argument, in its simplest form, is that nonnative or nonstandard accents are a "handicap."

What is important to note here is that Lippi-Green confines the meaning of accent to the utterances of the speaker rather than the perception and judgment of the listener (an oversight she acknowledges later in the text).<sup>14</sup> The same impulse of individualizing and anatomizing a phenomenon that is experientially relational and comparative informs her understanding of disability as a "handicap." For decades now, people with disabilities have preferred the terms "disability," "disabled people," and "people with disabilities" (which frame disability as a political category and experience shaped not just by bodies but by social structures and attitudes) to "handicapped" (which frames disability as a physical, physiological, or mental disadvantage, deficiency, or impediment that hinders normal achievement).<sup>15</sup> The earliest uses of the word "handicap" date to sixteenth-century England, when disabled veterans unable to find jobs resorted to begging for alms "cap in hand," a practice legalized by Henry VII. In his foundational book *Stigma: On the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman writes that "handicap" is synonymous with "stigma," which he defines as a discrediting attribute that marks its bearer as bad, dangerous, or weak.<sup>16</sup> *Stigma*, in Greek, means "to prick or to puncture"; the word originally referred to a sharp instrument used to brand or mark enslaved and incarcerated people to signify their fallen status. Disability studies has largely retired stigma as an analytical framework in part because the individualizing and bleak terms in which Goffman defines its contemporary categories ("abominations of the body," "blemishes of individual character," and "tribal stigmas of race, nation, and religion") reinforce the exclusion of the stigmatized person.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, these are the categories invoked by Lippi-Green when she frames denigrated accents not as a *disability*—that is, as a collective political category—but as a "handicap" that sets an individual speaker apart from other members of a social group. If an accent is an accent because it stands apart from the norm, then disability—understood as stigma, or an individual discrediting difference, especially an apparent one—*supplies an accent* to her theory of accent.

Disability experience is infrequently mentioned and rarely elaborated in recent books engaging with issues of accent in the fields of sociolinguistics,<sup>18</sup> raciolinguistics,<sup>19</sup> musicology,<sup>20</sup> postcolonial theory,<sup>21</sup> anthropology,<sup>22</sup> and sound studies.<sup>23</sup>

But reliance on the stigma of disability as a metaphor for discrediting accents is common in accent studies. In their landmark study of disability metaphors in literary narratives, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe this maneuver as a “discursive dependency on disability.”<sup>24</sup> Disabled bodies lend flesh to fact, a tangibility to abstract ideas or experiences.<sup>25</sup> Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability satisfies a basic preoccupation of narrative, supplying an aberrancy that narrative sets out to resolve, correct, or prostheticize.<sup>26</sup> Take, for instance, Hans Christian Andersen’s well-loved children’s story *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, in which a little boy, upon receiving a box of tin soldiers as a birthday gift, realizes that one of the soldiers is missing a leg. The perceived abnormality of the missing leg stands apart from and seemingly signifies the very collapse of the normal order. It supplies a lack that calls the story of the one-legged tin soldier’s inspiring adventures into being; one might say it is the crutch upon which the narrative relies for its symbolic and analytical inventions.<sup>27</sup>

Disability inaugurates theory—certainly accent theory—as much as it inaugurates narrative.<sup>28</sup> Consider, for instance, recent monographs by Jonathan Rosa (a sociologist) and Rey Chow (a literary scholar). Like Lippi-Green (a linguist), Rosa and Chow demonstrate how the *visibly* disabled body enables theory by spectacularly materializing the need for interpretation, explanation, and analysis that the stigmatized, “marked,” or accented voice demands. Rosa, in his study of the racialization of language in a Chicago public high school, contrasts the variation of Spanish spoken by Puerto Rican students, which students saw as incorrect but “ghetto” or “cool,” with the variation of Spanish spoken by Mexican students, which students saw as correct yet “lame” or “uncool.”<sup>29</sup> Rosa argues that the school principal’s administrative project of transforming students from “gangbangers and hoes” into “Young Latino Professionals” racially segregated students based on how they were perceived to sound (“ghetto” or “lame”).<sup>30</sup> Invoking Goffman’s tactics of passing (rendering a stigmatized identity invisible) and covering (reducing tension so as to divert attention from the stigma toward the content of the interaction), Rosa argues that the students were in a double bind, caught between colonial and “authentic” sites of identification.<sup>31</sup> He does not comment, however, on the force lent by the figure of the disabled body (“lame”) both to the students’ dismissive perception of a defanged mode of languaging, and to his own argument about the impairing logic of raciolinguistic enregisterment, or the process whereby “race and language are rendered mutually perceivable” in ways that disqualify or stigmatize some speakers.<sup>32</sup>

Chow’s book *Not Like a Native Speaker* opens with an excerpt from Barack Obama’s autobiography about his visceral reaction to an image of a Black man who had received a chemical treatment to lighten his complexion in order to try to pass as white.<sup>33</sup> Chow likens the redoubled psychic trauma of the botched chemical treatment (“a double disfigurement”; “a defective correction of something already

deemed defective") to the predicament of brown and yellow offshore call center agents who are obliged to undergo accent neutralization training in order to sound like their North American and other English-speaking customers.<sup>34</sup> Chow is making a point similar to Rosa's: playing on the twinned aural and visual resonances of the word "tones," she observes that the connotations that attach to visual perceptions (for example, to skin tones) can permeate and become inextricable from those that attach to auditory perceptions (for example, to the tone of a voice).<sup>35</sup> Thus, she argues, people with (nonstandard or nonnative) accents are, like people of color, "obliged to give themselves a bodily makeover" to cover up the stigma of difference.<sup>36</sup>

*Handicapped. Lame. Disfigured.*

Deformity, Helen Deutsch notes, "encapsulates the paradox of a visible sign of unintelligibility, a fall from form written by God or nature on the body."<sup>37</sup> It is also linked conceptually to stigma. To this day, writes Heather Love, visual deformities like leprosy, needle tracks, missing limbs, or obesity invoke this history and remain associated with moral disgrace.<sup>38</sup> Rosa and Chow both rely on the coded associations of the deformed body to explain how immigrant and diasporic accents are branded with negative racial, geographic, and class associations. Neither "native" nor "neutral," these accented speakers are suspended in a phonological no-man's-land and condemned to perpetually mourn the lingual belonging that eludes them. Their "negative accents" are deemed lacking or excessive; they operate as the locus of negative affects such as disgust, shame, worthlessness, embarrassment, and hurt whose internalization by the accented speaker festers a psychic wound.

A signal trait of melancholic theories of accent-as-handicap is that their diagnostic and prognostic criteria revolve around the psychically injured individual. This is a logical outcome of the medical model of disability that they employ (without naming it) as an analogy for the malady of accent. A reflection of enduring perceptions of disability as an underlying physical or mental condition, fact, or state that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities, the medical model locates disability "exclusively in an individual body, requiring treatment, correction, or cure."<sup>39</sup> When disability is understood medically, the pathological individual's options are cast in terms of external interventions (remedial treatment, surgery) or, failing that, self-improvement ("overcoming their challenges" with the help of friends and family). This may explain the focus of so much of contemporary accent discourse on injured identity, and the psychic implications of the tactics employed by people with stigmatized accents, such as disguising, covering up, reducing, or "eliminating" their accents. There are, however, other ways conceiving of disability, and therefore also of accent, that offer collective and social alternatives to the double bind of stigma.

ACCENT AS MISFIT, OR, THINKING  
ACCOMMODATIONALLY

Disability justice activist and artist Carolyn Lazard defines disability not as a “handicap” but as “an economic, cultural and/or social exclusion based on a physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive difference.”<sup>40</sup> Lazard’s definition, offered in the context of a practical guidebook on how to make small arts venues more accessible, is an example of what is commonly called the social model of disability.

Emphasizing meanings of disability that are “external to the body, encompassing systems of social organization, institutional practices, and environmental structures,” the social model often distinguishes between impairment and disability, arguing that disability results not from impairment but from structural and attitudinal barriers.<sup>41</sup> Devva Kasnitz, who experiences both mobility and speech impairments, writes that the medicalization of her disability (recall the speech pathologist who recommended that Mr. Kahakua seek professional help to “lessen his handicap”) impacts how she advocates for change or looks for assistance even when she is accessing the medical care she requires. She explains, “That is why I am so careful to describe ‘my’ disability as an experience of a certain kind of exclusion, as opposed to describing it as dystonia, which is the diagnosis, or as speech and mobility impairment, which is the realm of functional limitations.”<sup>42</sup> Kasnitz embraces her role as an “infrastructure activist,” but others have criticized the social model for overemphasizing design and architecture solutions.<sup>43</sup> They note, for instance, that the social model doesn’t always adequately address the mutual shaping of bodies and environments; the very real desire for medical treatment that can come from living with illness, pain, or fatigue; the relationship between disability and state-sanctioned forms of debilitation; and how disability experience and knowledge can become a site of collective reimaging.<sup>44</sup>

These interventions open a path to two other modes of thinking accent alongside disability that we can think of as the *accommodational* mode and the *coalitional* mode. But first, let me update Lippi-Green’s account of accent in light not just of the social model of disability but also of critiques of this model that stress the complex and evolving relationship among disabled bodies and their social and environmental location. Accent is not a handicap. Perceived differences of accent—as H. Samy Alim, Geneva Smitherman, and April Baker-Bell have asserted regarding speakers of Black English, who are perceived by monolingual listeners who use Standard American English to be “speaking with an accent”—can be a source of intragroup identity, community, knowledge, and pride while simultaneously resulting in economic, cultural, and/or social exclusion.<sup>45</sup> Some accented speakers, like the bilingual Latinx texters discussed by Sara Veronica Hinojos in this volume, may choose to embrace their accentual differences as a site of resistance, and others may choose to assimilate, like the migrant professionals described in Vijay A. Ramjattan’s contribution, who opt for remedial “accent reduction.”



Particular accents can, in the interface with particular systems of social organization, institutional practices, and environmental structures, become disabling. And while this isn't my central concern in this chapter, we could use that same logic to examine how disability-affected voices like Kasnitz's that manifest expressive or receptive impairments (such as strange, mechanical, proxy, confused, signing, slow, or Deaf voices) can, in the interface with their linguistic environment, become accented.<sup>46</sup> Deafness is often perceived as audible or visible evidence of cultural otherness. In an ethnographic study on crip humor, Thomas, a hearing-impaired college professor who reads lips and uses a hearing aid, reports that he responds “Deafmark” when hearing people who inquire about the origin of his accent but are unsatisfied with his answer (Wisconsin) ask again, “I mean what country are you originally from?”<sup>47</sup> In Lynn Hou and Rezenet Moges's chapter in this volume, Joseph Hill, a Deaf signer of color, similarly describes being perceived by other Black scholars as culturally white because his ASL interpreters at academic events are usually white women.

Once we articulate the relationships among accent and disability in this way, we can pose a different question: *when does becoming accented become disabling?* After all, accents can sometimes be enabling, although an accent that enables the speaker in one situation may disable them in another. An accent associated with elite British public schools like Eton or Harrow might benefit a candidate interviewing for a job at a prestigious law firm but disadvantage an actor auditioning for a role as an illiterate farmer. An “Indian accent” regarded as unremarkable in New Delhi might disable an immigrant graduate teaching assistant being evaluated by a predominantly American or Canadian student body. Like disability, accent emerges from embodiment as a result of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the “dynamic material relation between body and world.”<sup>48</sup> Garland-Thomson writes that the encounters among dynamic but relatively stable bodies and environments produce “fits” or “misfits.” In her words:

The built and arranged space through which we navigate our lives tends to offer fits to majority bodies and create misfits with minority forms of embodiment, such as people with disabilities. The point of civil rights legislation and the resulting material practices such as universally-designed built spaces and implements is to enlarge the range of fits by accommodating the widest possible range of human variation. . . . We become disabled when what seemed to be the unremarkable and familiar bodies that we inhabit encounter an unsustaining environment.<sup>49</sup>

Accented speakers routinely encounter unsustaining environments that frame them as misfits. The value of the accommodational line of thinking—evident in a range of literature that investigates legal avenues for redressing accent discrimination in housing and job applications, classrooms, or workplaces—is that it shifts the onus of creating a fit from the individual to the institutional spaces that deny them access or disqualify their participation.<sup>50</sup> The Americans with Disabilities



Act (ADA) of 1990, which has become a touchstone in the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well as the disability laws of many other nations, mandates “reasonable accommodations” to make “existing facilities . . . readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities” and “job restructuring” such as “modified work schedules” or “acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, appropriate adjustment or modifications of examinations, training materials or policies, the provision of qualified readers or interpreters, and other similar accommodations.”<sup>51</sup>

In their most dynamic interpretation, accommodations like extended times for test taking, ramps, captions, or working from home take disability as an occasion to recalibrate the baseline for everyone. Their most radical horizon is a fully accessible world in which individual differences are not deviations from some arbitrary norm but simply variations that warrant inclusion. In practice, however, accommodations are often interpreted in a static manner, as “favors” or “exceptions.” To borrow a term from Jay Dolmage, institutional accommodations are “retrofits”: small tweaks that temporarily make disability go away for individuals who demand inclusion without fear of recrimination.<sup>52</sup> They operate according to the logic of what André Gorz calls “reformist reforms,” or modifications to existing structures that “subordinat[e their] objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy.”<sup>53</sup> Recalibrating the baseline requires coalitional leverage (e.g., the massive cross-movement agitation that spurred Congress to enforce Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the first significant disability rights legislation, and subsequently the ADA, which was itself modeled on civil rights law) and/or extraordinary circumstances (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the historic decision by state and private institutions all over the world to permit employees to work from home, even though that accommodation was not previously extended to disabled or chronically ill workers with any consistency).

Under ordinary circumstances, demanding accommodations requires self-identification, self-disclosure, self-advocacy, and extraordinary persistence by people living with the experience of disability. Garland-Thomson writes that demanding accommodations based on the rights to equal opportunities (as opposed to favors or exceptions) guaranteed by disability law is “the most definitive way we become disabled.”<sup>54</sup> The reverse is also true: disability identity is often an unavoidable corridor to reasonable accommodations. But the difficulty, as Kasnitz puts it, is that it takes repetition, reflection, and *work* for the apprehension of disability status to become a politicized disability identity.<sup>55</sup> The same is true of accent.

What would it mean for accented “misfits” to self-identify as politically disabled? This is, to be sure, a fraught prospect in a world where modes of existence thought of as disabled remain profoundly abjected and discredited, and where who gets to decide who counts as disabled is a vexed question. It is hard enough for many to acknowledge that they are perceived as accented. One of my students,

a Nigerian immigrant to Western Massachusetts, notes that her mother "refuses to refer to herself as accented even though her thick Nigerian accent stands out here in Massachusetts." As a counterexample, this student pointed to the Austrian actor and politician Arnold Schwarzenegger, noting that "he identifies as accented but his identity as an accented actor has helped him in his acting career and has been wildly embraced by fans." These observations about the unfairly distributed advantages and perils of self-identifying as accented offer a restatement of what disability justice activist Mia Mingus has observed in a different context: "It can be very dangerous to identify as disabled when your survival depends on you denying it."<sup>56</sup> As Mingus notes, it is often easier for white disabled people to identify as "(politically) disabled" than it is for disabled women of color who have the lived reality of being disabled but whose capacity to identify as disabled might be precluded by a range of complicated factors having to do with race, ability, gender, and access.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this is why my student's mother sees no advantage to identifying with a Nigerian accent that brings social denigration rather than social acceptance or capital.

Accommodations are made every day for accented speakers that preserve the rationality and practicability of standard language ideologies, even if they are not named and understood as such. When a call center trainee from small-town India undergoes voice training to "lose" his regional accent, he is accommodating North American and other English-speaking customers. These customers benefit daily from the logic of disability accommodations without ever identifying as disabled, even as the call center trainee is made to feel defective, inadequate, and impaired—in short, in need of reform. Imagine a world in which the call center worker is accommodated as well as his customer. You might respond that text-based rather than telephonic exchanges have been widely adopted as a workflow modification that increases access for both accented call center workers and their customers. But the limitation of accommodational thinking is that it imagines access in terms of navigating built infrastructure rather than political leverage, and disability as legal identity rather than lived experience. A news story from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic reported that Filipino workers contracted by the Australian telecommunications company Telstra were "sleeping in the office in potentially unsafe conditions to help Australian customers, despite the risk of the coronavirus."<sup>58</sup> It took pressure from a union for Filipino call center workers and the threat of negative publicity for Telstra to relocate the agents.

Becoming disabled is not the same as being *debilitated*, Jasbir Puar's expansive and nonidentitarian category for populations rendered available by neoliberal racial capitalism for labor exploitation, occupation, incarceration, and other forms of "statistically likely injury"—populations that we now term, in the era of COVID-19, "essential."<sup>59</sup> The accommodational mode of thinking accent cannot, without coalitional leverage, remedy either 1) the debilitating working conditions (union suppression, low wages, unhealthy working conditions, job insecurity) that

are constitutive of the built infrastructure of the call center and other industries that rely on accented labor but fall outside the domain of workers' compensation law, or 2) the bodily experiences of accented speakers whose debilitation is a function of their racial, ethnic, gender, class, and/or locational underprivilege but does not fit within the rubric of disability identity protected by disability laws.<sup>60</sup>

Debilitation, Puar reminds, works hand in hand with capacitation. Accommodational technologies like wheelchairs, cochlear implants, and rights-based discourse recognize, capacitate, and leverage some bodies—they “script and rescript what a body can, could, or should do”—even as they debilitate and incapacitate other bodies.<sup>61</sup> Recalibrating the baseline for everyone necessitates what Gorz calls “nonreformist reform” or “what *should be made possible* in terms of human needs and demands.”<sup>62</sup> The liberal interpretation of accommodation-as-inclusion hears the radical demand for a society that meets these needs as a reformist demand for greater assimilation into the very biopolitical circuits that cause debilitation in the first place. Garland-Thomson describes such a radical demand as a call for a “habitable world”: an accessible world in which the social participation and thriving of disabled people is deemed valuable and desirable for its own sake. A habitable world is made hospitable to disability not only by accessible structures but by an inclusive value system in which disability signifies the possibility for things to be otherwise.<sup>63</sup>

#### ACCENT AS CRIP CURB CUT, OR, THINKING COALITIONALLY

Implicit in the transformative call for a habitable world is a call for a *coalitional* mode of thinking accent with disability. To think coalitionally across the experiences of becoming disabled and becoming accented is to address the intersectionality of struggles and issues pertaining to accent and disability as vectors of stigma, debility, and capacity. Coalitional thinking, as articulated by queer/crip and feminist of color disability scholars, asks how shared interests as well as competing needs and demands emerging from common conditions of debilitation can be leveraged in the service of shared inclusion in a habitable world.<sup>64</sup> The coalitional model trains its sights not on individuals (the melancholic model) or infrastructures (the accommodational model) but on the very social relations, conditions, values, and logics that trigger accent and disability oppression.

Many design-focused interventions emerging from disability activism and innovation, like the movement toward resonant design, emphasize interest convergence as a coalitional horizon. Resonant design, as defined by Graham Pullin, is “a design intended to address the needs of some people with a particular disability and other people without that disability but perhaps finding themselves in particular circumstances.”<sup>65</sup> Pullin describes resonant design as an aspirational goal rather than a compromise, specifying that it is “neither design just for able-bodied

people nor design for the whole population; nor even does it assume that everyone with a particular disability will have the same needs.”<sup>66</sup> The idea is that the needs of particular disabled and nondisabled people—or differently disabled people—can, under particular circumstances, come into resonance. Take, for example, the designers of the palmtop computer (commonly known as the personal digital assistant or PDA), who recruited two visually impaired people into the design team, realizing that they shared a need with busy professionals who would benefit from a voice-operated portable device. Video-conferencing platforms are another example of resonant design that serves people in lockdown and people in wheelchairs. Masks with a clear screen that provide Deaf or Hard of Hearing users with visual cues to help understand what a speaker is saying may also help to reduce confusion for accented speakers and listeners; in the context of a protest or a rally such a design modification might prove lifesaving.

How can the coalitional aspirations of resonant design be mobilized to build social capacities and solidarities *not only* when the interests of different groups are convergent *but also and especially* when their desires and aims are distinct or dissonant? What is the difference between these two approaches to thinking across differences, and why does it matter? I began this chapter by examining the affordances and limitations of “handicap” as a metaphor for accented speech. Let me answer these final questions by turning to another metaphor that offers a more capacious vision of the “cross-impairment synergies” among disability and accent, or what Kasnitz calls “a recognition that we share a unique and heightened energy across specific impairment labels that we cannot access separately”: the cripp curb cut.<sup>67</sup>

The curb cut, writes critical design and disability scholar Aimi Hamraie, has been mobilized as a storytelling device in two distinct historical narratives of disability rights and U.S. citizenship. These stories offer distinct interpretations of access, expertise, and the social world. In the first, liberal, narrative, the curb cut is a metaphor for unimpeded, barrier-free design. In the postwar era, progressive lawyers and rehabilitation experts extolled curb cuts and ramps as technologies of inclusive design from which “everyone” could benefit: “disabled veterans, disabled non-veterans, aged and infirm persons and mothers with baby carriages.”<sup>68</sup> The liberal curb cut has become a go-to metaphor for the accessible or barrier-free design movement, promoting a vision of bureaucratic expertise and the compliant assimilation of “misfits” into public space and productive circuits.

The second, radical, narrative offers a coalitional model for thinking accent alongside disability. Rumor has it that in the late 1960s, the Rolling Quads—a group Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha describes as “white, polio-surviving, physically disabled men who got radicalized while attending UC Berkeley by both witnessing Black and brown power and free speech movements and being sequestered in each other’s company because they were only allowed to live in the campus infirmary”—rode around Berkeley with nondisabled allies under cover of night,

smashing sidewalks with sledgehammers and recementing them with asphalt to produce curb cuts.<sup>69</sup> For Hamraie, this narrative situates disabled people not as passive recipients of rehabilitation experts but as “crip technoscientists” asserting disability as a source of scientific expertise, activist leadership, and engaged practice: members of the Rolling Quads went on to become pioneers of the Independent Living movement.<sup>70</sup>

In this narrative, the curb cut functions as a metaphor not for compliant assimilation but for crip refusal and resistance. The crip curb cut enables the frictional production of *force*, not smooth movement, across material and ideological impediments. In Hamraie’s words, “As a frictioned, leverage-generating device, the curb cut represents noncompliant labor within an existing system, discourse, or built arrangement.”<sup>71</sup> Perhaps as crucially, both Hamraie and Piepzna-Samarasinha insist, it represents how social movements need the leverage of other social movements to multiply their own force. When disability activists began a nearly month-long occupation in April 1977 to protest the federal government’s failure to guarantee the barrier-free programs and services enshrined in Section 504, the Black Panthers and a Chicago group, the Mission Rebels, not only sustained the occupiers with food; disabled party members Bradley Lomax and his caregiver Chuck Johnson also became thought leaders in an emerging intersectional consciousness among the racial justice and disability justice movements despite the ableism and whiteness internal to each group.<sup>72</sup>

The curb cut generates so much more leverage than “handicap” as a metaphor for nonnative and nonstandard accents. Accents that interrupt, delay, or complicate smooth communication are not handicaps to be overcome, nor are they inconveniences to be accommodated. They are *crip curb cuts*. Their rough inclines represent minoritarian expertise, noncompliant labor under conditions of forced compliance, and a demand for a habitable world in which embodied difference is valuable and desirable.<sup>73</sup> At stake in this reframing of the discursive connections among becoming accented and becoming disabled is an acknowledgment that metaphors are not neutral in their politics or in the knowledge production they enable. If we approach accents as crip curb cuts, we evoke not the medical or liberal social history of disability but a radical one that centers coalitional, anti-assimilationist, nonreformist, minoritarian, and disabled ways of being, feeling, making, knowing, and movement building.

Where “handicap” individualizes and stigmatizes struggles for equity, the crip curb cut emphasizes the multiplication of force. It frames accent discrimination as a disability justice issue and disability rights as an accent justice issue. As a metaphor, the crip curb cut foregrounds the solidarity politics that were instrumental in getting disability rights legislation passed, and which are increasingly invoked, as a colleague at Stanford recently remarked to me, in how they are applied. Describing the overwhelming number of requests for academic accommodation from students of color in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by racist police as a coalitional tactic,

she reflected, “It is striking that in the very moment when academics are eagerly rejecting ‘accommodation’ as inadequately political, our students have keyed into the power of this category to create coalition with students who identify as disabled and force the university to recognize their experience of racialization as an administratively actionable category of psychic distress.”<sup>74</sup> Injured identity, in this instance, is not an individual attribute to be “managed,” qua Goffman, but a means of friction-multiplying leverage. Kasnitz adds that marking accommodation needs as relational and interactive can be a radical group advocacy tactic. She writes, “Everyone should fill in the ‘Accommodation Request’ box with notes such as ‘I don’t sign. I’ll need an interpreter for any presentations by deaf participants,’ or ‘I’ll need a revoicer for Devva at these times when I hope to meet with her.’”<sup>75</sup>

The implications of such a shift in consciousness when it comes to the methods, histories, and horizons of accent studies is a topic for another study. Having spent most of this chapter considering how disability has been leveraged in accent studies, let me conclude with one final example of how accented speakers can leverage the project of disability justice, this time from my perspective as a documentary scholar.

To this day it is common for documentarians to enlist speakers whose accents are regarded as “neutral” or “accentless” to provide voice-over commentary for their films. This practice of masking or neutralizing the particularity of standardized accents is seldom considered in tandem with another common practice in documentary as well as fiction film: using burned-in subtitles to transcribe non-standard accents. This selective use of subtitles to transcribe nonstandard accented speech indicates that a particular accented listening ear is being accommodated as if it were a neutral or default setting. There is, to my knowledge, no industry-wide terminology for describing the routinized practice of employing nonoptional or “open” subtitles to provide sensory access as opposed to linguistic access. Anecdotally, when I have encountered documentaries that employ such “open subtitles” I have found that they tend to segregate to an optional track sensory access features like captions and audio description that make the film accessible to audiences with visual and auditory disabilities.<sup>76</sup>

A growing movement among artists and filmmakers with disability and accent exposure is working to change these access practices, which reinforce both the unmarked norm of a sighted and hearing audience *and* unspoken raciolinguistic norms. In *Shared Resources* (2021), a meditation on their white, southern father’s self-reliant attitude toward war debilitation, illness, debt, and bankruptcy, Jordan Lord uses open captions and burned-in audio description as the building blocks of a new documentary language in which access features guide both the film’s aesthetic and its narratological movement. I experience the film’s integrated sensory access as a crip curb cut with varying inclines. As someone who speaks English with an “L2” accent, I appreciate that the “thick” southern accents in the film are not the only ones to be visually transcribed—a reminder that accents happen

in the eye and ear and not just the tongue. Lord's inventive approach to audio description (in describing what they see, Lord's mother and sister also reveal the invisible and inaudible care work that literally and metaphorically props up the story of Lord's father and his recovery) also invites me to reflect on how my habituated preferences as a hearing and seeing spectator have reinforced a narrative economy in which sensory access is treated as an afterthought rather than a practice of collective care that swells documentary meanings and horizons.<sup>77</sup> *Shared Resources* demonstrates why accented speakers and listeners, especially those of us who are as-yet-nondisabled, should add our voices to the call for sensory access as a matter both of disability and accent justice.

This is just one instance of how accented and disabled people can become partners in cocreating a more habitable world. The history and future of our coalition remains to be written.

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#### NOTES

1. All citations of Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* refer to the 2nd edition (2012), unless otherwise noted.
2. Lippi-Green defines standard language ideology, a term first coined by James and Lesley Milroy, as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class." See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 67. "Compulsory able-bodiedness" is a term coined by Robert McRuer to refer to the ways in which ability, as a standard of body and mind, has been naturalized as a universal rather than culturally and historically specific aspect of being a human being. See McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness," 369–70.
3. Matsuda, "Voices of America"; Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling."
4. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44–45. Phonology has to do with the system of relationships among the speech sounds that constitute the fundamental components of a language.
5. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 45–46; Moyer, *Foreign Accent*, 1.
6. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 2.
7. Matsuda, "Voices of America," 1366, quoted in Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 47; 157.
8. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 1st edition, 46.
9. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 47.
10. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 48.
11. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 50.
12. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 157.
13. Also see Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 1st edition, 162, for a citation from the court transcript, in which it is noted that a native of China and a professor of mathematics who was refused promotion "is at a decided disadvantage in the classroom because of his natural accent" and "has a difficult time overcoming this handicap"; and Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 84, where the



author summarizes a Massachusetts teacher's bias against their Puerto Rican students' perceived deficiencies in spoken English as a "cultural handicap."

14. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 45.
15. See Linton, *Claiming Disability*, 10.
16. Goffman, *Stigma*, 11.
17. Goffman, *Stigma*, 13; also see Love, "Stigma," 174.
18. See Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*; Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee, *Feeling It*.
19. See Alim, Rickford, and Ball, *Raciolinguistics*.
20. See Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.
21. See Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*.
22. See Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*.
23. See Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*.
24. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 51.
25. Mitchell and Snyder call this the "materiality of metaphor" (*Narrative Prosthesis*, 52).
26. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 53.
27. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 49, 54.
28. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 57.
29. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 18, 152.
30. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 63. Rosa likens the language ideologies used to separate and stigmatize these Spanish-speaking students to the racialized segregation of Black and Mestiza subjects discussed by W. E. B. Du Bois and Gloria Anzaldúa, respectively.
31. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 64–66.
32. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 7.
33. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 1–2.
34. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 8.
35. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 8.
36. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 9. Notably, Chow sounds a rejoinder to Lippi-Green's argument that accents are as obdurate as skin color. Seemingly material facts are, Chow argues, ideological through and through.
37. Deutsch, "Deformity," 52.
38. Love, "Stigma," 173.
39. Adams, Reiss, and Serlin, "Disability," 8.
40. Lazard, *Accessibility in the Arts*, 6. Lazard situates her work as part of the Disability Justice (DJ) movement, or the second wave of the disability rights movement as articulated by queer and trans activists of color in the San Francisco Bay Area, who have advocated moving away from a single-issue approach to an intersectional, multisystemic way of understanding the uneven distribution of disability.
41. See Adams, Reiss, and Serlin, "Disability," 8.
42. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S21.
43. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S24.
44. See for instance, Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 7–11; Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 22–27; Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 74.
45. See Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*; Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice*; also see Lynn Hou and Rezenet Moges's contribution to this volume.
46. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S20.
47. Milbrodt, "Crip Humor, Storytelling, and Narrative Positioning of the Disabled Self."
48. Garland-Thomson, "How I Became Disabled."
49. Garland-Thomson, "How I Became Disabled."
50. See for instance, Baugh, *Linguistics in Pursuit of Justice*.
51. See Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 192; Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, As Amended.
52. See Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 70.



53. Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, 7.
54. Garland-Thomson, "How I Became Disabled."
55. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S19.
56. Mingus, "Moving Toward the Ugly," quoted in Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 15.
57. Mingus, "Moving Toward the Ugly," quoted in Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 15.
58. See Atkin and Kewley, "Call centre staff in the Philippines have been sleeping at work."
59. Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xviii.
60. See Puar's critique of the social model of disability in *The Right to Maim*, 74.
61. See Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xv. Also see 22, 74.
62. Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, 7 (italics added).
63. Garland-Thomson, "A Habitable World," 303.
64. See the chapter "Accessible Futures, Future Coalitions" in Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip."
65. Pullin, *Design Meets Disability*, 93.
66. Pullin, *Design Meets Disability*, 93.
67. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S19.
68. Letter from attorney Jack H. Fisher (1946) to mayor of Kalamazoo, Michigan, quoted in Hamraie, *Building Access*, 95.
69. Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 39.
70. Over the past four decades, people with not only physical but also sensory and mental impairments have reappropriated "crip" (from cripple, an insult for people with visible physical disabilities) as a defiant expression of disabled pride that embraces the valuable forms of creativity, interdependence, pleasure, and noncompliance that disability experience can yield. Queer theorists Robert McRuer and Carrie Sandahl have emphasized the simultaneously confrontational and invitational quality of crip provocation, understood as a political and conceptual intervention in productive reciprocity with queer activism and queer theory that is founded on the tenets of nonidentitarian solidarities and unlikely dis/identifications across identities. See Sandahl, "Queering the Crip, Crippling the Queer"; McRuer, *Crip Theory*.
71. Hamraie, *Building Access*, 102.
72. Hamraie, *Building Access*, 125–30.
73. I hear Nina Sun Eidsheim's articulation of "just recognition" in her contribution to this volume as an attempt to articulate a listening practice that responds to such a demand.
74. Email from Roanne Kantor, April 27, 2021.
75. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S18.
76. Closed captions (which exist on a separate file and are usually identified by a [CC] symbol in the corner of the screen that allows the viewer to switch them on or off) are the most common type of captions used by major broadcasters and video streaming services. An umbrella term for techniques meant to make visual media accessible to blind and partially sighted audiences, audio description refers in the cinematic context to the verbalization of images and text that appear on screen, usually on an optional prerecorded audio track.
77. For a more detailed comparative discussion of these issues of linguistic and sensory access as they pertain to documentary, see the chapters "Listening with an Accent" and "Listening in Crip Time" in my forthcoming book, *The Documentary Audit*.

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## “Accented” Latinx Textese

### *Bilingual Scriptural Economies and Digital Literacies*

Sara Veronica Hinojos

Sara: Que le paso

Mami: Ya tiene tiempo dice q se durmio con el brazo colgando y le duele

Mami: Y para q no este llorando le dije q pasaremos para q lo sobaran

Sara: What happened to him

Mami: It's been a while [he] says that he slept with his arm hanging off the side of the bed and it hurts

Mami: And so he won't cry about it I told him that we could stop by for a massage [from a natural healer]<sup>1</sup>

The digital exchange above is one of the many text message conversations my Spanish language–dominant Mexican immigrant mother (Mami) has with me. My mother's use of digital abbreviations, hyperbole, and cultural medical preference are the focus of this chapter. Specifically, I engage with how intergenerational Latinx communities represent Spanish, Spanglish, and Spanish Accented English (SAE) when communicating via short message service (SMS), or texting. I argue that their digital exchanges are not only clever, and at times humorous for some Spanish-English bilingual speakers, but, most importantly, that this form of what I call “accented” Latinx textese is an example of a bilingual scriptural economy.<sup>2</sup> A bilingual scriptural economy fosters a bilingual digital literacy that is diverse, innovative, and multigenerational. The content of the text messages is not central to the analysis of a bilingual scriptural economy; rather, it is about what the “accented” digital language signifies in its *visual* transformation.

I encase the word *accented* in quotation marks because “accents” are relational, live in the imaginary, and are only attached to certain people, thus linking physical speaking bodies to complex power structures.<sup>3</sup> I understand that the visual emphasis (“ ”) marks “accents” even more, but, because of the nature of interdisciplinary research, I want to constantly remind readers that “accents” are

situational; we all have them and communicate in “accented” identities. Because Latinx communities are perceived and represented in English-language U.S. media as linguistically deficient, this chapter calls attention to a digital textual space where Latinx media users have agency in how they represent and construct their “accented” identity.<sup>4</sup> Mainstream media representations tend to depict Latinas and Latinos as sexualized, laboring, or criminalized objects.<sup>5</sup> When they are not depicted as social burdens, Latinx bodies and cultures are viewed as either sites of pleasure (in the case of women’s sexuality and holidays like Cinco de Mayo) or sites of consumption (as in the buying power of the Latino market) rather than as innovative contributors to the United States’ cultural fabric.<sup>6</sup> Latinx, and specifically Mexican, communities’ “desires for recognition, to make a political impact, and to embody cultural or economic change encounter opposition from long-standing [English-speaking] citizens.”<sup>7</sup> Latinx people confront hostility from English-speaking U.S. citizens because, as Shilpa Davé argues, their racialized “accents” exclude them from the American Dream, or, as Rosina Lozano argues, speakers of “nondominant languages[s] challenge citizens’ understanding of their own nationalism.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, arguments about “the digital divide” often exclude Latinx participation as nonexistent, but research shows that Latinx communities do engage with media.

My focus on Latinx media practices centers the important creative contributions that Latinx communities make in digital spheres, specifically through the scriptural forms in which they represent their “accented” voices. Theories of language politics and media representations concerning Latinx populations in the United States are relevant in order to understand the social and political impact of texting, the multigenerational “accented” linguistic exchanges between bilingual Latinx people, and the significance of a bilingual scriptural economy. A quantitative approach was utilized to gather one hundred text messages and social media discourses about texting among Latinx communities, for example via the hashtag “Hispanic Parent Texting.” A qualitative analysis of the social media posts revealed three forms of textese communication: shorthand and abbreviations, Spanglish, and Spanish Accented English (SAE). My success in using social media as a research site to find posts about SMS shows that Latinx texters are engaged with not only one form of media communication (texting) but two (social media), and it also shows that Latinx people are not only having private digital conversations but are simultaneously creating public digital discussions and communities about multigenerational language politics. Texting with “accents” and posting about it creates a linguistic capital that circulates digitally and provides stigmatized linguistic communities new spaces of scriptural belonging.<sup>9</sup> Analyzing the language of texters, otherwise known as textese, provides examples of how people type themselves into being.<sup>10</sup> Accented Latinx textese is a bilingual scriptural economy of everyday tactics of digital place making, solidarity, and multigenerational survival.<sup>11</sup>

## LATINX COMMUNITIES AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A 2014 study found that 87 percent of Hispanic populations use their phones for texting.<sup>12</sup> Texting is a linguistic practice as well as a social action that shares similarities with how linguistic “accents” function. Texting and speaking share similar qualities because both practices are forms of communicating. Linguistic “accents” are personal and attached to social and geographical settings, as is the textese of people who communicate via SMS.

“Accents” are very personal, yet they also link speakers to larger speech, physical, and digital communities.<sup>13</sup> Initially, research on the digital divide was concerned with making physical resources available to various populations rather than with issues of literacy, community, social resources, or language.<sup>14</sup> Mark Warschauer calls for understanding digital access through such a literacy lens instead of determining the divide in terms of technological possession. Patricia Baquedano-López argues that the power of social institutions to shape what is understood as literacy contributes to misguided interpretations of people’s potential.<sup>15</sup> Literacy should not be measured by someone’s ability to read and write through formal education; literacy is instead about enacting a social practice by “having mastery over the processes by means of which culturally significant information is coded.”<sup>16</sup> Literacy, understood through a wider lens that takes into account the various sociocultural, political, and historical skills of diverse people, is not narrowly about obtaining formal education but rather about attaining social power.<sup>17</sup> The invention of social media and new devices to navigate digital spaces provides all users with new literacies and forms of self-expression.<sup>18</sup> Texting in particular is a semiotic process that requires not only the skill to write, but also the capacity to use a small keyboard and screen.<sup>19</sup> Understanding the digital linguistic practices of Latinx communities as a form of literacy, therefore, values bilingual practices that Latinx communities engage within digital spaces, including, for my purposes here, the text messaging through which Latinx communities communicate.

Bilingual texters and their linguistic practices are relevant in understanding the importance of texting with an “accent.” Bilingual texters’ abilities to understand various forms of “accents” in texting garner linguistic communities scriptural power and showcase their diverse mediated literacy practices. Texting, in any language, is understood as part of youth culture across all racial and ethnic demographics.<sup>20</sup> There are some academic studies on the inventiveness and circulation of teenagers’ digital English-language choices.<sup>21</sup> Existing research on Latinx bilingual texters suggests there is no academic interest so far in the texting practices of these communities. In studies on texting, none of the research centers bilingual multigenerational familial texting practices or analyze the linguistic “accents” used in digital communication. The ability to write down and keep track of one’s language showcases not only one’s literacy but also one’s scriptural power.

## BILINGUAL SCRIPTURAL ECONOMY

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* centers the idea that people are not passive consumers but rather can actively change their environments through everyday actions and choices.<sup>22</sup> De Certeau refers to the everyday actions that people engage with to challenge authority as "tactics." Of particular relevance to this chapter are the everyday uses of language that de Certeau calls the "scriptural economy." De Certeau argues that people in power gain control and institutionalize rules for "proper" forms of writing (as well as reading and speaking), thereby granting institutions scriptural power in order to control and maintain fixity. As a central practice of daily life, writing thereby captures and homogenizes voices in print even though these voices are unique in their diversity. There is power in implementing the "proper" forms of writing, and in learning how to write "properly," but there is also power in the ability to change the "proper" forms of writing. Because people in the United States have been colonized to speak English, it does not mean that people cannot symbolically fight back in the same language by reinventing and redefining words. As de Certeau states,

"It is a matter of *exhausting* the meaning of words, of playing with them until one has done violence to their most secret attributes, and pronounced at last the total divorce between the term and the expressive content that we usually give it." Henceforth, the important thing is neither *what is said* (a content), nor the *saying* itself (an act), but rather the *transformation*, and the invention of still unsuspected mechanisms that will allow us to multiply the transformations.<sup>23</sup>

This is why de Certeau encourages language play, creativity, and the shift in meanings of words. These everyday tactics of active consumers challenge the status quo. There is value in the written representation of language, which guarantees a scriptural power in making history and can change depending on who has access to the means of recording language or to recorded language itself. The playfulness and creativity of "accented" Latinx textese is made evident in the diversity of digital self-expression. The "accented" language play that circulates privately, in texting, and publicly offers a familial and communal digital record of linguistic creativity once it is posted online.

The circulation of the bilingual scriptural economy provides the ability to symbolically "talk" back to mainstream expectations and linguistic stereotypes of Latinx communities.

For some Latinx people living in the United States, Spanish and English continue to linguistically colonize their voices and structure their daily life.<sup>24</sup> Sociolinguistic research reminds us that traditional speakers of Spanish (Latinx communities) in the United States are seen as racialized speakers.<sup>25</sup> A bilingual scriptural economy is not only the textese used in digital communication and its visual transformation

of language, but also the permission to express oneself bilingually, to carve out diverse digital spaces, and to text oneself into being.

### LATINX LANGUAGE POLITICS

To recognize the importance of a Latinx digital “accent,” it is necessary to understand how Latinx communities are represented in media. Spanish- and English-language media outlets contribute to the classed and racialized perceptions of the Spanish language by showing narrow representations of Spanish-English speakers and creating linguistic hierarchies in favor of standardized English. In the United States, Spanish is a colonial, indigenous, and immigrant language that went from a language of governance (1848–1902) to a language of “foreignness.”<sup>26</sup> Even with the current large number of Spanish speakers in the United States, “Spanish maintains a racialized, classed, and ‘second-tier’ status within the US imaginary.”<sup>27</sup> Discourses about making English the official language of the country, immigration, and bilingual education always center the Spanish language and Latinx people, even though there are a diversity of languages and immigrants in the United States.<sup>28</sup> Public opinion concerning Spanish has been made obvious by the termination of bilingual education, the removal of teachers because of “heavy accents,” and bans on Spanish in workplaces.<sup>29</sup> The legislative and institutional regulations to control accented sound is not about the inflected speech but about catering to white listening ears.<sup>30</sup>

Bilingual Spanish-English speakers in the United States face two standardized linguistic systems (English and Spanish) that claim notions of “correctness, the importance of authority, the relevance of prestige, and the idea of legitimacy.”<sup>31</sup> English established itself as the language of the country (although not legally), and by default Spanish was converted to “foreign.” But, even within Spanish media circles, some Spanishes seem more “foreign” and less accepted. As Manuel G. Avilés-Santiago and Jillian M. Báez argue, one of the historically largest Spanish-language television outlets, Univision, is invested in projecting and protecting a standardized “generic” Spanish known as “Walter Cronkite Spanish.”<sup>32</sup> The circulation of this “standardized” Spanish excludes speech patterns of diverse Spanishes, like those spoken by Caribbean and working-class Latinx people.<sup>33</sup> Because Spanish is racialized and classed, when immigrants arrive in the United States, not only do media outlets in their language isolate them (by producing one type of linguistic variety), but immigrants also work against a larger English-language media market that knows very little of traditional Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. As Zentella argues,

The linguistic (in)security that immigrants bring from Latin America is exacerbated by repeated critiques of what and how they speak in the USA, contributing to the



“chiquita-fication,” i.e., the diminishment and disparagement, of Latina/o languages and identities (Zentella 1993). Damaging stereotypes include (1) a Spanish accent in English is laughable, (2) Latina/o bilinguals are incompetent in both English and Spanish, and (3) English monolinguals are inherently superior to Spanish monolinguals.<sup>34</sup>

Bilingual Latinx communities thus speak against classed and racialized Spanish- and English-language ideologies. “Accented” Latinx textese is an example of digital self-expression that challenges these two linguistic “authorities” in media.

There are some minor differences when discussing the linguistic representations of multigenerational Latinx people in the United States, yet both first- and second-generation Latinx people ultimately come to represent linguistic threats. First-generation Latinx people (those born outside the United States who migrate as adults) are understood by mainstream English-language media as speaking only Spanish, refusing to learn how to speak English, or speaking English with “heavy” Spanish “accents.”<sup>35</sup> This narrow form of thinking about first-generation Latinx immigrants not only erases the fluency of some first-generation immigrants in Indigenous languages but also positions them as linguistic threats because of their perceived status as “forever foreigners” who either refuse to speak English or speak Spanish Accented English (SAE).<sup>36</sup> Various legislation encourages immigrants and their children to learn and speak English because the belief that immigrants refuse to learn English is rampant.<sup>37</sup> Latinx characters on television are represented more often than not with linguistic “accents,” hinting to viewers that English is their second language; this marks them as foreigners regardless of their legal status and suggests that they are unintelligent.<sup>38</sup> Even though some first-generation immigrants come to the United States with professional degrees and know how to speak English, they are not seen as bilingual like their U.S.-born children.

Second-generation Latinx communities are traditionally perceived as bilingual Spanish-English speakers. In media representations their English is heard with a Spanish “accent”—an aural signal to viewers that they have no control of either language.<sup>39</sup> Bilingual Latinx speakers are also seen as linguistic threats, but for different reasons than their presumed first-generation immigrant parents. Second-generation Latinx people are heard and seen as linguistic threats because of their knowledge of Spanish and English and their use of Spanglish (a mixture of Spanish and English), yet their knowledge of Spanish and English is perceived as “a-lingual” because they are represented as not knowing either language.<sup>40</sup> Therefore creating and mixing words (Spanglish) from a standardized perspective is seen not as a creative form of language play but instead as a deficiency in two languages.

There are other popular misunderstandings about what it means to be bilingual. It is commonly assumed that bilingualism means fluency in both languages (speaking, writing, and understanding); in reality, bilingualism is a spectrum of fluency that involves varying proficiencies in speaking, writing, and understanding a second language. In mainstream media representations of Latinx people, bilingualism is not celebrated; instead, viewers are encouraged to laugh at or fear

the way bilingual speakers speak English.<sup>41</sup> Conservative and restrictive definitions of being bilingual make bilingual speakers feel like they cannot speak English or Spanish “correctly” in addition to intra-Latinx policing of Spanish-language fluency. A common skill of bilingual speakers that does not get enough media representation is language brokering. Language brokering, which occurs when bilingual people translate for others (usually their parents), requires complex cognitive, cultural, and linguistic skills.<sup>42</sup> Bilingual speakers develop a listening ear to comprehend not only their parents’ voices, but also, as some SMS messages show, their parents’ texts.<sup>43</sup>

Both Latinx generations in the United States are bilingual, yet only second-generation Latinx people are considered bilingual. Both generations work against linguistic stereotypes that do not celebrate their ability to live in two languages and cultures. Living languages are in flux and change over time because every day new speakers are born who continue to use, circulate, and play with different linguistic forms.<sup>44</sup> The media’s message, however, is obvious: “Latinas/os, especially poor youth or black immigrants, enjoy little linguistic capital whether they speak Spanish or English, and mixing languages is particularly devalued. But this message conflicts with the comfort, trust, solidarity, and affection generated by the sounds and styles of family and community.”<sup>45</sup> The “styles of family and community” Zentella mentions are evident in digital exchanges between multigenerational bilingual Latinx texters. Such exchanges embrace linguistic “accents” and invoke digital everyday tactics of solidarity, place making, and survival.<sup>46</sup>

#### APPROACHING ACCENTED TEXTESE

Examples of multigenerational digital communication are found on users’ public social media accounts. A typical social media post consists of a screen grab of a SMS conversation and the social media user commenting on their conversation with a family member, frequently a parent. This research began in 2016, and by 2020 I had collected one hundred posts from social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. All examples are from public accounts, and some were found by searching for certain hashtags, including “Hispanic Parent Texting,” for example. Table 4.1 organizes one hundred social media posts and summarizes the data into six textese trends.

After conducting an open coding qualitative method of analysis, six textese trends were found: shorthand/abbreviations, Spanglish, Spanish Accented English (SAE), sounds, discourse about texting, and multiple trends.<sup>47</sup> I discuss the first three of these styles of accented textese in detail below. Textese labeled “sounds” are Spanish forms of laughing, “jajaja,” instead of laughing in English that is represented “hahaha.” “Discourse about texting” were posts in which users did not share a screen grab of the text message conversation but instead made comments about texting behaviors. For example, some discourses about accented textese are,

TABLE 4.1 Frequency of the use of accented textese trends in 100 texts posted on social media

Textese Trend	Frequency	Textese Trend	Frequency
Shorthand/Abbreviations	13	Sounds	2
Code-switching/Spanglish	35	Discourse about texting	11
Spanish Accented English	59	Multiple Trends	18

TABLE 4.2 Examples of common abbreviations and shorthand used in a bilingual scriptural economy between multigenerational Latinx people

#	Textese	Spanish Meaning	English Translation
1.	q   k   ke   eske	qué	what, that, than
2.	d	de	of, from, by, with, at
3.	x	por	by, for, through, at
4.	alv	a la verga	fuck you/yourself, go to hell
5.	qvo   qvo le	qué hubo	hello, what’s going on
6.	mc	muy cute	very cute
7.	tqm	te quiero mucho	I love you very much

“I realize I’m horrible at reading #Spanglish texts. I can speak it but don’t text me. LOL #BadMexican,” and “Not only is hispanic parent culture adding an unnecessary amount of emojis in every text message, it’s also adding an excessive amount of hashtags when they post.”<sup>48</sup> “Multiple trends” refers to SMS conversations that use two or more of the listed communication styles in table 4.1. Research was not conducted to see if parents post or comment on their children’s accented textese or the use of emojis in texting. All of the digital forms of communication in table 4.1 are examples of different forms of digital literacy and bilingual scriptural economies.

*Aesthetics of Bilingual Textese: Shorthand and Abbreviations*

One common form of digital communication across all languages is the use of abbreviations and shorthand. This form of digital communication used in SMS and online is convenient because it allows users to send messages at a faster pace. It is associated with the digital practices of young people, and it made texting faster when the only option was “multitap.”<sup>49</sup> Even though most phones have a QWERTY keyboard and users are not multitapping or using T9 practices, some forms of early texting practices are still in use.<sup>50</sup> Table 4.2 summarizes some common examples of Spanish transformed into textese.

The textese examples provided are a small portion of a diverse bilingual Latinx scriptural economy. The data includes a variety of representations of the word “qué,” as shown in the first example in table 4.2. The letters “q,” “k,” and “ke” are used as shorthand for the Spanish word “qué.” Such scriptural representations of

“qué” function not so much as linguistic “accents” or an inflection while texting but more as aesthetic “accents.” The shorthand way of representing “qué” with “q,” for example, is a decoration and stands out in the visual flow of texting. The scriptural creation of the word “eske” (which is usually spoken and, if written, it is represented as “es que”) is vernacular Spanish that would not appear in formal Spanish-language spaces and is a linguistic “accent” that racializes and classes texters. The verbalization of “es que” in everyday speech is a signifier that represents working-class speech styles. People are stereotyped as unintelligent when they utter this word, and “es que” is portrayed as a linguistic trait of Indigenous forms of Spanish usage in Mexico. The creation of “eske” and its use in textese is not only a creative innovation of SMS, but it also provides a scriptural example of how to represent a word only used orally. Without judgment, the circulated “accent” among Latinx parents and their children is a digital tactic of solidarity. The exchange among multigenerational Latinx bilinguals shows that the use of shorthand and abbreviations is not only part of youth texting practices since the trends listed in table 4.2 were used by both Latinx parents and their children.

Another textese word in my data that exists mainly in the realm of the oral comes from a different linguistic tradition: “Qvo” and “qvo le” (example 5 in table 4.2) are examples of Chicano Spanish-“accented” textese and are not considered Spanglish words. The expanded version of the Spanish word is “qué hubo,” which means “hello, what’s going on,” but when used in Chicano Spanish, Mexican working-class speech styles, and U.S. Southwest Calo greetings it is pronounced “quihúbole.”<sup>51</sup> The use of Chicano Spanish and English is stigmatized: it often gets confused with Spanish Accented English (SAE, discussed later on) and is not seen as an official ethnic dialect of English.<sup>52</sup> Popular perceptions categorize Chicano English as “mispronunciations” by Spanish speakers of English words.<sup>53</sup> To be able to circulate words that are rarely textually represented and used in verbal communication makes SMS exchanges in Chicano Spanish significant because users can express their accented identities in digital spaces without the surveillance of standardized forms of Spanish and English speech. For bilingual Latinx users who are not formally taught to represent words that exist primarily in oral communication, such textese is a powerful means of cultivating a digital scriptural economy of self-expression and linguistic pride. The various forms of “quihúbole” and “qué” enact digital belonging and demonstrate the boundless rules of texting with an “accent.”

Another example of linguistic creativity represented in “accented” textese is example 3 in table 4.2. The “x” used as shorthand for the Spanish word “por” is used in similar ways that “x” is used in English SMS to represent “times.” “Por” is verbalized and represents the “x” in multiplication problems. For example,  $2 \times 2$  in Spanish is verbalized as “dos por dos” (two times two). An example of how to use this shorthand in “accented” textese is “x donde vamos,” which in English means “where are we going” or “the way we are going.” Similar English-language texting styles for the word “times” represented as “x” are found in the digital linguistic

practices of Latinx bilinguals in Spanish. These shorthand examples change the visual flow of the text message by highlighting small breaks between words and draw the eye to the shortened word. In this case some of the abbreviations work not only as linguistic “accents” but as aesthetic accents as well. Both Latinx children and their parents utilize shorthand and abbreviations in SMS communication, providing textual examples of bilingual familial communication and digital place making.

*Mixing Textese Linguistic Codes: Spanglish*

There are thirty-five examples of code-switching between Spanish and English in the collected SMS exchanges, and all are diverse in their communication styles. In true bilingual fashion there are a variety of forms of “accented” self-expression. Latinx bilingual texters named this style of digital communication Spanglish when they posted pictures of their SMS conversations online. “Spanglish cannot be reduced to static dictionary entries; it is a creative and rule-governed way of speaking bilingually that is generated by and reflects living in two cultures.”<sup>54</sup> Because there are different expressions of living in two cultures and because of the many levels of bilingual proficiency of Latinx people, switching between two languages occurred differently in every digital conversation I studied. Code-switching occurs in the same sentence (intrasentential) or in consecutive text messages where sentences were completely in English or Spanish (intersentential).<sup>55</sup> Also, Spanglish communication was not initiated solely by younger texters, but their parents (presumed to be first generation, depicted in mainstream English media as speaking only Spanish) also engaged in code-switching when they communicated with their children. Table 4.3 lists examples of Spanglish textese.

Example 1 in table 4.3, a text sent from a daughter to her mother, is a common form of speaking and texting in Spanglish. In English the text states, “I am coughing more.” The caption that accompanied the picture of the SMS exchange reads, “I always text my mom in spanglish bc I be forgetting the Spanish word for something,” followed by a pensive emoticon face.<sup>56</sup> The emoticon suggests a sense of melancholy about the sender’s inability to write text messages to her mother entirely in Spanish. The feeling of being inadequate is common among Latinx bilingual people who have experienced discourses of linguistic standardization. As Ramón Antonio Martínez argues, some bilingual speakers have deficit rationales “to explain their engagement in Spanglish, essentially attributing their code-switching to a lack of proficiency in one of the two languages.”<sup>57</sup> Far from a lack of linguistic proficiency, the aforementioned example demonstrates the clarity of intergenerational exchange among Latinx texters. The sender is able to communicate with her mother, who in turn understands that her daughter continues to feel ill, as the complete SMS conversation reveals. An interesting quality of intrasentential code-switching in texting is that the sender, the daughter, could have searched for the Spanish word “coughing” in order to complete the message in Spanish, but she did

TABLE 4.3 Examples of code-switching textese with the relationship between the sender and receiver

#	Textese	Sender/Receiver
1.	Estoy coughing mas	Daughter → Mother
2.	Mija Buena suerte tomorrow en tu escuela	Father → Daughter
3.	Haha nomas entre a ver k fregados posteabas lots of beagle pics	Brother → Sister

NOTE: Example 1 was posted by @MobPsychoo on Twitter; example 2 was posted by @Tahhhli7 on Twitter; and example 3 was posted by @PlasticineStar on Twitter. All representations of the text messages are exact.

not. The use of her Spanglish “accent” to communicate is deliberate, even though she has some concerns about how she texts her mother.

A similar intrasentential code-switching style of communication occurs in example 2 in table 4.3. In this example, viewers are not aware of the sender’s relationship with Spanglish; instead, the receiver’s response is highlighted. In this particular digital exchange, a father sends a text to his daughter. The translated text states, “Good luck at school tomorrow sweetheart.” The reason for the father’s choice of code-switching for the word “tomorrow” is unknown, like the previous example where the texter admits forgetting certain words. The caption that accompanied the picture of the SMS exchange states, “Lol at the text my dad just sent me [ . . . ] #spanglish #lovemyoldman.” The information in the brackets are two emoticon faces that illustrate the daughter’s sentiments regarding her father’s communication style: a face with tears of joy and a smiling face with smiling eyes.<sup>58</sup> The humorous textese (lol) and icon (emoticon) does not belittle her father’s texting ability but instead expresses happiness and warmth. The affective qualities of Spanglish elicit positive reactions in the receiver and, in this case, underscores a familial connection. In these and other SMS exchanges, there are intentional choices made in the vocabulary chosen for the text. The father’s use of Spanglish demonstrates a valuable linguistic resource of the bilingual scriptural economy to communicate digitally that brings comfort to his daughter.

Finally, example 3, a digital exchange between brother and sister, shows similar forms of bilingual code-switching as well as the use of a Spanglish word. The translated English text reads, “Haha I logged on to see what the fuck you posted lots of beagle pics.” In the original Spanglish text, the sender uses “k,” which, as discussed earlier, is a shorthand representation of the word “qué”; “fregados” which is a working-class Mexican Spanish word and euphemism for “chingar” (fuck); and “posteabas,” meaning “you posted.” Because “to post” is a new verb, created because of social media, the word “posteabas” is an English word that is conjugated in Spanish, therefore creating a Spanglish word. As Zentella argues, “Latina/o bilinguals often blur the boundaries between Spanish and English in ways that reflect new ethnic and racial identities.” In this case, the new ethnic and racial identities are forms of linguistically representing accented identities via digital tools.<sup>59</sup> Latinx

bilingual texters create and carve out digital accented spaces by mixing words that combine their cultural and linguistic identity. The caption that accompanied the picture of the SMS exchange stated, “Text I just got from my brother. Can you tell he’s home sick on a Friday night? Also, spanglish is our default.” Spanglish is a common form of communication for these siblings. According to Martínez, one of the six conversational functions of code-switching is to joke or tease. This function is evident in the brother’s word choices to describe his sister’s social media activity (“fucking posting too many beagle pictures”).<sup>60</sup> The conversational aspects of Spanglish appear in “accented” textese. The combination of textese shorthand, textual representation of a colloquial word, code-switching, and a millennial Spanglish word shows the various ways Latinx bilinguals text in their linguistic “accents.”

All of the examples detailed above are representations of bilingual literacy because the use of the English words “coughing” and “tomorrow” and the phrase “lots of beagle pics” follows the grammatical structures of Spanish. All the texters in these examples know the order of parts of speech for both languages, signifying that code-switching is a reflection not of incompetence in one of the languages, but instead a mastery of both.<sup>61</sup> The “accented” textese also represents different relationships with their identity by the way texters represent their “accent.” It is a complicated relationship that is humorous, sad, loving, and a normal form of communication for some.

#### *Sounds and Re(spellings): Spanish Accented English*

The last textese trend of Latinx bilingual texters, the use of Spanish Accented English (SAE), is only evident in the Latinx parents’ texts. More than half of the examples collected for this study contained SAE words. A visual SAE is English written with Spanish style phonetics, “or a visual vocabulary based on sound.”<sup>62</sup> Some of the accented words in SMS exchanges do confuse some texters. As one person commented on Twitter, “I swear, trying to decipher a Hispanic parents text message is like the damn da Vinci code.”<sup>63</sup> According to Alexandra Jaffe, “Becoming literate is not just the acquisition of orthographic decoding skills, but also involves the development of a (culturally conditioned) graphic sensibility.”<sup>64</sup> At times, understanding the graphic sensibility of Latinx parents’ text might feel like a code, because readers must rely on their eyes to comprehend the messages instead of listening to the visual text. As Dolores Inés Casillas and I argue elsewhere, “Chicana/o readers rely much more on their listening ears than their eyes to understand how these accents are voiced in print. . . . [L]istening to accents operated as a popular form of literacy, one that registers the audible, racialized experiences of Spanish-speaking immigrants.”<sup>65</sup> SAE is therefore not the same as Spanglish or Chicano Spanish and appears even less scripturally. SAE is associated with English as a Second Language (ESL) and adult Latinx immigrant styles of speaking English. It has been ridiculed in mainstream representations and continues to be used to signal an un-American sound.<sup>66</sup> In Latinx digital popular culture,



TABLE 4.4 Spanish Accented English (SAE) words sent via text messages with English-language translations

#	Textese	English Translation
1.	aifon	iPhone
2.	barigar	bodyguard
3.	nais	nice
4.	orait	alright
5.	yaketh	jacket
6.	ray nao	right now
7.	plis	please
8.	goodnaig/good 9/ gud naigh	goodnight
9.	guajape	what happened
10.	homaigune	oh my goodness

users circulate humorous memes commenting on the visual transformation of English when their immigrant parents speak.<sup>67</sup> This style of humor is not meant to ridicule, but instead it expresses an intimate understanding of the struggles and resiliency that accompany those accented sounds. “Effectively ‘reading’ a visual accent does not privilege a bilingual speaker but rather an accented *listener*, one raised or surrounded by immigrant speakers. . . . For those of us with accented speakers in our families and communities, accents function as emotional markers; vocal or vernacular archives that trace an individual or family’s migration, travels and/or histories.”<sup>68</sup> In the SMS data collected, only Latinx parents used SAE. As in the previous textese examples, the data collected is diverse, and different words appear accented in the SMS. Table 4.4 lists some examples of SAE used in digital communication.

SAE, like Spanglish textese, is as diverse as Latinx bilingual speakers. A unique quality of this style of texting is that only Latinx parents appear to use this type of “accented” speech. SAE is not meant to follow conventional spellings. Instead, the English (re)spellings recognize the bilingual digital literacy involved in creating this bilingual scriptural economy. The visual representation of “accented” speech is innovative and challenges standardized forms of English. Because Spanish is spelled the way it sounds, Spanish-dominant speakers apply those same techniques when writing in English. In research on historical visual “accents,” mainstream media used this style of quoting Mexican film actor Lupe Vélez to exoticify, racialize, and infantilize her and Mexicans in general.<sup>69</sup> Some techniques journalists used when quoting SAE were using double vowels or consonants and omitting certain letters, for example representing “his” as “hees” and “very” as “ver.” Because it is Latinx people themselves (and not mainstream media sources) who participate in the bilingual scriptural economy, the “accented” text is not exaggerated, and



the purpose is not to ridicule. Interestingly, the (re)spellings of English words in SAE are similar to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) form of writing. Example 3 in IPA is represented as *nais*; example 6 *rait nau*; and example 7 *pliz*. The only word that reappeared and had various representations was “good-night” (example 8 in table 4.4). An innovative use of the number nine to substitute “night” functions as a shorthand example of SAE textese. The reappearance of the word “goodnight” is telling of the caring and intimate relationships Latinx parents have with their adult children. SAE is used as a form of a bilingual scriptural economy and literacy; however, occasionally there are misunderstandings. Figure 4.1, which shows a series of text messages exchanged by a daughter and her father, demonstrates both their misunderstanding and humorous relationship. The bilingual exchange begins with the contact information shown at the top of the image. In the contact information, the daughter has saved a picture of a red truck, the name “Papa” (which means “father”), and two emoticons of a potato and a male’s face. The use of a potato emoticon is an example of digital bilingual Latinx humor. In Spanish, “father” is spelled “Papá,” but without the accent mark over the letter “a” it spells “potato,” hence the inclusion of the emoticon in her father’s contact information. The daughter tells her father in Spanish that she is going to the office tomorrow (“Mañana voy a la oficina”), and her father answers with a series of emoticons (a man shrugging and man face-palming). He follows by asking in SAE, “Ned da maní,” which the daughter shows she does not understand by her use of “?”. Her father answers in Mock Spanish, “No comprende?” The father’s ability to change the conversation to SAE, followed by Mock Spanish, and ending with Spanish demonstrates his ability to code-switch and to make social and political commentary on the language politics of Latinx people.<sup>70</sup> “No comprende?” is a Mock Spanish phrase used by white monolingual speakers who are attempting to speak Spanish and wish to belittle Spanish-speaking people. The insult is used when monolingual speakers who believe they are speaking “Spanish” are offended by Spanish speakers who do not understand them; in Mock Spanish they ask, “You don’t understand?” thereby burdening the listener instead of learning Spanish themselves and asking “¿Me entiendies?” (Do you understand me?). The father uses Mock Spanish to make fun of his daughter for not understanding him. The use of humor here, however, is not to devalue; instead, he resignifies the meaning of “No comprende” to make fun of the way white monolingual speakers think they are speaking Spanish. The Mock Spanish used by the father is a survival tactic in the face of mainstream mockery.<sup>71</sup> When the phrase “No comprende” is used in spoken communication, it is sometimes prefaced with “como dice el gringo,” meaning “like the white American man says.” It is an example of a working-class sense of humor that is used to laugh at the way some white monolingual speakers demand understanding in “Spanish.” The daughter says she understands (“Ya entendi”) that her father is asking her if she needs money. He ends the conversation



FIGURE 4.1. A text message conversation between a daughter (on the right) and her father (on the left).

with the visual representation of Spanish laughing (“jajaja”) and a saying, “ponte mosca.” The literal translation in English is “get fly” (the insect), but the meaning of the phrase in this context is to stay alert and pay attention. The code-switching and use of linguistic “accents” “are not always deficient engagements with desired (global) languages, nor are they necessarily remnants of local dialects; rather they

can be strategically used claims to particular life trajectories.<sup>72</sup> The father's life trajectories are reflected in the distinct forms of how he communicates with his daughter via various "accents." The use of his various identities are made evident by his conscious textese choices. The bilingual scriptural economy provides unique, innovative, and diverse forms of expressing a bilingual identity digitally and offers various options for changing the textual representation of words to reflect and cultivate the accented sounds of home and community.

#### CONCLUSION: PONTE MOSCA

"Accented" Latinx textese, as I have analyzed it, exemplifies just some of the diverse and playful language forms through which Latinx people communicate digitally via language play. Having public scriptural examples of words that have only oral and aural representations in daily communication among family members provides examples of how to belong in a digital age. More specificity in the bilingual scriptural economy is needed to add to the repertoire of forms particular ethnic groups use to communicate digitally, and to showcase the diversity of Latinx linguistic engagement in technology. The use and circulation of accented textese is an example of group identity in the face of the English-language mainstream media continuing to represent Latinx people as linguistically deficient and reducing linguistic varieties of Spanish in ways that isolate some Latinx people in their own language. There is communicative power in the scriptural transformation of the words, a power granted to various digital communities, and which this research claims for Latinx bilingual SMS users.<sup>73</sup> The ability to highlight one's "accent" digitally challenges linguistic and technological hierarchies. The circulation of "accented" Latinx textese is a lively cornerstone of a bilingual scriptural economy that highlights users' literacy, linguistic pride, and sounds of home.

#### NOTES

1. The translation is not a direct Spanish-to-English translation. The English-language version is loosely translated so readers can understand the context of the conversation.

2. I use the terms *Latina*, *Latino*, and *Latinx* in this chapter. *Latina* is used to refer to only women, *Latino* to only men, while *Latinx* is an umbrella term that refers to all genders. I have used the term *Hispanic* in some cases and not changed it to *Latinx*, especially if the term was used in the data collected by texts or in my source materials.

3. See Agha, *Language and Social Relations*; Hill, "Language, Race, and White Public Space"; Zentella, "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres"; and Zentella, "Latina/o Languages and Identities."

4. Zentella argues that Latina/o communities are treated as linguistically deficient; see "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres."

5. On Latinas and Latinos as sexual objects, see Beltrán, "The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle"; and Monila-Guzmán and Valdivia, "Brain, Brow, and Booty;" as objects of labor, see Chávez, "Ethnic Stereotypes"; and as criminal objects, see Santa Ana et al., "Druggies Drug Dealers Rapists and Killers."

6. On burdens, see Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising*; on sites of pleasure, see Monila-Guzmán, *Dangerous Curves*; and on consumers, see Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*

7. Lozano, *An American Language*, 11. Mexican people were considered “treaty citizens” because legally they were granted political citizenship via the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. Their access to social citizenship, however, was not easily accepted by white English-speaking citizens because Mexicans were U.S. citizens who spoke Spanish.

8. See Davé, *Indian Accents*; and Lozano, *An American Language*, 10.

9. Or, as argued by Hillewaert in “Writing with an Accent,” “The foregoing analysis of ‘writing with accents’ and the examples discussed push our thinking about virtual circulation of linguistic resources in several ways. . . . Rather, it argues that the resignification enabled through the digital contexts creates a space for the reevaluation of stigmatized varieties” (209).

10. On textese, see Grace and Kemp, “Assessing the Written Language of Text Messages”; Drouin and Driver, “Texting, Textese and Literacy Abilities”; Kemp, “Texting vs. Txtng”; and Verheijen, “The Effects of Text Messaging and Instant Messaging on Literacy.” For examples of texters texting themselves into being, see Deumert and Vold Lexander, “Texting Africa.”

11. Hinojos and Casillas, “Don’t Be Self-Conchas.”

12. Mendus, “For Latinos, Cell Phones Are Everything.”

13. I added digital communities. On links between “accents” and speech and physical communities, see Deumert and Vold Lexander, “Texting Africa.”

14. Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion*, 6.

15. Baqueando-López, “Literacy Practices across Learning Contexts.”

16. Baqueando-López, “Literacy Practices across Learning Contexts,” 245–68. See also De Castell and Luke, “Models of Literacy in North American Schools”; and Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

17. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*; Deumert and Vold Lexander, “Texting Africa”; Barton and Hamilton, *Local Literacies*.

18. Crystal, *Language and the Internet*.

19. Deumert and Vold Lexander, “Texting Africa.”

20. See Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, for a full discussion of how youth use and change everyday language in an online setting.

21. International research chronicles various visual representations of British English dialects through SMS and differences of oral and written language representation in texting in the Spanish language from Spain, both claim creative forms of expression of youth cultures in monolingual settings. For British English linguistic diversity, see Wood, Plester, and Kemp, *Text Messaging and Literacy*. On texting in the Spanish language in Spain, see Alonso and Perea, “SMS.” For teenagers’ digital English-language choices, see Grace and Kemp, “Assessing the Written Language of Text Messages.” There is some research on multilingual texters from various African countries that provides a relevant framework for understanding some practices of bilingual Latinx texters in the United States, most importantly on the topic of how texting is at times the only form for keeping track of and documenting local languages. For example, Deumert and Masinyana’s research found that the visual representation of English and isiXhosa differed, meaning that English-isiXhosa bilingual texters engage in two different languages and two “non-overlapping sets of sociolinguistic norms”; see “Mobile Language Choices,” 117–47. See also Deumert and Vold Lexander, “Texting Africa,” who also analyze multilingual text messages and argue that there is an emotional commitment by the texter who uses African languages, that the use of African languages is a skillful linguistic performance, and that texting is the only space where local languages are documented.

22. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

23. De Certeau quotes Michel Sanouillet, *Duchamp du signe: écrits* (Flammarion: Paris, 1975), 16, in *The Practices of Everyday Life*, 152.

24. Zentella, “Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres.”

25. Urciuoli, *Exposing Prejudice*; and for white public space, see Hill, “Language, Race, and White Public Space.”

26. Macías, "Minority Languages in the United States, with a Focus on Spanish in California," 333–34; and Lozano, *An American Language*.

27. Scamman, "Spanish Speakers in the United States (Infographic)." Spanish continues to be seen as foreign, even though the United States has the second-highest concentration of Spanish speakers (roughly 53 million people) and is projected to have 138 million by 2050, making the United States the largest Spanish-speaking country. See also Casillas, Ferrada, and Hinojos, "The Accent on *Modern Family*," 65; Hill, "Language, Race, and White Public Space"; Urciuoli, *Exposing Prejudice*; Zentella, "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres"; and Zentella, "Latina/o Languages and Identities."

28. Tse, "Why Don't They Learn English?," vii.

29. Hinojos and Casillas, "Don't Be Self-Conchas."

30. Hinojos and Casillas, "Don't Be Self-Conchas." Because the white listening ear drives the sonic color line (process of racialized sound), it is related to dominant listening practices that suppress and tune out people of color, and how dominant culture exerts pressure on individuals to listen to the sonic color line's norms. For specific information on the white listening ear, see Stoeber, *Sonic Color Line*.

31. Milroy, "The Ideology of Standard Language," 134.

32. "Walter Cronkite Spanish" is a middle-class Mexicanization of the Spanish language that television networks like Univision and market-driven research bases it on because 63 percent of Latinx people in the United States are of Mexican descent. See Avilés-Santiago and Báez, "Targeting Billennials"; Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*; Rodríguez, *Making Latino News*; or *la norma culta* as stated by Zentella, "Spanish in New York."

33. Avilés-Santiago and Báez, "Targeting Billennials"; and Casillas, Ferrada, and Hinojos, "The Accent on *Modern Family*."

34. Zentella, "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres," 32.

35. Tse, "Why Don't They Learn English?"; Fought, *Chicano English in Context*; and Casillas, Ferrada, and Hinojos, "The Accent on *Modern Family*."

36. Davé, *Indian Accents*; and Hinojos, "Lupe Vélez and Her Spicy Visual 'Accent' in English-Language Print Media."

37. In actuality, immigrants who arrive from non-English-speaking countries learn how to speak English well, especially the longer they live in the United States, debunking notions that adult immigrants refuse to learn how to speak English. See Tse, "Why Don't They Learn English?," 1.

38. Casillas, Ferrada, and Hinojos, "The Accent on *Modern Family*," 66; Bucholtz, *White Kids*; Giles and Marlow, "Theorizing Language Attitudes"; and Gluszek and Hansen, "Language Attitudes in the Americas."

39. Fought, *Chicano English in Context*.

40. Zentella, "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres," 33. According to Tse, "Despite reports to the contrary, immigrant children have been very successful if we look at two important indicators: students' general level of English proficiency and their school achievement" ("Why Don't They Learn English?," 17).

41. Zentella, "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres," 32; and Hinojos, "Lupe Vélez and Her Spicy Visual 'Accent' in English-Language Print Media."

42. On language brokering see, Faulstich Orellana, *Translating Childhoods*. Tse, in "Why Don't They Learn English?," mentions that children "who grow up in homes where a language other than English is spoken actually outperform monolingual English speakers once they themselves are fluent in English" (20).

43. For a discussion of bilinguals' listening practices of their immigrant Latinx parents, see Hinojos and Casillas, "Don't Be Self-Conchas."

44. Lozano, *An American Language*, 12.

45. Zentella, "Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres," 26.

46. Hinojos and Casillas, "Don't Be Self-Conchas."

47. Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*.

48. The comment about being a “#BadMexican” is meant to be humorous and shows that texting is about not only writing but also the ability to read and listen to the text in order to decipher its content.

49. Erickson, “A Brief History of Text Messaging.” T9, or text on nine keys, is a predictive text technology that uses nine-key keypads to communicate on mobile devices. Users can create words with few keystrokes. For example, pressing the keys 4, 3, 5, 5, and 6 in T9 mode spells out “hello.”

50. T9, or text on nine keys, is a predictive text technology that uses nine-key keypads to communicate on mobile devices. Users can create words with few keystrokes. For example, pressing the keys 4, 3, 5, 5, and 6 in T9 mode spells out “hello.”

51. Minoves Myers, “Language and Style in ‘POCHO.’”

52. Santa Ana and Bayley, “Chicano English: Phonology”; and Fought, *Chicano English*.

53. Santa Ana and Bayley, “Chicano English: Phonology.”

54. Zentella, “Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres,” 33.

55. Montes-Alcalá, “Attitudes towards Oral and Written Codeswitching in Spanish-English Bilingual Youths.”

56. The phrase in this example begins and ends in Spanish, but it uses an English verb. This form of code-switching is called crutching. Crutching occurs when a bilingual speaker cannot continue in the first language but “can keep speaking by depending on a translated synonym as a stand-in.” Zentella, *Growing Up Bilingual*, 198. For a Twitter example of a pensive face emoticon see, Emojipedia, “Pensive Face.”

57. Martínez, “‘Spanglish’ as Literacy Tool.”

58. For a Twitter example of a face with tears of joy emoticon, see Emojipedia, “Face with Tears of Joy”; and for a Twitter smiling face with smiling eyes emoticon, see Emojipedia, “Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes.”

59. Zentella, “Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres,” 25.

60. Martínez, “*Spanglish* Is Spoken Here.”

61. Hernández-Chavez, Cohen, and Beltramo, eds., *El lenguaje de los Chicanos*; MacSwan, *A Minimalist Approach to Intrasentential Code Switching*; and Poplack, “Syntactic Structure and Social Function of Code-Switching.”

62. Hinojos and Casillas, “Don’t Be Self-Conchas.”

63. See @DieselEddy99 on Twitter.

64. Jaffe, “Introduction,” 509.

65. Hinojos and Casillas, “Don’t Be Self-Conchas.”

66. Davé, *Indian Accents*.

67. See Hinojos and Casillas, “Don’t Be Self-Conchas” for an analysis of SAE memes.

68. Hinojos and Casillas, “Don’t Be Self-Conchas.”

69. Hinojos, “Lupe Vélez and Her Spicy Visual ‘Accent’ in English-Language Print Media.”

70. Hill, *Covert Racist Discourse*.

71. Latorre, “Humor and Hemispheric Consciousness.”

72. Hillewaert, “Writing with an Accent,” 208.

73. Grace and Kemp, “Assessing the Written Language of Text Messages.”

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# Everything Is Accented

## *Labor and the Weight of Things Unsaid*

Anita Starosta

What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent?

—TILLIE OLSEN, “I STAND HERE IRONING”

This chapter continues—or, more properly speaking, returns to—an idea that began with “Accented Theory,” my contribution to a *boundary 2* roundtable held in 2011 and prompted by the question: “What is the proper agenda for a critical journal?” My initial answer was inspired by two moments: Joseph Conrad’s contention that “written words have their accent, too”; and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “double-accented word,” which proposes that there is no neutral speech and calls attention to the multiple contexts that inflect any utterance. In two articles that followed, I considered three modalities of “accent”—related to power, foreignness, and contextual inflection—in its capacity to put pressure on the dominant and the universal, which in turn derive their power from, precisely, claiming to be without accent.<sup>1</sup> Under the heading of “accented criticism,” I sought a kind of attunement to a pervasive accentedness that might inform not only criticism but also thinking and being in the world.

This piece is unfinished but it’s also not a work in progress. Its ambition is expressed in a question from “I Stand Here Ironing,” a short story by Tillie Olsen: “What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent?” The narrator, overwhelmed by work, cannot step away from her ironing board long enough to sustain a thought. I take her question as my epigraph: what did I start to gather together? What did I try and make coherent? It gives me permission to step back to the more basic question of what an accent is, in the first place—in order to explain more precisely the sense in which everything is accented.

Moving through a number of literary texts to collect pieces of that definition, I take literature as a mode of knowing, a lens to be trained on the world beyond the

literary. Literature, in other words, is this chapter's source but not its final objective; its questioning is directed outward. Literary thinkers ranging from Denise Frohman, Franz Kafka, and Tillie Olsen to Deepak Unnikrishnan, Olga Tokarczuk, and Cathy Park Hong help us to listen for an accent even when it may be unexpected.

These works help us seek a definition of "accent" that may locate it not against or apart from but within the ostensibly unaccented. A simple linguistic definition says that a foreign accent is "non-pathological speech that differs in some noticeable respects from native speaker pronunciation norms."<sup>2</sup> An accent, thus, exists only in its difference; it needs the norms from which it may differ. Therefore, to suggest that everything is accented seems to undercut the very idea of an accent, to render it meaningless. If everything were accented, there would no longer be a norm from which any particular accent could differ.

This chapter, nonetheless, will insist that everything is accented and that thinking with an accent must try to do away with the very idea of the unaccented utterance. The underlying, and likely unanswerable, question is whether that is possible. Is it possible to think (to be in the world) without some idea of a stable center, foundation, or norm?

To say that this question may be unanswerable, however, is not to claim an alibi for an inadequate answer, but to follow Werner Hamacher's insight in *Minima Philologica*: "A question that did not . . . accept the possibility at least for an instant that it might be unanswerable would not be a question but rather an instrument for the extraction of already available information; it would be an exam question and one that in turn did not deserve to be examined."<sup>3</sup> Any genuine question is, by definition, in some way unanswerable: Is it possible to think without resorting to *some* idea of unaccented speech? Is it possible to note an accent even where it may be obscured, disappeared, or neutralized?

Pursuing such less obvious accents, I move between reflections on spoken accent, on the one hand, and readings of less explicit, often textual, manifestations of accentedness, on the other. I also assume that the binary of the native and the foreign, or the norm and the departure, that informs the familiar definition of "accent" is linked directly to the international division of labor that relies on a regime of borders and dictates belonging. If those with an accent are always, by definition, not in their proper place, they are in principle removable and temporary. An adequate grasp of accentedness thus must be linked to questions of labor and temporality.

To start with the spoken accent, then: it is a disruption, eminently noticeable. The foreign-accented speaker is coded as both lacking and overdetermined, always prompted to say what he or she is. For the listener, an accent appears to be an index of identity. For the speaker, it's a mark of what he or she is *not*: not from here, not fully occupying any given present. An accent—concrete and material—is a trace of past circumstances that becomes audible *as an accent* only in displacement, in

some other place where one happens, at the moment, to be speaking. By definition, a spoken accent can take place only elsewhere—in the place it appears to begin with and where it sets the speaker apart as a stranger.

The disruption of the spoken accent provokes the listener to try to “place” it, or else to decide on its acceptability. At the same time, an accent is also something easily assimilated or even erased, as when, once an accent is “placed” in some elsewhere, it can become explicable and ordinary—or when accented speakers themselves become inaudible or invisible, part of the background, the way migrant or ethnicized workers often do.

Moreover, although we say that people “have” accents, an accent is less a property of the speaker than it is an event. It is something that takes place (not elsewhere but here)—and that takes place within a relation. An accent, finally, is nothing other than the effort of traversing an utterance that, depending on the specific relation, becomes audible and accrues significance. This is a dimension articulated in Denice Frohman’s spoken-word poem “Accents.” As Frohman writes about her mother’s speech, “Her tongue can’t lay itself down flat enough. . . . Her lips can barely stretch themselves around english.”<sup>4</sup> The mother’s entire body takes part in the speaking until her utterances overflow the boundaries of English, “too neat for her kind of wonderful.” The greater the effort of traversing an utterance, the thicker the accent.

In contrast to the spoken accent, a written accent is necessarily more figurative. Most often, that kind of accent barely even registers. The historical conditions or material circumstances in which written words arise—that is, the effort involved in their emergence—often remain inaudible. The accent of written words—their effort of traversing the utterance—is possible to restore only intermittently, and it often reappears as a separable, external element, to be regathered under the sign of origin, identity, biography, or context. There are times when this is marked on the page, in spelling or syntax meant to signal irregular speech or to approximate a dialect. But the written accent is neither localized in this way nor localizable. Instead, like irony, it both pervades and destabilizes the text.<sup>5</sup>

A short parable by Franz Kafka, “The Building of the Temple,” offers a generative figure for the written accent. It contributes to answering the question of whether it is possible to note an accent where it may be obscured, disappeared, or neutralized. Kafka’s parable, divided into two almost equal parts, presents a scene of construction, with an unnamed builder, architect, or king at the helm. At first, “Everything came to his aid during the construction work,” as “foreign workers brought the marble blocks, trimmed and fitted to one another. . . . The stones rose and placed themselves according to the gauging motions of his fingers. No building ever came into being as easily as did this temple.” The “he” in this moment stands on the side of permanence, even eternity, as the temple seems to build itself. His power is supposed to be unmarked by effort, without obstruction, while the foreign workers disappear from view.

Midway through Kafka's parable, however, comes a turn. Everything goes according to plan, except for one detail: "Except that, to wreak a spite or to desecrate or destroy it completely, instruments obviously of a magnificent sharpness had been used to scratch on every stone—from what quarry had they come?—for an eternity outlasting the temple, the clumsy scribbles of senseless children's hands, or rather the entities of barbaric mountain dwellers."<sup>6</sup> The temple is supposed to be eternal, testimony to the power of its maker. And that power is, indeed, almost absolute—"except that" the carvings, which arrive with the stones, become inextricable from the temple. They mar this monument to power and even threaten to outlast it. The carvings change little in the architecture itself, but they perform a sabotage nonetheless, as an inconvenient remainder of the workers who were meant to be only temporary, who were meant to have left no traces. The temple is irreversibly accented by the fact of their having existed. For the king, the accented element is supposed to be on the side of labor and temporariness, the unaccented on the side of wealth and permanence. But in Kafka's temple, the accent is impossible to eradicate; it is inscribed *within* the ostensibly unaccented.

This kind of accent does not produce propositional knowledge but remains a formal disruption. Kafka's parable tells us that to think without resorting to some idea of unaccented speech is not to pretend that foundations, centers, and norms do not exist or to disavow their power. It is to examine those foundations, centers, and norms (already in their plurality) more closely—and to examine their own accentedness.

. . .

My longer project on accentedness, begun in 2011, has been taken up and put aside many times, with the necessary focus and continuity always just out of reach.<sup>7</sup> The research and thinking were interrupted by a constant search for short-term, nonsustainable, poorly paid work over the span of years, in which the horizon of futurity was at most a year at a time.

To borrow Tillie Olsen's astonishing phrase, the present chapter thus bears "the marks of part-time, part-self authorship" (37). Olsen's nonfiction collection of essays on the writing conditions of women, immigrants, and workers first began as an unwritten lecture. It was delivered from notes in 1962 at the Radcliffe Institute and transcribed from a tape recording for publication in *Harper's* in 1965. Eventually collected in *Silences* (1978), Olsen's essays deal with the silencing effects of difficult material circumstances and familial obligations. These silences, she explains, "are not *natural* silences, that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. . . . The silences I speak of here are unnatural: the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot."<sup>8</sup> Even as Olsen draws on passages from many writers, she writes also from her own experience as a person who has felt her life consumed by earning a living and by feminized care work. The resulting "cost of 'discontinuity,'" she writes, "is

such a weight of things unsaid, an accumulation of material so great, that everything starts up something else in me; what should take weeks, takes me sometimes months to write; what should take months, takes years.”<sup>9</sup>

When Olsen writes, she does it, remarkably, *through* obstruction—not transcending or setting it aside but instead wading unavoidably, laboriously through it. This is to say that Olsen’s writing is accented—by the labor in which her life is steeped. Her written accent consists precisely of “the weight of things unsaid” that gives her words a particular inflection. The periods of hard-won time that could be devoted to writing result in work that, in both form and subject matter, testifies to its own conditions.

Olsen’s book *Silences* opens with two dedications. The first dedication—relatively straightforward, commemorating losses—is for *them*: “For our silenced people . . . their beings consumed in the hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art . . . anonymous; refused respect, recognition; lost.” The second dedication in *Silences* is for a collective *us*: “For those of us (few yet in number, for the way is punishing), who begin to emerge into more flowered and rewarded use of our selves in ways denied to them—and by our achievement bearing witness to what was (and still is) being lost.”

This second dedication is less transparent and raises a paradox: *Silences* is a book, completed and published, yet it cannot be testimony to triumph. Its writer is nearly broken, and the book bears witness precisely to that very brokenness, not to its overcoming. The achievement of partial and belated access to what had been denied is not meant to serve as a model for anyone else who might belong to Olsen’s class. It is not evidence of resilience, not offered in praise of perseverance that would overcome obstacles. Instead, her achievement bears witness to loss that is not squarely in the past tense: “what was (and still is) being lost” has the unbearable temporality of something almost in the past but nonetheless ongoing. In *Silences* Olsen’s own weariness, disappointment, and even bitterness are palpable, but the point is that she is *unexceptional*: “the weight of things unsaid” is borne by all those who have had their “work aborted, deferred, denied.”<sup>10</sup> The injury is all the greater precisely for being so widespread and so commonplace yet, at the same time, unrecorded.

The kinds of silences Olsen catalogs—linked to conditions of pain, exploitation, poverty, and violence—are usually set apart from normative language and experience, which are in turn governed by presumptions of stability, security, permanence, and completeness.<sup>11</sup> While the conditions that produce those silences are common and widespread, these conditions, she writes, “have not yet been written into literature” —nor, I would add, into discourse and practice—and continue to be treated as departures from norms.<sup>12</sup> While not impossible to name and, in fact, amply documented, they are presumed temporary, exceptional, or marginal. Those conditions, in other words, remain uninscribed: without a permanent articulation, they must be made explicit and brought into the picture again and again. They

exhibit the temporality of emergency, exception, or passing crisis, even as they are actually foundational.

As a critical postulate, then, accentedness is an incitement to listen for what is presumed temporary in its possibly permanent and ubiquitous presence—or, to listen for it when it's not anticipated. As an element of the world, accentedness refers to both the material experience of blocked access and the thickness that might encumber normative language. Insofar as accentedness is framed by the binary of the native and the foreign, finally it is also bound up with labor and temporality.

The written accent that is proper to temporariness finds an apt articulation in Deepak Unnikrishnan's novel *Temporary People*, which takes place precisely at the intersection of accent, labor, and temporality. The novel is set in the United Arab Emirates, where Unnikrishnan himself grew up as the child of Kerala immigrants and where, by law, he had to leave as soon as he reached adulthood. In the UAE, the predominantly South Asian construction and domestic workers, along with foreign sex workers who also include Eastern Europeans, make up more than 85 percent of the population—a temporary majority, constantly replenished by new arrivals replacing previous workers who are obliged, at some point, to leave. The mere fact of this particularly high percentage of migrants within the total population brings out the absurdity of a widespread and otherwise normalized phenomenon: many of those who walk the streets of cities or occupy other spaces are not fully there. Their presence is circumscribed by limited rights or outright illegality and by the highly regulated duration of their stay: no matter how long their stay is, it is always finite. Temporariness, Unnikrishnan's novel insists, is a major feature of the condition of migrant workers.

In the twenty-eight sections of *Temporary People* that shape-shift between poems, short stories, lists, plays, and other forms, it is not always clear who is speaking or whether some parts of the text are quotations, documentation, or complete fiction. The first of the three books in the novel opens with a short anonymous passage entitled "Limbs." The anonymous speaker—whose "name [is] withheld by request"—addresses readers directly, as if welcoming them to the place they are about to enter: "There exists this city built by labor, mostly men, who disappear after their respective buildings are made. Once the last brick is laid, the glass spotless, the elevators functional, the plumbing operational, the laborers, every single one of them, begin to fade, before disappearing completely."<sup>13</sup> This barely visible workforce is meant to leave no traces except for the products of their labor. But then—reminiscent of the turn toward the scribblings on the stones in Kafka's parable, the turn signaled by "*except that . . .*"—there comes a warning: "Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the facades they helped build. When visiting, take note. If you are outside, and there are buildings nearby, ghosts may already be falling, may even have landed on your person." The spatial counterpart to temporariness is intermittent visibility—or, perhaps, never-complete disappearance.

Like “the weight of things unsaid” in Olsen and the scribblings on the stones in Kafka, that ghostliness constitutes the novel’s own accent, with the potential to reappear anywhere as the reader moves through the book.

After this initial warning in “Limbs,” *Temporary People* remains haunted through its form, discontinuous and uncertain, and through its language, an English inflected with borrowings and distortions specific to the diaspora in the Gulf. The word *pravasi* appears as the title of three “chabters” (“chapters” spelled to approximate local pronunciation), one in each of the novel’s three books. Unfamiliar to most English speakers in the Global North, *pravasi* means an expatriate, exile, or someone living overseas. The first chapter under this title dispenses with narrative. Instead it arranges simple pairs of almost exclusively nouns in a column that spans two pages. There is no movement, and the long list evokes a kind of roll call or inspection, its mechanical rhythm marking out a cramped space:

Expat. Worker.  
 Guest. Worker.  
 Guest Worker. Worker.  
 Foreigner. Worker.  
 Non-resident. Worker.  
 Non-citizens. Workers.

The shape of the column is that of an ever-rising skyscraper. By its end, the tall edifice of paired nouns, arrested and static, gives way to just the slightest intimation of movement when it admits the occasional adjective, past participle, or gerund:

Temporary. People.  
 Illegal. People.  
 Ephemeral. People.  
 Gone. People.  
 Deported. Left.  
 More. Arriving.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, *gone* and *deported* are almost but not quite verbs, suggesting processes, passively endured or outside control, rather than actions. *Arriving*, in contrast, implies decision, but this agency or movement too is aborted. As the pairs of nouns throughout the chapter insist, those who arrive will be inexorably converted into “worker,” a function and designation that evacuates any particular identity. As the “gone” and “deported” are exchanged for new arrivals, and as those “arriving” are, in turn, cycled into new workers, the intimation of movement brought in by the non-nouns is arrested again.

In the chapter titled “Pravasis?” in the second book of *Temporary People*, the text completely fills the page. The column of workers dissolves into a throng. The list is still paratactic but now without a discernible rhythm: “Tailor. Hooker. Horse looker. Maid. Camel Rider. Historian. Nurse. Oil Man. Shopkeeper. Chauffeur. Watchman. [ . . . ] Globetrotter. Daydreamer. City Maker. Country Maker. Place



Guilder. Laborer.” It ends with “Cog. Cog? Cog. Labor. Labor,” suggesting numbness.<sup>15</sup> The cogs fit seamlessly as they take their appointed places in the machinery of production—even as, consigned to temporariness, the workers do not properly inhabit the spaces they physically occupy in the territory of the UAE.

The third and final chapter on *pravasis* is also the last in the novel. It consists of a blank page, with only “PRAVASIS = ” in the lower right corner. There is no equation (no identity), and no elaboration.

In the terms of the present chapter, one way to locate the novel’s accent is in the weight of circumstances, in the traces of the workers’ historically and territorially situated experience. Keralan workers’ conditions in the Gulf are absolutely particular, specific to them. Because of the author’s own background, moreover, it’s reasonable to assume Unnikrishnan to be primarily concerned with their fate. In her reading of the novel, Priya Menon focuses precisely on Unnikrishnan’s personal history as the child of Keralan migrants and on the problem of identity, that of Keralan *pravasis* as much as that of the Arabian Gulf. In Menon’s relatively narrow framing, *Temporary People* “highlights the nuances of the formation of Gulf identity . . . , influencing the ways in which we look at the Arabian Gulf” while Unnikrishnan “takes on the dual role of novelist and historiographer to expose the overt omission of Gulf-pravasi experiences from ideologically driven narratives.”<sup>16</sup> Even more precisely, for Menon the novel “illuminates the ethical response humanity owes to the Keralan emigrants on whom it continues to build development, but whom it opportunely refuses to recognize.”<sup>17</sup>

But accentedness in *Temporary People* has a more abstract dimension as well, one not tied to the conditions specific to Keralan migrant workers in the UAE or even to any other particular group in any other particular place. In its more abstract dimension, common to many conditions, that which is accented is presumed temporary, on the other side of the presumption of permanence. Temporariness and its obverse—permanence—have meaning, in turn, only in relation to places: that which is accented is not in its proper place. That more abstract dimension is found here in the structural aspects of Keralan and other foreign workers’ situation in the UAE; and these structural aspects are, in turn, shared by people in many other circumstances and places. Read in such a broadened context, foreign workers in the Gulf are not exceptional, even as they may represent a limit case: an extreme instance of a more widespread global condition of unbelonging that is predicated on temporariness.<sup>18</sup>

Accentedness necessarily involves borders because being temporary, without claim to the place where one actually is, is most directly marked out by border regimes. In an early essay on the phenomenology of borders, Etienne Balibar reflects on the differential meaning of border crossing, which depends on a person’s wealth and passport. While, at one end of the spectrum, the crossing of a border may be so uneventful as to go almost unnoticed for some, for “a poor person from a poor country” the border is “a place he runs up against repeatedly, passing

and repassing through it . . . so that it becomes, in the end, a place where he *resides*. It is an extraordinarily viscous spatio-temporal zone, almost a home—a home in which to live a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life.”<sup>19</sup> Here, Balibar’s characterization of a poor migrant’s life as “a non-life” is double-edged. On the one hand, it seems like a failure of recognition of a nonnormative form of life as life. On the other hand, however, “a waiting-to-live” captures accurately the way migrant life is experienced: foreign workers (in *Temporary People* and in the world) are hyper-aware of time. Remittances sent home are a literal deferral of one’s own life; in the most extreme cases, migrant detention is a complete pause on life.<sup>20</sup> Temporari-ness, a legal tool of labor exploitation, is at the same time a tool of dehumanization that instrumentalizes human beings.<sup>21</sup> The written accent of *Temporary People* denormalizes this condition while the novel also, impossibly, fills in the contours of the presumed “non-life.”

In Kafka’s “The Building of the Temple” as in “Limbs,” the opening fragment in Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People*, the neutral or the unmarked is the place of power. It appears undisturbed and placid and, more importantly still, appears to expend no effort. The effort and the upset, meanwhile, happen on the side of the accented, and only some of that effort is immediately audible in the spoken accent.

Both written and spoken accents pervade “A Scottish Month,” a short story by Olga Tokarczuk from the late 1990s. Reading the story for accentedness will bring further insights into two of the questions guiding this chapter: whether it is possible to note an accent where it may be obscured, disappeared, or neutralized; and how to define an accent to begin with. In this reading, “accent” is an effect of world-historical situatedness that nonetheless resists identity.

“A Scottish Month” is about a Polish writer who (unlike Tillie Olsen in *Silences* or the working-class characters in her fictions) is given the gift of time: she is invited to spend a month in a wealthy woman’s mansion in Scotland and do nothing but write. At the start of her visit, the protagonist is shown a small library attached to the house. Apparently frozen in time, the library is filled with reference books and anthologies dating to the 1950s. “There was an *Encyclopedia Britannica* from 1956,” reports the narrator, “a collection of world literature bound in beautiful dark green leather. There were books of art history, catalogues from art auctions, dictionaries, lexicons . . . some histories of the world, mythologies.”<sup>22</sup> The library is a kind of temple, reflecting modes of knowledge specific to empire that rely on classification, direct access, transparent possession.

This knowledge is ostensibly unaccented and, as the narrator soon realizes, it contents itself with inaccurate, partial, and distorted accounts. Surprised to find a whole bookshelf on the subject of her country, she opens a book at random: published in 1958, it “asserts with English self-assuredness that ‘Silesia, *Germany*.’ Not believing my eyes,” the narrator continues, “I read in an American magazine about ‘Polish concentration camps.’” In yet another book she reads a line that troubles

her most: "Poland is a country which has popped up on the map of Europe from time to time, though never quite in the same place twice."<sup>23</sup> Like the two previous assertions, this one appears in English, as a direct quotation, in the otherwise Polish text of the original story.

At dinner that evening the narrator reads out loud to her Scottish benefactress, "Poland is a country which has popped up on the map of Europe from time to time, though never quite in the same place twice." Scornful and wounded, her cheeks still flushed, she comments on the self-assured volumes from the library:

Yes, it's true. . . . We grow like nightshades, we bloom only one night a year. . . . We appear from time to time, and only on the occasion of wars, uprisings, and other catastrophes. We change languages like clothes. We have houses on wheels, our passports are practically unreadable. We will never grow up; we always reach for dessert before we've had the main course. We really are an odd lot—we turn up and then disappear. It could be the climate, or the unbounded plains. Our small plant civilization leaves infantile traces behind it, to the distress of all future archaeologists: drums, broken tin soldiers, single words far too difficult to pronounce.<sup>24</sup>

But the narrator's outburst is no match for the self-evident, dispassionate language of the library books. The power of those English quotations from the old library remains intact. Moreover, there is no one in particular to appeal to; the Scottish woman is not at fault. There is, instead, an established order of knowledge that claims to account for someone like the Polish writer even as it actually erases her. "In the evening," she writes, "I called home . . . to reassure myself that I still exist."<sup>25</sup>

The narrator does not find a language for expressing that existence except in negative terms: she can only say what she is *not*, and even that she says indirectly, through irony, from some unreliable, unstable position. This is significant because earlier in the story the difference between Eastern Europe and the West is figured precisely as a matter of stability. Observing the house in which she is to spend a month of uninterrupted quiet, the narrator notes, "Here, everything has already been determined. There was no room for improvisation. Every object was in its proper place, as if during all those years when every conceivable thing was turned on its head in my country, here things patiently searched for their places and, having found them at last, made their permanent nests."<sup>26</sup> Order is contrasted here with disorder, stability with instability. The values of these respective terms, moreover, are not symmetrical: order and stability are the norm, disorder and instability a departure from it.

This asymmetry illustrates a familiar dynamic. With respect to Western Europe, Poland and Eastern Europe as a whole represent a kind of otherness that has been put at an arm's length, long domesticated under the sign of underdevelopment. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, for instance, renowned Western intellectuals spoke with the untroubled confidence of the library books from Tokarczuk's story: "Not a single new idea has come out of Eastern Europe in 1989";<sup>27</sup> and, damningly, the revolutions exhibited a "total lack of ideas that are either innovative or orientated

towards the future.”<sup>28</sup> One source of the asymmetry is the monological quality of these statements: self-sufficient, certain, fully embracing their own presumably unaccented authority.

Rectifying this asymmetry—a problem familiar to other parts of the world subjected to the Eurocentric gaze—is not only a matter of epistemic justice or adequate representation. The imposition of Western norms on Eastern Europe—that is, the attempt to reduce its accented quality—has had broader consequences that reach into the present insofar as the present is marked by so-called democratic backsliding and the specter of fascism. Two instances of such an imposition of Western norms, carried out without admitting the possibility of questioning the norms themselves, translate directly into the problematic of accentedness. The first comes after World War I, when the newly constituted states of postimperial Eastern Europe were made to adopt the ethnonationalist model of statehood. Long established in Western Europe by the centuries of complementary processes of internal linguistic homogenization and colonial expansion, the principle of identity between territory, language, and nation did not apply in the always multiethnic Eastern Europe. Something else had obtained there, even if it also eventually went under the name nationalism. As Hannah Arendt observed, the consequence of enforcing that principle of identity was long-term disaster: No matter how numerous, “the minorities [that resulted from this enforcement] could . . . be regarded as an exceptional phenomenon, peculiar to certain territories that deviated from the norm. This argument was always tempting,” Arendt continues, “*because it left the system itself untouched,*” and the argument “has in a way survived the second World War whose peacemakers . . . began to ‘repatriate’ nationalities . . . in an effort to unscramble ‘the belt of mixed populations.’”<sup>29</sup> The process of ethnic and linguistic homogenization, begun by the post-Versailles nation-state system and hastened by wartime genocide, was completed by the forced population transfers after World War II.

The second instance in which ill-fitting but dominant norms went unquestioned is the post-Soviet transition to capitalism and liberal democracy. As in the first instance, a political and economic system that took centuries to develop in Western Europe was introduced in a few years, and any flaws that surfaced in this temporal compression were attributed to Eastern Europe, not to the contradictions inherent in the conjunction of liberal democracy with a market-based economy. Because this misattribution of the problem again “left the system itself untouched,” to recall Arendt’s remark regarding the earlier context, in this process, too, the region emerged as the problematic, unstable element being integrated into a larger, ostensibly stable, order. Liberal elites, as Ivan Krastev argues, presented “their policies not merely as ‘good’ but as ‘necessary,’ not merely as ‘desirable’ but as ‘rational,’” and thereby removed the possibility of democratic deliberation at the very inception of new democratic systems.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent turn to illiberal populism and far-right nationalism, which began before any signs of a *global* turn,

seemed contained to the region and easily attributed to its peculiarities. Writing in 2007, however, Krastev was able to see it not as “a pathology but a profound transformation in the nature of [all of] Europe’s liberal democracies. It is the very structure of contemporary democracy that is at issue, rather than a particular malfunction of an otherwise workable model.”<sup>31</sup> This and the previous post-Versailles instance, then, are moments of missed opportunity to interrogate the systems (presumed unaccented, rational, and necessary, without context and universal) that had been granted the force of a norm.

It is no wonder that against this background a place like Poland has only intermittent visibility. This kind of discursive and political asymmetry between order and disorder is what the narrator of Tokarczuk’s short story hears in the casual, presumably unaccented statement from the library books that “Poland is a country which has popped up on the map of Europe though never . . .” The consciousness of this asymmetry is also what gives the peculiar accent to her outburst: “We really are an odd lot—we turn up and then disappear.”

So far in this analysis and in Tokarczuk’s story, these accents are primarily figurative, embedded in the written word. They would not be immediately recognized *as* accents, even if they do determine the intelligibility of the respective utterances. After the narrator’s outburst, however, the dynamic of asymmetry in the story shifts when the Scottish woman shows her an old photo. It shows a man in a Royal Armed Forces uniform, one of the many Polish pilots who joined Britain after their own country was occupied by Germany and the Soviet Union. To the narrator’s surprise, the woman pronounces his name perfectly—Tadeusz Poniatowski—and says, “I loved him. . . . He spoke with the same accent as you.”<sup>32</sup>

What does the Scottish woman mean by the same accent? The audible difference in the narrator’s and the pilot’s spoken English from the woman’s own? Or the unstable passion they both directed at protesting forms of their own nonexistence? The narrator and the pilot are removed from one another by half a century, but the old woman can hear her long-dead pilot in the narrator’s accented English. “So that’s why I was there,” thinks the narrator. “I had something in common with Tadeusz Poniatowski, a pilot who perished somewhere over Hamburg.” Instead of instant recognition or affinity, at first there is surprise: her own voice comes already listened to, as an iteration of the pilot’s. For the narrator, being told she and the pilot had the same accent does not imply a shared identity—or, if it is an identity, it is one mediated by the narrator’s and the pilot’s foreignness in relation to a third person, in their shared displacement. The determination of “the same accent” comes from without.

Still, in Tokarczuk’s story the old woman’s comment on the narrator’s spoken accent is lovingly enigmatic. The accentedness she remarks on is open-ended. In other contexts, the spoken accent will bring with it a specific emplotment, a place readily assigned to the speaker. There is a story I know of a young woman who

worked at an art museum on New York City's Upper East Side. The museum was itself a kind of monument to the unaccented: wealth made visible without the labor that built it, and exclusion covered over by claims of universality. One day an older woman visitor, elaborately dressed, came in. She happened to exchange a few words with the young woman who worked there and then leaned closer, asking with a smile, "I detect an accent! Where are you from?" But the answer ("from Poland") shifted her posture upward again. "Oh!" the older woman said. "What a good job for you!"

Little else happened between the two women. For the older one, this was a moment of unpleasant surprise. For the younger woman, the reaction to her accent suddenly made present two historical accidents: on the one hand, her place of origin, still miraculously living on in her utterances; on the other hand, New York City's ethnicized domestic labor, in which she—or, in the eyes of the visitor, women just like her—would ordinarily find her place as a cleaner or a caretaker.<sup>33</sup> In the collusion of these two historical circumstances, suddenly made material in the visitor's remark, it was as if she were doubly displaced, first by the trace of her past in her own voice, suddenly audible, and then again by the emplacement imposed on her by her interlocutor, that other frame of reference informed by the then-recent presence of Eastern European housekeepers across upper Manhattan. The encounter is a shock because, at least for a moment, these two determinations leave the young woman no ground to stand on. The older woman—the one putatively without an accent—can remain oblivious of the dynamics she has put into motion. But her surprised, "What a good job for you!" assigns the younger woman to a place that she, working the museum job and not a job more proper to her accent, deliberately did not choose. Even as having an accent can mean being out of place, therefore, it turns out that a new proper place—a place of secondary, often imposed, proper belonging—may be already waiting.

An accent is a mark of both displacement and of a potential new emplacement. Temporariness, in turn, is their temporal analog: the accented speaker does not belong permanently in the place she actually occupies. But this is paradoxical, because the accented speaker is also acutely attuned the place she occupies: it's where her own body and her material circumstances make the accent happen to begin with.

In *Minor Feelings* Cathy Park Hong argues for a mirroring attunement—for the speaker who is presumably without an accent to assume some of the weight of materiality. "If you want to truly understand someone's accented English," she writes, "you have to slow down and listen with your body. You have to train your ears and offer them your full attention."<sup>34</sup> (In different terms, borrowed from elsewhere, listening with one's body may go so far as to mean "carrying one another's burden"—that is, being in solidarity.)<sup>35</sup> Hong's own conviction that one must listen with one's body comes from having observed her own mother speak and interact with others. "When she speaks Korean, my mother speaks her mind. . . .

But her English is a crush of piano keys that used to make me cringe whenever she spoke to a white person. As my mother spoke, I watched the white person, oftentimes a woman, put on a fright mask of strained tolerance: wide eyes frozen in trapped patience, smile widened in condescension.”<sup>36</sup> The frozen, strained response, Hong implies, is the opposite of listening with one’s body; instead of opening, it seems like a flight response, or a hasty closing off.

The young woman at the art museum would recognize her own interlocutor’s reaction in the fright of these white, unaccented women—even though in her case the older woman’s smile wanes not at the fact of an accent per se, but at the wrong kind of accent, even though they are supposed to share in whiteness. But the young woman would recognize it because in both of these moments the reaction on the part of the unaccented speaker is an effort to maintain boundaries—nothing less than an act of “bordering.”<sup>37</sup>

In assuming the bodily posture of bordering, the unaccented speaker is listening with her body after all, except that the “strained tolerance” of her expression strips her interlocutor’s utterances of any content. It converts them into signifiers of mere identity. The posture of bordering, on the part of the unaccented, severs reciprocity.

## NOTES

1. See Starosta, “Accented Criticism: Translation and Global Humanities” and “Perverse Tongues, Postsocialist Translations.”

2. Thomson, “Measurement of Accentedness, Intelligibility and Comprehensibility,” 3.

3. Hamacher, “For—Philology,” 104.

4. Frohman, “Accents.”

5. De Man, “The Concept of Irony.”

6. Kafka, “The Building of the Temple,” 47.

7. We have statistics and figures but no consciousness.

8. Olsen, *Silences*, 6.

9. Olsen, *Silences*, 39.

10. Olsen, *Silences*, 8.

11. For one instance of this, see Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, which starts with the observation that the migrant “has been predominantly understood from the perspective of *stasis* and perceived as a secondary or derivative figure. . . . Place-bound social membership in a society is assumed as primary” (3), regardless of the increasing numbers of migrants.

12. Olsen, *Silences*, 21.

13. Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 5.

14. Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 25–26.

15. Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 119, 121.

16. Menon, “*Pravasi* Really Means Absence,” 198.

17. Menon, “*Pravasi* Really Means Absence,” 198 (italics added). It’s worth noting that at the same time as Menon insists on such an identity-specific reading, she also leaves an opening for other readings, such as mine: “While my own reading of *Temporary People* emphasises the spectres of *pravasis* as a historical recovery to better explain the complexities of Gulf migration, others may find ghosts of different compelling forces in the same text” (196).

18. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*.



19. Balibar, "What Is a Border?," 83. See also Gurman, "A Collapsing Division," for a discussion of the expansion inland of border zones, so the border is no longer a boundary line but an aspect of the territory.
20. Bouchani, *No Friend but the Mountains*.
21. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*.
22. Tokarczuk, "Szkocki miesiąc," 62–63. Translations of the excerpts are my own except where noted.
23. Tokarczuk, "Szkocki miesiąc," 62–63.
24. Tokarczuk, "Szkocki miesiąc," 65 (translation by Krzysztof Masłoń, modified).
25. Tokarczuk, "Szkocki miesiąc," 63.
26. Tokarczuk, "Szkocki miesiąc," 55.
27. François Furet, quoted in Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, 27.
28. Habermas, "What Does Socialism Mean Today?"
29. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 276 (italics added).
30. Krastev, "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding?," 58.
31. Krastev, "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding?," 62.
32. Tokarczuk, "Szkocki miesiąc," 66.
33. In referring to the ethnicized division of labor, I follow Immanuel Wallerstein's definition of ethnicity within the international division of labor and the world system ("The Construction of Peoplehood").
34. Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 104.
35. Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, 2.
36. Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 98–99.
37. Sakai, "Translation and the Figure of Border."

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PART TWO

## Accented Perception



## Is There a Call Center Literature?

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan

Hi. You have reached “Is There a Call Center Literature?”

Is there a literature that registers the social, political, and economic transformations wrought by the call center? Is there a literature that stages the tech-support relations institutionalized by the business process outsourcing industry? Is there a literature that operates through formal techniques of accent neutralization and modification comparable to those employed by call center agents?

Press 1 for details on our current services.

Press 2 for a history of our institution.

Press 3 to listen in on a trainee’s performance review.

Press 4 to review a proposal for a transnational study of Call Center Literatures.

Press 5 for a job advertisement in Global Anglophone literature.

Press 6 to watch call center theater.

Press 7 to talk to an English professor about the latest New India novel.

Our dedicated staff are eager to assist you in thinking about the Indian call center and its relationship to the English-language literature of New India. For all other inquiries, including about the Mexican, Central American, and Filipino call centers, please consult the Works Cited.<sup>1</sup> This call may be peer-recorded for quality assurance. Thank you for holding, and please stay on the line. Someone will be with you shortly.

I. [When: Now. Where: Here. Who speaks: An “I” that sounds like “Me.” To whom: You. What: Details on our current services. A mission statement. An admission.]

Is there a Call Center Literature? I’ve been asking this question for the better part of a decade. I entered a doctoral program in the interdisciplinary humanities in 2009 and started writing about the literary signature of the call center in 2012. I had conversations about Call Center Literature and presented on it at conferences. I drafted a dissertation chapter, article, job talk, and project proposal that sought to use Call Center Literature as a rubric to organize the study of non-Western

Anglophone texts. I pronounced “Call Center Literature” in many ways: as archive, method of study, aspiration.

It’s also true that I stopped asking my titular question some years ago, stopped searching for “a specific ‘way of speaking’” Call Center Literature.<sup>2</sup> The phrase does not appear in my 2016 dissertation on the Anglophone literature of contemporary India. In 2018, I published an article on the discursive symmetries between the figures of the expatriate writer and the call center agent.<sup>3</sup> Call Center Literature is absent there too.

As the call center industry moved on from India, which had been its global center, as India deemphasized the call center’s centrality to its global brand, as scholarship on the call center accrued in a wide range of fields, I began to feel that there was no longer any suspense in the act of answering the call center’s call, that whatever there was to say about the call center had already been said, and, equally, that whatever the call center agent had to say had already been heard.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, my advisor didn’t think Call Center Literature sounded right, and I got the message that I didn’t sound right either, speaking it, not quite like an English scholar.

I moved on. Or I thought I moved on. In fact, my departure from Call Center Literature appears to me now like the virtual migrations of a call center worker whose imaginative life elsewhere (with other, more worthy scholarly objects) belies the strictures of her position here (back where I started, never having left). My giving up on Call Center Literature after listening to myself fail to say it right feels from the present vantage like an exercise in accent reduction, neutralization, and modification (that’s still not it; can you repeat that?; never mind). Accent reduction, neutralization, and modification are of course the practices of linguistic transformation for which the call center agent is primarily known, and which are conventionally construed by scholars and fictionists as signs of the agent’s subordination. In Bharati Mukherjee’s 2011 novel, *Miss New India*, customer support jobs require malleable dispositions. “I think,” an employer says to an aspiring agent, “you have a great deal of difficulty erasing yourself from the call . . . Being a call agent requires modesty . . . submission. We teach you to serve.”<sup>5</sup> We teach you, that is, to produce a truly acousmatic voice; the source of your sound must remain unseen; the caller should not be able to locate you.<sup>6</sup>

I erased Call Center Literature from my work. This chapter narrates my return to its concerns, which happened slowly, through ongoing efforts with Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, and Pavitra Sundar to theorize accent as non-indexical, relational, and inherently comparative, and all at once, inspired by our coproduction of *Thinking with an Accent*. My present aim is to enact such thinking by offering a retrospective interrogation of the forms of accented perception—by which I mean both listening and reading—that I tried to anticipate and accommodate through variously accented articulations of Call Center Literature over the years. In the process I reconsider who and what Call Center Literature itself accommodates through

its manifold accents, internal translations, and elisions. Who speaks (writes) Call Center Literature, and to whom does Call Center Literature speak? Who receives (reads) Call Center Literature's call, and to whom is the receiver listening?<sup>7</sup>

If you are reading this chapter for an argument (which is itself a form of accented reading),<sup>8</sup> I offer this: an argument for accent as a form of approach; an argument for speaking as seeking, specifically for the speaking subject as seeking convergence with the one to whom she speaks; an argument for accent as a mode of fashioning language so that it approximates—even if it never reaches—the desired object. Another way of stating this is as an argument for accent as the residue of thought, as the metalinguistic trace of a process of accrual by which, in speaking, we attempt to know something, and in accommodating the one to whom we speak, we attempt to consummate that speaking as knowing.

I derive the language of accommodation from two sources. First, from sociolinguists who study how accents shift, consciously and unconsciously, in the presence of different listeners. Such shifts are termed “accent convergence and divergence,” “code-switching,” “communication accommodation,” and “dialect accommodation.”<sup>9</sup> Understood as a practice of convergence and accommodation, accent emerges as the sticky tissue between what we say and who we say it to, how we sound and how we are heard, between subjects and ideas of subjects, between, to borrow J. L. Austin's typology, speech acts (locutions), the intentions that drive them (illocutions) and the way that those speech acts are taken up by intended and unintended addressees (perlocutions).<sup>10</sup> Accent understood thus does not betray identities and origins; rather, it lays bare logics of representation, interpretation, and identification.

I am also following Rangan, whose chapter in this volume on the relationship between becoming “accented” and becoming “disabled” includes this insight:

When a call center trainee from small-town India undergoes voice training to ‘lose’ his regional accent, he is accommodating North American and other English-speaking customers. These customers benefit daily from the logic of disability accommodations without ever identifying as disabled, even as the call center trainee is made to feel defective, inadequate, and impaired—in short, in need of reform.<sup>11</sup>

If you've read anything about the call center, it's this: that its agents don't speak in their own voices, that they have aliases, that they manipulate their accents to smooth over business transactions.<sup>12</sup> Very rarely do scholars focus on the accented *listening* that is happening on the other end of the line, which Rangan emphasizes. When we assume that the call center agent has been trained to reduce and minimize herself and her accent, when we assume that the call center agent's English is inadequate, we miss the ways in which she is performing radical accommodation of the Western caller, who tunes in with what Jennifer Stoeber terms the “listening ear” and is therefore primed to hear unfamiliar pronunciations of English as suspicious, deficient, or inaudible.

Stoever's listening ear is "a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices."<sup>13</sup> My earliest articulations of Call Center Literature sought a vantage from which to problematize the dominant ideologies of globality at work in English literary studies in its American institutional form. These ideologies have changed over time through the culture of classroom and canon, and they put pressure on our individual readings of non-Western Anglophone texts. With Call Center Literature, I aimed to lay bare the assumptions of belatedness and Western address that, along with ironic fantasies of world literary interconnectedness, undergird readings of contemporary New Indian texts. Call Center Literature would marshal the call centers' lessons of vexed telephonic exchange, somatic adjustment, and accent modification in the reading of New Indian literature. Call Center Literature would expose the dominant Anglophone reader's "reading ear," which is primed to receive the non-Western English text as derivative, pandering, and inauthentic. [Press 2 for a history of these inaugural attempts.]

This discussion registers and advances these goals by reading both the call center and Call Center Literature as the setting and structure of an ongoing knowledge project. Like the call center, this chapter is a time machine: it flouts assumptions of chronological temporality and disrupts circadian rhythms. It is a force of connection that operates through disruption; it creates the illusion of movement toward the desired object despite its anchoring. Call Center Literature is a dissertation that was never written, a book that was never proposed, an argument that builds through self-concealment. In asking "Is there a Call Center Literature?" here, now, as you read these words, I seek to induct the academic critic into the call center by respecifying the space and time of her speaking and its reception.

The following sections reenact my past efforts to accommodate particular recipients of what I hoped would be Call Center Literature, including conference audience, thesis advisor, and hiring committee. Each section is offered as a performance of thinking with an accent. Each is a time capsule that might be read as a provisional mode of producing the intelligibility of Call Center Literature. Together they seek its origins and telos. They pursue both the archive that Call Center Literature names and the itinerary of the one who pursues it. If accent can be understood as a "biography of migration, as an irregular and itinerant concoction of contagiously accumulated voices," then this work attests that accent can also serve as a biography of thought, as "testament . . . to an unstable and migratory" process of attempting to articulate what one endeavors to know to an-other with whom one endeavors to think.<sup>14</sup> In this way I return the subject "to the critic's otherwise subjectless speech."<sup>15</sup>

Is there a Call Center Literature?

To whom am I speaking?

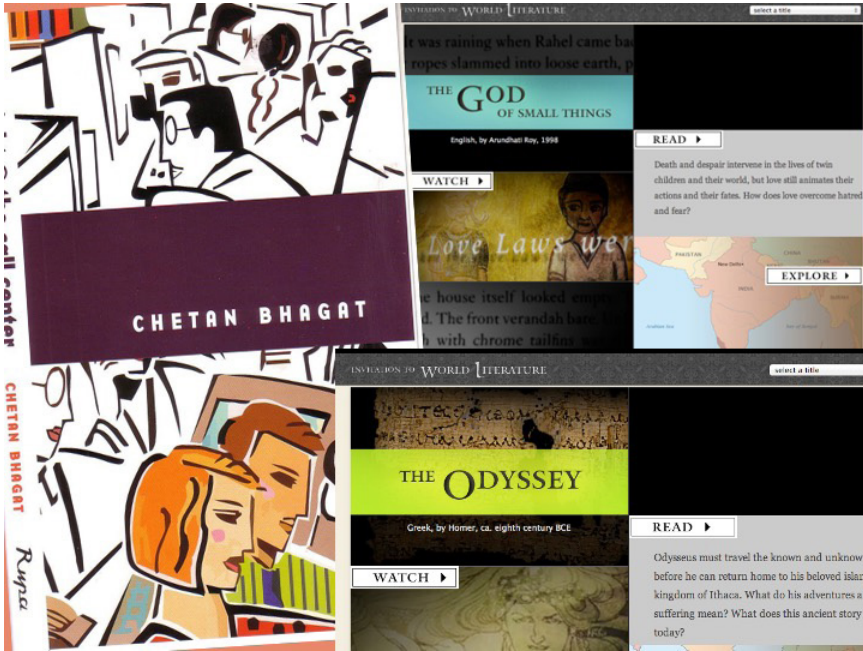


FIGURE 6.1. World literature from *The Odyssey* to Chetan Bhagat. From “Is There a Call Center Literature?” PowerPoint presentation delivered February 2014 at the University of Chicago at the graduate student conference “Whole Worlds: Systems of Affect, Capital, Aesthetics.”

II. [When: February 2014. Where: A graduate student conference. Who speaks: Some versions of “I” who recollect who “We” were. To whom: Professors, fellow students, conference audiences. What: An institutional history. Inaugural attempts at an original coinage.]

Call Center Literature began as a response to world literature, a field that sits uneasily between the disciplines of English and comparative literature (see figure 6.1). Our founder, then a doctoral candidate, was steeped in debates about world literature. Here’s how she described those debates on January 9, 2014, at a conference in Chicago during a polar vortex. It was one degree Fahrenheit outside the Aloft Hotel. Let’s listen in, and listen to those listening:

World literature is being invoked as a successor to postcolonial literary studies and critical response to globalization that is also, somewhat counterintuitively, occasioned by the globalization of literary studies and markets. Now, one triumphalist story goes, non-Western texts may finally be promoted from the marginal statuses of “postcolonial” and “ethnic” to the vaunted status of “world.” But which non-Western literatures are receiving world literary recognition? Does world literature adequately problematize globalization?



These were not original questions; these were the questions on offer in literary studies at the time. Contributors to the 2003 volume *World Bank Literature* and critics like Emily Apter, in her 2013 *Against World Literature*, had already elaborated the violence of world literature's analogical thinking while specifying transnational capital and American imperialism as undergirding conditions of theorizing the world.<sup>16</sup> Our founder was emboldened by these texts and by rhetorical questions like Peter Hitchcock's "What if world literature is not?"<sup>17</sup> Let's tune in again:

We must question world literature's assumptions about the vocation of literature, its readers, and what qualifies a text as "world"-ly. Damrosch classes as world literature "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language." He further specifies that a text has an "effective life as world literature whenever . . . it is *actively present* within a literary system beyond that of its original culture."<sup>18</sup> Dimock's world literary texts have a "*prolonged life* and a *global following*"; her "*practiced*" reader hears "the planet as a whole."<sup>19</sup> These and similar elaborations tie a theory of the world to the nonequivalent conceptions of the *global*, a political and economic construct discursively constituted by the capital flows now identified with globalization, and *planetary*, a term with ecocritical resonances and an attendant call for ethical stewardship of the earth, made familiar by Spivak, while putting forth exclusive criteria for inclusion.

Our founder's task as an apprentice academic was to practice speaking the language of the world literature debate, to rehearse known questions in the hope that they might eventually spin off into something original. She would accent her intervention through carefully curated citations. She was leading up to a comment on the English-language literature of the New India. This is what she said next, in transitioning from the critique of world literature to the elaboration of a new mode of thinking about Global Anglophone literary production:

What are the criteria for effectivity and active presence? How long is a prolonged life? How is a global following measured? If "global following" were measured in terms of sheer number of readers, then the pulpy, ninety-five-rupee novels of Chetan Bhagat and his "unpracticed" readers might be far worldlier than those of, say, Arundhati Roy, whose 1997 *The God of Small Things* was recently hailed by PBS as a world literary exemplar along with *The Odyssey* and *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Ah, Bhagat. Our founder did not particularly like Bhagat, the pulp-fiction writer credited with being India's highest-selling English-language writer. She had only read one of his novels, the 2005 *One Night @ the Call Center*. What seemed clear, however, was that Bhagat had achieved the symbolic heft in the critical discourse on global Indian literature that only Salman Rushdie had in the postcolonial context, and that he had done this by explicitly dismissing writers like Rushdie who were celebrated in the West. "What is the point of writers who call themselves Indian authors," Bhagat asked, "but who have no Indian readers? . . . I want my books next

to jeans and bread; I want my country to read me.”<sup>20</sup> Bhagat’s novels were marketed and read almost exclusively in India; they were the exemplary case of novels that do not “circulate beyond their culture of origin” and instead “stay home.”

Our founder thought she could use Bhagat to advance—playfully, creatively, seriously—a critique of world literature. Here was a writer with a finger on the pulse of Indian globalization who was expressly *not* worldly, nor cosmopolitan, nor planetary in sensibility; a writer who was not addressing Western readers; a writer whose work did not travel, whose novels were not meant to be translated, and who wrote in a language as neutral as call center English.<sup>21</sup> Bhagat would never be read as world literature, but was he not, in his way, worldly?

Bhagat was a red herring. The plan was always to pivot to concerning trends in the scholarship on Indian English literature more generally. Because while Bhagat may have been a genuinely “anti-literary”<sup>22</sup> writer, recipients of international prizes were also subject to criticisms of their literary merits. Take, for example, the charges leveled against Aravind Adiga, author of the 2008 Booker-winning New India novel, *The White Tiger*. Despite his wide circulation and popularity—or, indeed, because of both—many critics read Adiga as pandering, inauthentic, and derivative.

*Pandering:* Both the English language and the global novel carry with them an assumed Western reader, who is, by virtue of his persistent self-centering, almost impossible to shake. Thus, India-based critics read *The White Tiger* as delivering up yet another “exotic India” for Western readers—as if they were de facto the intended audience of the novel. “[For] many of us,” Shobhan Saxena wrote in the *Times of India*, “our worst fears have come true—the West is once again using our poverty to humiliate us.”<sup>23</sup>

*Inauthentic:* Despite English’s “prestige” in the Indian context, “its lack of regional specificity . . . often marks it as being culturally inauthentic.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Sanjay Subrahmanyam criticized Adiga for using English to depict non-elite Indians: “What we are dealing with is someone with no sense of the texture of Indian vernaculars, yet claiming to have produced a realistic text.”<sup>25</sup>

*Derivative:* Just as Pascale Casanova charged Vikram Seth with copying the “typically English and largely outmoded” literary techniques of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, Adiga was understood to be working in the form of the Western novel, retelling Richard Wright’s 1940 *Native Son*, and indigenizing someone else’s realism.<sup>26</sup>

These critiques were there in classrooms, syllabi, and textbooks; they were leveled by Indian and non-Indian critics alike. They are, our founder realized, baked into the study of all Indian literatures that come to Anglo-American critical attention through the operations of the global literary marketplace. English is always assumed, against the common sense of history and biography, to be inescapably “other” to the contemporary Indian writer. Indian English literature, as Rashmi Sadana argues, “is seen not only as being less authentic than vernacular, or bhasha,

literature but also, and more specifically, as a betrayal of a particular linguistic community by one of its own.”<sup>27</sup> The literary Indian English writer, in turn, “is assumed to be pandering to a global rather than to a regional audience and . . . is considered ‘less Indian’ for doing so.”<sup>28</sup>

While our founder was chafing against dominant readings of Indian English literature, she was also reading ethnographies of the Indian call center, which was, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, a well-established signifier of the New India. It was the key institution through which upwardly mobile, aspirational young Indians were speaking—literally, on the telephone—to the world. Our founder was drawn to these young Indians; she recognized their efforts at accent modification and neutralization as analogous to those of Indian English writers like Adiga, as well as to her own. Call center agents were tasked with making their Indian English sound *global*. Writers like Adiga were trying to make their English sound marketably (as opposed to inscrutably) *Indian*. She was struggling to draft a dissertation that would sound like *English*, disciplinarily speaking.

Like the call center agent, like Adiga, our founder would rise to the project of simultaneously eliminating difference and cultivating a very specific difference—an Indian and global difference; a postcolonial and ethnic difference—from the American- or British-accented (which is also to say, the American- or British-literature-focused) English-speaking (and reading) voice. Whatever she wrote, it would have to pass muster with scholars steeped in the English canon, accustomed to the accents of Milton, Tennyson, and Joyce, as well as the accented criticism of their particular readers. By that same token, she would have to embody the analytics that constitute the margins of the field. [Press 5 for an enumeration of these analytics in the space of a job ad.]

That’s where “Call Center Literature” began: as a coinage vested with a nascent critique of a disciplinary fantasy of worldliness; as a coinage straining for audibility and legibility within English. Call Center Literature would trouble the premise of “world” (literature) and query the construction of the (Global) “Anglophone.” (See figure 6.2.) According to the OED, an “Anglophone” is an English-speaking person, or a place where English is spoken and heard. But what is English? A language that is not one. A subject who is not one. A voice which is not itself. As Daniel DeWispelare observes, “The ‘anglo’ in ‘anglophony’ represents a simulacrum of Englishness in a world where the vast majority of anglophones are not and have not been English since the late eighteenth century.”<sup>29</sup> To name the “Anglophone,” then, is to conceive of literature as not just written in English, singular, but as a venue where Englishes, plural, are spoken and heard, lobbed and received. To call a literature “Anglophone” is to raise the question of who and what the text itself is listening for, and who, in turn, is listening back.

III. [When: November 2012. Where: An English professor’s office. Who speaks: A dissertator. To whom: A dissertation advisor. What: A performance review. A postmortem on a chapter draft.]

# Call Center Literature

- ...traces the call center's and India's discursive transformations in the story of Asia's rise
- ...“stays home”
- ...speaks in an accent-neutralized voice
- ...offers a commentary on World Literature

FIGURE 6.2. Defining Call Center Literature. From “Is There a Call Center Literature?” PowerPoint presentation delivered February 2014 at the University of Chicago at the graduate student conference “Whole Worlds: Systems of Affect, Capital, Aesthetics.”

No, I'm not just talking about the call center novel. Yes, there are call center novels. There are novelistic depictions of call centers and their Americanized agents, like Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center*, Anish Trivedi's 2010 *Call Me Dan*, and Mukherjee's *Miss New India*. These are lowbrow, pulpy texts written in the “modular” and “serviceable” English of the outsourcing industry.<sup>30</sup> Critics have only recently started writing about Bhagat, and nobody wants to touch Mukherjee.<sup>31</sup> There is limited commentary on a related genre, “techie lit.”<sup>32</sup> There are call center plays, too, and art installations, and movies, like Jeff Jeffcoat's 2006 *Out-sourced*.<sup>33</sup> I'm not writing about those either.

An argument? I think I'm trying to argue that it's possible to write a work of Call Center Literature without actually depicting a call center. I'm not aiming for a literal description of a genre's content, but rather for a formulation that might shed light on the cultural production of the New Indian contemporary. Call Center Literature will be a heuristic device and a provocation. To adapt Amitava Kumar's question about “World Bank literature,” “To think about books and jobs—about authors as much as agents, the literature of self-help as well as outsourced tech support—is that ‘Call Center Lit?’”<sup>34</sup> I argue that it is.

What do I mean by literature of self-help? Let me put it this way: The cliché about India is that it's where searching Westerners can “find themselves.” From

*A Passage to India* to *Eat Pray Love*, India has always accommodated the West's desires, nostalgia, and projections. India was a source of spiritual help for the subjects of a disenchanting West long before the inauguration of call center tech support. And so, yeah, this is what really bothers me about the novel of New India: that it depicts the people delivering tech support as the ones in need of help, in need of external models to complete their journeys into commercial self-actualization, as the ones who are deficient and in need of rehabilitation.

Mohsin Hamid's 2013 *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is the obvious place to go; it unfolds as a twelve-step self-help program, and each chapter offers a maxim for getting rich, like "move to the city" and "dance with debt." I guess what I'm wondering is, do you think I can use the term *self-help* to describe all novels of entrepreneurship? Novels that fetishize "individual initiative, personal responsibility and ambition, and individualistic notions of success"?<sup>35</sup> Take Bhagat's call center novel. It includes blank spaces on its opening page for readers to reflect on their fears; it solicits their "participation in and affective commitment" to the narrative and then offers them "an easy takeaway" or two.<sup>36</sup> (See figure 6.3.) Ethnographers describe call center agents as "entrepreneurial" even though they're not entrepreneurs because they supposedly embody the neoliberal ethic. Even though his subject is not the call center, Adiga—writer of that iconic New Indian entrepreneur, the murderous Balram—has been called "the Charles Dickens of the call-centre generation."<sup>37</sup>

And actually, the call center is very much there in *The White Tiger*, and other New India texts too. It's a critical part of the *mise-en-scène*. Adiga writes India as a nation of entrepreneurs who "virtually run America now" from cities like Bangalore, where you "can't get enough call-center-workers, can't get enough software engineers, can't get enough sales managers."<sup>38</sup> In Danny Boyle's 2008 *Slumdog Millionaire*, Jamal works as a chaiwallah in a Mumbai call center; he gets on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" by tapping into the center's resources. In Raj Kamal Jha's 2015 *She Will Build Him a City*, the fantastical New City-scape that stands in for the New Indian city is authenticated by the presence of the call center, as in, "There's little traffic at so early an hour except for call-centre Toyotas that dart from light to light."<sup>39</sup>

Yes, the call center is always there because it symbolizes the contradictions of New India. It is a deeply ambivalent sign that accents New India by standing apart from its surrounds. On the one hand, the call center is a sign of India's ongoing colonization; that's where we get the language of "cybercoolies," "dead ringers," and "phone clones"—as if the agents have no agency; as if they are robotic copycats; as if they are all mimicry and no menace.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the call center is a scene of Western disempowerment and overdependence on the East; that's why "outsourcing" and "offshoring" came up so often in the 2004 and 2008 U.S. elections as threats to American world dominance.

The call center is a sign of India's rise and fall. It's evidence of the Empire striking back; it's also the Indian analog of the Chinese sweatshop. On top of that, the

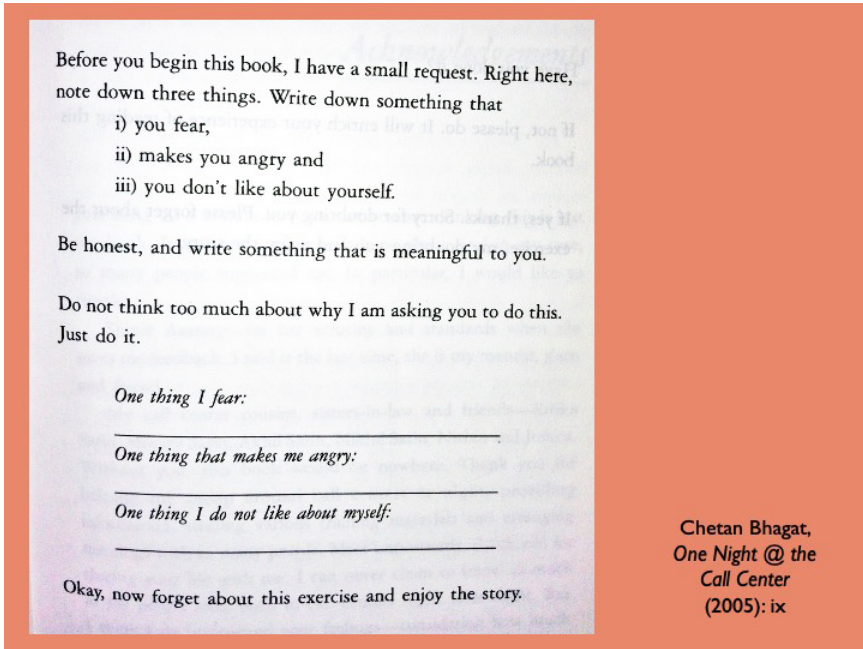


FIGURE 6.3. Bhagat's invitation to readers. From "Is There a Call Center Literature?," Power-Point presentation delivered February 2014 at the University of Chicago at the graduate student conference "Whole Worlds: Systems of Affect, Capital, Aesthetics."

call center agent has absorbed the brunt of India's own internal critique of globalization, as voiced, for instance, by one of Smitha Radhakrishnan's informants in her ethnography of IT workers: "Take the kids working for BPOs. No background, their parents have never seen money—some get into drugs. It's very, very negative. The culture is opening up for a whole lot of wrong kinds of things."<sup>41</sup> Do you see where I'm going with this? Call center agents are considered pale imitations of Americans, but they are also considered inauthentic, inappropriate Indians.

Female call center agents have it especially tough. Do you remember the horrific gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, who was called "Nirbhaya" and "India's daughter," in Delhi last year? Jyoti was putting herself through medical school by working nights at a call center. This came up often in the news coverage, because call center agents, specifically women, serve as "placeholder[s] for a temporal rupture that threatens to render Indian futurity unintelligible from its traditional pasts."<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, the female call center agent is independent and autonomous; she earns good money, works night shifts, and interacts with both women and men professionally. On the other hand, she is a threat to so-called Indian values: "Call center job equals call girl job!"<sup>43</sup>

When Megha Majumdar's novel *A Burning* comes out in 2020, the call center will still serve to signify the dangerous new subjectivities that emerge in New



India's name. In that novel, newspapers make up stories about suspected terrorist Jivan, specifically imagining her wanton life as a call center agent: "Look," Jivan tells her cellmate, "*Deshar Potrika* says I used to work at a call center, and they have pictures of somebody! Somebody else on the back of a motorcycle with a man. I have never even been on a motorcycle."<sup>44</sup>

And—

Sorry, what was that? Yes, I guess I've moved away from my original questions about tech support and self-help. How will I sell this project, you ask?

IV. [When: January 2016. Where: Microsoft Word—Drafts Folder. Who speaks: A "scholar." To whom: Search committee members. What: A proposal for a project not undertaken.]

*Is There a Call Center Literature?* develops a theory of the literature emergent from the encounter of plural Englishes in the global Anglosphere through a transnational, comparative study of Anglophone textual and visual media routed through three "call center countries": India, the Philippines, and Mexico. As service-oriented "back rooms" of the global economy, each of these national sites evidences the contradictions and epistemic violences of contemporary economic and cultural relation on the world stage. By that same token, they have significantly different histories of English-language imposition and acquisition, geopolitical entanglements with the United States, migratory itineraries, and relations to world literature, which the project pursues.

The global iconicity of the call center—an institutional satellite of Anglo-American multinational and transnational corporations—has made it a key site for the investigation of colonial afterlives, racial capitalism, the international division of labor, and global narratives of entrepreneurial opportunity. *Is There a Call Center Literature?* marshals the poignant symbolism and material infrastructure of the call center in order to conduct a transnational literary study situated at the nexus of Global Anglophone and Global American studies. The project asks the following: To what extent are contemporary Indian/American, Filipino/American, and Mexican/American literatures mediated by the cultural and linguistic phenomena of the call center and call center English? Do we hear the "accent-neutralized," economically optimized voice of the call center agent in the voice of the Global Anglophone literary text?

At the turn of the twenty-first century, India was at the center of the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry, subject to journalistic and scholarly debates about the relative freedoms and unfreedoms of a form of cybercoolie-ism that nevertheless seemed to secure the nation's triumphant arrival into capitalist futurity. Since 2010, the Philippines and Mexico have each assumed the mantle of "call center capital of the world." As the call center has physically relocated in space and time from Bangalore to Manila to Mexico City, the call center agents themselves have shifted from provincial, rural-to-urban, in-country Indian migrants whose accents and "mother tongue influences" must be neutralized, to

Filipinos whose English is more audibly American than that of British-oriented Indians, to the Mexican “returnee” who is often a U.S.-born and/or raised deportee and whose call center English is unambiguously a form of American English.

This project reads the BPO industry’s movement away from the accent neutralization of potentially global Indians toward the ready intelligibility and assumed globality of Filipino English speakers and Mexican deportees as a form of return from the vexed aspirations of the global and neutral to the constrained realities and demands of the American listening ear.<sup>45</sup> If, as scholars of the Indian call center have argued, the object of call center accent neutralization was once the development of a placeless (and thus global) voice, the “skin tones” of audible Americanness have reasserted themselves as the primary sign of globality.<sup>46</sup> The chapters seek to understand this movement in relation to a corresponding dynamic between “world” and “global” literary paradigms, which are being mediated by the United States as the producer and representative of the dominant ideology of globality and cosmopolitan literary style. How might the Americanization of global communications technologies and service infrastructures relate to the internationalization of American literary studies? How have Indian, Filipino, and Mexican American literatures written in the time of the call center participated in the creation of a “global” American literary voice?

V. [When: Fall 2015. Where: The Modern Language Association Job List. Who speaks: An institution. To whom: Potential assistant professors of English. What: A job ad, one of few.]

The Department of English announces an entry-level tenure-track position in Global Anglophone literature, to begin in the fall semester of 2016.<sup>47</sup> The successful candidate must be able to teach postcolonial and globalization theories, world literature broadly conceived, and a specific field of specialization (e.g., African, Caribbean, or South Asian global literatures) to advanced undergraduates and graduate students, as well as intermediate courses in English and in the core curriculum.

[Please hold for interview prep, in the form of a riddle.]

*Question:* What do you tell an English department searching for a Global Anglophonist?

*Answer:* You tell them you study the discourse on India’s *globalization* and concomitant transformations in the critical understanding of Indian *Anglophonism*.

*Answer:* You tell them you study the Global Anglophone.

*Answer:* You tell them you study Call Center Literature.

[Please hold for the interviewer’s follow-up questions.]

Is Call Center Literature really “global”? Or just . . . Indian?

What’s the relationship between Anglophone literature and American literature?



How would you organize a course on the twentieth- and twenty-first-century English-language novel?

What else could you teach?

VI. [When: April 2013. Where: The San Jose Repertory Theatre. Who speaks: An accented listener. To whom: Fellow members of the global Anglosphere. What: An Indian American reflects on watching Indian Americans perform as Indians performing as Americans.]

Playwright Anupama Chandrasekhar's *Disconnect* follows the working nights of three "last stage" debt collectors at BlitzTel call center in Chennai in 2009. Its primary interest is how the India-based call center agents engage with unseen Americans on the other end of the line. What forms of connection might they forge?

*Disconnect* was staged across the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere between 2010 and 2013, earning positive reviews and more than one comparison to David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The play is about impersonation: the agents take on American monikers, biographies, and attitudes while putting on their best American accents to serve their Buffalo-based client, True Blue Capital. Agent "Ross Adams," who is really Roshan, has the most convincing accent. His fellow agents—Giri/Gary and Vidya/Vicki—have less luck convincing their interlocutors that they are actually in the United States.<sup>48</sup> Ironically, Roshan/Ross's "authentic" accent proves to be a liability. The titular disconnect refers to his ultimately disastrous infatuation with one of his Illinois-based "marks," Sara, who manipulates him into having her credit card debt expunged. Roshan/Ross imagines that the two of them are in a relationship; he calls her 167 times in one week when he feels her interest waning. Sara then files a lawsuit against the company.

Here are the character descriptions from *Disconnect*'s official playbook:

*Avinash, male, mid-forties, clearly Indian accent*

*Ross, male, early twenties, American accent*

*Jyothi, female, mid-twenties, fake American accent*

*Giri, male, early twenties, neutral accent*

*Vidya, female, early twenties, neutral accent*

*None of the characters has been to America<sup>49</sup>*

The specification of a "fake" American accent implicitly produces Ross's American accent as authentic, despite the fact that he, too, is putting it on. Also, the specification of a "neutral" accent distinct from the "American" accent confirms what scholars like sociologist A. Aneesh have argued: namely, that the neutral accent of the call center is a global signifier of placelessness and not an attempt to universalize the American, British, or Transatlantic accent.<sup>50</sup> The playbook curiously replicates Roshan's self-erasure by listing him, and him alone, via his alias, Ross, as

if he has fully effected the transformation from Indian agent to American subject.<sup>51</sup> It also provocatively queries what it means to have “been to America.”

In a 2013 production staged in San Jose, California, the actors were primarily Indian Americans, playing Indians, playing Americans. In other words, they were American-accented Indians, who were also American-accented Americans, performing as Indian-accented Indians, performing, with varying degrees of success, as American-accented Americans. All forms of mimeticism on display were self-referential. Everyone had been to America. Everyone has always already been to America. But what kind of going is this, and what form of belonging? Is the relationship of the Indian call center agent to his imagined life in the United States all that different from the relationship of the Indian American to his imagined life in India?

There’s another way to ask the question. In Americanizing his accent, performing somatic adjustments to a time zone across the world, producing the knowledges of an American subject, and serving to smooth over business transactions for a transnational corporation, is Roshan performing as a white American “Ross” or as an Indian American “Ross,” who might also be understood as a form of the Indian subject-self? How might this revision of our conventional assumptions of the call center agent’s performance enable us to ask and understand not just who is speaking (an Indian) and who is listening (an American), but to whom the speaker is speaking and to whom the listener is listening?

VII. [When: July 2020. Pandemic times. Where: Here. Who speaks: An “I” that might be “Me.” To whom: You? What: An English professor reads a celebrated debut.]

COVID summer. The end of American empire. The hottest summer in Arizona in 125 years. Megha Majumdar’s *A Burning* hits the stands with the force of an event. A glowing review from James Wood in *The New Yorker* begins with a comparison to William Faulkner’s 1930 *As I Lay Dying*.<sup>52</sup> The debut novel receives two separate reviews in the *New York Times*, including on the cover of the Sunday Book Review.<sup>53</sup> Oprah adds *A Burning* to her 2020 Summer Reading List.

Attuned to the market, I read *A Burning* the week it comes out. It is the latest English-language take on the abortive promises of the New India. It tells the stories of three ambitious characters—Jivan, Lovely, and PT Sir—who are variously on the rise before they intersect and effect what will be for one of them a devastating fall. We have read versions of this story before. Majumdar’s debut joins Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Mukherjee’s *Miss New India*, Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Jha’s *She Will Build Him a City*, and Arundhati Roy’s 2017 *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in attempting to lay bare the contradictions and depredations of an ascendant, global India that cannot, or will not, accommodate the aspirations of the majority of its people. As in each of its novelistic predecessors, the path to having “a better life” in *A Burning* begins with English, which is “the language of the modern world.”<sup>54</sup> Majumdar’s characters aspire to

middle-classness and regular chicken dinners. Politicians are corrupt. Teachers are corrupted. Working-class men in dirty sandals attempt and fail to gain entry into air-conditioned shopping malls.

*Derivative*, I think, catching myself in an act of bad faith comparison.

I read on. Page by page, *A Burning* recruits the listening ear. It raises my hackles with its explicit address to an assumed non-Indian reader. This address comes across most clearly in the novel's descriptions of food; ambition in the New India novel is frequently measured in appetites. In *The White Tiger*, New India is a land of two castes and two destinies: "Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies . . . eat—or get eaten up."<sup>55</sup> "From an eater of cabbage," Majumdar's Jivan reflects, she was "becoming an eater of chicken."<sup>56</sup> PT Sir becomes "a man with bigger capacities than eating the dinner [his wife] cooks."<sup>57</sup>

At first I take note of the novel's most explicit moments of internal translation and definition:

Some men cluster around an enterprising phuchka walla, a seller of spiced potato stuffed in crisp shells, who has set up his trade. The scent of cilantro and onion carries. On all the men's foreheads, even the phuchka walla's, PT Sir sees a smear of red paste, an index of worship—of god, of country.<sup>58</sup>

Phrases like "spiced potato" and "index of worship" center the non-Indian reader and decenter the reader in the know. It is an unremarkable mode of translation—the lifeworld on offer is of course an object of ethnographic interest to Wood, Oprah, and the average reader who needs these glosses—but I am as annoyed as if my own name has been mispronounced. Majumdar is not talking to me.

*Pandering*, I think, catching myself in the articulation of a knee-jerk critique.

Reading on, I underline the English-language translations that stand in for what could have been English-language transliterations. Unlike "phuchka walla," the following never actually appear in the text: "spiced lentil sticks" are not introduced as "chanachur" or "sev"; "yogurt fish" do not read as "doi maach"; "syrup-ice" is not first given as "ice gola."<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere in the text, even these suppressed forms of regional suggestion, the ghostly syllables that do not sound on the page, are elided: "My mother was cooking fish so small we would eat them bones and tail"; "PT Sir slams his after-dinner dish of sweets on the table and lunges for the remote"; "[PT Sir] gets up and washes his hands clean of turmeric sauce."<sup>60</sup> "Fish" and "sweets" and the inconceivable "turmeric sauce" are offered as universal signifiers, devoid of specificity; they appear in these lines without referents, unmarked.

*Inauthentic*, I think, catching myself in a routinized performance of policing.

Wood approvingly characterizes Majumdar's novel as "spare"; he compares her "surface realism" to that of Akhil Sharma, noting that both avoid the use of "sticky words"—words involving touch and taste and smell.<sup>61</sup> Susan Choi's review is more ambivalent: "[Majumdar] is so far from exoticizing her setting as to be almost too economical, leaving the reader to snatch at clues where she can as to political, social and cultural context."<sup>62</sup> It is telling that the New York-based Majumdar's

narrative decisions are posited by these critics as the result of a choice between “surface” and “sticky,” between the “economical” and the “exotic.” This has always been the catch-22 of ethnic authorship in the U.S.-dominated, global publishing industry: be ethnic on the surface, but don’t let the reader get *stuck*; signal difference but do not discomfit; accent the text (economically) if you must, but translate, gloss, explain, paraphrase, *italicize* (the exotic). In short, accommodate.

Reading Majumdar, I hear echoes of Bhagat’s neutral English that requires neither italicization nor translation. I recall the rise of Adiga’s hungry entrepreneur; I remember that Hamid writes self-help as a rise preceding a fall. I hear myself leveling criticisms of *A Burning*—derivative, pandering, inauthentic—that were leveled against these other works of what, once upon a time, in an effort to skirt just these sorts of critiques, I thought I’d call “Call Center Literature.”

But what if Call Center Literature is not? What if Call Center Literature isn’t about the call center, doesn’t signal Indian globality through the strategic placement of call center as prop, doesn’t formally register tech support relations as self-help, or name the contemporary transnational Anglosphere, but is, in simplest terms, a literature of accommodation? What if Call Center Literature exposes the West and the limits of its literacy, the norms it upholds in order to shore up its status, its demands for compliance? What if Call Center Literature names the accommodated listener, not the speaker who accommodates? What if Call Center Literature names the reader and the limits of her critical position, not the writer and hers?

I, we, have long focused on the questions of how the Indian English writer uses English, and whether the writer convincingly captures the accents and vernacular sensibilities of an authentic Indian milieu. We come to the text with normative Anglophone reading ears, hot with the knowledge of our Anglophony. Do I chafe against Majumdar because I perceive she is not talking to me, because she accommodates someone else? Or is it that her text exposes my own incontrovertible thinking with an American accent?

I pick up *A Burning* like I pick up the phone these days: hesitant, curious, suspicious. I hear Majumdar’s anticipation of the dominant Anglophone reader, in whose place I uncomfortably sit. I hear her pronounce words that are not meant for my ears. I am supposed to read over them, to ignore them, to excuse them. But they catch my eyes and catch in my throat like the fish bone she doesn’t name. I am listening for an accent that only my accented reading can produce.

Is there a Call Center Literature?

Who is reading?

## NOTES

1. Blitzer, “Deportees”; Lopez, “Dreamers”; Padios, *A Nation on the Line*.
2. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44.
3. Srinivasan, “Call Center Agents.”
4. The call center has received scholarly treatment in fields including anthropology, communication, cultural studies, film studies, geography, linguistics, literature, new media, performance studies,

politics, rhetoric, and sociology. For examples of monograph-length ethnographies of the Indian call center, see Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*; Basi, *Women, Identity*; Mirchandani, *Phone Clones*; Nadeem, *Dead Ringers*; Patel, *Working the Night Shift*; and Rowe, Malhotra, and Perez, *Answer*. See also Chow, *Native Speaker*; Gupta and Mankekar, "Intimate Encounters"; Menon, "Calling Local/Talking Global"; Sharma, *In the Meantime*; and Vora, *Life Support*. Treatments and emphases vary. For instance, Vora reads the call center agent in relation to the gestational surrogate, as one who provides "life support" by investing "vital energy" in other, comparatively more valuable bodies (1). Gupta and Mankekar read call center labor in relation to recent Marxist theorizations of immaterial labor, affect, and alienation. For Menon, the call center presents an opportunity to retheorize "cosmopolitanism from below" (13).

5. Mukherjee, *Miss New India*, 241–42.
6. For an elaboration of the acousmatic in the fields of film and sound theory, see Chion, *Audio-Vision*, and Kane, *Sound Unseen*.
7. Napolin, *Fact of Resonance*, 16. Accented perception is a form of resonance in Napolin's terms.
8. Following Eidsheim's argument that "attending to the acousmatic question tells you only who is listening," I return the acousmatic question to the reader: who are you, reader, and who or what are you reading for? Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 24.
9. Giles, *Communication Accommodation*.
10. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.
11. See chapter 3 of this volume.
12. Indian accents are made to sound global and placeless at the level of the syllable. For instance, agents are taught to pronounce both *o*'s in the word *laboratory*, as opposed to dropping the second *o* in the British-accented *lab-o-ra-try* or the first *o*, as in the American-accented *lab-ra-to-ry*. See Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*, 59.
13. Stoeber, *Sonic Color Line*, 7.
14. Abu Hamdan, "Aural Contract," 72–73.
15. Starosta, "Accented Criticism," 178.
16. Kumar, "Introduction"; Apter, *Against World Literature*.
17. Hitchcock, "The World," 87.
18. Damrosch, *World Literature*, 4 (italics added).
19. Dimock, "Literature," 175, 180 (italics added).
20. Quoted in Sinha, "Chetanic Verses."
21. Anjaria, "Introduction"; Butalia, "Panel," 201–2.
22. Joshi, "Chetan Bhagat," 319.
23. Saxena, "Fact." See also Ghoshal, "Booker"; Subrahmanyam, "Diary."
24. Sadana, *English Heart*, 15.
25. Subrahmanyam, "Diary."
26. Casanova, *World Republic*, 121.
27. Sadana, *English Heart*, 137.
28. Sadana, *English Heart*, 138.
29. DeWispelare, *Multilingual Subjects*, 18.
30. Krishnamurthy, "Furtive Tongues," 92.
31. For a discussion of Bhagat, see Chakravorty, *In Stereotype*, chapter 6.
32. Thottam, "Techie Lit."
33. Other visual mediations of the call center include the television series *Outsourced*, the film *Call Center Girl*, the art installations "Call Cutta" and "Call Cutta in a Box," the theatrical production *Al-ladeen*, and the mixed-media photo animation and video series "The Virtual Immigrant."
34. Kumar, "Introduction," xviii.
35. Mankekar, "Becoming Entrepreneurial," 226.
36. Anjaria, *Reading India*, 44.
37. "His Master's Voice."

38. Adiga, *White Tiger*, 3, 45.
39. Jha, *She Will Build*, 134.
40. Mirchandani, *Phone Clones*, and Nadeem, *Dead Ringers*.
41. Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian*, 45.
42. Rowe, Malhotra, and Perez, *Answer the Call*, 139.
43. Patel, *Night Shift*, 48.
44. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 50.
45. The United States is of course not the only Anglophone nation served by the call center industry. However, I offer the “American listening ear” as a figure for a deterritorialized mode of American racialization and communicative relation that has come to inflect both the international division of labor and the assertion of “global” subjectivities more broadly.
46. Chow, *Native Speaker*, 8.
47. On the emergence of “Global Anglophone” as a job market category, see Anam, “Introduction.”
48. Merchant, “India’s Call Centres,” 13. Merchant observes that many of “India’s call centres [dropped] the fake accents” as early as 2003. By 2009, Chandrasekhar implies, Americans were onto the game.
49. Chandrasekhar, *Disconnect*, 5.
50. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*.
51. I am indebted to Pavitra Sundar for this point.
52. Wood, “Debut Novel.”
53. Choi, “Facebook Post,” and Sehgal, “Terrorist Attack.”
54. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 38.
55. Adiga, *White Tiger*, 54.
56. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 38.
57. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 73.
58. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 42.
59. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 47, 73, 171.
60. Majumdar, *A Burning*, 5, 30–31, 48.
61. Wood, “Debut Novel.”
62. Choi, “Facebook Post.”

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# Rewriting Algorithms for Just Recognition

*From Digital Aural Redlining to Accent Activism*

Nina Sun Eidsheim

## INTRODUCTION

On the evening of the first day of the “Thinking with an Accent” virtual symposium, my three-person family sat down on the floor of my son’s room to play Monopoly with “voice banking,” a version of the game that was new to us.<sup>1</sup> It promised that we could “talk to Mr. Monopoly and he responds.”<sup>2</sup> Originally called The Landlord’s Game, Monopoly was designed in the early 1900s to expose the structural inequity between landowners and renters. As Eula Biss tells the story, its inventor, Elizabeth Magie Phillips, had hopes the game would teach kids about the injustice of our economic system. Later repackaged by Charles Darrow, who also diffused some of the economic messaging, the game, with its underlying continuous loop of play concept taken from the Oklahoma Kiowa people, would instead pit children against parents in the practice of rapacious landownership.<sup>3</sup> The endlessly updated versions of the game, with new color schemes and characters and branding related to pop culture themes, such as the blockbuster Disney movie *Frozen*, offer yet another opportunity for overbuying. Across all the different versions of games I’ve seen over the last thirty years, the concept of Monopoly remains the same. Each player picks a character that moves around the board and buys streets, houses, and hotels, or pays rent for landing on them, all which is determined by dice and cards that give instructions such as “go to Such-and-such Street.”

The voice banking game’s key material distinction from other versions is that it uses no paper money. Rather than one player taking on the role of banker, each begins with an amount automatically “deposited” in their account, and each keeps track of their voice-triggered earnings, purchases, debts, and transactions.<sup>4</sup> For example, when a player wants to buy a street, they click on their character’s button,

which speaks to notify Mr. Monopoly. As the evening progressed, I would learn that this new Monopoly game encapsulated a number of issues, including how early in a child's development attitudes about voice are absorbed. Furthermore, the game shows how human listening practices are programmed into digitized vocalizing and listening tools, which constitute one of the many sites of algorithmic racism perpetuated through everyday technology. Family game night became an illustration of the very dynamics I study: the ways in which power is wielded through listening—here, listening programmed into zeros and ones.

The first few rounds were uneventful: we rolled the dice and advanced our characters. Then my son purchased the first street. It was fun hearing him interact verbally with the voice banker, and he was thrilled with these vocal exchanges. But as my husband and I began to interact with the voice banker, things took an unexpected turn. Mr. Monopoly interpreted most of my instructions correctly but repeatedly misunderstood the street names and instructions my husband gave. At first we laughed, but having to repeat the instructions began to take up too much time, interrupting the flow of the game. We moved along, haltingly, and after a short time our son won, far ahead of us. Having won so hugely over his parents, my son wanted to play again immediately. This time he quickly stepped in. Rather than waiting for us to attempt our own transactions with the voice banker, which would force him to sit through our multiple repetitions of “purchase Oriental Avenue,” he began talking for us—and the electronic banker always understood him. In the end he was playing the entire game for all of us, controlling our assets to his own advantage.

Witnessing this in awe, I let him go a bit further than I normally would. On our son's bedroom floor, we inadvertently played out one of the themes that had been discussed at the symposium that day: the intricacies, challenges, and power dynamics of performing with and listening to accents—with my little interracial nuclear family exemplifying the classic immigrant experience. I grew up in Norway and have a Norwegian accent when speaking English, but I have lived in the United States for over twenty years. My husband grew up in Colombia and has a Colombian Spanish accent when speaking English. He has lived in the United States for a much shorter amount of time and, compared to me, has many more opportunities to speak his native tongue on a daily basis. Our son grew up speaking the three languages of his family.

Mr. Monopoly's listening algorithm showed me something that our son's corrections and good-natured jokes about our accents had not. In its new “Monopoly meets voice recognition” version, the game performs the boundary around accepted accents. When notifying players that “Kitty has 500 Monopoly dollars in her account,” its prerecorded phrases perform what most people would hear as a nonmarked American English accent. The game's tagline—“Control it all with the power of your voice”—refers to more than Monopoly transactions.<sup>5</sup>

DIGITAL AURAL REDLINING: WHOSE ACCENT  
IS ACCENTED?

Accent, like skin color and hair texture, is universal. Everyone has some kind of skin hue and hair texture. However, as Black feminist studies scholars, including Rasul Mowatt, Bryana French, and Dominique Malebranche, have noted, certain skin colors, hair textures, and accents are framed as hypervisible or hyperaudible.<sup>6</sup> They are perceptually *accentuated*, made into markers and sources of Otherness.<sup>7</sup> Only some accents are *accented* in their reception, to invoke an alternate meaning of accent: *emphasized*. Within a broader linguistic context,<sup>8</sup> *accent* is defined as a “distinct mode of pronouncing a language”; it is therefore something every speaker displays.<sup>9</sup> But the colloquial use of the word suggests that only some speak *with an accent*, and some even with a *strong accent*. In other words, not all accents are accented. The assessment that accentuates some accents is added during the process of listening.

Shifting our attention from vocalizing to listening, I propose to consider this active form of listening—which carries out the work of marking certain voices—as *accented*, and indeed as *accented listening*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although all voices are accented, active listening marks further accentuation. That is, as voices are always already accented, the process of further marking certain voices gives rise to *accented accents*.<sup>11</sup> The status of the accented accent is by definition unstable, as it is produced by listening communities that reproduce, and indeed solidify, specific vocal and listening configurations. To get to the heart of the power wielded through listening, each configuration requires a specific analysis—some examples of which are offered in this volume.

In this chapter I am interested in the adaptation of certain assumptions and listening practices into algorithms, and their proliferation through digital media and digital tools. Thus, cross-feeding my own work on voice, race, and power with that of internet scholar Safiya Noble, the digitized voice and the digitized listening to voice become inflections of what she succinctly describes as “the power of algorithms in the age of neoliberalism and the ways those digital decisions reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling.” Adapting Noble’s apt term for this phenomenon, “technological redlining” I describe listening that defines certain ways of voicing as accents as *aural redlining*.<sup>12</sup> This is an example of my plea for us to “listen to listening”—to begin to note the specific ways in which both humans and machines perform power through listening practices.<sup>13</sup> Or, in June Jordan’s unambiguous formulation, we must understand how “white power uses white English as a calculated, political display of power to control and eliminate the powerless.”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Noble reminds us that search engines are not neutral—for example, when they autofill the search field when a user types “Black girls . . .”<sup>15</sup> Such relationships, defined by those in power, are also quantified in voice and listening

algorithms.<sup>16</sup> Allison Koenecke and her coauthors note that the language models used to develop commercial automated speech recognition (ASR) systems are not publicly available. In lieu of these specific language models, Koenecke's team of mathematicians, engineers, computer scientists, and linguists chose to work from the assumption that it is "likely that these systems use language models that have similar statistical properties to state-of-the-art models that are publicly available, like Transformer-XL, GPT, and GPT-2. [They] thus examine potential racial disparities in these three models, using the publicly available versions that have been pretrained on large corpora of text data."<sup>17</sup> As a singer and a humanities scholar, I do not attempt to address the underlying ASR systems but rather consider the underlying values performed through listening practices that tacitly shape digital application development. I'm guided by the conviction that naming these elements can help to diagnose systemic issues in current voice-based technologies and to counter the belief that digital environments may be more neutral than people.<sup>18</sup>

I think of listening practices translated into algorithms as *digital aural redlining*, and of practices that oppose this redlining as *digital aural jamming*. Largely associated with the real estate and lending markets, redlining disproportionately saddles Black and Latino people (especially those with underprivileged socioeconomic status) with higher interest rates, fees, and banking premiums, putting them at an economic disadvantage.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the term describes practices that discriminate against individuals and communities based on race and class regardless of individual character or credit score. *Aural redlining* captures a systematic listening practice that, first, others people based on their accents; second, makes them hyperaudible or inaudible; and, third, due to the ubiquity of such othering digital voice and listening tools, disadvantages individuals economically.

In a study that coined the term "linguistic profiling," John Baugh showed that housing rental practices relied on discriminatory accent cues in decision-making processes.<sup>20</sup> The study's potential renters would call about an advertised unit. Callers with a presumed alterity—based on their accent—would be rejected. This study demonstrated that listeners were certain about their racial or ethnic assessment based on a voice alone, that is, based on a brief phone conversation. It also showed that although individuals could be approved if the listener assessed an unaccented accent, the same applicant could be rejected in person if his or her body did not also prove unmarked. Building on Noble's and Baugh's work, the term *aural redlining* expands redlining to cover listening practices applied to voices, including timbre, more broadly, and it includes *digital aural redlining*, speech- and voice-based profiling practices applied to the digital domain. Aural redlining may take place in all vocalizing and listening configurations, from live situations in which vocalizer and listener are together and can see each other to broadcasts and recordings with or without live or static images of the vocalizer. "Digital" denotes listening practices that have been quantified into code that carries out practices such as ASR, which is used in technologies such as voice-to-text, virtual assistants, and

automatic captioning. While these examples are quite different from one another, they draw on collective vocalizing and listening practices to, in Jonathan Sterne's and Mehak Sawhney's apt words, "datafy and classify the human voice."<sup>21</sup>

Digital aural redlining can take different forms. I will discuss two here. The first type of digital aural redlining describes a situation in which a particular accent is assumed based on nonvocal cues. Listeners perceive a certain accent based on the way in which they read the speaker's race, such as visually. In other words, what listeners see affects how they hear accents—or we could say that listeners *see* accents.<sup>22</sup> The second type of digital aural redlining describes the digital acoustic shadow: when a person is, in effect, rendered inaudible because their accent prevents or precludes them from effectively using many voice-based technologies.<sup>23</sup> (This phenomenon is not unique to digital aural redlining. However, for me it is very helpful to examine the general process of aural redlining as it is defined and formalized in order to be re-created through algorithms.)

#### SYNTHESIZING THE ACCENTED ACCENT

The vocal synthesis software system Vocaloid was first released in 2003 to great fanfare.<sup>24</sup> The first two products, LOLA, LEON, and many later versions are commercial music software described as "voice fonts." Just as MIDI instrument packages allow users to play a melody using the sounds of different instruments—first a piano, say, and then a banjo—a Vocaloid voice can be used to "sing" a melody. The major difference between a MIDI instrument and a synthesized voice is that a vocal sound is put together in such a way that it will provide not only pitch and timbre but also the various sounds necessary to form consonants, vowels, and diphthongs, which are needed to express lyrics. Just as users can transform their text with the click of a button from one font to another, musicians can have different Vocaloid voices to choose between when recording a song. Vocaloid was hailed for rethinking and reframing this technology from technologically advanced software to *backup singers in a box*. Up to this point, vocal synthesis had been advertised in terms of computational power, but instead of touting the program's high-tech bona fides, LOLA and LEON were advertised as racialized characters through blackface iconography. Both LOLA and LEON are represented in close-cropped profile images with protruding full lips. As a stock character returns in minstrel repertoire, the same picture is used for both LOLA and LEON. For LOLA, the designer simply mirrored LEON's blue-tinted image and colored it red.

Vocaloid's synthesis was created from source recordings—short recorded phonemes on multiple pitches—which were then combined via the synthesis algorithm to form any words a user typed into the program (that's the vocal synthesis part). Vocaloid's synthesis combines recorded phoneme samples into a seamless string of notes that sound words in melodic sequences.<sup>25</sup> Users can input notes using the visual interface, or they can use a MIDI keyboard to play a melody that

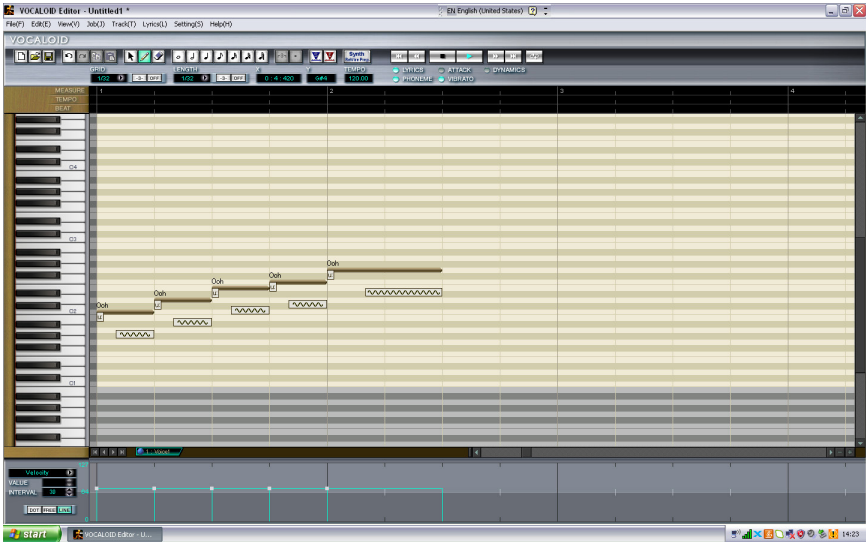


FIGURE 7.1. Screenshot of the Vocaloid interface.

is recorded onto the visual interface. The lyrics can then be inserted underneath the music notation (see figure 7.1). In electroacoustic music terms, Vocaloid may be considered “hybrid vocal synthesis” because it uses basic sonic material from the phoneme recordings, whereas “complete sound synthesis” does not use sound samples. Vocaloid relies on synthesis techniques in order to combine and alter the sounds of the samples.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these comprehensive efforts to present a Black soul singer, many of LOLA’s users did not hear her voice as a soul voice and/or as Black. User RobotArchie wrote on parent company Zero-G’s internet message board, “Do we have a British soul singer with a Japanese accent who lisps like a Spaniard? Eesa makea me tho unhappy.”<sup>27</sup> Heatviper chimes in with, “Hello . . . I think LOLA works great for mondo/ mournful/giallo morricone style tracks using vowels. . . . Wordless soulful vowels are nice.”<sup>28</sup> Jogomus asks for advice: “My LOLA sounds a little bit like a ‘big Ma’—what can I do, [so] that she sounds a little bit neutral?” Another user named hk suggests lowering the “Gender Factor” value.<sup>29</sup>

What happened here? The developers, based in Britain, had chosen Black singers to sample as the source of the synthesis. However, in talking with them I learned that the male voice was a British-born singer and the female voice was a Jamaican-born woman. As professional vocalists, the singers were both adept at performing soul idiomatically, including timbre and word pronunciation. However, when they recorded thousands of syllables outside the context of a musical style, I hypothesize that they did not do so with an accent associated with soul, but rather with the accents of their mother tongues.<sup>30</sup> The singers were selected to

provide source data based on a judgment about their visual presentation as Black rather than on an aural assessment of both soul and their particular accents.

Indeed, the process of providing source material for Vocaloid's voice banks does not take place within the context of a musical genre. The source sound is a carefully recorded bank that forms the sonorous basis for pronouncing the 3,800 possible vowel and consonant combinations it can voice within the English language. In other words, the source syllables are recorded out of context. Within the conventions of soul singing, the syllable "ma," as part of the word man, would be pronounced with a diphthong and would potentially be drawn out, depending on the prosody. Outside the context of soul style, native speakers of British and Jamaican English would sing the syllable "ma" differently. This means that every voicing takes place within what we may think of as an aesthetic genre. Such a genre can be chosen, and is very likely to be chosen, when singing within the context of a vocal musical genre such as soul.

LOLA and LEON were built on the premise of vocal racial essence, with no regard for the fact that English-speaking and -singing Black singers around the world grow up with myriad accents. Further evincing an essentialist attitude toward voice and race, as noted above, the graphic design featured on the software boxes echoes blackface imagery. Instead of orienting listening for a rich geographically and culturally specific musical style that arose within a specific community, within specific social and economic pressures, within the complex history of the African diaspora, *soul* was reduced to monolithic blackness and accent. As I've followed Vocaloid's development, Zero-G has repeatedly shown that a technology that could offer an expansion of the vocal and listening imaginary is instead primarily recruited to re-create, and seemingly to confirm, essentialized categories.

LOLA and LEON were introduced seventeen years ago—truly ancient in terms of the voice and listening consumer technology found on today's smart phones and computers. Because vocal synthesis technology and the algorithms that attempt to make sense of our voices are no longer technology-forward choices but nearly unavoidable presences in our lives, what is and will be the sound of the voices we will associate with sophisticated knowledge and technology? How will we have been conditioned to hear voices through generations of vocal technology built on voice models that assume and reproduce accent alterity? And which of us do digitized voice and listening technology have the capacity to hear?

#### DIGITAL ACOUSTIC SHADOW

If many voices are singled out through alterity or accent hyperaudibility, as Vocaloid attempted with LOLA and LEON, my family's Monopoly anecdote captures the flip side—the phenomenon I call the digital acoustic shadow. Sun rays can be blocked by solid objects, resulting in areas left in shadow. When sound waves meet solid obstacles like pillars, corners, or overhangs (such as a balcony),



certain frequencies can be attenuated, causing what are known as *acoustic shadows*. We may extend the phenomenon of the acoustic shadow in order to understand the muting of certain voices: those deemed less legible due to visual cues interpreted as alterity, and those who are misheard because training materials do not include such voices.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, algorithms based on similar assumptions about voice, accent, and race can create *digital acoustic shadows* within digital tools. As noted, hypervisibility's constant companion is invisibility, which marks accented voices in either case. The digital acoustic shadow's veil is hyperaudibility's constant companion.

Some technologies may be broadly categorized as “listening to” and “analyzing” voice and speech. Their purposes range from transcription (text-to-speech) and prompts to action (voice bank Monopoly, automated phone services) to assessments of, for example, intelligence and skill level (AI hiring systems). Those in this industry making such products will point to the numbers, which are moving in a positive direction.<sup>32</sup> For example, Google's word error rate had decreased from 23 percent in 2013 to 8.5 percent in 2016, reaching 4.9 percent only a year later, in 2017.<sup>33</sup> But the question is not whether the technology has improved—even improved tremendously—in a short amount of time, but what hides behind the uniformity of these improvements. For example, if 4.9 percent is the average error rate, what is the rate for a white male Midwestern speaker versus a Black male from the South? In an interview addressing the question of differing user experiences, John Baugh noted that “Microsoft, the most accurate system, had a 27 percent error rate for Black speakers and 15 percent for white speakers; Apple, the lowest performer, missed the mark for 45 percent of words from Black speakers and 23 percent of white speakers—it has limitations in its scope.”<sup>34</sup>

The algorithms that create this error rate underpin the product development of the largest technology companies in the United States. These algorithms are integrated into products that permeate everyday and work-life technology, making the ramifications of unequal access—redlining—an urgent matter. Comparing two thousand voice sample transcript results based on recorded interviews with African Americans and white speakers, Koenecke and her coauthors tested commercial automated speech recognition developed by Amazon, Apple, Google, IBM, and Microsoft.<sup>35</sup> Their sample corpus was collected in five U.S. cities and consisted of interviews with forty-two white speakers and seventy-three Black speakers of mixed age and gender. Across the technologies, they found on average that the error rate was 35 percent for African Americans compared to 19 percent for white speakers.<sup>36</sup> They attributed this error rate to a lack of representation in training data. This “gap in the acoustic models” suggests “that the systems are confused by the phonological, phonetic, or prosodic characteristics of African American Vernacular English rather than the grammatical or lexical characteristics. The likely cause of this shortcoming is insufficient audio data from black speakers when training the models.”<sup>37</sup>



In contrast, “dialectal language is increasingly abundant” on social media, yet “few resources exist for developing NLP [natural language processing] tools to handle such language,” Su Lin Blodgett, Lisa Green, and Brendan O’Connor note.<sup>38</sup> In a paper a year later they noted (in scientists’ cautious language) that “current systems sometimes analyze the language of females and minorities more poorly than they do [that] of whites and males. We conduct an empirical analysis of racial disparity in language.”<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, in automatic caption software, “the lowest average [speech recognition] error rates were for General American and white talkers, respectively. . . . [T]he higher error rate [for] non-white talkers is worrying, as it may reduce the utility of these systems for talkers of color.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, these software systems rely on algorithms that cannot properly process certain accents. The string of code that is unable to process selected accents represents the obstacle that casts a digital acoustic shadow, excluding potential users from meaningful use of the technology. As a case in point, in my family, the person with the accent under the darkest digital acoustic shadow lost the game. In playing, each person had to use significantly different resources in order to simply participate—that is, to be understood by the technology—and each turn to play was accompanied by the anticipation of that challenge. Hesitation and reduced interest in the game were the results of these obstacles. While the stakes were not high in this context, it helps to explain the overall dynamic and the discriminatory negative outcome, both in the end result (losing the game) and in some players’ detachment from engagement, when we see that voice-based technology fails some users while favoring others.

#### RAMIFICATIONS OF THE DISCREPANCY IN ERROR RATE

The discrepancy between my son’s error rate and his dad’s mirror real life with disconcerting accuracy. The person with the lowest error rate earned the most property and money. In real life, what it means to lose the game due to aural redlining depends on specific technologies and on the circumstances of their use. For example, speech-to-text software is used in consumer technology such as smartphones, which are increasingly necessary in many work situations, including many jobs that require employees to use phone apps. A specific accent’s interaction with the technology required to carry out a job may prevent groups and individuals from performing equally, which may lead to lower work performance and fewer chances for promotion and mobility. And if voice technology software is used to screen candidates, others may not be selected for a job at all. In the same way that redlining practices in real estate prevent an entire community’s economic advancement, we can see that digital aural redlining can have a similar effect.

Within the court system, the situation is equally concerning.<sup>41</sup> Writing about human court reporters, Maarten Sap and his coauthors have shown that

“annotators’ insensitivity to differences in dialect can lead to racial bias in automatic hate-speech detection models, potentially amplifying harm against minority populations.”<sup>42</sup> Specifically, in investigating “toxic language identification tools” they found that “the task is especially challenging because what is considered toxic inherently depends on social context (e.g., a speaker’s identity or dialect).” Given the racial history of the United States, “phrases in the African American English dialect (AAE) are labelled by a publicly available toxicity detection tool as much more toxic than general American English equivalents.”<sup>43</sup> And as Aylin Caliskan, Joann Bryson, and Arvind Narayanan show, “cultural stereotypes propagate to artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in widespread use.”<sup>44</sup> This work, they argue, “has implications for AI and machine learning because of the concern that these technologies may perpetuate cultural stereotypes.” Their research suggests that if “we build an intelligent system that learns enough about the properties of language to be able to understand and produce it, in the process it will also acquire historical cultural associations, some of which can be objectionable.”<sup>45</sup> And as Taylor Jones and his coauthors note, “Any solution to the (narrow) transcription problem must take into account the broader problem of harmful linguistic ideologies with common-currency anti-black stigma, bias (both conscious and not), and a court system that is the accumulated product of four centuries of white supremacy.”<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, research across consumer and professional speech-recognition software shows that aural redlining permeates this technology sector.

#### TO BE JUSTLY RECOGNIZED: AURAL-REDLINE JAMMING AS ACCENT ACTIVISM

Not hyperaudible, not inaudible, but, to quote Goldilocks, “just right”—the unaccentuated voice ideal is confirmed and strengthened by both analog and digitized voices that perform this self-fulfilling fantasy.<sup>47</sup> As a recent *New York Times* article on accent coaches and their clients noted, “Actors, or their agents or managers, find her because they either have booked a role that demands a certain sound or aren’t booking anything because they don’t sound a certain way. They are often hoping to achieve that general American sound to break in or refashion their career for the Hollywood market.”<sup>48</sup> To find work or to move beyond typecasting, actors with some accents take on additional voice training to replace their accent with what is considered a normative one. This cycle confirms which voices are dominant in movies.<sup>49</sup>

What actors and casting agents alike have in mind when they seek training and voices for characters, respectively, might be something like what the team behind iPhone’s Siri does: “The first phase is to find a professional voice talent whose voice is both pleasant and intelligible and fits the personality of Siri.”<sup>50</sup> According to one industry analyst, “[Apple recruiters are] listening for some ineffable sense of helpfulness and camaraderie, spunky without being sharp, happy without being

cartoonish.”<sup>51</sup> In their minds’ ears, producers listen for which accents will fulfill such descriptions—and both Hollywood and Siri’s team shy away from anything that could be perceived as an accented accent.

This chapter is an accentuated plea. While there is not one solution to prejudice and power imbalances, I do have a singular wish for all of us: to be *justly recognized*. To be justly recognized always stands firm against the seemingly innocuous *just right*. It refuses accented listening. What is the difference between *just right* and *justly recognized*?

Recommendations from researchers such as Koenecke include “using more diverse training data sets that include African American Vernacular English.”<sup>52</sup> Improvements to the underlying acoustic models used by the ASR systems are vital. Improving the training data set could potentially move speech and acoustic patterns out of the acoustic shadow. Further, “developers of speech recognition tools in industry and academia should regularly assess and publicly report their progress along this dimension.”<sup>53</sup> In technology development and data collection, a wider range of voices should be present from a tool’s inception. As the error rate decreases in one area it may increase in others, evening out the user experience. But what is the data set tipping point at which voices will no longer be divided into those deemed to exude the qualities of “helpfulness and camaraderie, spunky without being sharp, happy without being cartoonish” and those that are not selected, or are heard as expressing opposing qualities? While the work of opening voice-driven technology to a much broader range of accents is clearly needed, it is not the solution.

A vocal assessment that *recognizes justly* is diametrically opposed to an assessment of whether an accent is *just right*. That which is *just right* is established by listening from a position of power, with the particularities set by time, place, and other circumstantial forces. A voice is deemed just right (or simply wrong) by outside forces based on a static and monolithic understanding of the person behind it. When instruments are attuned to capture just right, just right can also be used for surveillance.<sup>54</sup> While I am not prepared to offer a series of concrete steps—it will take a broad range of scholars, developers, artists, users, and activists to suggest, test, reject, and experiment with specific solutions—I know that to be justly recognized is to be recognized in relationship to oneself and to the multiplicity of histories and communities that we constantly adopt, reject, and form within multiple relationships. To be recognized justly is to retain protections and human rights.<sup>55</sup> Listeners who recognize justly afford each voice its multiplicity, including its humanity. In this way, just recognition makes clear that the hyperaudible and the inaudible, or the accented accent and voices veiled in acoustic shadows, are human- and (human-through-)machine-created fantasies.

As listening ability is not theoretical but is formed through practice, I have thought a lot about what the path toward just recognition might include. I think one component could be accent activism in the form of *aural redline jamming*.

Here, the experimenting listener both performs the assessment and experiences the impossibility of an operation such as *just right*. I take this term from the devices and apps known as “speech jammers,” which record a person’s speech and replays it with a slight delay, “jamming” the speaker’s ability to maintain their train of thought. While perhaps tongue-in-cheek, this device, which won the Ig Nobel Acoustics Prize in 2012, is advertised for its ability to “inhibit” a person’s speech; it is ironic, indeed, that the speaker is “jammed” with their own voice and words.<sup>56</sup> Aural redline jamming is similar in that it uses the same technology in an extreme way to dilute or jam comprehension of whichever accent is accented within a given context.

Users decisively rejected the hype that the vocal syntheses LOLA and LEON sounded like American-accented soul singers. Rather than tweaking the sound within the software to reach toward whatever sonic image users might have of idiomatic soul singers, the users instead jammed the system, creating songs that were much faster than the highest recommended BPM to sound legible and writing in Japanese, a language the phonemes were not intended for.<sup>57</sup> Hence, although the software was originally intended to replace live singers, users used LOLA and LEON to sound nonlocatable accents, jamming the built-in organizing principle. Moreover, the same technology that mistook race for accent later featured voice artist Misha, who insisted on basing her voice bank, Vocaloid Ruby, on her Latina identity—jamming Vocaloid’s foundational premise.<sup>58</sup>

While, as my earlier work has shown, vocal and listening practices have always served to perform power, Noble notes that “discrimination is embedded in computer code and, increasingly, in artificial intelligence technologies that we are reliant on, by choice or not.” Indeed, she warns that “we are only beginning to understand the long-term consequences of these decision-making tools in both masking and deepening social inequality.”<sup>59</sup> While each individual voice has always been shaped through a deeply social and collective process and has mirrored and reinforced existing inequalities, is it challenging to remember the human hand in algorithms. For example, firms that use AI to screen job candidates with the belief that such tools will be less biased are actually using technology created by biased humans. Not only will the technology perform the same biases, but it will perform them on a larger scale, often with no option to “press o for the operator.”

In other words, “part of the challenge of understanding algorithmic oppression is to understand that mathematical formulations to drive automated decisions are made by human beings.”<sup>60</sup> This means that voice synthesis, voice recognition software, and transcription algorithms are not simply part of a system of neutral calibration of digital-audio information. Instead, these technologies were developed by people who heard voices and understood accents in specific ways, and then re-created that reality. Each smartphone voice tool has been created by a string of subjective decisions, as were LOLA and LEON. In the same way that Kodak film was calibrated for white skin color, voice and listening technologies will carry

over the social biases of earlier vocal categorizations and normalized listening conventions. Digital vocal technologies as we know them in the third decade of the twenty-first century, then, are artifacts of a particular listening culture. Noble predicts that “artificial intelligence will become a major human rights issue in the twenty-first century.”<sup>61</sup> To think about accented accents is to think about how, in a democracy, the right to be recognized justly is tied to the impact of listening practices and aural representations of voices in the acoustic, analogue, and digital realms.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. “Thinking with an Accent: Through Voice, Across Media” virtual symposium, May 1–3, 2020, Amherst University.

2. This line can be found at the bottom of the box.

3. Eula Biss, *Having and Being Had* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020).

4. “Monopoly Voice Banking Electronic Board Game,” <https://monopoly.hasbro.com/en-us/product/monopoly-voice-banking-electronic-family-board-game:97BC561B-145E-42CA-AB15-917F2E2FD5BA> (accessed April 1, 2020).

5. There are eerie connections between a game based on buying, selling, and renting property in which success is tied to degree of perceived accent and Cheryl I. Harris’s work on whiteness as property. This particular Monopoly game epitomizes the ways in which the voice is tied to power and to property. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91. Thank you to Iris Blake for reminding me of this connection.

6. Rasul A. Mowatt, Bryana H. French, and Dominique A. Malebranche, “Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 45, no. 5 (2013): 644–60.

7. For discussions regarding the relationship forged between the categories of language and race, see H. Samy Alim, John R. Rickford, and Arnetha F. Ball, *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas about Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8. Within a narrower context, *accent* can refer to an accent within a word, i.e., the stress placed on a syllable.

9. “Accent,” Oxford Languages for Google, January 7, 2021, [www.google.com/search?q=accent&rlz=1C5CHFA\\_enUS891US892&oq=accent&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i433l2j461i99i29i1433j0i433l2j69i61l2.1589j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](http://www.google.com/search?q=accent&rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS891US892&oq=accent&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i433l2j461i99i29i1433j0i433l2j69i61l2.1589j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8).

10. In general, to better understand the dynamics around voice, I am convinced that we need to shift our attention to listening through what I call “the acousmatic question,” “Who is this?,” which

allows us to actively name and define the voice. This active form of listening creation also takes place in terms of other constructed sociocultural categories. I discuss this construction with regard to gender, calling it “audience drag performance,” in my *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1–38, 91–114.

11. The concept of the “accented accent” was developed in conversation with Anita Starosta, “Accented Criticism: Translation and Global Humanities,” *boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 40, no. 3 (2013): 163–79.

12. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 1.

13. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 18. In addition to race, regionality (when it comes to American English) and national forms of English (when it comes to the English language) can also play a role. It is well known that Scottish English is not represented thoroughly in voice data sets, as can be seen in the skit “Voice Recognition Lift” from *BBC Scotland*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAz\\_UvnUeuU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAz_UvnUeuU) (accessed August 19, 2022).

14. June Jordan, “White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation,” *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays* (London: Virago, 1989), 29–40.

15. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 64–109.

16. I have written extensively about the kind of listening to voices that focuses on bodies that perform. See my *The Race of Sound*; “Maria Callas’s Waistline and the Organology of Voice,” *Opera Quarterly* 33, nos. 3–4 (2017): 249–68; “The Micropolitics of Listening to Vocal Timbre,” *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 3 (2014), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v024/24.3.eidsheim.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v024/24.3.eidsheim.html); “Voice as Action: Towards a Model for Analyzing the Dynamic Construction of Racialized Voice,” *Current Musicology* 93, no. 1 (2012): 9–34.

17. Allison Koenecke, Andrew Nam, Emily Lake, Joe Nudell, Minnie Quartey, Zion Mengesha, Connor Toups, John R. Rickford, Dan Jurafsky, and Sharad Goel, “Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 14 (April 7, 2020): 7684–89.

18. For the power of naming, see Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, eds., *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015).

19. Eula Biss, “White Debt: Reckoning with What Is Owed—and What Can Never Be Repaid—for Racial Privilege,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/white-debt.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/white-debt.html) (accessed December 2, 2015). The streets purchased during the board game that provoked much of my thinking in this chapter also have a curious connection to redlining. In the early 1930s, Atlantic City realtor Jesse Raiford affixed property prices to Monopoly that reflected the city’s residential segregation. The cheapest streets, such as Baltic and Mediterranean Avenues, were in Black neighborhoods, while the more expensive streets, like Park Place and Boardwalk, were in affluent white neighborhoods. To read more about the complex history of Monopoly, see Mary Pilon, *The Monopolists: Obsession, Fury, and the Scandal Behind the World’s Favorite Board Game* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). Thanks to Robert Fink for the conversation that led me to look into the street price differentiation.

20. John Baugh, “Linguistic Profiling,” in *Black Linguistics: Language, Society, and Politics in Africa and the Americas*, ed. Sinfree Makoni, Geneva Smitherman, Arnetha F. Ball, and Arthur K. Spears, 155–68 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

21. Jonathan Sterne and Mehak Sawhney, “The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy: Otter.ai, Low-Resource Languages, and the Politics of Machine Listening,” *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 9, no. 2 (forthcoming Winter 2023).

22. This idea of accent beyond the sonic relates to a discussion in the introduction to this volume: poet Li-Young Lee “captures the workings of accent not only across senses but as that which crosses senses, which gives skin ‘tones,’ to use Rey Chow’s term. The ear does not simply receive sound; it is a ‘coloring ear’ that shades the voice. Importantly, too, Lee hones in on accent as that which inflects encounters ‘even before’ meaning, irrespective of the speaker’s identity, and prior to the act of interpretation” (3, this volume).

23. An acoustic shadow is a phenomenon in which sound is inaudible, even in close proximity to the listener, because of some obstacle that obstructs the sound waves.

24. The best-known Vocaloid is Hatsune Miku, who—like many anime characters—has large fan-base. Readers may be familiar with her 2014 hologram performance on *The Late Show*, which received considerable press. “Hatsune Miku on David Letterman! (FULL),” October 9, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwJ1i5CwoM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwJ1i5CwoM) (accessed November 1, 2014). To learn more about Miku in regard to vocal processing and perception, see my *The Race of Sound*, 115–50; Gretchen Jude, “Vocal Processing in Transnational Music Performances, from Phonograph to Vocaloid,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2018, 111–43; Nick Prior, “STS Confronts the Vocaloid: Assemblage Thinking with Hatsune Miku,” in *Rethinking Music through Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Antoine Hennion and Christophe Leveux (New York: Routledge, 2021), 213–26.

25. For more information regarding the vocal synthesis system, see my *The Race of Sound*, 115–50.

26. Practically, what matters to amateur users who neither know nor care about these distinctions, and to a general public told that the voice it hears is a synthesized voice, is not the technical distinction between full and hybrid vocal synthesis. What matters is that they believe it is vocal synthesis.

27. RobotArchie, forum post on Vocaloid-User.net, “When Will Vocaloid Meet Your Expectations?,” April 12, 2004, <http://vocaloid-user.net/forum/general-vocaloid-discussion/when-will-vocaloid-meet-your-expectations>. Although this link and those cited in the next two notes are currently dead, I have screenshots of their contents.

28. Heatviper, “Mike Oldfield,” forum post on Vocaloid-User.net, January 19, 2006, <http://vocaloid-user.net/forum/general-vocaloid-discussion/mike-oldfield>. Dead link.

29. Jogomus et al., “2 Questions about Vocaloid,” forum post on Vocaloid-User.net, August 5, 2005, <http://vocaloid-user.net/forum/general-vocaloid-discussion/2-questions-about-vocaloid>. Dead link.

30. The question of which accent is associated with soul is extremely complex and beyond the scope of this chapter. There are various lineages, some based on regionality, others on individual singers whose idiosyncratic pronunciation marked the genre. However, while the braided genealogy of the soul accent is contested and complex, those familiar with the genre would typically flag performances that do not exhibit any of the accents that are recognized as performing soul.

31. D. L. Rubin, “Nonlanguage Factors Affecting Undergraduates’ Judgments of Nonnative English-Speaking Teaching Assistants,” *Research in Higher Education* 33, no. 4 (1992): 511–31; John R. Rickford and Sharese King, “Language and Linguistics on Trial: Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and Other Vernacular Speakers) in the Courtroom and Beyond,” *Language* 92, no. 4 (2016): 948–88.

32. When I presented this work in progress, many noted that given how digital recognition technology is used, it might be preferable to stay in the acoustic shadow. It is also worthwhile to note that the level of risk involved in being digitally tagged through one’s image or voice is very different for different individuals. The solution is never hyperaudibility. Instead, I introduce below the concept of *justly recognized*, which seeks to capture privacy and human rights issues.

33. Emil Protalinski, “ProBeat: Has Google’s Word Error Rate Progress Stalled?,” *Venturebeat*, May 10, 2019, <https://venturebeat.com/2019/05/10/probeat-has-googles-word-error-rate-progress-stalled/> (accessed January 13, 2021).

34. Jeff Link, “Why Racial Bias Still Haunts Speech-Recognition AI,” *Built In*, July 26, 2020, <https://builtin.com/artificial-intelligence/racial-bias-speech-recognition-systems> (accessed January 13, 2021).

35. Koenecke, et al., “Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition,” 7686.

36. Koenecke, et al., “Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition,” 7685.

37. Koenecke, et al., “Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition,” 7688. It should be noted that most linguists who study African American Vernacular English do not distinguish as clearly between “phonological, phonetic, or prosodic characteristics of African American Vernacular English . . . [and] the grammatical or lexical characteristics” as Koenecke et al.; see, for example, Alim, Rickford, and Ball, *Raciolinguistics*. In fact, as Charles Kronengold aptly remarked in an email exchange,



“Koenecke et al. may be stepping into the same mistake-space as the Vocaloid designers, but making the opposite assumption (i.e., they assume disconnectedness between discrete phonemes and the systems that give them meaning where there’s actually a connection, while Vocaloid assumes the connection when it’s absent).” Personal correspondence, February 10, 2021.

38. Su Lin Blodgett, Lisa Green, and Brendan O’Connor, “Demographic Dialectal Variation in Social Media: A Case Study of African-American English,” *arXiv* 1608.08868v1 (2016): 1.

39. Su Lin Blodgett and Brendan O’Connor, “Racial Disparity in Natural Language Processing: A Case Study of Social Media African-American English,” *arXiv* 1707.00061v1 (2017): 1.

40. Rachel Tatman and Conner Kastern, “Effects of Talker Dialect, Gender & Race on Accuracy of Bing Speech and YouTube Automatic Captions,” *Interspeech* 2017: 934. See also Rachel Tatman, “Gender and Dialect Bias in YouTube’s Automatic Captions,” *Proceedings of the First ACL Workshop on Ethics in Natural Language Processing*, Valencia, Spain, April 4, 2017: 53–59.

41. See Mari Matsuda’s groundbreaking work on accent and antidiscrimination, “Voices of America: Accent, Antidiscrimination Law, and a Jurisprudence for the Last Reconstruction,” *Yale Law Journal* 100, no. 5 (1991): 1329–1407.

42. This echoes the patterns of imaging technology. Kodak famously standardized their Shirley cards test. Later, as Sara Lewis has noted, “You see it whenever dark skin is invisible to facial recognition software. The same technology that misrecognizes individuals is also used in services for loan decisions and job-interview searches. Yet, algorithmic bias is the end stage of a longstanding problem.” Sarah Lewis, “The Racial Bias Built into Photography,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/lens/sarah-lewis-racial-bias-photography.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/lens/sarah-lewis-racial-bias-photography.html) (accessed April 26, 2019). Newer biometric identification technology such as vein matching or vascular technology also suffers from having been developed with a limited range of skin hues in mind. Colleagues at the University of California, San Diego, report that they were routinely unable to enter their office building, which used such identification technology. The problem was so severe that the identification technology had to be switched to key cards.

43. Maarten Sap, Dallas Card, Saadia Gabriel, Yejin Choi, and Noah Smith, “The Risk of Racial Bias in Hate Speech Detection,” *Proceedings of the 57th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics* 2018: 1668–78.

44. Aylin Caliskan, Joann J. Bryson, and Arvind Narayanan, “Semantics Derived Automatically from Language Corpora Contain Human-Like Biases,” *Science* 356 (2017): 183.

45. Caliskan, Bryson, and Narayanan, “Semantics Derived Automatically,” 186. Although this chapter clearly argues that stereotype is to be avoided in AI system development, the underlying issue that is at stake is the system of value and power for which accent (i.e., people) are placeholders, and the particular historical and cultural origins of a given accent are implicated insofar as they are implicated in a colonial, geopolitical power grab. Black feminist language activists such as June Jordan have argued this through essays and poetry; see, for example, Jordan, “White English / Black English.”

46. Taylor Jones, Jessica Rose Kalbfeld, Ryan Hancock, and Robin Clark, “Testifying While Black: An Experimental Study of Court Reporter Accuracy in Transcription of African American English,” *Language* 95, no. 2 (2019): e216–e252.

47. The unaccentuated voice ideal is of course not a specific accent but rather what is thought to be the ideal in a given context and at a given moment.

48. Art Streiber, “The Accent Whisperers of Hollywood,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/magazine/accents-hollywood-dialect-coach.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/magazine/accents-hollywood-dialect-coach.html) (accessed July 21, 2020).

49. It should be noted that nonwhite actors are still typecast, regardless of accent.

50. Siri Team, “Deep Learning for Siri Voice: On-device Deep Mixture Density Networks for Hybrid Unit Selection Synthesis,” *Apple Machine Learning Research*, August 2017, <https://machinelearning.apple.com/2017/08/06/siri-voices.html#9>. Siri’s voice originated in a collection of voices recorded in 2005 and stored in a digital database/archive. Apple will not reveal the actual voice of Siri, but it has been widely accepted that Karen Jacobson (Australian Siri), Jon Briggs (British Siri), and Susan



Bennett (American Siri) are the sources of the original voices. All three are voiceover actors and musicians who auditioned for the spot. The voice database was originally part of a speech recognition system owned by Nuance Communications, which Apple licensed. These Siri voices have since been replaced by a much more complex vocal speech synthesis technology and new voice talent. Hannah Jane Parkinson, “Hey Siri! Meet the Real People Behind Apple’s Voice-Activated Assistant,” *Guardian*, August 12, 2015, [www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/aug/12/siri-real-voices-apple-ios-assistant-jon-briggs-susan-bennett-karen-jacobsen](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/aug/12/siri-real-voices-apple-ios-assistant-jon-briggs-susan-bennett-karen-jacobsen) (accessed September 19, 2020).

51. David Pierce, “How Apple Finally Made Siri Sound More Human,” *Wired*, September 2017, 4.

52. Koenecke et al., “Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition,” 7685.

53. Koenecke et al., “Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition,” 7688.

54. It should be noted that in addition to facial recognition, the Chinese government uses personal voice samples to build a biometric portrait of its Uyghur population, although this surveillance system is aimed at specific individuals rather than general accent comprehension. In an interview with *Wired*, Amina Abduwayit shared that in addition to providing face scans and DNA and blood samples, she also had to give a voice sample to the police, which was used by the Chinese artificial intelligence giant iFlytek: “They gave me a newspaper to read aloud for one minute. It was a story about a traffic accident, and I had to read it three times. They thought I was faking a low voice.” Isobel Cockerell, “Inside China’s Massive Surveillance Operation,” *Wired*, May 5, 2019, [www.wired.com/story/inside-chinas-massive-surveillance-operation/](http://www.wired.com/story/inside-chinas-massive-surveillance-operation/) (accessed February 11, 2021). See also Pooja Rangan’s forthcoming work on forensic speech analysis—also known as LADO (Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin) or, colloquially, “the accent test”—used to profile asylum seekers. “Accented Listening: A Hearing on Documentary’s ‘Audit,’” *Audibilities: On Documentary Listening* (forthcoming).

55. It makes sense that algorithmic vocal equality should arise simply from expanding the training corpus. However, as Sterne and Sawhney note, “we should understand that the expansion of machine learning systems is a kind of technological manifest destiny, a digital colonialism, a future that is sold as *necessary* and *logical* but in fact [is] backed by financial and military force.” They show that when data collection in India, which has primarily taken place in urban settings, extends into rural areas, 1) the agency of participants who are in financially precarious situations is highly questionable; and 2) the results of this research will not benefit the research subjects themselves. Furthermore, the move of work, education, and socialization online during the COVID-19 pandemic has “occasioned one of the great data heists in human history, specifically, the mass harvesting of voiceprints” (Sterne and Sawhney, forthcoming).

56. Kazutaka Kurihara, “SpeechJammer: A System Utilizing Artificial Speech Disturbance with Delayed Auditory Feedback,” <https://sites.google.com/site/quirihara/top-english/speechjammer> (accessed April 1, 2013).

57. Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 129.

58. Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 139–46.

59. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1.

60. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1.

61. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1.

# “SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT!”

## *Racial Dynamics of Deaf Scholars of Color Working with White Female Interpreters*

Lynn Hou and Rezenet Moges

### WHAT DOES THE TITLE MEAN?

“SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT!” (SHUSA!) is a phrase in American Sign Language (ASL) that a Deaf Scholar of Color may see an ASL interpreter say.<sup>1</sup> When this phrase is produced spontaneously in response to the interpreter’s struggle to understand speakers, especially those explicitly marked as having nonnative English accents, the scholar often does not know how to evaluate the situation. Did the interpreter just commit a microaggression, or were they genuinely struggling to understand the speaker and were informing the scholar about it? In either case, the scholar would not always know whether to interject or keep quiet to allow the interpreter to finish interpreting the speaker’s talk. The scholar then would have to process the interpreter’s stance and decide whether to address it or to let it go. This is an example of the many awkward moments that a Deaf Scholar of Color may experience when working with ASL interpreters in academia. It is also an example of the mediated representation of other people’s voices that scholars experience through their interpreters’ own understanding.

The above example is inspired by our personal experiences of working with interpreters in academia. We are two female Deaf Faculty of Color employed at predominantly hearing and minority-serving institutions, and our understanding of such experiences has been shaped by our lives growing up in the United States as children of immigrants. When we started working at our respective institutions, we found ourselves constantly negotiating the dynamics of presenting our language to audiences and asserting our expertise, and those topics became a recurring theme in our conversations with one another and other Deaf Scholars of Color. These issues have not received much attention, so writing about such

a delicate topic has put our vulnerability in the limelight. We acknowledge the potential risks and consequences of writing about such experiences. It is not our intention to target particular individuals or groups; rather, our intention is to flag the unique challenges of working with interpreters in academia from our intersectional perspectives and to call attention to the challenges of negotiating intersubjectivity with interpreters and to make recommendations for more inclusive interpretation practices. It is our privilege, owing to our multimodal abilities to accommodate hearing non-signers in everyday contexts and our interdisciplinary training in multiple social science fields, to be able to reflect about such experiences in this space.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter explores the lived experiences of Deaf Scholars of Color who navigate and negotiate predominantly hearing spaces with white ASL interpreters at higher institutions, where the scholars deal with the mediated representations of themselves and other people.<sup>3</sup> What does it mean to be a Deaf Scholar of Color who works with white, female hearing interpreters who interpret and voice for them on a daily basis? Many Deaf scholars use ASL as their primary and dominant language and use academic interpreters to mediate communication with hearing people such as colleagues, students, and administrators who do not know ASL. The interpreters are not only tasked with the job of interpreting between signed and spoken languages, but they also have to represent everyone as accurately as possible, which requires them to construct the meaning of messages. Hearing people rely on the voice of the interpreters to understand Deaf people's signing. Interpreters rely on the voice of hearing speakers to interpret their messages into ASL. While this volume primarily frames accent as one of the first things people notice from listening, this privileges the phonocentric experience of perceiving (and using) spoken language, something that both of us do not relate to. Yet the spontaneous reaction of listening to speakers and judging them by their accents is undoubtedly part of the hearing ASL interpreters' experience. When the Deaf scholars themselves are People of Color and the interpreters are white, there is a greater perceptual incongruity—and also two distinct entities with their own lived experiences shaped by intersectionality, which has profound implications for the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity, including the mediated representation of language.

We start with some background information about what it means to speak and perceive "accent" in the context of spoken languages. The perception of an accent contains an implicit bias about different speakers based on their backgrounds, including racial bias, which is a central theme we highlight here. We briefly discuss how the concept of accent operates differently in signed languages to the extent that there are no direct analogues between accents in speaking and signing. Next we offer an overview of literature on Deaf scholars working with interpreters and move onto a much-publicized example of a white interpreter's refusal to voice a Black Deaf consumer accurately as a way of introducing microinvalidations, a type of microaggression. Next we present the stories of various Deaf Scholars of Color

who work with ASL interpreters in academic spaces, negotiating the dynamics of intersubjectivity in which racial microinvalidations occur through mediated representations of voices. Finally, we close with some thoughts about calls for the incorporation of social justice in the future training of hearing interpreters.

#### SPEAKING—AND SIGNING—WITH AN ACCENT

Everybody has an “accent,” regardless of whether they speak or sign or what language they use. The question is how Deaf Scholars of Color negotiate the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity when they are represented and perceive the representation of other people through largely white sign language interpreters in academia. It may be helpful to first briefly discuss the concept of “accent” in spoken languages, which is simultaneously tangible and elusive (Lippi-Green 2012). Many people understand what an accent means when it is compared to something and assessed through the perspective of a listener, but otherwise it is difficult to explain in isolation. When one says that a person has an accent, it is implied that the person sounds like they are speaking differently from what one is accustomed to. One reason for the difference might be that the speaker is using a language that is their second language; this non-native speech phenomenon is known as a foreign accent (Moyer 2013). When a person is said to have a “strong accent,” it is often interpreted to mean that some of their first language’s phonology, or sound system, comes through when speaking the second language. No two languages are exactly alike in their phonologies, and various biological and sociocultural factors can influence how a person “sounds” when using their second language. What makes the perception of an accent subjective is that no two listeners process accents in the same way. Listeners’ perceptions are shaped by an interplay of biological, cognitive, and sociolinguistic variables, such as their life experience of listening to certain accents and their implicit bias about the physical appearance of so-called prototypical speakers of different languages.

Another reason for the difference in perception of accent is the association of variation in some element of the prosody or the pronunciation of words with another variety of language based on a social group, a region of a nation-state, or another country; in some cases, the difference may be more about a language variety, or dialect.<sup>4</sup> For U.S. English language varieties, one would generally be considered to be speaking with an “accent” and/or using a “dialect” if they are not speaking Standard American English (SAE). African American English (AAE), for example, encompasses a collection of American English varieties spoken by U.S. people of African descent and the African diaspora (Weldon 2021). AAE has been called by various names, from “Negro dialect” to “Black Vernacular English” to “African American Language” (Green 2002); the names represent long-standing ideologies about the linguistic status of AAE in U.S. society that are built on the foundation of white supremacy. From the perspective of monolingual listeners who use SAE, when they hear someone speaking AAE, they may say that the

person has an accent or dialect. The same listeners hearing another person speaking SAE may say that the person does not have an accent or a dialect. Moreover, the listener may decide that the person speaking AAE sounds “Black” and the person speaking SAE sounds “white.” The use of auditory cues to assess the speech of a speaker—and to assess their racial identity—is known as linguistic profiling and is an analogue to the use of visual cues for racial profiling (Baugh 2003). The profiling of AAE and SAE speakers is hardly an objective representation of linguistic differences, but rather an implicit—and racial—bias about which language variety is superior on account of the prestige of the social group that uses it.

Then there is the gray area of culturally specific knowledge that is not widely shared by the whole group of language users. Many people such as immigrants and children of immigrants with linguistically marginalized and racially minoritized backgrounds are bilingual or multilingual to varying degrees. Even those who self-identify as dominant in English retain some culturally specific words and phrases from their home languages and can be sensitive to the orthographic representation and pronunciation of these words, especially when it comes to personal names. A well-documented example in recent memory is the debate over the anglicized and non-anglicized pronunciations of the Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (Bucholtz 2016). How one pronounces a name is an act of performativity that indexes social meaning that is tied to context of use, and the choice of pronunciation illuminates language ideologies about different languages (Bucholtz 2016; Rosa 2019).

What constitutes an accent in signed languages is not as well understood as it is for spoken languages, and it has not been investigated as much. Deaf signers who use a second sign language in adulthood may be perceived as having a “visible foreign” accent (Quinto-Pozos 2008; Sandler, Belsitzman, and Meir 2020). Deaf people who learn to sign later in childhood and hearing people who learn to sign as adults may be perceived as having accents too. But accent in the sense of phonetic-phonological variation does not appear to translate well to signed languages. Variation in signed languages has been observed in the lexicon and beyond. In a large-scale study of regional variation in British Sign Language (BSL) in the United Kingdom, Deaf BSL signers strongly associate accent with lexical variation, that is, with signs that are perceptually distinct from one another, not with phonetic variation of perceptually similar signs (Rowley and Cormier 2021). Black ASL is considered a distinct variety of ASL that emerged from segregated residential schools for the deaf in the U.S. South (McCaskill et al. 2011; *Signing Black in America* 2020; Waller 2021). Linguists have described various linguistic features that distinguish Black ASL from the ASL used by white deaf signers; those features are manifested through the whole body, from the number of hands used to the signing space to the rhythm of movement to the incorporation of AAE. So what renders signing accented to deaf eyes appears to be the presentation of the whole body, not merely how a sign is “pronounced.”

A far more complicated issue about accented signing is that there are no direct analogues between accents in signing and speaking. It would not be appropriate to compare the more standardized variety of ASL to, say, SAE. Signed languages have never been on a par with spoken languages, and the variation associated with signing varieties is a product of the complex histories of Deaf people intertwined with multiple types and layers of oppression. The lack of analogues between signed and spoken accents add a whole dimension of complexity to sign language interpretation, especially when qualified interpreters in the United States are overwhelmingly white women (Obasi 2013). The vast population of these white female interpreters is discussed in the next section.

#### WORKING WITH SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

To be considered qualified, interpreters must be certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). It is a U.S. organization with a national certification system; the certification is for general—not specialized—interpreting.<sup>5</sup> A white paper authored by the RID in 2019 stated that their organization has a total of 14,452 registered members from all over the United States (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. 2019). Most of the members are certified. Out of 11,004 members who self-reported their racial/ethnic backgrounds, only 1,689 members identified as People of Color.<sup>6</sup> The majority of the members also self-reported their gender as female. There is no information about the linguistic and educational backgrounds of the members, but our lifelong experiences of working with interpreters lead us to deduce that most certified interpreters grew up speaking SAE as their first (and only) language and vary in their highest level of education completed from a high school diploma to a master’s degree. Interpreters who know another spoken language, such as Spanish, often as their home language, tend to identify as People of Color. Thus, Interpreters of Color constitute a small minority of interpreters in the national registry, and those with multilingual backgrounds may be an even smaller minority. This statistic may include Deaf Interpreters of Color, who are conflated with the total number of 317 general Deaf interpreters, but the exact number of Deaf Interpreters of Color is unknown.

Literature about Deaf scholars working with interpreters has focused primarily on collaboration between Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and late-deafened scholars and professors and their interpreters (Trowler and Turner 2002; Woodcock, Rohan, and Campbell 2007; Campbell, Rohan, and Woodcock 2008; Hauser et al. 2008; Burke and Nicodemus 2013; De Meulder, Napier and Stone 2018). General interpreters do not share the educational background and specialized knowledge of Deaf scholars, which presents a big challenge for interpretation. This is where designated interpreters come in. They may be employed as permanent staff, not as contractors, and are responsible for working closely with a Deaf professional and becoming familiar with the Deaf professional’s role, their relationships with

other colleagues, and the culture and language of the work environment (Hauser and Hauser 2008). They acquire some of the ambient culture and language that facilitates interpretation. Unfortunately, most Deaf scholars do not have access to designated interpreters and tend to work with general interpreters.

Burke and Nicodemus (2013) stated there is no standardized ASL terminology for specialized academic or occupational fields because there are not enough Deaf professionals in each subject to reach a certain critical mass. Most Deaf scholars do not have the luxury of having designated interpreters, so they are not always assigned the same interpreters in each situation. Deaf scholars must therefore generate new signed vocabulary for their assigned interpreters, who are not professionally trained in their specific discipline. They must repeatedly engage in this task, taking valuable time away from concentrating on the issues at hand (Chua et al. 2022). The issue of interpreters also affects graduate students—the largest part of the pipeline to incoming generations of Deaf faculty—who struggle to locate qualified and even designated interpreters capable in both speed and the ability to comprehend the subjects of their classes (Woodcock, Rohan, and Campbell 2007; Chua et al. 2022).

At a minimum, having a qualified, if not designated, interpreter is essential for constructing an appropriate persona; otherwise, Deaf scholars can lose face by being misrepresented, sometimes unbeknownst to them at the moment. Stapleton (2015a), a hearing member of the faculty in a Deaf Studies department, has witnessed unqualified interpreters voicing a Deaf colleague in important meetings and has described how interpreters “stumbled, used a lot of ‘ums,’ missed important details and big concepts, and relied on a very limited vocabulary” (2015a, 58). As a result, her “highly intelligent [Deaf] colleague came across as a nervous, unclear, and unskilled presenter who could not accurately articulate ideas” (ibid). Her recollection showcased the severe issue of insufficient high-quality interpreters, and, to make matters worse, the number of Interpreters of Color whose skills are suitable for a particular discipline is microscopic.

Other literature has examined the role of the interpreter’s stance in mediating intersubjective discourse (Janzen and Shaffer 2013), or the phenomenon of “the translated deaf self.” That includes hearing people’s perceptions of deaf people through sign language interpretation in the workplace (Young, Oram, and Napier 2019) and deaf signers’ bimodal translanguaging strategies for maintaining their professional identity in interpreted interactions with hearing people (Napier, Oram, et al. 2019). In addition, there is no standard procedure for interpreters to prepare for interpreting an organized lecture or new or unfamiliar speakers (Swabey et al. 2016; Napier, Skinner, et al. 2019), although many designated interpreters do, in fact, undertake such preparation. The absence of such procedure contrasts with the usual conduct of interpreters to request preparatory materials from Deaf presenters (Campbell, Rohan, and Woodcock 2008). Any implementation of procedure will better prepare interpreters who are not familiar with the speakers’ materials or voices.



Accent in sign language interpretation, however, has seldom been mentioned in the above literature with the exception of a recent study on the influence of the regional accent of Dutch-speaking interpreters on hearing people’s perception of Deaf signers (Heldens and van Gent 2020). The gap in literature can be attributed to the more pressing issue of getting a qualified interpreter that shares the Deaf signer’s background. The gap can also suggest that race and ethnicity have not been considered or have been trivialized in the mediated representation of Deaf signers. Yet there have been published some personal stories about Deaf scholars from racially minoritized backgrounds working with sign language interpreters (García-Fernández 2014; Stapleton 2015b; Gallon 2018; Moges-Riedel 2020). Since most sign language interpreters are reported to be white, Deaf Scholars of Color are unlikely to get Interpreters of Color whose voices and physical presence, as well as experiences and worldviews, could best represent the scholars. No publications have explored in depth the experiences of this underrepresented group working with Interpreters of Color and what this could mean for Interpreting Students of Color (Shambourger 2015; West Oyedele 2015).

Even if a Deaf scholar of Color does get to work with an Interpreter of Color, the scholar still has to labor for quality control in ASL interpretation. A Chicana Deaf scholar, García-Fernández (2014) explained her method of gathering data for her dissertation study with a non-designated trilingual interpreter.<sup>7</sup> The interpreter was tasked with providing a Spanish translation of questions from ASL and was not sensitive about word choice of “deaf.” The interpreter picked a word that translates to “deaf-mute” instead of “deaf,” so García-Fernández would “read through the questions and interpret them using certain words [she] prefer[s] as opposed to their words of choice, in order to be as conceptually accurate as possible. Overall, all interpreters found this very helpful since the list helped them be more prepared and stay close to [her] research questions and interpret both questions and answers accurately” (García-Fernández 2014, 102). Despite both the researcher and interpreter sharing the same racial identity, García-Fernández, as a Deaf Scholar of Color with Latinx and Deaf epistemology, had to maintain firm control of research data collection and experience. Her example illustrates how crucial it is for Deaf Scholars of Color to find interpreters who are a good fit for them *and* can accurately represent their language. This is a sentiment widely shared by Deaf People of Color.

#### MICROINVALIDATING THE LANGUAGE OF DEAF PEOPLE OF COLOR

In 2019 Nikita Williams, a Black Deaf female, went viral after a vlog post in which she boldly claimed that “we need more Latinx and Black interpreters” was featured by the Daily Moth, an ASL radio show (The Daily Moth 2019). Williams first shared her deep frustration with video relay service (VRS), which is a phone interpreting service that uses a video screen for Deaf and Hard of Hearing consumers to



communicate with hearing non-signing people. Her anecdote revealed that the white female interpreters on VRS refused to accurately voice the words she chose in her ASL-signed conversation over the phone. Her word choices included curse words, such as the “f-word,” and she claimed that those white female interpreters felt those words were inappropriate due to their religious beliefs, while Latinx and Black interpreters would authentically capture and voice her accurately and justifiably. Williams’s exclamation, “If you can’t translate all the words I signed, then don’t do the job. Find another career!” (The Daily Moth 2019, 15:52), was echoed by many Facebook users, leading to more than six thousand shares of the vlog upon its release. This significantly shows the shared experiences of Deaf People of Color being misrepresented by white interpreters who voice them inauthentically. This performance of dismissing Deaf People of Color’s preferred voice interpretation such as AAE (or Black English) is an act of microinvalidation, a type of microaggression.

Microaggressions are defined as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward People of Color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000, 60). Sue (2010) explains that microaggressions can be covert or overt incidents and are “numerous, continuous, and have a detrimental impact upon targets” (40). He identified three different forms of racial microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al. 2007; Sue 2010). A microassault is categorized as an extremely explicit form of racial derogation performed consciously. A microinsult, which can be either conscious or unconscious, conveys inexplicit messages that are considered rude and insensitive to a person’s racial identity/ies. Finally, a microinvalidation is a usually unconscious behavior that excludes or trivializes the experiences or achievements of People of Color. Vulnerable people who are triggered by microinvalidations often question whether what they saw or heard was a microaggression (Sue et al. 2007; Sue 2010). This goes back to the Deaf Scholars of Color listening to their interpreters who were quick to criticize a speaker for their “strong accent” and wondering if that was a form of microaggression. Gallon (2018) added three different types of racial microaggressions performed by interpreters with university students: infantilizing, assumed authority, and taking credit for the accomplishments of Deaf People of Color. Her findings are truly noteworthy; we expand them with our focus on racial microinvalidations that emerge from the dynamics of intersubjectivity between Deaf Scholars of Color and their interpreters in academic spaces.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVES AS EMBODIED LANGUAGE USE

To best understand the racial microinvalidations as experienced by Deaf Scholars of Color, we approach language as an embodied phenomenon in which bodies produce language and language produces bodies (Bucholtz and Hall 2016), with an emphasis on the racialization of bodies. This approach dovetails nicely with sign languages, the natural languages of Deaf, Deaf-Blind, and Deaf-Disabled people,

as evidenced by some sixty-odd years of research from linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. It also captures the reality of how we signers use our whole bodies to perceive and produce language—and to make social judgments about people and their bodies based on how they produce their messages and how they perceive our messages (see Moges 2020 about the embodied signing styles of Deaf female-bodied masculine lesbian ASL signers). Because sign languages are located in the whole body, it is virtually impossible for signers to have a “disembodied” voice, even with sign language interpreters. Bodies must be visible for communication in visual sign languages. The corollary is that both linguistic *and* racial profiling evokes language ideologies about people, especially those from linguistically marginalized and racially minoritized backgrounds. Interpreters, along with everyone else, are not exempt from the practice of profiling.

The data presented below were drawn from personal and collective narratives from various Deaf Scholars of Color employed at different higher education institutions and other academic spaces in the United States. Some of the data were originally reported in the dissertation of one of this chapter’s authors (Moges-Riedel 2020). Each narrative represents a mismatch of intersubjectivity: the discomforting presence of white female interpreters occupying the physical space of a Black male scholar, the linguistic and sociocultural constraints that a Latinx scholar encounters in working with white interpreters, the mispronunciation of non-anglicized names that an East Asian scholar tried to redress, and the tension of the mismatched assignment of white interpreters to an all-Black-and-Deaf panel that a Black scholar had to facilitate.

#### THE DISCOMFORTING PRESENCE OF WHITE INTERPRETERS

It is important to consider what happens to conferences because presenting and sharing one’s work is a crucial responsibility of tenure-track faculty’s research agenda. The first example, which takes place at an academic conference, conveys how the visible whiteness of an interpreter can determine how Deaf Scholars of Color appear to others, rendering them approachable for some people and unapproachable for others. A Black male conference attendee, Dr. Joseph Hill, who is a tenured professor, shared his conference experience on Twitter under the handle “@jaceychill,” posting about being assigned white female interpreters (see figure 8.1). Interpreters of Color were frequently unavailable or not considered appropriate to be hired at those social events at conferences, since the practice of assigning interpreters focuses on providing basic access rather than on providing appropriate representation of the Deaf Scholar of Color. Hill adds another perspective to his dilemma in addition to the problematic representation of him sounding white: the problematic physical presence of his white interpreters.

This anecdote suggests a notion of a safe space or POC space that is infiltrated by white interpreters and how for Deaf Scholars of Color it is not their language



FIGURE 8.1. Screenshot 1 of Dr. Joseph Hill's Twitter post from a thread about his experience of white interpreters at a conference. Twitter, October 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jaceyhill/status/1183267937450283010>.

or modality of ASL that is a barrier but rather the race of the interpreter. Hill did not realize that until his Black colleague brought up the issue of the discomfiting presence of whiteness around him (see figure 8.2). However, it was not within Hill's power to make specific requests for an interpreter, as is often the case for conference attendees, especially at national conferences that rotate between different states. Importantly, a white interpreter is usually a foot or further away from the body of a Deaf Scholar of Color, thus producing an unintended repellent in POC spaces. This is truly difficult for Deaf Scholars of Color to control due to the limited supply of Interpreters of Color (Street Leverage 2015; Jones 2020).



FIGURE 8.2. Screenshot 2 of Dr. Joseph Hill’s Twitter post from a thread about his experience of white interpreters at a conference. Twitter, October 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jaceyhill/status/1183268745566806016>.

### SOUNDING WHITE AND . . . MULTICULTURALLY INCOMPETENT?

Moges-Riedel (2020) conducted extensive interviews of fifteen Deaf Faculty of Color who work at postsecondary institutions. Some of their narratives revealed a recurring theme of working with white interpreters. While those faculty members are already racialized because of their identity, the voices of their white interpreters present an additional complication in terms of how they present themselves through speaking. For tenured and tenure-track Deaf faculty at institutions of higher education, the interpreters can spend a substantial amount of time voicing

for the Deaf faculty as part of interpretation. This creates a pressing challenge for Deaf faculty and interpreters who do not share the same racial and ethnic background, which may inadvertently lead to the racialization or the lack of racialization of Deaf Faculty of Color, whose racialized identities are presented via their white, female voice(d) interpreters. The interpreters may lack knowledge of culturally specific words and may not be aware of how they sound “white” when voicing in SAE. Many Interpreters of Color have more cultural knowledge and background of multi-ethnic words (West Oyedele 2015) and more training with multilingual practices, such as trilingual skills with ASL, English, and Spanish, than their white peers (Treviño and Quinto-Pozos 2018).

Antonio shared his experience with a white interpreter who wasn’t able to interpret Spanish:

They’re struggling with the French names and the pronunciation, and not knowing how to get that out clearly, and then I’m wondering, . . . what are you going to do to Spanish when you hear those names? And you know the students who would speak Spanish. . . . So the students would speak Spanish, in my class, you know, just a few little words, and then another student would hear that, and they would say, “Hey, what did they just say?” But the interpreter had no idea what to tell them [since] they didn’t understand the Spanish at all. They weren’t able to completely interpret all of it. And so, I’d ask for, you know, some type of spelling and they couldn’t lip read it, and I would be stuck.

The interpreter who was unskilled at voicing Spanish and not culturally trained obscured Antonio’s Latinx identity by making him seem to be ignorant of any non-anglicized names or any basic Spanish words. Due to his lost opportunity to claim his Spanish-speaking culture, his identity was obstructed by the inability to access a clearly racialized voice from his white interpreter, and he was not able to build connections with those Spanish-speaking students. In addition, he felt too embarrassed to join any Spanish-speaking events on campus with any of the staff interpreters, who were all white.

Antonio continued by mentioning a revelation about how a Latina ASL interpreter had contributed to and validated Latinx identities in a classroom. He had never had that experience until he had a substitute Latina interpreter, and consequently they had this eye-opening experience together. Antonio shared how she understood the cultural behavior of Latino gestures:

You know, when you sign “eat,” how we sign it. So in the Latino culture you usually have . . . closed fingers and [a] flat, open hand [the palm is facing upward and you bend fingers repetitively toward your mouth] for “eating,” and that would be a Latino gesture, for example, but other interpreters wouldn’t catch that. But this Latina interpreter caught it and I felt great about that. I felt validated with that. And it allowed me to further assess myself and realize, “Okay, I have my own identity and my own behaviors that match who I am, that match my parents. This is all part of me and who I am.” And that was awesome for me, that validation, that feeling from that incident.

. . . It was so inspiring, I was so excited about that, you know, I wanted to just let everyone know that this process . . . occurred.

Antonio had this revelation of the importance of Interpreters of Color, especially those who are fluent in Spanish or conscious of Latinx culture, to experience the validation of his Latinx roots. The insufficient number of Interpreters of Color with ethnic epistemologies has resulted in Deaf Scholars of Color not being able to achieve a sense of belonging or to connect with other POC in academic fields.

(MIS)PRONOUNCING PERSONAL NAMES AND  
DEMONSTRATING MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE

Names matter, and pronouncing them correctly not only signals respect, but it can also signal how the user perceives the bearer of the name. In the United States many names of racially minoritized and/or linguistically stigmatized backgrounds have been subject to anglicization (Bucholtz 2016). As someone who grew up having her Mandarin Chinese surname frequently mispronounced in the United States, Hou, one of the authors of this chapter, is sensitive to the complex racial politics of “foreign” names and the trauma that comes with the experience of hearing (or seeing) the mispronunciation of one’s name. She works in a linguistics department in which the majority of students and faculty use multiple language varieties and languages in their personal and professional lives. A substantial percentage of the graduate students (and even some of the faculty members) pronounce their personal names according to the phonology of the language that they grew up using. The department maintains a member directory that includes the pronunciation of names in the International Phonetic Alphabet, an alphabetic system of phonetic notation used for transcribing speech sounds in Latin script. In principle, everybody adopts the pronunciation of a name as explicitly modeled by the bearer of that name from that list, but in practice most people rely on the most frequently heard pronunciation of the name as a guide. Hou works with a team of two designated interpreters: one is not fluent in any other spoken languages apart from SAE and the other is fluent in both SAE and African American English. She trained them to pronounce her surname correctly so the students would know how to pronounce it and, more importantly, students who knew Mandarin would not take offense or even think of their professor as ignorant. What could be more embarrassingly ironic than an ignorant linguistics professor who herself is visibly East Asian? Hou also trained the interpreters to pay close attention to the pronunciation of other people’s names based on how they pronounced the names themselves so they would not mispronounce them when Hou called on someone in class.

There was a Catalan student whose name many English and Spanish speakers often struggled to pronounce. As people tend to pronounce other people’s names more than the bearer of a name pronounces it themselves, there is more room for mispronunciation. Unbeknownst to the author, the interpreters often heard

the mispronounced version from other individuals and used it as an exemplar for their own pronunciation. It was not until an open and frank discussion about microaggressions among several faculty members and graduate students that Hou deduced that the interpreters were validating the mispronounced version of the Catalan student's name. She asked the student to clarify his preference about how his name should be pronounced, and he replied that he wanted it pronounced as it is in Catalan, or at least as close to it as possible, and he found the question empowering. Hou informed the interpreters about the student's preference; in thinking about the emotional labor and cost involved in redressing the situation, she advised them to not take anyone's pronunciation of other people's names as accurate and to directly ask the bearer of the name for a demonstration. This strategy allowed her to exercise more agency over the interpreters' pronunciation of names, which not only signaled respect for and the legitimacy of the student and his personhood, but it also asserted her multifaceted positionality as a linguistics professor and as a woman of color with social justice values.

#### HURDLES OF UNSOUND INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

Another institution with a strong-led interpreting program hosted an event on Zoom about Black Deaf art. Moges, one of this chapter's authors, an East African American, was asked to facilitate the six other Black Deaf artists. Her tasks were to arrange panel questions in advance, assign the questions to several of the panelists, and ensure that there would be enough time for each topic and for each panelist to participate. It never occurred to her to double-check if the voice interpreters assigned to the panel were Black since she trusted the hosting institution would provide Black interpreters. How mistaken she was to assume they had the common sense to provide suitable representation for Black voices. When she first signed in at the event and saw two unknown white female faces on Zoom, they assured her that they would turn their cameras off during the panel. She was stumped, unable to compose herself in time to speak up and ask if they were just moderating or interpreting. Hoping and praying that they were moderators, not interpreters, she thought to herself, "Well, what if it's the latter? It's too late, right?"

When the event started, the racial difference of the voice interpreters began to manifest in several ways, eventually producing tension and outrage. First, while the cameras of the interpreters were closed and unseen, their names still appeared on the top of the screen above the row of panelists. On the Zoom platform, what kept popping up were their white anglicized names that read as "Lori is talking" or "Shari is talking" (the names are pseudonyms). The pop-ups were extremely distracting and disempowering at the same time. Second, Moges's iPhone was buzzing with texts from Black hearing colleagues who were outraged by watching the panel and listening to the white interpreters trying to sound Black and picking inappropriate words to reflect the struggles described in the stories of the



Black Deaf artists. Clearly, at that moment it was impossible to stop the event and request a Black interpreter or just any Interpreter of Color, as the event was only an hour and half long, and Black interpreters, who are often in high demand, usually require at least two weeks’ advance notice for bookings.

As an afterthought, this event would not have been possible if it weren’t for the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, which together initiated a series of online panels that increased the visibility and representation of Black hearing and Black Deaf people. The use of Zoom has presented many opportunities for signing communities to watch and listen to Black Deaf or other Deaf presenters online without the need to fly across states to a conference or a university for such an event. However, this increased access did not reassure the Black Deaf panelists about why Black interpreters were not hired from agencies across the nation. They later learned that it was the institutional policy of the event’s organizers that created a barrier to hiring interpreters from an outside agency. The organizers were required to first assign their staff interpreters (who happened to all be white) before requesting that someone from an external service be hired. This presents an institutional and ethical issue for interpreter coordinators to consider. While this code of professional conduct (CPC) is established by the RID, there is no discussion or statement about encouraging event organizers to ensure that the Interpreters of Color have job opportunities to represent Deaf People of Color justly.<sup>8</sup>

SHUSA! (SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND  
STRONG ACCENT)

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, “SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT!” is a phrase that ASL interpreters sign when they struggle to understand the speech of someone who speaks English as their second language. There is some variation in how the phrase may be translated, depending on the interpreter’s facial expressions and body position. Regardless of what intentions the interpreter has, “strong accent” clearly marks speakers as problematic, that is, it suggests that they are not idealized native English speakers, and it positions them as Others while absolving the interpreters from their responsibility of understanding the speakers. This position is magnified if the speaker has a racialized body. The comment is one of the recurring microinvalidations that we are reluctant to tie to a specific time, place, or individual; this has happened over and over again based on both our personal experiences and those of other Deaf Scholars of Color to the point where it feels normalized.

We are flagging this particular microinvalidation because it gets to the heart of what it means to “think with an accent.” The stories of Deaf Scholars of Color place great value on embodied representations of language that cannot be separated from the whole body or reduced to the voice box, but this sentiment may not be equally shared by the interpreters. On the job, interpreters are constantly filtering



what they hear, focused on relaying as much auditory information as possible to the Deaf consumers, but they are not immune to linguistic and racial profiling. It does not come as a surprise that interpreters are sensitive to hearing accents that do not match their own or are not familiar, since for hearing people, the spoken language accent comes first. Using a phrase like SHUSA! as a normalized practice of interpretation to a Deaf Scholar of Color can be baffling, and even dehumanizing and potentially triggering. This can exacerbate the effects of microinvalidations that are more salient and more important to Deaf Scholar of Colors—such as the visible presence of white interpreters and using the language that does not match the scholar's persona, as illuminated by the stories presented here—in academia.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

The stories of Deaf Scholars of Color about working with white, largely female interpreters demonstrate recurring themes of microinvalidations in the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity; these themes relate to the negotiation of linguistic and sociocultural conflicts, including racial microinvalidations through mediated representations of voices. Those conflicts cannot and should not be attributed and reduced to mere individual differences of linguistic knowledge. Rather, they are best understood as products of the complex dynamics of institutions rooted in white supremacy. It is indeed white supremacy that has prized and privileged Standard American English, as spoken by many white people, in the United States. What, then, can be done to address those conflicts? We offer some recommendations for future generations of Deaf Scholars of Color, prospective interpreters, and academics who are interested in demonstrating allyship for those scholars.

To begin, it would be beneficial for the RID to create a registry of Interpreters of Color and their locations to provide to Deaf Scholars of Color. As Professor Hill mentioned, national academic conferences are responsible for the assignment of interpreters for Deaf attendees, so there was no way for him to immediately know all the sources for locating highly qualified interpreters. The emphasis on “highly” is meant to highlight that not all Interpreters of Color are suited to interpret at the postsecondary level or even for specific disciplines, just as we cannot expect all interpreters to be knowledgeable about every discipline. In addition, if a recurring conference does not have an interpreter coordinator, the organizers should consider hiring a qualified one and also take the responsibility of educating themselves and other committee members—especially those who have never worked with ASL interpreters—about accessibility guidelines. In fact, conferences should comply with what are called “standard practice papers” to have consistent professionalism to organize and coordinate with certain agencies of interpreters or support providers.<sup>9</sup>

For a situation such as that of Antonio, who benefited from working with a Latina interpreter in his classroom, Latinx-identified interpreters could have a

stronger networking system with Deaf Latinx faculty members. The interpreters need not necessarily be fluent in Spanish or trilingual, but they should be culturally competent with Latinx cultures. A good start in this direction is the trilingual sign language interpreter agency *Mano a Mano*, which has thirty-plus members registered on its public list. As suggested by García-Fernández’s (2014) study, which is built on Deaf Latinx epistemology, it would be useful for both Deaf Latinx faculty members and Latinx interpreters to connect and become familiar with each other.

Higher education institutions that are looking to hire Deaf faculty can implement a policy that would allow the faculty to select their own team of designated interpreters. The policy could even allow for the hiring of additional interpreters who are more appropriate and qualified than the designated interpreters for certain events. For example, if Hou wanted to attend a campus-sponsored event where a prominent Latinx scholar was presenting, she could ask her university to permit the assignment of Latinx interpreters for this event. This kind of flexibility would not only ensure better quality of interpretation for everyone, but it would also set an ethical precedent about social justice in access and inclusion. Since the number of qualified Interpreters of Color will not proliferate overnight and will be an issue for a long time, requesting a team of two Interpreters of Color may present a greater challenge than requesting one to work in a team with a white interpreter and one who can reinforce with informational support of cultural competence.

As the pool of Deaf Faculty of Color (and Deaf faculty in general) expands and more are employed at higher institutions, including predominantly hearing institutions, there will be a greater need for designated interpreters. There will also be a greater need for networking and mentoring about interpreters. Currently there is no formal training for Deaf faculty for learning how to work with designated interpreters and how to supervise them, much less for learning how to address the challenges of negotiating the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity. Deaf Faculty of Color can be empowered with training, particularly if it includes the topic of racial microaggressions, and be better prepared to address any issues that arise from the dynamics of intersubjectivity. RID chapters and Conference of Interpreters Training (CIT) can provide workshops on such issues so Deaf Scholars of Color will know how to give constructive feedback to designated interpreters, and the interpreters will know how to use it to improve their work.

Finally, sign language interpreter training programs can take an intersectional social justice approach to their curriculum. Sign language interpretation is a type of human service profession that has not historically addressed the relationship between the Deaf consumer and the interpreter with respect to racial inequalities and power differentials. Given that the majority of hearing ASL interpreters are white people who lack the lived experiences of Deaf People of Color (and hearing People of Color) *and* lack training about microaggressions, the interpreters may not be aware when they commit microaggressions (Gallon 2018). Integrating a combination of linguistics, critical race theory, and other social science topics in

the curriculum, for example, can show how different social groups benefit and do not benefit from axes of privileges, and how the more privileged groups can reflect on their implicit bias about minoritized and stigmatized language varieties and the people who use them. They can learn to become more conscious about their own bias, including linguistic profiling, in their interpretation skills of listening to accents and also learn to avoid committing racial microinvalidations. They also can practice how to mitigate the problem of being an unwanted buffer zone when working with Deaf Scholars of Color.

Sign language interpreting training programs can also incorporate a more proactive model of interpretation that would involve higher-standard practices of preparation in advance. Part of an interpreter's responsibilities involves obtaining presentation materials from Deaf presenters in advance to prepare, but these responsibilities could extend to preparing for all presenters. The interpreters could familiarize themselves with the hearing presenters' voices as a practice of listening to their accents and getting accustomed to them. Presenters can do their part too by providing their materials to the interpreters in advance. This practice would not only benefit both the Deaf audience and the interpreters, but it would also set a new precedent for access for everyone.

Lastly, in line with our call for social justice training in sign language interpretation, we need to problematize the phrase "SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT" (or SHUSA!) and replace it with something along the lines of "need more time get used their speak way" or, in English, give one a moment to train one's ears to comprehend another speaker's accent and to focus on the bigger picture of embodied representation. To the ears of hearing people, the spoken language accent comes first, but to Deaf people, it does not. It is the whole body.

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#### NOTES

The order of the authors of this chapter is alphabetical.

1. Sign languages do not have conventionalized writing systems. It is common practice for researchers to use English glosses in capitals for an approximate representation of the meaning of ASL signs. However, the glosses do not sufficiently capture the nonmanual markers of sign languages such as facial expressions and body movements.

2. In this chapter we have chosen not to go into detail about the heterogeneity of spoken language capabilities among Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, including those with intersectional identities and multilingual backgrounds. See Padden 1980 for the cultural perspectives on this issue.

3. We capitalize "Deaf" and "Color" to highlight people's cultural identities. When we cite other publications, we use lowercase for "deaf."

4. There is no clear-cut boundary between accent and dialect, since the delineation of language varieties has been strongly intertwined with language ideologies, e.g., beliefs about what are considered “standard” languages and what are not. However, there is a general consensus about how accents refer to differences in phonological characteristics of a language variety, while dialects encompass differences in all levels of linguistic structure, including morphology, syntax, and semantics.

5. There are specialized certifications for legal and medical interpretation but none for academic interpretation. Most interpreters work as ad hoc, freelance, or general interpreters, and often work contract jobs.

6. Of the 1,689, 592 identified themselves as African American/Black, 203 as American Indian/Native Alaskan, 210 as Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 684 as Hispanic/Latinx.

7. Trilingual interpreters interpret from ASL/English to a third language, which is usually Spanish in North and Central America, or from Spanish to ASL. There are very few certified trilingual interpreters. More information can be found at <https://manoamanoinc.org/>.

8. To learn more about this code of professional conduct (CPC), established by National Association for the Deaf (NAD) and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) together, see <https://rid.org/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct/>.

9. To learn more about this practice, visit see “Coordinating Conferences” at <https://rid.org/about-rid/about-interpreting/setting-standards/standard-practice-papers/>.

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## Accentings, Acoustic Surveillance, and Political Crisis in 2010s Brazil

Leonardo Cardoso

In 2013 Brazil's federal police launched an investigation into major black-market financial dealers. The police suspected that Carlos Habib Chater, a well-known dealer who had been previously convicted, was using his currency exchange store and gas station in Brasília (Brazil's capital) to launder money. The investigators wiretapped his phone lines and confirmed that Chater was part of a money-laundering network. In a nod to Chater's gas station, the police dubbed the investigation Operação Lava Jato, or Car Wash Operation. The leader of the network was a dealer known in the phone calls as Cousin. One day, after weeks of eavesdropping on Chater's phone calls, a police inspector noticed Chater had said "Beto" instead of "Cousin." That slip suggested the boss was likely Alberto Youssef. In his book about the investigation, journalist Vladimir Netto recounts the moment the investigators established that Cousin was, in fact, Alberto Youssef:

[The investigators] ran to the listening room and turned up the volume to hear better. Igor Romário de Paula [one of the investigators] had been a flight controller and knew Youssef's voice since his days as a pilot when he crossed the skies of Paraná [a state in Southern Brazil] with smuggled goods. It was him. The voice was his, [de Paula] was confident. . . . The agents could hardly believe . . . they were about to catch Youssef.<sup>1</sup>

Youssef had coordinated a billion-dollar tax-evasion scheme involving the State Bank of Paraná. It surprised the investigators that he was still engaged in money laundering, as a few years earlier he had signed a plea bargain deal agreeing not to get involved in crime. Confident that the "Cousin" in the wiretaps was Youssef, the investigators requested permission from Sérgio Moro, the federal judge who had authorized Youssef's plea deal, to wiretap his phone lines and access his bank transactions. Soon they found that Youssef had purchased a vehicle for the former director of supplies at Brazil's oil giant Petrobras. Following that thread, the Car



Wash Operation unveiled a massive bribery and tax-evasion scheme involving private companies, political parties, and state officials.

In March 2014 the Car Wash Operation went public, with dozens of searches and seizures, coercive questioning (compulsory appearance in front of the authorities), and temporary detentions. From the southern state of Paraná, the Car Wash task force (a group of federal police officers and prosecutors) coordinated a criminal probe consisting of more than sixty phases. In its first three years (2014–17), the operation amassed impressive results: 730 search warrants, 300 police inquiries, 330 wiretap authorizations, 57 criminal charges against 260 people, 125 convictions of 90 individuals, and BR\$10 billion recuperated via plea deals. The country had never before seen so many public officials, CEOs from large companies, and black-market dealers investigated, charged, convicted, and imprisoned. Judge Moro became a folk hero and an international celebrity, with mentions in the *Financial Times*' "50 People Who Shaped the Decade," *Time* magazine's "The 100 Most Influential People," and *Fortune*'s 2016 "World's Greatest Leaders" (just ahead of U2's Bono).<sup>2</sup> *The Mechanism (O Mecanismo)*, a Netflix series that premiered worldwide in 2018, is "loosely based" on the Car Wash Operation.

This chapter describes how the Car Wash investigators deployed electronic eavesdropping to build their case. In the context of an investigation, electronic eavesdropping depends on the performance of two types of correspondences. First, investigators need to match the eavesdropped voice with an individual. Without the voice-individual correspondence, such as the matching of Cousin with Alberto Youssef described above, the state's law enforcement actors are left with a disembodied voice and a suspect at large. The second correspondence refers to the content of the eavesdropped conversation. It involves identifying convergences between the intercepted utterances and the existing legal framework. The robustness of the audio recording *as legal evidence* depends on how stable that correspondence is. As Bruno Latour notes, this process relates to "the transportation of obligation from one end of the procedure to the other, and from a text to the case at hand."<sup>3</sup> The back-and-forth movement of legal text and the case at hand exists in the fluid terrain demarcated by maximum and minimum correspondence horizons. If the former can cause state paralysis (everyone suing everyone), the latter represents a hermetic state whose legal sphere is kept out of reach of any case at hand.

To analyze voice-individual and utterance-infraction correspondences within the Car Wash Operation, I follow various accenting practices. I define accenting as *the act of stressing one or more acoustic events from a larger collection of events*. That definition requires three qualifications. First, I am using the gerund "accenting" rather than the noun "accent" as a reminder that we are dealing with a process of selection, foregrounding, and filtering that occurs through reiteration. Second, as the editors of this volume make clear in the introduction, accenting is a two-way street: one speaks with an accent and hears with an accent. If I say to someone, "You *should* have stuck to the plan," but the person hears "You *should* have

stuck to the plan,” we have two different accentings. If someone says to me, “You should have stuck to the plan,” and I register that as “You should have a plan,” we also have different accentings. While in the first example the accenting is one of word emphasis, in the second example it involves the exclusion of words. In that sense (and this is the third point), as a matter of perception, comprehension, and interest, accenting is potentially endless and outside the speaker’s control. As a relational and context-dependent performance, accenting is the act through which we endow acoustic events their ontological stability as language, music, noise, or something in between.

The recent explosion of smart speakers and voice assistants has brought attention to the “accent gap” among tech users.<sup>4</sup> A much more consequential issue that is less discussed in the news is that of accenting in legal cases. Two issues further aggravate the problem. First, prosecutors explicitly rely on accenting to *sensitize* their audience (a judge or jury) to an audio recording’s content. Second, intermediaries responsible for converting the audio into a different format (usually a text) risk bringing their own accenting into the process.<sup>5</sup> For example, a recent study asked twenty-seven court transcriptionists working in the Philadelphia courts (which require 95 percent transcription accuracy) to transcribe eighty-three sentences in African American English (AAE). A sentence-by-sentence analysis showed only 59.5 percent of the transcribed sentences were accurate, with 31 percent of the transcriptions modifying the who, what, when, or where from the audio.<sup>6</sup> While the case studies I examine here do not involve race and cross-cultural communication, they too suggest how different interpretations of the same audio recording can impact a legal case. I propose analyzing those loaded discrepancies in terms of what I call “modes of accenting.”

## CASE STUDIES

I focus on two electronic eavesdropping cases during the Car Wash Operation to explore correspondences and accenting issues. The first case is the 2016 wiretapping of conversations between former president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva and other members of his Workers’ Party, including then-president Dilma Rousseff. Judge Moro’s handling of the wiretaps was unquestionably one of the most controversial moments of the Car Wash Operation. The second case involves the recording of a meeting between President Michel Temer and businessman Joesley Batista in 2017. The meeting, secretly recorded by Batista, became the center of a political crisis and legal battle that severely damaged Temer’s political career. Below I provide a summary of each case study.

### *The Lula Tapes*

In 2014, after a highly divisive campaign and a tight runoff, President Rousseff from the Workers’ Party was elected to a second term. However, shortly after her inauguration, as new developments in the Car Wash Operation engulfed the news,

Rousseff's popularity started to decline. Around that time an anonymous source leaked a document issued by the prosecutor general of the Republic that listed the politicians suspected of involvement in the Car Wash scheme. Claiming the Rousseff administration had intentionally leaked the document, the president of the Senate and the president of the Chamber of Deputies (both included on the list) retaliated by halting Rousseff's economic agenda in Congress. In December 2015, arguing that the continuous leaks were an attempt by the Rousseff administration to stain his credibility, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, fired back by accepting an impeachment request against Rousseff. The request accused the Rousseff administration of taking undeclared loans from state-owned banks to pay for governmental expenses. According to the request petitioners, the budgetary maneuver was part of the Workers' Party's determination to remain in power—an argument strongly supported by the Car Wash Operation prosecutors.

As the Car Wash Operation advanced, and with Brazilians listing corruption as the country's top problem, Rousseff's approval rate reached single digits.<sup>7</sup> Confirming what many had already anticipated, the Car Wash probe soon reached former president Lula, the founder and prominent leader of the Workers' Party, Brazil's largest leftist party. According to the prosecutors, Lula had received bribes from construction companies involved in the Petrobras scandal in the form of real estate assets. In February 2016, Judge Moro authorized the investigators to wiretap the phone lines associated with Lula. At least thirty-seven phone lines were wiretapped. A few weeks later, the police searched Lula's residence and brought him in for coercive questioning in a widely televised event portrayed as the long-awaited confrontation between Moro and Lula.

Two weeks after that coercive questioning, the Rousseff administration signaled that Lula could join the government to help Rousseff reestablish political support in Congress. On March 16, the administration confirmed Lula would join the president's cabinet as chief of staff. The appointment, however, was frustrated. On that same day, Moro authorized the federal prosecutors to make the wiretaps public. A total of fifty-three phone conversations made between February 20 and March 16, 2016, became available for public scrutiny.

#### *The Temer-Batista Tape*

In May 2016, after Rousseff was suspended by the Senate to face an impeachment trial, Vice President Michel Temer became the acting president. In May 2017, the newspaper *O Globo* announced that Joesley Batista, co-owner of JBS, the world's largest meat-processing company, had secretly recorded a private meeting with President Temer as part of a plea deal negotiated with the prosecutor general. In the forty-minute recording of the meeting, held late at night in Temer's official residence, Batista tells Temer he (Batista) had managed to elude various criminal probes, including the Car Wash Operation, by bribing police inspectors, prosecutors, and judges. Batista also asks Temer to provide a new contact point, explaining

the probes had disrupted his previous links. Temer then suggests Federal Deputy Rodrigo Rocha Loures, describing him as someone in whom had the “utmost confidence.”

### MODES OF ACCENTING

I chose these two cases because the legal and political controversies around them allow us to trace different types of accenting. Four modes are addressed here: legal, technological, discursive, and political.

#### *Legal Accenting*

Legal accenting refers to the delicate process through which legal experts determine the weight of each recorded utterance. For the Car Wash prosecutors to establish the utterance-infracton correspondence in the Lula and Temer-Batista tapes, they had to address two central questions: 1) was the audio content persuasive enough to incriminate those individuals, and 2) was the electronic eavesdropping and the disclosure of its contents conducted lawfully.

Brazil’s 1988 Constitution was the first to admit the possibility of telephone interception in a criminal investigation. Per Law 9,296 (1996), Brazil’s first wiretapping law, law enforcement agencies need a court order to intercept telephone conversations. To do that, police officers need to demonstrate proof of probable cause, exhaustion of other investigative channels, and a pre-delimited timeline for wiretapping. The law requires that any information related to the wiretaps be kept confidential as an undisclosed annex in the police inquiry or prosecutorial charge. Law 9,296 establishes it is a crime to breach the confidentiality of the wiretap “with purposes not authorized by law.” Additionally, any conversation not directly related to the investigation must be discarded so that the privacy and intimate conversations of those caught in the wiretaps can be preserved as much as possible.

In March 2016, when Moro authorized the disclosure of the Lula tapes, several aspects made that decision remarkable. First, the recordings contained intimate exchanges between Lula’s family members, which had no direct connection to the investigation. Second, the wiretaps included conversations between Lula and his lawyer, whose disclosure appeared to be a breach of attorney-client privilege. Third, the disclosed conversations involved high-ranking public officials who were outside the jurisdiction of a federal judge. Known in Brazil as “privileged forum” (*foro privilegiado*), the rule establishes that only the Supreme Court can oversee a criminal case involving the president and cabinet members. To justify his unorthodox approach to the wiretaps, Moro argued, in a biased decision, that “democracy in a free society requires the governed to know what those in the government do, even when they seek to act behind the shadows.”<sup>8</sup>

Even more astounding was the fact that one conversation between Lula and President Rousseff took place 1) after Moro had already requested the police to

stop wiretapping Lula's phones, and 2) on the very same day he had authorized the disclosure of the wiretaps. After explaining he had "not noticed" the wiretap was outside his order's time window, Moro *still* defended his decision. Again, he did so using a disturbingly biased argument: "Not even the president has absolute privilege in protecting her communications, captured incidentally only. The well-known precedent of the U.S. Supreme Court in *U.S. v. Nixon*, 1974, is an example to be followed."<sup>9</sup>

In the weeks that followed, that one-minute-and-twenty-five-second conversation between Lula and Rouseff became the focus of intense legal accenting. The conversation goes as follows:

- Rouseff: Hello.  
 Lula: Hello.  
 Rouseff: Lula, let me tell you something.  
 Lula: Tell me, my dear.  
 Rouseff: It's this, I am sending "Bessias" [Jorge Messias, an aide to the chief of staff] with the papers, so that we have them, just in case of necessity, that is the appointment letter, OK?  
 Lula: Uh-huh. OK, OK.  
 Rouseff: That's all, wait there, he is heading there.  
 Lula: OK, I'm here. I'll wait.  
 Rouseff: OK?  
 Lula: OK.  
 Rouseff: Bye.  
 Lula: Bye, dear.

What exactly did the president mean by "in case of necessity"? The Rouseff administration explained that the president wanted Lula to sign the document beforehand in case he could not attend the appointment ceremony in Brasília. But for Moro and the Car Wash task force, "in case of necessity" meant something very different. For them, Rouseff was letting Lula know he should use the appointment letter as evidence he now had privileged forum in the event of an unexpected police search. That Moro disclosed the wiretaps on the same day that the Rouseff administration announced it would appoint Lula chief of staff makes it quite obvious the judge wanted to frustrate Lula's nomination.

One day after the disclosure, while Lula attended his appointment ceremony as chief of staff in Brasília, the opposition requested the Supreme Court to annul the appointment. On March 18, Justice Gilmar Mendes accepted the request and suspended the appointment, calling the tactic a "constitutional fraud" that failed to demonstrate "morality and impersonality." According to Justice Mendes, Rouseff's acknowledgment that the conversation occurred (thus fulfilling the voice-individual correspondence) was an "extrajudicial confession."

The attorney general and Lula's lawyer submitted their complaints to the Supreme Court, arguing that Moro should have sent wiretaps involving officers

with privileged forum to the Supreme Court. Accepting the attorney general's arguments, Justice Teori Zavascki (in charge of the Car Wash cases at the Supreme Court) concluded that Moro had violated the 1996 wiretap law and a 2014 decision in which the justice authorized Moro to adjudicate only Car Wash cases that did not involve officers with privileged forum.

While deploring that "the practical effects from the improper disclosure of intercepted telephone conversations are irreversible," Justice Zavascki reinstated the confidentiality of all wiretaps. In June 2016, Zavascki sent back to Moro the cases involving individuals without privileged forum, including the Lula tapes. Although he invalidated the last exchange (the Lula-Rousseff call), Zavascki authorized the Paraná prosecutors to use the other wiretaps in their investigations. In July 2017, Moro sentenced Lula to more than nine years in prison for his involvement in the Car Wash scandal. After the court of appeals sustained Moro's sentence, Lula was arrested. He was released in 2019 when the Supreme Court (reversing its 2016 position) decided that defendants had the right to remain free until they had exhausted all appeals. In a public note, the Car Wash task force stated the Supreme Court decision went "against the sentiment of repudiating impunity and the fight against corruption."<sup>10</sup>

Roughly one year after the Lula tapes had wrecked the Rousseff administration, electronic eavesdropping was at the center of another presidential crisis. On May 17, 2017, *O Globo* published in a scoop that JBS's Joesley Batista had signed a plea deal with the prosecutor general. According to the story, the plea deal included an audio recording incriminating President Temer. The next day, Supreme Court justice Edson Fachin authorized the prosecutor general to open a criminal inquiry against Temer and lifted the confidentiality of the widely anticipated Temer-Batista tape. As with the Lula tapes, legal accenting revolved around a minuscule portion of the disclosed material. Below is Prosecutor General Rodrigo Janot's transcription of the exchange included in the inquiry request sent to the Supreme Court:

Batista: I'm alright with Eduardo.

Temer: You have to maintain that, OK?

Batista: Every month . . .

Temer: . . . Yeah . . .

"Eduardo" refers to Eduardo Cunha, the former president of the Chamber of Deputies. In May 2016, the Supreme Court suspended Cunha from the presidency, asserting he had been using the position to slow down the Car Wash inquiry against him. In September 2016, the Chamber of Deputies voted to revoke Cunha's mandate. Cunha now having lost privileged forum, the Supreme Court sent his case to Judge Moro, who ordered his preventive detention.<sup>11</sup> In March 2017, Cunha was sentenced fifteen years in prison for corruption, tax evasion, and money laundering. That means the meeting between Batista and Temer took place while Cunha was in preventive detention, a few weeks before his sentencing.

On the day the *O Globo* story was published—before he had access to the audio recording—Temer confirmed he had seen Batista in his office. He argued, however, that the seventeen-second exchange had nothing to do with bribery. According to him, Batista was simply saying he had been helping Cunha in an “act of solidarity” as the politician and his family were going through financial difficulties. For Prosecutor General Rodrigo Janot, the exchange reveals the president directing Batista to continue buying Cunha’s silence with monthly bribes. Four days after the Supreme Court disclosed the Temer-Batista tape, the Chamber of Deputies had already received nine impeachment requests against Temer.

### *Techno-Accenting*

Technological accenting (or techno-accenting) relates to the accenting produced by objects. As my earlier definition of accenting suggests, techno-accenting is intrinsic to an acoustic event (think, for instance, of the resonant frequencies of a room). In legal cases that involve audio recordings, techno-accenting can help a human audience establish both the voice-individual and the utterance-infraction correspondences. Audio experts rely on software techno-accenting to visualize a voiceprint and determine to whom a voice belongs. The techno-accenting embedded in sound analysis devices is also crucial in establishing an utterance-infraction correspondence as it relates, for instance, to the authenticity of an audio recording.

On the same day the Supreme Court disclosed the recorded conversation between Temer and Batista, the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* suggested that the presence of inaudible segments made the content of the recording “inconclusive.” On the following day, the same newspaper published the analysis of an audio forensics expert. According to the expert, the Temer-Batista tape had more than fifty edited points, in “a clear sign of manipulation.” Armed with that new piece of information, Temer changed his defense strategy. Instead of investing in the legal accenting and intelligible acoustic events, he claimed the *unintelligible events* compromised the recording. “This covert recording was manipulated and altered, clearly with shady intentions,” Temer said in a press conference, “[and was] included in the police inquiry without proper inspection.” Legal accenting had now become a matter of techno-accenting.

In April, the public prosecutor’s office submitted a “perceptive coherence analysis” of the recording. The report concluded that although it had some noises and unintelligible segments, the Temer-Batista tape was audible overall, and its content presented a “logical sequence.” The authors of the report acknowledged, however, that their analysis was preliminary. It was based exclusively on “human perception,” without the “assistance from specialized equipment in the assessment of the integrity of the audios.” Without the use of techno-accenting for sound analysis, no utterance-infraction correspondence could be achieved. In a note, the National Association of Federal Forensic Experts strongly criticized the prosecutor general for annexing the recording in the case without first submitting it to Federal Police forensic experts for a complete technical assessment.



Taking a step back, Justice Fachin then requested that the Federal Police examine the recording. In June 2017, the police finished and sent their report to the Supreme Court. The 128-page document describes the procedure used to analyze the audio file and provides a detailed transcription of its content. Adobe Audition and Praat (a speech analysis software) were used for most of the techno-accenting.<sup>12</sup> The report also addresses the questions submitted by Temer's defense attorneys and the prosecutor general. Here we see how each party tried to persuade their audience on the effects of techno-accenting on legal accenting. Was the recording edited? If so, who or what edited it? The report identified a total of 294 discontinuities in the audio file. It transcribed the famous seventeen-second exchange as follows:

*Batista:* I'm alright with Eduardo.

*Temer:* Very good.

(Discontinuity 74 in 00:11:36.491)

*Batista:* . . . and . . .

*Temer:* You have to maintain that, OK?

(Discontinuity 75 in 00:11:38.404)

*Batista:* . . . oooo . . .

*Temer:* (unintelligible)

(Discontinuity 76 in 00:11:39.552)

(noises of someone moving the recording device)

*Batista:* (unintelligible) Every month . . .

*Temer:* Eduardo as well, right?

*Batista:* As well.

*Temer:* Yeah . . .

(Discontinuity 77 in 00:11:44.272)

The report goes on to claim that the recording device itself generated those discontinuities. As the police experts explained, "Whenever the sound intensity falls below a certain threshold [around 62 dB (A)], the storage of samples [i.e., the recording] is interrupted, which produces discontinuities in the audio." Testing the two devices allegedly used by Batista at the meeting, the experts concluded that, due to its internal mechanism, the device recorded 4.82 seconds of a 6.23-second acoustic event. For the Federal Police, then, the source of the interruptions was simply the device's techno-accenting. With that, the prosecutor general resumed his legal accenting. In June 2017, Temer became the first president in Brazil charged for crimes while in office. In October 2017, the Chamber of Deputies rejected the indictment and allowed Temer to stay in office until the end of his term.

Temer's defense continued to insist it was impossible to bypass issues of techno-accenting. Temer's forensic expert argued that regardless of what had caused the discontinuities, admitting a recording with 23 percent of the conversation missing was "like accepting a completely shredded contract."<sup>13</sup> Rebuking the police's argument that only the device could have created the discontinuities, the expert



maintained that someone could edit the recording by simply *emulating* the device's techno-accenting.

In 2019, after Temer stepped down from the presidency and lost his privileged forum, the Supreme Court sent his case to a federal court. In October 2019, Temer was acquitted of one of the charges. For the judge, “monosyllabic and disconnected statements, recorded in a conversation with numerous interruptions, cannot support the arguments in the accusation.” In comparing the transcriptions provided by the prosecutor general with the one in the Federal Police's technical report, the judge criticized the former for “disregarding the audio interruptions, suppressing what the technical report deems unintelligible utterances, and for placing together utterances that are presented separately in the report.”

### *Discursive Accenting*

Discursive accenting refers to ways of speaking. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of Lula's, Rousseff's, and Temer's vocalities as these relate to the political persona each has fashioned before, during, and after their time in office. I also consider how their opponents compared those politicians' public vocalities with the eavesdropped conversations. As I show, accenting those private conversations gave critics a unique avenue to question the politicians' authenticity.

Throughout his political career, critics have mocked Lula for his lack of formal education. Born in a small rural town in Brazil's northeast, Lula was still young when he migrated with his family to the more industrialized state of São Paulo. As a kid, Lula quit school after the second grade and worked as a street vendor and shoeshine boy. In the 1960s, during the military dictatorship (1964–85), he got a job at a steel company in greater São Paulo and joined the ABC Union of Metallurgical Industry Workers. As president of the ABC Union in the 1970s, Lula coordinated massive strikes in the steel sector. In 1980, together with other union leaders, scholars (including sociologists Antonio Candido and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda), and progressive intellectuals such as Paulo Freire, Lula founded the Workers' Party, serving as its first president.

After the country returned to representative democracy, Lula ran for but lost the 1989, 1994, and 1998 presidential elections. He was elected in 2002 and reelected in 2006. Opponents attack Lula for speaking with an “accent” in two senses of the word. First, they ridicule Lula for his frontal lisp (which causes him to vocalize the *s* and *z* sounds like *th*). In 2002, when Lula was elected president, the magazine *Istoé* joked that his government would be called “the Lisp Administration.”<sup>14</sup> In that sense, Lula's lisp is often portrayed as a political disability, an obstacle for the type of articulated speaking expected from a head of state. Second, in contrast to the more scholarly and refined oratory of some members of the Workers' Party, Lula's way of speaking is perceived as the embodiment of a simplistic mind. “If it were just a matter of grammatical errors,” stated journalist Gilberto Kujawski in 2005, “it would be easy to forgive Lula. But what those errors denounce is not

limited to breaking the academic rules of language, but something much more serious—the simplicity of ideas (inadequate to the complexity of the problems of government), and the inefficiency of conduct, limited to irrelevant measures.”<sup>15</sup>

Lula’s supporters hear his discursive accentings as a useful political tool. Sociologist Florestan Fernandes claimed that Lula’s ability to combine “the everyday, the prosaic, the complex and the grand, without bitterness and bossiness, projects him as a catalyst in the popular imagination.”<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines, journalist Jocenilson Ribeiro noted, “Lula’s speech . . . is the expression of a language without simulations or rehearsals because Lula does not rehearse, he plays with his audience while talking about history, economics, foreign policy, international relations, science, and technology in a didactic of easy understanding.”<sup>17</sup>

Dilma Rousseff comes from an upper-middle-class family in the southeast state of Minas Gerais. In the 1960s, she joined organizations to fight against the military regime. Between 1970 and 1972, Rousseff was incarcerated at the Tiradentes penitentiary in São Paulo. After her release, she helped launch the leftist Democratic Labor Party. She joined the Workers’ Party in 2001, serving in the Lula administration as Minister of Mines and Energy (2003–5) and chief of staff (2005–10). In 2010, Lula chose her to run for the presidency. During her first term (2010–14), Rousseff was often portrayed as a serious and honest public official with zero tolerance for corruption.

During her reelection campaign in 2014, as the Car Wash scandal exploded and the country neared a severe economic crisis, critics started to attack Rousseff’s discursive accentings. Rousseff’s “seriousness” was reframed as a lack of charisma and intelligence. In his 2015 book *Dilmês: O Idioma da Mulher Sapiens* (Dilmese: The language of the sapiens woman), journalist Celso Arnaldo Araújo examines several speeches by Rousseff. For Araújo, Rousseff’s addresses comprise “disconnected and deformed sentences” presented in a “rudimentary logic.” The “sapiens woman” in the title refers to a 2015 speech at the opening of the World Indigenous Games, in which Rousseff described a soccer ball as the “symbol of our evolution when we became homo sapiens . . . and sapiens women.” Widely mocked by the press and on social media, the gaffe resulted from Rousseff’s concern with gender-inclusive language—for instance, she insisted on being called *presidenta* (a grammatically contentious term) rather than *presidente*.

The Lula tapes provided opponents with ample opportunity to attack both Lula and Rousseff via discursive accenting. Below are three dialogues from the wiretaps:

- 1) *Where are the women with tough clits in our party?* (Lula complaining to former minister Paulo Vannuchi about the lack of support from Workers’ Party congresswomen)
- 2) *We have a totally cowardly Supreme Court, a totally cowardly Supreme Court, a totally cowardly Congress . . . a Speaker of the House who is fucked, a president of the Senate who is fucked, I don’t know how many lawmakers are under*

*threat . . . and everyone thinks that some kind of miracle is going to happen.*  
(Lula, talking with Rousseff about the weak reaction in the legislative and judiciary branches to the Car Wash Operation's abuses)

- 3) LULA: *Clara* [Clara Ant, Lula's assistant] *was sleeping alone when five men entered; she thought it was a gift from God, but it was the Federal Police, you know?* (laughs)

ROUSSEFF: *She thought it was a gift from God?!* (laughs)

These remarks suffered two types of discursive accenting. First, opponents claimed the wiretaps legitimized attempts to hear in Rousseff's and Lula's ways of speaking an unfitness for public office. They mocked Rousseff for referring to Jorge Messias as "Bessias" (in the last wiretap) and attacked Lula for the unflattering language he used to describe government officials. Supreme Court Justice Celso de Mello described Lula's statements as "vile and undignified."<sup>18</sup> In a formal complaint, the Bar Association of Brazil stated, "Besides the perplexity they caused, the unkind, inelegant, and disrespectful references to the Brazilian Bar Association, the Federal Supreme Court, and the National Congress, with the use of unpronounceable expressions coming from a prominent person of the Republic, attest to the precarious view that some public figures hold and express about national institutions."<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, opponents contrasted the statements from the wiretaps with Lula and Rousseff's public stance on various issues. For critics, Lula's sexist "tough clit" expression and Rousseff's laughter upon hearing the anecdote about the "gift from god" eroded their investment in gender equality. Feminist intellectuals argued the remarks reproduced known and historical prejudices, "even in men who, in public, exalt social and gender equality."<sup>20</sup> For writer and activist Daniela Lima, the "gift from God" comment "reflects a macho society that places men at the center of women's desire. It is possible to say that it was 'just a joke,' but laughter is always loaded with ideology."<sup>21</sup> Lula's assistant, Clara Ant, assured the public that Lula had never been disrespectful toward her. The Lula Institute (an NGO created in 2011 after Lula left the office) asserted that Lula's comments in the wiretaps "[do] not erase or reduce his performance in the causes of women, his concrete, historical, and real performance."<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Lula and Rousseff, Temer is known for his highly formal and rehearsed presentation; he is someone who whispers, never uses slang, and expresses himself in traditional Portuguese. After receiving his doctorate in public law and teaching constitutional law, he was appointed prosecutor general for the state of São Paulo. In the 1980s, Temer joined the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) and served as a federal deputy in 1987–91 and 1994–2011, becoming the president of the Chamber of Deputies on two separate occasions. After endorsing Lula's opponent in the 2002 election, he helped consolidate an alliance as president of the PMDB between his party and the Workers' Party. Although neither Lula nor Rousseff liked the idea of nominating the "voracious and cunning" Temer for vice

president in the 2010 election, the PMDB refused to accept another name.<sup>23</sup> As historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro stated in a prescient 2009 article, the Rousseff-Temer alliance put together “a presidential candidate who has never had one vote in her life” with “a vice president who handles all the levers in Congress and the PMDB machinery.”<sup>24</sup> In 2016, when it became clear that Temer favored Rousseff’s impeachment, the Workers’ Party accused Temer of plotting a parliamentary coup.

Despite his decades of political experience, Temer does not have a well-defined public image. As journalist Consuelo Dieguez put it, “At the most, he is known as a professional and anodyne politician.”<sup>25</sup> A *New York Times* story stated that before he became interim president, “relatively few Brazilians had even heard of Mr. Temer.”<sup>26</sup> Temer’s first speech as interim president became a source of discursive accenting, and not only because of its archaic expressions and phrasal constructions. The press conference is permeated by coughs, throat clearing, and a hoarse vocality, which required Temer to punctuate his speech with awkward pauses to sip water and take cough drops. Like the discontinuities caused by Batista’s recording device (discussed in terms of techno-accenting), the unintelligible “noises” in Temer’s speech became an acoustic avenue to assess his character. Internet rumors claimed (mostly jokingly) that Temer was a Satanist, and that the point at which his hoarse voice caused him “to harrumph and cough in a deep voice” was the moment “Satan took possession.”<sup>27</sup>

Although the Temer-Batista tape did not contain the same inflammatory remarks as the Lula tapes, it was not exempt from discursive accenting. For his opponents, Temer’s soft utterances and polished reaction upon hearing Batista describe criminal acts confirmed his portrayal as a profoundly corrupt and slippery figure.

### *Political Accenting*

Finally, political accenting relates to the impact of the audio recordings on public opinion. It also considers how the recordings can undermine a president’s ability to govern. I argue that media leaks are one particular type of political accenting.

The most powerful political accenting promoted by the Car Wash task force is less about emphasizing certain acoustic events than about publicizing those events. The promotion of audibility during criminal investigations allowed stakeholders to sway public opinion and reshape state power through legal, technological, and discursive accentings. The Car Wash Operation established a notion of justice by contrasting an assumed criminal voice and a virtuous public ear. In that sense, it both informed and formed an “audience” (from Latin *audientia*, or assembly of listeners), which ended up preceding, amplifying, and guiding the legal and technological accentings of court trials.

Since its early stages, the Car Wash task force has shown a particular interest in media exposure, achieved through the strategic disclosure of information related to police inquiries, plea bargains, temporary or preventive detentions, and

criminal charges. The disclosures included small-scale leaks, large data dumps, and judicial confidentiality lifts. Members of the Car Wash task force have been vocal about the importance of publicity in high-stake criminal probes. In a 2017 interview the task force coordinator, federal prosecutor Deltan Dellagnol, explained that it would have been impossible to investigate influential figures without media exposure. Another member of the task force, prosecutor Carlos Fernando dos Santos, asserted that “a public agent has less right to privacy than an ordinary citizen, not more.”<sup>28</sup>

Judge Moro has also defended the publicity of white-collar crime investigations. In a 2004 article he argued that public support had been crucial for the success of Italy’s Mani Pulite investigation. According to Moro, anonymous leaks provided the publicity that allowed the Mani Pulite judges to work without political interference. As he put it, “Although there is no suggestion that any of the prosecutors involved in the investigation deliberately fed the press with information, the leaks served a useful purpose. The constant flow of revelations kept public interest high and party leaders on the defensive.”<sup>29</sup>

The Car Wash task force used the political accenting of audio leaks to build a narrative according to which privacy is the sphere of criminal negotiation *and* authenticity—one seems always to imply the other. As a piece of information disclosed *despite* legal “obstacles” (including privileged forum, wiretapping law, and audio forensics assessment), the leak “is likely assumed to contain more truthful representations of reality than denunciations and allegations presented without the restraints imposed by criminal charges and pending sentences.”<sup>30</sup> Besides, unlike witness accounts (testimonies or plea bargains), which are curated via legal accenting, audio leaks “can be interpreted in many ways, allowing for speculation and extrapolation.”<sup>31</sup>

At one level of political accenting, the audio recordings helped frame the operation as a newsworthy political scandal. Widely circulated in the press, the audio leaks were audible in their original format and through the journalists’ voices and discursive accentings. Sound bites extracted from the audio leaks provided quotes that went viral with impressive speed (often with humorous effect) on Twitter and Facebook. The proliferation of internet memes based on passages from the Lula and Temer-Batista tapes became powerful political accenting tools. They helped to galvanize dissent online and via street demonstrations and loud coordinated pot banging (*panelaços*).<sup>32</sup>

At another level, as the embodiment of political scandals, the publicity of the Lula and Temer-Batista tapes is conducive to power shifts. As Mads Damgaard argues in his insightful analysis of the Car Wash Operation, “media leaks about corruption provide political actors with opportunities for shifting political allegiances, and leaks also provide the conditions for a range of exceptional judicial interventions into politics and even conditions for political interference in accountability processes.”<sup>33</sup> On the same day of the Lula tapes’ disclosure,

Brazilians organized public demonstrations in at least nineteen states to protest Lula's appointment.<sup>34</sup> Rousseff's impeachment gained an extra stimulus in Congress. Soon after, the Chamber of Deputies elected a commission to analyze the impeachment request. A month after the disclosure, lawmakers commemorated Rousseff's ousting by performing yet another political accenting during a highly televised plenary vote, waving "goodbye, dear" signs in an ironic nod to the Lula tapes. Following the trend, a suspended (and soon-to-be arrested) Eduardo Cunha tweeted, "For her, only one sentence: Bye dear." For Lula, the most critical consequence of this incident was his disqualification from running in the 2018 presidential election. A 2017 poll showed Lula winning 35 to 36 percent of the vote in 2018, well ahead of Jair Bolsonaro (15 percent).<sup>35</sup>

Temer was also politically damaged by the disclosure of the tape. A story anticipating the existence of an incriminating tape described Batista's plea deal as "an atomic bomb that will explode the country."<sup>36</sup> Following the disclosure of the audio recording, Brazil's stock market crashed and the Brazilian real (BR\$) had one of its most significant falls in a decade. Even before the tape's disclosure, the press started speculating that Temer would resign. Lawmakers changed their alliances in Congress, with entire parties jumping to avoid any association with the Temer administration. Although in March 2017 (before the audio disclosure), 10 percent of the population considered the Temer administration good/excellent and 55 percent bad/terrible, in September 2017 those numbers had changed to 3 percent and 77 percent, respectively. In June 2018, with 88 percent of the population considering his government bad/terrible, Temer was ranked the most unpopular president in Brazil's history.<sup>37</sup> While Temer managed to remain in the office, he was unable to advance his agenda in Congress. If at some point he considered his reelection campaign viable, the Temer-Batista tape quickly evaporated that possibility.

## CONCLUSION

I have examined in this chapter how federal investigators, prosecutors, and judges deployed electronic eavesdropping to *modulate* the narrative involving three former presidents. The Car Wash task force performed that modulation, I argue, through *accenting*, a practice that I have proposed we understand as the filtering and selection (either human or nonhuman) of acoustic events. More specifically, I have described how opposing parties related to the Car Wash Operation approached two controversial audio recordings through legal, technological, discursive, and political accenting.

Whereas legal and technological accentings are confined to issues of legality and due process (how a case at hand and the law align), discursive and political accentings are a matter of public perception and individual character. Central questions related to discursive and political accenting include: How have the press and other stakeholders accented the disclosed recordings? How have those

discursive and political accentings determined Lula's, Rousseff's, and Temer's political fates? In the context of a highly popular criminal investigation such as the Car Wash Operation, both discursive and political accenting are useful for rearticulating political alliances and redistributing power.

In analyzing the Lula and the Temer-Batista tapes according to legal, technological, discursive, and political accentings, I am not suggesting these are hermetic or autonomous pairs of practices. On the contrary, as I have shown throughout the chapter, each mode of accenting continuously interferes with the others, creating zones of interaction that inform the field of possibilities of a narrative. In the two case studies presented here, we saw that if techno-accenting can *slow down* the voice-individual and utterance-infraction correspondences through which legal accenting moves, political accenting can *accelerate* and *extend* those correspondences (as in Temer's voice-individual correspondence becoming "proof" of his Satanic connections). The triumph of the Car Wash Operation (at least in its first years) emerged through the strategic exposure of "raw" and "transparent" audio privacy and circumventing/streamlining legal accenting via political accenting, and political accenting via legal accenting. By considering the network of voices, utterances, recordings, devices, politicians, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and journalists, we see how the elusiveness and multimodality through which accents operate can become powerful tools. More than a marker of linguistic difference, accents are always already entangled in accenting strategies invested in articulating reality—be it as a personality trait, smoking gun, political rearrangement, or technological hiccup.

## NOTES

1. Netto, *Lava Jato*, 58–59.
2. FT Reporters, "Fifty People Who Shaped the Decade"; Walsh, "Sergio Moro"; Naím, "The World's 50 Greatest Leaders: Sergio Moro #13."
3. Latour, *The Making of Law*, 194.
4. Harwell, "The Accent Gap."
5. See Baugh, *Linguistics in the Pursuit of Justice*, for several examples of accenting issues in the U.S. legal system.
6. Jones et al., "Testifying While Black."
7. Datafolha, "Corrupção lidera pela primeira vez pauta de problemas do país."
8. Moro, "Ofício No. 700001743752."
9. Moro, "Ofício No. 700001743752." In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously decided that "the President's generalized assertion of [executive] privilege must yield to the demonstrated, specific need for evidence in a pending criminal trial." It is telling that Moro seems to be comparing himself to the Supreme Court.
10. Savarese, "Brazil's Ex-president Could Be Freed after Top Court Ruling."
11. Preventive detention, which Moro justified as necessary to prevent the suspect from fleeing the country or interfering with the investigation, was widely used during the Car Wash Operation and strongly criticized by legal scholars.
12. Boersma and Weenink, "Praat."



13. Anizelli, “Defesa de Temer critica perícia e diz que gravação ‘transpira irregularidade.’”
14. Bock, “Solte o Freio.”
15. Kujawski, “O linguajar de Lula.”
16. Fernandes, “O discurso de Lula.”
17. Ribeiro, “A língua do povo na fala do Lula.”
18. Romero, “Temper Flare in Brazil over Intercepts of Calls by Ex-President ‘Lula.’”
19. Melo, “OAB reage ao xingamento de Jaques Wagner convoca conselho federal.”
20. Ferreira and Grandelle, “Expressões chulas de grampos telefônicos de Lula reproduzem preconceitos”
21. “Feministas se dividem sobre falas de Lula captadas em grampus.”
22. “Feministas se dividem sobre falas de Lula captadas em grampus.”
23. Dieguez, “A Cara do PMDB.”
24. Alencastro, “Os riscos do vice-presidencialismo.”
25. Dieguez, “A Cara do PMDB.”
26. Romero, “New President of Brazil, Michel Temer, Signals More Conservative Shift.”
27. Phillips, “Brazilian Politics Take a Satanistic Turn, and Temer Is in Hot Water.”
28. Albuquerque, “Sem exposição, é impossível avançar contra poderosos, afirma Dallagnol.”
29. Moro, “Considerações Sobre a Mani Pulite,” 59.
30. Damgaard, *Media Leaks and Corruption in Brazil*, 51.
31. Damgaard, *Media Leaks and Corruption in Brazil*, 51.
32. Carless, “This Is What It Sounds Like When a Government Is Tanking.”
33. Damgaard, *Media Leaks and Corruption in Brazil*, 73.
34. G1, “Manifestações contra governo são registradas pelo país nesta quarta.”
35. Reuters, “Brazil’s Lula, Bolsonaro Well Positioned for 2018 Elections: Poll.”
36. Caram, “Governo Temer é aprovado por 3% e reprovado por 77%, diz Ibope.”
37. Boghossian, “Reprovação aumenta e torna Temer o presidente mais impopular da história.”

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## “The Native Ear”

### *Accented Testimonial Desire and Asylum*

Michelle Pfeifer

#### INTRODUCTION

The video installation *FF Gaiden: Delete* depicts a synthetic computer voice played over scenes of a video game avatar moving through a virtual landscape.<sup>1</sup> The work is the product of a collaboration between British artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, undocumented migrants in Oslo, and the self-organized migrant group Mennisket i Limbo (People in Limbo). The thirty-three-minute video tells the story of two undocumented migrants living in Norway with whom Achiampong and Blandy collaborated.<sup>2</sup> The narrators speak of staying in reception centers in Norway and detention centers in Iran, trying to obtain passports and work permits, and receiving threats of deportation. Their stories detail experiences with infrastructures of crossing, precarious mobility, and the stoppages of state identification and migration regimes that are accompanied by the virtual video game environment of *Grand Theft Auto V*. Rather than showing a densely populated urban space and speedy car chases, however, here the virtual environment depicts deserted train tracks, tunnels, and mountain roads. One story is an autobiographical account of Sara, who details her experiences during the Eritrean-Ethiopian war; her flight to Saudi Arabia, where she performed precarious domestic migrant labor; and the bureaucratic limbo of asylum administration to which she is subjected in Norway.

The video game landscape and the synthetic voices function as a form of obfuscation that arguably makes this migrant testimony possible. In an interview, cocreator Blandy said that “the avatars and computer voices becom[e] like masks for [the speakers] to wear in order to speak without fear.”<sup>3</sup> This form of masking points us to the precarity experienced throughout asylum proceedings, during which applicants fear both repercussions from persecutors in their countries of origin and the state surveillance mechanisms they are subjected to in Norway.



FIGURE 10.1. Still from the video installation *FF Gaiden: Delete* (2016), by Larry Achiampong and David Blandy.

Moreover, the use of synthesized voices functions to obscure the speakers' identities, thus ensuring their anonymity. Tellingly, Blandy suggests that in the video “the cold computer voice and stilted animation actually forces viewers to listen more intently, to understand the words rather than blank them out as just another testimony.”<sup>4</sup> While Blandy's comments on the anonymity and protection afforded by this kind of masking suggest that synthesis makes the voice nonlocatable, one critic rightly points out that the synthetic voice is not *unaccented*, but is instead a “strangely-Americanised synthetic voice,” which leaves the narrations of flight, political violence, and struggle void of emotion and tone.<sup>5</sup> The absenting of tone, affect, and accent is part of the work of obfuscation and in turn highlights what Blandy refers to as “just another testimony,” the routinized accounting and retelling of violence and persecution in the context of asylum, refuge, and forced migration. By masking the voice and identities of its speakers, *FF Gaiden: Delete* exposes the demand and desire for what is constructed as an authentic migrant story, identity, and voice.

Testimony, therefore, becomes valuable currency for people seeking asylum. In the video, Sara, one of the narrators, reflects on the act of storytelling as she describes giving testimony as (re)opening a wound. In a revealing moment, she says, “I am a voice of the undocumented woman. I tell this story in place of those who cannot” (see figure 10.1). Embedded in this statement are the differentially produced vectors of speaking and listening at work in migration and

asylum regimes. While the equation of voice with presence and agency has been critiqued as inhering a logic of liberal forms of recognition in which minoritarian subjects need to make claims to inclusion into the nation-state,<sup>6</sup> Sara's statements and the obfuscation of the synthesized voice in *FF Gaiden: Delete* point us to the (im)possibilities of testimony operating in asylum determination proceedings. While people seeking asylum need to speak of their experiences of persecution to gain access to humanitarian forms of protection, *FF Gaiden: Delete* dramatizes how their testimony is routinely scrutinized. As such, testimony can become a liability when people seeking asylum do not capture the right tone, affect, and accepted narrations of persecution. As the reviewer quoted above notes and I explore in this chapter, accent is among the features of speech under scrutiny in asylum determination.

*FF Gaiden: Delete* demonstrates how migrant voices, identities, and testimonies are caught in demands for authenticity to become legible to state-sanctioned forms of recognition. Building on the example above, this essay considers how migrant testimony functions as a precarious referent for identification, how accent emerges as a site of state identification that can be forensically observed and analyzed, and how accent is treated as an index of identity, or what I term *accented testimonial desire*. To this end I examine the use of linguistic analyses in asylum proceedings enacted by European states as an instance of state-administered identification that makes use of, incites, asks for, and desires accented speech. These linguistic analyses, commonly called Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (LADO), are used to verify and determine the origin of people seeking asylum based on the language or dialect they speak. As such, LADO functions as a technology that reinscribes border and migration regimes into accented voices. Linguistic analysis used in asylum proceedings considers that context, movement, kinship relations, and biography all impact what can be gleaned from someone's speech. I contend, however, that accent, rather than indicating the identity of the speaker, is produced through the state's desire to use accent as a site of authentication.

This chapter draws on interviews conducted with linguists and LADO practitioners, linguistics scholarship, state and court documents about LADO, and debates about the use of native speakers in linguistic analyses. By examining these debates I show how accent emerges from and is rooted in the listener rather than the speaker. In doing so, I focus specifically on what practitioners of linguistic analyses call the native ear, or a native speaker's ability to recognize attributes of their native language in other speakers, and develop the concept in order to illustrate how LADO points to the ambivalence about scientific objectivity and naturalized assumptions about the relationship between origin and accent. On the one hand, LADO's development can be characterized by processes of scientification and the desire for the categorization of accents that persist in administrative and juridical systems of asylum determination; on the other hand, the very concept of *the native ear* assumes a natural link between accent and origin. This accent is

not, as LADO claims, located in the speaker but in the listener, whose embodied knowledge is assumed to allow for a natural recognition of accent.

By showing how accent operates as a site of desire for state identification and classification and how it resides in the listener, I emphasize accent as an embodied, rather than a purely semantic, phenomenon. While scholarship on asylum, borders, and migration has shown that migrant voices, narratives, and testimonies are routinely devalued and, further, that the body as an evidentiary object becomes the means through which recognition can be accessed, the voice is typically considered as a purely semantic phenomenon separate from the body. I demonstrate how accent must be understood as an embodied event by situating LADO within a generalized suspicion of asylum claims in border and migration regimes and technologies that target the body to identify and verify asylum claims, thereby devaluing testimonial content and valorizing the form of classifiable and analyzable individual phonemes.

Moreover, my analysis of accented testimonial desire illustrates that accent and voice become framed as stabilized indices of identity. My analysis shows how the accented voice is called upon, desired, and valorized, whereas scholarship on accent and voice has focused on how accent alternatively becomes a naturalized, globalized, or stigmatized marker of racialized and gendered identities.<sup>7</sup> Accent becomes an indicator of geographical origin, citizenship, or socialization, and in turn it can be used to access political and legal recognition and protection. Different from the phenomena of globalization and naturalization through which accented speech is attempted to be neutralized to create nonlocalizable speech, LADO attempts to localize speakers through their accent.

#### LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS AND ASYLUM

In the early 1990s Scandinavian countries started to conduct crude linguistic analyses as part of asylum procedures. Later termed LADO, these analyses were introduced to determine the origin of asylum seekers, specifically in cases where people seeking asylum could not provide identification documents or when their testimonies were thought to be untrue. This practice was adopted in other countries, including the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, Belgium, and Canada. The premise of the analyses is that the language or dialect spoken by someone indicates where they were socialized and, in turn, can function as evidence about their country of origin, nationality, and citizenship, which are crucial categories in determining whether someone has a “well-founded fear of persecution.”<sup>8</sup> Relevant linguistic information for these analyses includes morphology, syntax, lexis, intonation and pronunciation, and phonetics as well as geographical, cultural, and geopolitical knowledge.

The premise of LADO that someone’s origin can be inferred from the language they speak has been critiqued—prominently by linguists, migrant rights groups

and activists, and immigration lawyers—for falsely tying language to territorial and geopolitical boundaries. Common critiques of LADO are that the premise of using language and dialect as an indicator of someone's origin, socialization, or even nationality is based on commonplace and lay assumptions about language as static, monoglossic, and a stable index of identity. These assumptions produce the idea of a linguistic passport for which language is supposed to function as a form of official state identification that distributes possibilities and impossibilities of movement and mobility. This notion of a linguistic passport is also a reason why LADO became an attractive method of state identification; while passports can be lost or forged, accent supposedly gives access to the identity of a person that is innate, unchanging, and tied to the body. In a 2010 paper the director of the Office for Country Information and Language Analysis (OCILA), the Dutch department in charge of all LADO cases in the Netherlands, describes this affordance as follows: LADO "is a form of evidence that cannot be taken away, stolen or left behind very easily, as documents can."<sup>9</sup> Part of the allure of accent is that it is supposedly less easy to fake than documents are, signaling a discourse of veracity and truth claims central to asylum determination.

This conception of a linguistic passport assumes that language is intimately tied to a place of origin according to a language ideology that maps linguistic boundaries onto geographical boundaries.<sup>10</sup> This ideology neglects how dialects are distributed independently of geopolitical borders as they are often the product of colonial forms of border making. Colonial powers divided up territories that did not adhere to linguistic communities. The premise of LADO further assumes immobile languages and immobile people and does not account for migratory movements, heteroglossia, multilingualism, and the immersion of people in different linguistic communities. All of these factors complicate the assumption that one can infer origin from accent. Especially in the context of asylum determination, these aspects are very common as migrant biographies often involve spending months or years in transit, which means that people become immersed in different linguistic communities and contexts.

All of these aspects show crucial limitations of LADO's premise that origin can be determined based on accent. Therefore, while LADO claims to be a method of state identification that ties accent to identity, I suggest that accent points us to the state's desire to classify accents. This desire demands that people seeking asylum offer their voices and stories, which become scrutinized and classified to reinforce border and migration regimes by mapping linguistic boundaries onto territorial borders. Lawrence Abu Hamdan has argued that LADO transforms the relationship between jurisdiction and territoriality by attempting to establish a correlation between voice and citizenship.<sup>11</sup> My analysis of LADO shows that this assumed naturalized link between identity and accent in processes of state identification valorizes the locatability of accent to access recognition and resources. By focusing on the state's desire, my analysis examines the listener rather than reproducing the racialized and gendered dimensions of accent in the speaker.



The example of LADO here departs from other dominant examples discussed in accent scholarship. One of the areas in which accent and globalized economies are most discussed is in the literature on international call centers. For instance, A. Aneesh argues that neutrality is “crucial to understanding the unhinging of accents from places, identities from persons, and persons from their biological clocks.”<sup>12</sup> Accents are repositories for information about origin, class, gender, and race. So-called accent neutralization trainings attempt to neutralize these markers of identity and locale and remove locatable accents, or at least make them less audible to the listener. As Aneesh argues, “[w]ith the construction of a neutral accent, we can imagine the development of placeless accents—placeless, not in the sense that it is from no place, but rather that hearers cannot place it.”<sup>13</sup> The task in LADO, however, aims at localization rather than neutralization: the observation of language properties cannot be definitively tied to someone’s place of origin but can nevertheless result in the denial of asylum claims. My analysis of LADO, therefore, points us to processes of accenting other than neutralization that become valorized.

#### THE NATIVE EAR

LADO was first introduced by states as a measure to determine the origin of asylum applicants who did not have any identification papers or whose papers or testimonies were considered fraudulent. Interpreters informally commented on the way asylum applicants spoke and noted what they considered to be inconsistencies in the language, dialect, and accent of the speaker. These informal observations hint at what were perceived as irregularities or inconsistencies concerning people’s claimed origin, which would then be added to asylum files and enter the decision-making processes of asylum cases. As LADO developed it came under the purview of linguists who are regularly employed or commissioned to conduct linguistic analyses, and critiques of these informal practices of listening were formulated. Problems with this approach include bias, judgment, and prejudices of the interpreters. One important critique of LADO is that it disregards the process of accommodation in which speakers adjust their accents and other aspects of language to accommodate their conversation partners.

Accommodation can be particularly common in asylum interviews because interpreters do not necessarily speak the same dialects as the people seeking asylum. Despite this critique, interpreters are commonly asked to note what they perceive as inconsistencies in the accents of asylum applicants. In Germany this has been a standard but informal practice for decades. Interpreters are instructed and obligated to pay attention to, and report, any conspicuous irregularities during or after the asylum interview, which will become part of the record of the interview.<sup>14</sup> These inconsistencies could include uncertainties a speaker displays in speaking a specific language that could suggest there are doubts about an applicant’s statements about their country of origin, nationality, or citizenship.<sup>15</sup> Instructions



for caseworkers also show that any such indication of language inconsistencies should be pursued and clarified in the asylum interview. The persistence of this practice suggests that despite the professionalization of LADO, native speakers are considered to have an innate ability to recognize and place someone's accent.

LADO practitioners and linguists I interviewed commented on this history of LADO and emphasized the subsequent scientific development, professionalization, and research in the field attempting to establish a scientific and, therefore objective and legally defensible, methodology. For instance, a group of linguists came together under the name Language and National Origin Group and published a set of guidelines for the use of language analysis in asylum cases. Those guidelines included the claim that language can only indicate a person's socialization, not their national origin, nationality, or citizenship, as those are "political or bureaucratic characteristics, which have no necessary connection to language."<sup>16</sup> This understanding of language coincides with that of some linguists I interviewed, who lament the inadequacy of the term *LADO*, claiming that it misleadingly suggests that a language analysis could unproblematically indicate someone's citizenship.

To offset the problem of accommodation and the unscientific nature of early LADO analyses, the field started to professionalize, resulting in different approaches to implementing LADO. However, the matter of who should best conduct analyses remains highly contested and debated among LADO practitioners. Some linguists working on LADO have described this debate as "the most prominent debate in the field"<sup>17</sup> and as "reflecting a serious rift among scholars and practitioners."<sup>18</sup> In particular, the use of so-called nonexpert native speakers in LADO receives regular scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> The 2004 guidelines argued that "judgements about the relationship between language and regional identity should be made only by qualified linguists," and they explicitly distinguish between the ability to conduct language analysis acquired through linguistic training and expertise from the ability to speak or translate a language.<sup>20</sup>

Other practitioners, however, consider native-speaker involvement in LADO as beneficial or even superior to linguistic expertise. One linguist I interviewed referred to the importance of "hav[ing] someone who has the native ear" to pick up on nuances and specific features that can be found in the dialect of the asylum claimant.<sup>21</sup> He elaborated that academic training in linguistics might pose a hindrance to effectively identifying features in the native dialect, as such training could "taint the native ear."<sup>22</sup> This perspective is further illustrated by the Swedish company Sprakab, one of the primary companies contracted to provide LADO analyses to several countries.<sup>23</sup> A post on the FAQ section on the company's website explains Sprakab's reasoning for employing native speakers rather than trained linguists as analysts, noting how that even without linguistic training, native speakers are the best analysts of language, as they "normally know whether the asylum seeker is speaking the claimed dialect in a matter of minutes. This is

perfectly normal. It is no more strange than a native Cockney-speaker being able to distinguish another native Cockney-speaker from someone speaking ‘Mockney’ almost instantly.”<sup>24</sup>

The suggestion by Sprakab and my interlocutors that native speakers can identify features and attributes in their native language relies on an ideology of dialect and language analysis that reproduces naturalized perceptions about the ability to place people by the way they speak. One linguist I interviewed referred to this assigned ability of the native ear as a “gut feeling” that, while likely accurate, does not necessarily allow for a correct and effective description of specific attributes found in someone’s speech.<sup>25</sup> The linguist explained further that these features must be described and built into an argument that must be defensible in court. Therefore, some linguists have claimed that the accuracy of nonexpert native speakers is too low to be used in asylum cases.<sup>26</sup>

The use of native speakers as analysts and the methods of linguistic analyses more generally have also been debated in court cases. A 2014 judgment of the U.K. Supreme Court commented on the expression of certainty in Sprakab reports, arguing that rather than relying on the relative conviction expressed by the reports, courts should judge on “the strength of the reasoning and expertise used to support them.”<sup>27</sup> Sprakab reports indicate different levels of certainty, including “the person speaks a variety of x found” and ticked boxes indicating “1) with certainty not in x, 2) with certainty in x, 3) most likely in x, 4) likely in x, 5) possibly in x.”<sup>28</sup> The judgment further challenged comments made by linguistic analysts as providing “evidence [going] beyond the proper role of a witness.”<sup>29</sup> In the Sprakab report, the analyst included comments indicating that the applicant’s “knowledge sounds rehearsed for the occasion since she does not give any detailed descriptions of the area she says she is from. She often hesitates and gives short answers to the questions she is asked.”<sup>30</sup> The tribunal argued that it should not be the role of language analysts to judge the credibility of claimants beyond expertise on language use.<sup>31</sup> The tribunal also commented on the length of the recordings utilized for the Sprakab report and concluded that “in any event it was doubtful to what extent such issues (general view on credibility) could be properly explored in a telephone conversation lasting only 18 minutes and dealing also with other matters.”<sup>32</sup>

The debates about native speakers in LADO scholarship and practice reveal a fundamental tension between the need and desire to establish a scientific and standardized method to properly conduct LADO and categorize, research, and classify accents and the simultaneous claim that native speakers are best suited to hear linguistic variations. *The native ear* describes this simultaneous need to be made legible in a juridical system. In other words, as the court case reveals, LADO operates under the idea that the right methodology will produce a more objective way of placing accents, through linguistic training, research, and method, which in turn will result in fairness and justice. This desire for scientific objectivity is in tension with the reliance on the intuitive knowledge of native listeners, or what

one of my interlocutors described as “gut feeling”—that is, the embodied, localized knowledge of language. However, this ability to hear an accent needs to be made legible to the legal system. As such, *the native ear* describes this ambivalence about the status of science and expertise that becomes negotiated through debates about native speakers working as LADO analysts. Secondly, the concept of *the native ear* also implies that accent is located in the listener, not the speaker, because the listener’s ability to hear accent is naturalized. The listener’s locatability, experience, and history become equated with the ability to hear accent intuitively.

My analysis of LADO thus shifts an understanding of accent as an index of identity to accent as it is perceived by listeners. Following Jennifer Stoeber’s concept of the listening ear “function[ing] as a modality of racial discernment” and Nina Sun Eidsheim’s argument that voice does not correspond to an innate essence or identity of a vocalizer, but rather tells us about the assumptions made by listeners, my analysis of LADO further shows that accent functions as a localizer of identity and place, arguably telling us more about the listener than the speaker.<sup>33</sup> The native listener can hear and recognize different language attributes that produce an accent. In what follows, I show that the ambivalence illustrated by *the native ear* reveals the precarious status of testimony that the opening example of *FF Gaiden: Delete* poses. Specifically, I illustrate how it is not testimony’s content that becomes desired, but its form.

#### ACCENTED TESTIMONIAL DESIRE

In a decision of the Upper Tribunal Immigration and Asylum Chamber in the United Kingdom from February 26, 2010, we can observe what I call *accented testimonial desire*, or how a localizable accent becomes desired by the state to determine asylum cases. Before the court was the appeal of a Somali woman who arrived in the United Kingdom in June 2007 and applied for asylum. Her asylum claim was rejected in part because a LADO report conducted by the Swedish company Sprakab concluded that she was not Somali.<sup>34</sup> After a first appeal her case was rejected because the immigration judge concluded that the linguistic analysis found “that the Appellant is an educated Kenyan woman [who] tried to pass herself off as Somali.”<sup>35</sup> The second appeal to the U.K. High Court confirmed this decision, but the case nonetheless gives insight into how accent is desired. The court considered four analyses conducted by Sprakab and one contra-analysis conducted by an independent analyst to ascertain whether the applicant spoke a variety of Kibajuni found in Somalia rather than in Kenya. The Sprakab reports all indicated that there was strong evidence that she is not from Somalia and not Bajuni but from Kenya, noting that “although she does use some Kibajuni words, her pronunciation, intonation, and grammar are typical of Kenyan Swahili, indeed with a level of grammatical rectitude which shows her to be highly educated.”<sup>36</sup> The independent analysis, however, found that the applicant was Somali Bajuni

from Koyama and indicated that the interviewer "spoke broken Swahili with a very heavy Kikuyu accent," which likely led to the applicant accommodating the interviewer and speaking Swahili as well.<sup>37</sup> The court finally concluded that the applicant was not from Somalia as she claimed, but from Kenya.

The court case shows that the testimonial desire of the state ties accent not only to origin but also to socioeconomic markers such as education. As such, this case reveals the testimonial desire of the state that becomes accented. There is an insistence on the confessional and truthful as the only registers available to asylum speakers and the conditions of their speech more generally. Further, the case illustrates the same desire for authentic migrant testimony posed by *FF Gaiden: Delete*. LADO demands that people seeking asylum speak, while their testimony is desired not in content, but only in form, and that form needs to follow scripts of authenticity. In other words, accent becomes testimony. LADO functions as a technology that puts this accented testimony into a form that becomes legible within an administrative system of asylum determination.

These scripts of authenticity also become placed onto the accented form of testimony. Decisive in this determination that the applicant was from Kenya, not Somalia, were indications found by the Sprakab analysts that the applicant "appeared to be putting on an accent."<sup>38</sup> One analyst wrote that she sounded "as if she [was] trying to alter her speech in order to sound like she speaks Bajuni."<sup>39</sup> Another analyst wrote that she "trie[d] to use linguistic features typical of Somali Bajuni, but often g[ot] it wrong."<sup>40</sup> Finally, the court explained "putting on an accent" in the following way: "Many of us who have tried to amuse ourselves and others by assuming an accent for the purpose of telling an anecdote (for example) will understand exactly how the assumed accent can so easily slip away and let the natural accent reveal itself. Unusual words can be learned. Distinctive speech patterns are very much harder to copy and even harder to abandon."<sup>41</sup> Here, the court slips back into commonplace assumptions about accent, language, and identity as closely tied to locality and geography that become the basis for decisions about access to political and legal recognition and protection. The listener's role then becomes to be able to hear those signs of "putting on an accent." Like Sprakab's position on Mockney, native accent is believed to come through eventually, thus reinforcing the naturalized link between accent and territory emblematic of the linguistic passport. The invocation that distinctive speech patterns are "even harder to abandon" creates a link between accent and the body. This conception of speech patterns points us to a crucial way in which accent becomes embodied. By naturalizing accent, accent itself not only becomes tied to the citizenship and identity of a person, but it is considered a part of their body available for scrutiny, classification, and objectification. We therefore need to theorize accent as part of the body and not merely a semantic phenomenon.

Linguistic analyses are practiced among many operations that nation-states use to identify, classify, and valorize citizenship, origin, and belonging that target

different areas of the body. In the absence of identification papers, the body becomes captured in different ways in border and migration regimes that take the form of ubiquitous fingerprinting databases, visual forms of surveillance, and forensic assessments of the body.<sup>42</sup> These technologies developed while claims for refugee status or asylum are increasingly regarded with suspicion. In many European countries, the right to asylum has been consistently restricted since the early 1990s. The hermeneutics of suspicion produce the body as one source through which immigration agencies have attempted to locate or supplement the absence of (state-approved) identification documents supplementing what Didier Fassin has called the “regime of recognition” of asylum procedures.<sup>43</sup> In this regime, authenticating and verifying asylum seekers’ claims to legal and political recognition becomes framed not as a political or ethical problem, but as a matter of using the right technique or technology of calibration.<sup>44</sup> These “technologies of suspicion” are not entirely new.<sup>45</sup> In her 2004 essay “Affective Economies,” Sara Ahmed argues that such suspicion is created through the distinction between genuine and bogus asylum seekers, which effectively works to put all migrants under suspicion while also framing the nation as hospitable to genuine and deserving migrants. National boundaries become reinforced through the ability to determine the difference between the genuine and the bogus. This necessity to differentiate, and the constant possibility of that failure, turns a suspicious gaze and ear onto everyone, which means that all voices and accents are under suspicion from the start.

LADO enters into this frame as a “technology of suspicion.”<sup>46</sup> As one LADO practitioner argues, “The forensic context of LADO implies that we may be dealing with less than fully cooperative speakers, who may be hiding knowledge of a language, presenting a second language as their first language, or adding speech features that do not belong in their natural speech variety.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the task of LADO, as exemplified in the court case described above, is to distinguish between natural speech features and those that are “put on,” which reveals how the testimonial content of people seeking asylum is generally not trusted.

Although the voice’s embodied materiality is a central part of the body, it has not received much attention as an important phenomenon in the literature on asylum and migration. Accent, specifically, remains largely absent from considerations of the role of testimony in asylum proceedings. Asylum proceedings are often multilingual settings in which different linguistic communities interact with each other, including state or suprastate representatives, people seeking asylum, translators, lawyers, and other advocates. As such, asylum procedures are highly complex and dynamic linguistic and communication contexts. Scholars have highlighted different dimensions of these linguistic and communicative encounters including interpretation and transcription,<sup>48</sup> multilingualism and bureaucratic and institutional talk and speech,<sup>49</sup> and processes of de- and recontextualization.<sup>50</sup> In other words, talk is everywhere in asylum procedures, from the moment of first officially seeking asylum, to administrative and legal procedures, asylum

interviews mediated by lawyers, interpreters, and/or social workers, and judicial rulings on asylum appeals.

As my analysis shows, LADO makes use of the ubiquity of speech in asylum proceedings and turns accent into an embodied index of identity. These indexes, however, are abstracted. Jan Blommaert has argued that testimony given in the context of asylum proceedings provides sociolinguistic profiles and repertoires that “index full histories of people and of places.”<sup>51</sup> In asylum proceedings people are typically asked about their reasons for seeking asylum in another country and are asked about their history and fear of persecution in their countries of origin. These histories and biographies, Blommaert argues, are evaluated by institutional procedures that are “dominated by frames that refer to static and timeless . . . orders of things,” therefore reducing the complexity of transnational processes.<sup>52</sup> As I argued above, the accented testimonial desire of the state targets testimonial form, which demands a consideration of the embodied elements of voice and accent.

Despite these critical demands, the voice is rarely considered part of the body or embodied in scholarship on migration and refugees. In voice studies, the voice is understood as part of the body, materially produced by the larynx, the vocal cords, the mouth, the throat, and the lungs. In LADO, the embodied materiality of the voice becomes the basis to objectify migrant testimony. Analysts listen to phonemes and correlate these to territorial belonging and native speakers’ embodied knowledge, supposedly allowing for a more intuitive and natural recognition of accent. At the same time, as my opening example of *FF Gaiden: Delete* shows, there is no unaccented migrant testimony that can be authentically heard. The accent is the testimony.

## CONCLUSION

The figure of *the native ear* in linguistic analysis used in asylum proceedings functions as a shorthand for the argument that native speakers are able to recognize attributes and features of their native language in other speakers. I suggested that *the native ear* reveals how accent emerges and is located in the listener rather than the speaker. In the absence of other forms of identification and the presence of generalized suspicion of asylum claims, accent accumulates value while the content of testimony becomes devalued. Engaging with scholarship on accent and voice as well as migration, asylum, and testimony, I show how accent becomes an indicator of geographical origin, national belonging, and socialization, and in turn it is valorized to access political and legal recognition, or what I have called *accented testimonial desire*. This desire therefore functions as an operation of state-administered identification that makes use of, incites, asks for, and desires accented speech. Through this analysis, I have made three interrelated arguments. First, I have shown that localization of accent, rather than its neutralization, becomes

valorized to access recognition and resources. Second, I have argued for a conceptual shift from thinking about accent as inherent to a speaker's often racialized and gendered identity to focusing on the perception of accent by the listener. Lastly, through conceptualizing accented testimonial desire, I have suggested moving from considering voice as a semantic phenomenon to acknowledging its embodied materiality.

As my theorization of *the native ear* shows, LADO is situated between contradictory demands for scientific objectivity that is legible for the law and the naturalized construction of the intuitive listening of native speakers. This ambivalence places people seeking asylum in a predicament in which they are repeatedly asked to speak of experiences of persecution while this speech is simultaneously turned into an objectified index of identity. As such, my analysis of LADO challenges the equation of the voice with agency, presence, and identity in liberal and Western political thought—a belief that, as I have shown, is also central in procedures of asylum determination. As my opening discussion of *FF Gaiden: Delete* illustrates, asylum applicants are placed in a double bind, simultaneously being incited to speak during asylum procedures and having their testimony scrutinized and placed under general suspicion. Detaching the voice from racialized and gendered notions of identity and essence and understanding accent as embodied both highlights the precarity of testimony and asylum and might point us to alternative political possibilities. How could we listen otherwise?

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#### NOTES

1. I would like to thank Cheraine Donalea Scott for pointing me to this work.
2. The work is part of the *FF Gaiden* series by Blandy and Achiampong. The videos in the series were made in collaboration with incarcerated people and veterans, paperless migrants, female refugees, and youths. “FF” here stands for “Finding Fanon,” another collaborative series of video works by Blandy and Achiampong that engages with the lost plays of Frantz Fanon dealing with questions of postcoloniality, migration, race, and racism. *Gaiden* is Japanese for “side story” and stems from gaming lingo, in which it designates a spin-off of an existing video game. The side stories told in the *FF Gaiden* series take place in the virtual space of the video game *Grand Theft Auto V*.



3. Trigg, “David Blandly.”
4. Trigg, “David Blandly.”
5. Di Vito, “FF Gaiden.”
6. Rangan, *Immediations*.
7. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*; Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*; Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.
8. UN General Assembly, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*.
9. Cambier-Langeveld, “The Role of Linguistics,” 68.
10. Irvine and Gal, “Language Ideology.”
11. Abu Hamdan, “Aural Contract,” 72–74.
12. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*, 3.
13. Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*, 4.
14. Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 3.1.3, Dienstanzweisung-Asyl 21 2 2019.
15. Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 3.1.3, Dienstanzweisung-Asyl 21 2 2019.
16. Language and National Origin Group, “Guidelines,” 262.
17. Wilson and Foulkes “Borders,” 224.
18. Solan, “Identifying,” 384.
19. Patrick, Schmid, and, eds. *Language Analysis*, 8.
20. Language and National Origin Group, “Guidelines,” 262–63.
21. Personal interview.
22. Personal interview.
23. Sprakab has provided language analyses for several countries for decades. The Home Office in the United Kingdom used Sprakab services since 2000, until they suspended their services after a highly publicized scandal about one of their analysts who had lied about his qualifications. For more information, see [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/sprakab-agency-misled-home-office-over-checks-on-asylum-seekers-10089311.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/sprakab-agency-misled-home-office-over-checks-on-asylum-seekers-10089311.html)
24. Sprakab, “Questions and Answers.”
25. Personal interview.
26. Fraser, “The Role.”
27. *Secretary of State for Home Department v. MN and KY*, UKSC 30 (May 21, 2014), 29.
28. *Secretary of State for Home Department v. MN and KY*, 7.
29. *Secretary of State for Home Department v. MN and KY*, 22.
30. *Secretary of State for Home Department v. MN and KY*, 8.
31. *Secretary of State for Home Department v. MN and KY*, 21.
32. *Secretary of State for Home Department v. MN and KY*, 22.
33. Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13; Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.
34. *Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber)*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*) (2010), UKUT (IAC), February 26, 2010.
35. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 3.
36. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 5.
37. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 5.
38. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 32.
39. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 5.
40. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 6.
41. *Upper Tribunal*, RB (*Linguistic Evidence—Sprakab v. Somalia*), 32.
42. Several techniques used in asylum determination to identify people, including DNA analysis in family reunification cases and different forms of age assessments, have received critical attention.
43. Fassin, “The Precarious Truth,” 44.
44. Fassin, “The Precarious Truth.”
45. Haas and Shuman, *Technologies of Suspicion*.



46. Haas and Shuman, *Technologies of Suspicion*.
47. Cambier-Langeveld, "The Validity," 22.
48. Jacquemet, "Transcribing Refugees."
49. Jacquemet, "Crosstalk 2.o."
50. Maryns, *The Asylum Speaker*.
51. Blommaert, "Language," 416.
52. Blommaert, "Language," 415.

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PART THREE

## A Desire Called Accent



## Stereo Accent

### *Reading, Writing, and Xenophilic Attunement*

Akshya Saxena

#### A SCANDAL CALLED ACCENT

Thinking back now, there's at least a little irony to the controversy around the poem "How To" (2018), written by Anders Carlson-Wee, author of *The Low Passions* (2019). A short persona poem in the voice of a homeless man, it manipulates speech to sound the experience of invisibility. The poem dramatizes how members of marginalized groups are "asked, or required, to perform the work of marginalization."<sup>1</sup> It begins with the suggestion, "If you got hiv, say aids. If you a girl, / say you're pregnant—nobody gonna lower / themselves to listen for the kick." The null copula of these sentences continues through the rest of the ten lines as the poem recommends claiming greater and greater precarity. Nonetheless, the poem advises against categorically identifying oneself as "homeless" or "flaunting" one's disability. The addressee can see the speaker and already knows all this. The harsh truth is that the addressee neither cares nor can be bothered to listen to the speaker. The addressee is concerned with his own sense of charity and not the speaker's experience of hardship. "It's about who they believe / they is. You hardly even there." The visual order of the speaker's body is self-evident but tragically in excess of its corporeality as it is conjured by the listener's hearing of her voice. Overdetermined by what Jennifer Stoeber has called the listening ear, the dominant listening practice by which sounds come to us already heard, both the body and the voice remain unimportant.

Ironically, this reflection on the performance of one's marginalization came under attack for robbing marginalized voices of dignity. Only a few weeks after the poem was published in *The Nation*, it was prefaced by an editorial note on the magazine's website that permanently identified it as a "serious mistake."<sup>2</sup> Editors Stephanie Burt and Carmen Giménez Smith apologized for choosing to publish it. Readers were informed that the poem contained "disparaging and ableist language

that ha[d] given offense and caused harm to members of several communities.” The editors closed out their note with the assurance that they were revising the process of submission. “But more importantly, [they were] listening, and [they were] working.”

Although not explicitly stated anywhere in the editorial note, there was something else—beyond the poem’s use of the word “crippled”—that was also obviously offensive and harmful. The poem is in Black vernacular. Anders is white. As a friend said over text, “White dude can’t conjugate verbs like that.” Numerous readers concurred. On *The Nation’s* website, a few readers even offered Standard American English and second person translations of the poem, essentially saying to Carlson-Wee, “Look, your poem could be written, your point made, without the indefensible minstrelsy.”<sup>3</sup> The realization that the poem was an example of literary blackface was as “horrificing” to Carlson-Wee as to his readers.<sup>4</sup> The racialized linguistic stereotypes and throwaway slurs suggested that the poet himself was extracting the performance he wanted to censure. Not only did Carlson-Wee not make his subjects visible, he himself didn’t see them. *They were hardly even there.* Carlson-Wee was “profoundly regretful.” He issued a public apology, invoking his own responsibility and plans for “listening closely.” No subject was specified.

It is no surprise that *The Nation’s* editors and Carlson-Wee turned to listening in the wake of a literary scandal. Listening is a common response of contrition and apology. With its underlying intention to give attention, it conveys humility and respect for one’s interlocutor. Listening thwarts snap judgments based on what is visible with the promise of some deeper knowledge. Listening is thus paradigm shifting. It implies that I am going to shut up. I’ll center the other, follow their lead. It helps, if you are managing a scandal, that the future-oriented temporality of listening also deflects attention from what *has* been said to what will be.

And yet, listening is also what’s at issue in this controversy. “How-To” imagines an interlocutor who cannot be bothered to listen to the speaker and engages her through preconceived stereotypes, so it recommends leaning into those stereotypes and mirroring the abject picture the interlocutor holds of marginalized people. Within the logic of the poem, what is seen colors what is heard. The Black vernacular serves as a visual index of the speaker of the poem. Thus, spoken language—the poem’s diction and rhetoric printed on the page—conjures the racialized body of the homeless speaker with ethnographic certainty. The use of lowercase for *hiv* and *aids* and the omission of apostrophes in contractions minimize and further specify the poet persona. Ironically, as a result, the speaker is made invisible in the scene that’s dramatized in the poem. The poem’s awkwardness draws directly from the poet’s ventriloquism of Black vernacular to spell out racial difference. It is “problematic” because it maps the debilitation of the human onto a language the poet hears as debilitated. Without the use of Black vernacular, “How-To” would itself not be implicated in the coercive performance of marginality.

To use the terms of this volume, the controversy around “How-To” is a controversy about literary accent. An accent is usually understood as the vocal or visual

stress “in a way of speaking” that presumes to index the speaker’s race, location, or language.<sup>5</sup> In common parlance, an accent that refers to a style of speech also refers to orthographical and typographical markers. When reading a literary text, it is the orthographical accents that stand as and for spoken accents. Accented speech is represented by phonetic and nonphonetic signs that portray differences in pronunciation, diphthongs, word stressors, syllables, and pitch. Thus, conventions, fonts, syntax, and spelling inscribe and mark what the auditory apparatus of the reader hears—or *has heard* before encountering the page.

Textual accents have offered legible and reliable ways of knowing linguistic difference in literature, from Shakespeare to Zora Neale Hurston to Junot Díaz. This capacity of accents to mean something relies, as Friedrich Kittler demonstrated in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1990), on an understanding of written language as representative, as carrying within it a racialized and gendered voice. In his study of the audiobook, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (2016), Matthew Rubery also argues that “word recognition relies on both vision and audition. Mapping sounds to letters is an essential step in literacy.” If Deaf children struggle to learn to read, it is because of lack of access to spoken language.<sup>6</sup> Silent reading is not silent, he argues, and there is a culturally shaped “inner voice” that guides the reader’s pronunciation of written text. Once recognized by the reader, accented speech sets up circular expectations about the speaker. And yet, until the accent is made audible, until it is sounded out of the silence of standardized prose by unconventional spellings or italics or narrative description, we don’t know it. As readers, we exert more than one sense to *hear* an accent, which may be felt or apprehended visually in script. We read within an acoustic ecology, reading what we hear and listening to what we read.

The trajectory of a literary accent is thus circular. The knowledge that an accent betrays is presumed to name it in the first place. The description of the hermeneutic process as a betrayal is itself worth noting—what’s the secret that an unfaithful turncoat ally has let out in the world? As readers (at least of English), we have come to expect that written language should tell us about both the character and the body that writes. The phonetic English language thus lends an ethnographic character to what is written.<sup>7</sup> Social realism grounds literary sounds and produces textual embodiment. The tension we witnessed above—between identity and perception, between the spoken, the seen, and the heard—is at the heart of accent in literature. Who did the editors hear when they first listened to (*saw?*) the Black vernacular on the page? What or who will they listen to now—and how—that might yield different results? The subject was missing all along.

As literary scholars, we are used to asking “who speaks?” but rarely ask “who listens?” or “how?” These latter questions motivate Julie Beth Napolin’s book, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (2020), which explores the “acoustics” of the modernist novel. Napolin pointedly notes that the presence of a linguistic difference—be it a foreign language or dialect—in a literary work requires description, transcription, and translation. Each of these practices is marked by cultural power relations that “focalize” or home in on an ethnographic



difference. The questions of who listens and how are particularly resonant in literary texts that are oral and aural, providing at least two iterations of address and at least two layers of the speaker/listener dynamic: there is diegetic action with characters, and then there is the reader as listener and the narrator as speaker. With proliferating bodies—the tangible ones of the author and reader and the imaginary ones of the speaking characters and listening characters—from which body does a textual accent actually originate? Who speaks whom?

This chapter launches a preliminary exploration of the textual and political possibilities of listening to accents in literary works. Far from a straightforward course of attunement (and atonement), listening is a profoundly mediated modality of perception and relation. As scholars of auditory cultures have reminded us time and again, “although often deemed an unmediated physical act, listening is an interpretive, socially constructed practice conditioned by historically contingent and culturally specific value systems riven with power relations.”<sup>8</sup> While in commonplace terms we tend to think of listening as the opposite of speaking, Lisbeth Lipari argues that it is more accurately a part of an integrated plural of listening, speaking, and thinking that precedes any ethical response. In *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* (2014), Lipari writes that it “requires courage to listen for the not-already-known, and in so doing, reveal our own particular vulnerability and weakness.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, she suggests that listening is itself a form of speaking because “each utterance and action of listening and speaking resonates with a background context where an always already existing universe of prior dialogic relations vibrates.”<sup>10</sup>

Taking the ethical charge of listening seriously, I have two objectives in this chapter. First, I want to make substantive—to trace on the page—the ethical project of listening by asking how do we literally hear what’s written. Second, and relatedly, I am eager to imagine how we can “listen otherwise . . . a listening that speaks—a listening that is awakened and attuned to the sounds of difference rather than to the sounds of sameness.”<sup>11</sup> If listening is always relational, a resounding of diverse acoustic ecologies, what are the political possibilities of relationality forged in the event of accent?

To answer this question I want to bring in another text as a sounding board. Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy (2008–12) also emphasizes a careful listening of accents—language spoken and remembered—with respect to the political project of affective attachments on the page and subaltern historiography beyond it. Yet it is a very different kind of literary text from Carlson-Wee’s “How-To,” and it is their dissimilarity that motivates my methodological decision to read them together. The historical fiction of Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy offers an illuminating contrast to poetry that comes with little expectation of verisimilitude. “How-To” is a persona poem. Within the conventions of the form, it speaks *as* a homeless person. Ghosh’s ethnographic and historical fiction, by contrast, seeks to represent with a high degree of fidelity how the characters must have spoken during the nineteenth

century. In fact, Ghosh situates himself as a listener from the very beginning. In a lecture titled “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh describes his political project as xenophilic, “a *desire* to reclaim the globe in my own fashion, a *wish* to *eavesdrop* on an ancient civilizational conversation.”<sup>12</sup>

In both “How-To” and the Ibis trilogy, accents appear at the level of plot, where they belong to the character/poet persona and exist as a marker of the text to be perceived by the reader. Read alongside each other, the Ibis trilogy and “How-To” dramatize the comparative aspect of accents, which are most often (only?) heard in relation to another. But, importantly, the accentedness of Ghosh’s novels interrupt the communicational impulse of his realist description. Like the rest of Ghosh’s oeuvre, the Ibis trilogy is a work of “archival reconstruction” of a historical moment, an imaginative process of recovery.<sup>13</sup> Like many of his other works, the trilogy is also characterized by a vast historical and transregional sweep. Language plays an important role in reconstructing the British East India Company’s opium trade between India and China, and the trafficking of indentured labor from India to Mauritius. Yet, while Ghosh’s novels are noted for their use of the vernacular, these works also destabilize any truth value of those accents, which are acknowledged as profoundly slippery. Instances of accentedness—of which there are many—only draw attention to the construction of difference and relations that *listening* for the accent makes possible.

#### ACCENT AS METHOD: STEREOTYPIC TO STEREOPHONIC

In comparative literary studies, literary accent has often been figured as the final frontier of the linguistic, narrative, or literary standard. Accent has appeared in scholarly conversations about multilingualism and comparativism with seductive possibilities. Scholars such as Emily Apter, Lital Levy, Julie Napolin, Vicente Rafael, and Rebecca Walkowitz have invited us to engage with the profound challenge accent poses to monolingualism and/or the national model of languages. Apter and Rafael highlight the “insurgent potential” of accent, figuring it as an act of war against the language one is forced to speak. Similarly, Napolin explores lip-synching in literature as a postcolonial strategy. Levy has compared accented speech to silence as both, she argues, push language to its limits, where it ceases to sound (like) itself. Accent, Levy suggests, fractures and rewires the relation between a signifier and the signified. Accents wear you, the reader, down, argues Rebecca Walkowitz, in an evocative essay on typographic multilingualism and how it makes language less than itself.<sup>14</sup>

In several of these works, accent is sometimes used interchangeably with dialect, sometimes with style. As dialect and style, accent can conjure an experience, feeling, or politics. Accents in literary works bring literal voices to the page and rupture Standard American English. Speaking “not like a native speaker,” as Rey

Chow discusses in her work by that name, is itself a resistance to the hegemonic standard, an assertion of identity and history. When one is forced to speak a dominant language, one's residual traitorous accent disrupts that language.

And yet, if accentedness is a site of conflict between the language spoken and the language that is spoken over, then this contentious and discrepant nature of accents assumes that languages are countable and distinguishable. Far from disrupting monolingualism as the natural condition, this approach reifies monolingual models of literature and language and paints accents as the exception. An accent is not silence, nor is it the Deleuzian "stutter" (not fluent, a speech disorder) or even a murmur (soft, indistinct, unclear, far away, not audible).<sup>15</sup> Instead of being inaudible or indistinct, it is very much heard. In fact, as I argued in the previous section, accents only make sense—only register—when they are self-ethnographic, even as they are never quite that. Speaking with an accent does not disrupt monolingualism or a standard pronunciation. Speaking with an accent is the very condition of monolingualism and standard pronunciation.

I share Michael Allan's assessment in his 2021 essay "Translating Whispers: Recitation, Realism, Religion," in which he argues that as a discipline shaped by comparative grammar and philology, comparative literature "takes the fundamental status of language as a given." He goes on to conclude that in comparative literary studies, conventionally "there is no reading beyond language. Language is the material basis for what is called literature, or so it might seem."<sup>16</sup> In response, he presents what he calls "whisper as a method," arguing that "language matters as embodied utterance."<sup>17</sup> In this minor detail, Allan writes, "we can begin to imagine world literature beyond the scope of textuality to consider how we make literature speak. And here, an alternate philological practice emerges: less as a matter of translation than remediation, less language-as-such than language-in-use, less a message to be deciphered than the word embodied."<sup>18</sup>

I would argue that accent, considered similarly as a method, illuminates the seams of the comparative method. Indeed, new scholarship on postlingual aesthetics (of which Allan's scholarship is a foundational part) has turned attention to sound as both an object of and a method for literary studies. Accent has emerged as pivotal here because it reminds us that the shape and sound of language are not distinct from its sense. In a special issue of *SubStance* titled "The Postlingual Turn," Rebecca Walkowitz and Yasser Elhariry focus on the lingual instead of the linguistic to highlight the shape and meanings of language as it happens around the tongue. This embodied polysemic nature of language allows a valuation of language without counting languages toward the acquisitive and imperialistic impulse of comparative literary studies.<sup>19</sup>

Allan's suggestion that we consider how we "face language" and how we "make literature speak" involves attending to the role of the critic as reader and to accent as method. Reading aloud, as we know, is itself an act of interpretation, and the voice we hear on the page is our own (broadly understood). Accent is not a hidden

aspect of the text for a knowledgeable reader to sound out but an inevitable and necessary part of the reader's relation to the text. The perception of accent relies on the reader's embodied engagement with a text. An accent constitutes a moment of continuity, and attunement to the text and to the other. An accent does not defamiliarize a language but is actually a relation forged in familiarity. None of the representational accents register and make sense until we are ourselves implicated in listening to them and sounding them as a reader. An accent becomes intelligible in relations of speaking and listening. Rather than an instance where something—a sound, affect, style—sticks out, accent is at first a recognition, a moment of resonance, that emerges from a place of unknowing as a desire for familiarity. It is a bestowal of attention. In addition to defamiliarizing a dominant language, the detection of accent is also a fraught—definitely fraught—performance of a kind of xenophilic attunement.

In xenophilic attunement an accent still has the potential to conjure a body, but a collective body, not an ethnographic body marked by race, class, or caste. Accent gives the reader's voice and breath to the text. It interrupts silent reading, and it supplies a different voice—our own—to the text. In her study of transatlantic solidarity of the Black diaspora, *Africa in Stereo* (2013), Tsitsi Jaji offers the stereo as a metaphor of solidarity, "one which could bear witness to difference and respond to it in joyful creativity, one which values individual listening as much as enunciation as (pro)active dimensions of expressivity."<sup>20</sup> Jaji describes stereo as an effect that creates the impression of "being surrounded by the contours of a voluminous, extensive, three-dimensional body."<sup>21</sup> In audio engineering, a stereophonic system creates the illusion of being surrounded by a three-dimensional shell of sound. In printing, it produces an impression of an original solid object. "Stereo in these technologies refers to tools for experiencing the phenomenon of solidity. And stereo as a metaphor indicates a means of experiencing solidarity, the choice to work en bloc."<sup>22</sup> Accent reminds us that listening is plural but not identical, creating a stereophonic effect in the reading of the sounds of the writer, narrator, reader and the text, where the accent belongs to all of us.

What if we probed accent from a place of unknowing, as a desire for familiarity? What might it mean to hear and read accent lovingly?

#### UNRELIABLE SUTURE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY

In the three novels of the Ibis trilogy—*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—accent is both the story and the style. The trilogy is set in the years leading up to the First Opium War in the nineteenth century. It is named after the slave-turned-trading ship *Ibis*, on board of which most of the characters meet for the first time. The story of capitalism and imperialism is told through a cast of ordinary people. These include an American sailor, Bihari peasants of different

castes, Parsi businessmen, British and Chinese traders, a botanist of French origin, Cantonese boat people, and a disgraced Bengali aristocrat. Calcutta, where the *Ibis* is docked, is the hub of British colonialism as well. The ship was brought there by Zachary Reid, a mixed-race American sailor from Baltimore. He is assisted by a Rohingya man named Serang Ali. In Calcutta, Reid falls in love with Paulette Lambert, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist and a Mauritian-French mother, and who was raised with her Muslim Indian nanny's son. Mr. Doughty is a midlevel bureaucrat who serves as a liaison between the East India Company and the American shipping firm Burnham and Co. The firm is slowly shifting its interests in opium trade to the transport of indentured labor to Mauritius. Burnham's prime investor is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the symbol of a crumbling feudal order of landed gentry.

Together, these novels present a subaltern history of global migration in the nineteenth century, where accent appears as what Lawrence Abu Hamdan has called a "biography of migration" rather than "an immediately distinguishable sound that avows its unshakable roots neatly within the confines of a nation-state."<sup>23</sup> In "*Ibis* Chrestomathy"—a paratextual aid found on Ghosh's blog—Ghosh uses the same word, *girmityas*, for the indentured laborers as the loan words that find use in different languages. *Girmityas* are so called because their names were "on 'girmits'" (agreements) for the exchange of money that was paid to their families before "they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld."<sup>24</sup> If, in the world of people, "migration becomes the great equalizer for the people . . . ripping apart all existing hierarchies"<sup>25</sup> of caste and class, then, in the linguistic world, words seem to intermingle with disregard for linguistic distinctions, far away from what was ever home.

Ghosh's use of *girmitya*, an English word that is (mis)heard and then (mis)pronounced by Indian speakers, highlights how foundationally worlds novelistic and real are shaped by the sounds of spoken words as well as the attachments forged through them.<sup>26</sup> The polyphony and multilingualism of the novels makes Ghosh's prose stand out, which itself attains a kind of distinguishable accent. This accent is born of what B. Venkat Mani, drawing on Jahan Ramazani, calls "code-stitching."<sup>27</sup> The novels suture different languages together rather than switch between them or translate from one minor language into a dominant language. Such linguistic hybridity befits both the novel form, the region, and the story Ghosh is telling. Accent has shaped these worlds, and the novels' accented and multilingual telling enable an immersive stylistic conjuring of the ship.

Accent as the inflection of one language by another—language of the character, the writer, the narrator, and the reader—is the moment of suture. The sense of feeling around for kinship is part of Ghosh's linguistic and narrative style throughout the *Ibis* trilogy, as it is in his other works. These stylistic choices are political, shaped by what Ghosh—borrowing from Leela Gandhi's study of affective attachments between the colonizer and the colonized—has called his "xenophilia." The

word xenophilia literally means a love of the other and an affinity for strangers. Casting it in affective terms, Ghosh ascribes to it an “anti-colonial impulse.” In “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh variously describes it as “a *wish* to acknowledge the ways in which both the West and we ourselves have been irreversibly changed by our encounter with each other” and “a *yearning* not for a universalism of principles and philosophy, but one of face-to-face encounters, of everyday experience.”<sup>28</sup>

Ghosh specifically invokes listening to describe xenophilia, as I noted above. Eavesdropping is different from a face-to-face encounter. In the Levinasian tradition, writes Lipari, the face is the sign of the other that transcends social categories of identity, and ethics derives from the recognition of this face in all its otherness.<sup>29</sup> Eliminating the face altogether emphasizes listening and attunement as the means of an ethical response to the other. Accent—as the heard—gains greater ethical implications. Mediated in the xenophilic and wishful eavesdropping, the accented English of the novels seeks familiarity—“the ways in which we are changed by our encounter with each other”—to forge political relations in that knowledge. Such xenophilic attunement makes hearing accent an homage to the “interrupted cosmopolitanism” of an idea like the Non-Aligned Movement, which Ghosh also mentions in that essay.

This linguistic polyphony—heard by different ears—infuses the novel with the quiet movement of a ship on water. The prose feels heaving and rhythmic, almost as if alive with the sounds and breath of its human inhabitants. The dominant language—the linguistic medium—of the novels is English, but over the course of the trilogy this English is sounded through all the other languages the characters speak and the regions they belong to. The novels can feel verbose and sometimes indulgent as the author marshals a truly wide variety of languages, from recorded contemporary to ancient languages—in standardized forms as well as unformalized pidgins and creoles. The languages included are English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Latin, Cantonese, and French Creole. Hybrid dialects and pidgin like American slang and Laskari are also mentioned, as are many other Indian languages like Hindustani, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Tamil, Marathi, Kachhi, Konkani, Telugu, and Oriya.

Yet this linguistic polyphony does not enhance the trilogy’s verisimilitudinous claims but instead undermines them. It renders the project of “reclaiming the globe in my fashion” constitutively suspect. Some of the languages that appear in the Ibis trilogy are anachronistic, and these linguistic inventions trouble the realist and ethical claims of the novels. Vedita Cowaloosur writes that there is little evidence of the way people actually spoke in India in the mid-nineteenth century. “Before recordings were made in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following George Abraham Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India (conducted between 1894 and 1928), there was little documentation of actual demotic speech in that era.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, toward the end of the trilogy, especially in *Flood of Fire*, Ghosh

has Deeti speaking in Mauritian Creole, which would not have been the language she spoke as a first-generation immigrant, since it developed as the language of the region only with the subsequent generations of language practitioners.<sup>31</sup>

The novels seem to consciously dispense with a hierarchy among the many languages and accents. These different invented and existing languages are usually not distinguished. They have the effect of bleeding into each other and inflecting the English of Ghosh's Anglophone novel, especially since most of the trilogy is written phonetically but left graphically unmarked.<sup>32</sup> Looking at the page, the reader encounters the roman script, which may or may not immediately seem phonetic depending on the reader's familiarity with any of the languages above. In this way the trilogy indexes the experiences of ordinary people—indeed, ordinariness itself—in vast networks of oceanic and maritime cultures.

Take this example of the effect created by the lack of orthographical markers. Languages seem leveled here, and neither Serang Ali nor Zachary Reid nor Rajoo is marked as sounding different. There is no optical index of linguistic difference. Serang Ali's Laskari-language statements are rendered phonetically, not italicized to mark their deviation from standard English. The italics, when they do appear, only distinguish his vocal inflection and emphasis on certain syllables as Rajoo sings the psalm. The absent orthographical emphasis belies the phonic stresses in this conversation that are only produced if the reader sounds the words out loud.

"Nebba mind," said Serang Ali. "One-piece song-bugger hab got." He beckoned to a tall, spidery ship's-boy called Rajoo. "This launder blongi one-time Mission-boy. Joss-man hab learn him one-piece saam."

"Psalm?" said Zachary, in surprise. "Which one?"

As if in answer, the young lascar began to sing: "Why *do* the heathen so furious-ly rage together . . . ?"<sup>33</sup>

If an accent is a stress, there is not much that is emphasized or singled out in the novel except the cadence of Rajoo's singing. Still, the language of the novel is certainly *stressed*, tense, and burdened. This unmarked orthography and a rife internal tension mimic the plot of the novels. Zachary's puzzlement at Rajoo's knowledge of biblical hymns might position him as someone who knows more or commands greater authority. However, it is actually Serang Ali who helps Zachary settle into his eventual role as an officer on the ship and as a "white" man in India.<sup>34</sup> Thus, these relations to knowledge are also reversed. Earlier in the novel, it is Zachary who must learn to "wrap his tongue around words like 'dal,' 'masala.'" "He has to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became the 'ringeen,' 'avast!' was 'bas!', and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from 'all's well' to 'al'zbel,'" and so on.<sup>35</sup> In both instances, the sound of words heard through others' mouths are then committed to memory without any tinge of discomfort or authority, offering yet another example of how words—their languages and sounds—travel in the Ibis trilogy.



While English is the dominant language in the trilogy, it is also transformed in colonial and capitalist circuits. Power is often associated with linguistic knowledge manifested not in a standard English but in the invented and accented English that absorbs other languages, signaling reach, adaptability, and history. This fact is perhaps most visibly borne out in the use of *zubben*, which itself is an Anglicized pronunciation of the Urdu word *zubaan* (language or tongue) by the British residents of Calcutta, who speckle English with Hindustani expressions. Before this accented English is taken as an unconditional celebration of hybrid languages, we would be wise to remember Mr. Doughty's recommendation to "mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn't sound too good: don't want the world to think you've gone native."<sup>36</sup> In this manipulation of a "vernacular" language in the service of colonial governance, there is such a thing as being too native. Indeed, what "gub-brows"—frightens—the native is the accent. It is the uncanny sound of one's own language coming out of the mouths of those who are racialized differently and in positions of authority. While minimal orthographic accents have created the sense of the demotic, the polyphony of the novelistic world as of the colonial world is highly controlled. For instance, in contrast to the British *zubben* that ruled the land, the natives who spoke correct English were humiliated and mocked. In a reversal of stereotypes, hybrid English is associated with power and standard English is laughable.

## TWO SCENES OF LISTENING

The *Ibis* carries a large number of people from different backgrounds. This fact prompts everyone to try and figure out what they share in common. Aboard the *Ibis*, characters try to place each other by their accents. There's a lot of "you are one of us" and "you aren't one of us." These moments are tender, eager, and attentive as well as presumptuous. Thrown together on the ship and traveling to unknown lands, the characters are seeking the comfort of familiar sounds. The narrator assists in this process by describing some accents as "raffish" and others as "refined and silky." Still, despite this mesmerizing attention to linguistic detail—especially to how languages are spoken—the characters' accents repeatedly prove to be deceptive or inadequate as identity markers. Mishearing and misidentifying are running conceits in the novels; no characters really sound like they should. Their accents are always surprising and unexpected. Characters like Ah Fatt and Zachary Reid look one way ethnically, but any assumptions about their ethnicity are challenged when they speak. The narrator revels in these moments of identitarian complexity, and the misrecognized accents are a key part of Ghosh's flourish as a writer of transregional breadth. Yet these invariably misleading accents serve as grounds for affective associations between people move toward a new land where presumably their accents won't matter anymore.



For instance, Neel is accorded linguistic authority in the trilogy, a role he really comes into in *River of Smoke*, in which he works as a “linkister,” a kind of translator. He is also supposed to be the author of the “*Ibis* Chrestomathy” found on Ghosh’s blog. Neel channels the anxiety of the male critic as he tries to place people. Despite his vast knowledge, Neel often gets things wrong. A man of many languages, Neel starts off as a character obsessed with speaking refined English before becoming one who is most at home in the pidgin of Canton. Indeed, he emerges as the source of a stereophonic effect here. As his character becomes one with the acoustic ecology of the ship, the situation highlights the mediated and embodied aspects of listening.

Two scenes of listening in the *Ibis* trilogy dramatize how xenophilic listening, while critical to the politics of the subaltern historiographical project of eavesdropping, is not ethnographic or reliable. The first instance of listening is a familiar colonial scene. When, by a twist of fate, Neel is arrested for forgery and boards the *Ibis* as a convict, he pleads for mercy in English. He requests that the orderlies not hit him or tear his clothes, but he is neither heard nor afforded the privilege and familiarity that he expects from speaking English. All he gets is the sergeant’s accented Hindustani—which the narrator marks in italics—asking him to take off his clothes, “*Kapra utaro.*” The Hindustani expression *kapra utaro* stands out visually and linguistically on the page. Such a theatricalization of these words creates a sense of violence on the page. Much like in the scene described in “How-To,” the sergeant does not even look at Neel or acknowledge his humanity. “Without a glance in his direction,” he ticks off whether Neel has “Syphilis? Gonorrhoea?”<sup>37</sup> By not hearing and recognizing Neel, the officer categorizes and racializes Neel while refusing to “see” him.

Standing naked with his hands raised, Neel asks, “Can you not afford me the dignity of a reply? Or is it that you do not trust yourself to speak in English?”<sup>38</sup> As the sergeant looks visibly agitated, Neel is pleased to extract some response. He decides that for as long as he is a convict he will speak only in English. However, even though he really wants to keep talking in English, his mind fails him. Instead of addressing the sergeant, he starts reciting Shakespeare: “His voice rose till the words were echoing off the stone walls.”<sup>39</sup> The echoing resounds his voice over the ship. It dramatizes a kind of stereophonic navigational process that helps Neel connect with other characters on the ship. This is the start of his attunement that assumes greater centrality as the trilogy progresses, culminating in his diegetic role as a linkister and his extradiegetic role as the compiler of the chrestomathy. Neel becomes the one figure who brings the different bodies on the *Ibis* into resonance.

Now take the interaction between Neel and Paulette (who is in disguise as a Bihari woman, Putli, in order to run away to Mauritius), in which both are eavesdropping on the other. Once they are all on the *Ibis*, the men and women are separate. Neel is in a completely different part of the ship because he is a convict. Over time, Neel finds himself catching the muffled sounds of conversation in the

women's section and notices that someone has been eavesdropping on his conversations. Paulette, like the other women, is behind a veil, a ghunghta. Based on how Paulette looks—"her henna-darkened hands and alta-reddened feet"—Neel eliminates English as one of the languages she can speak and understand, classifying her as one of the peasant women. Yet, "from the intonations of her voice, he had surmised that she differed from the other migrants in that her language was Bengali rather than Bhojpuri."<sup>40</sup> He is intrigued by his own assessments because he has also felt her listening in on his English-language conversations.

When he overhears Paulette knowledgeably responding to other indentured laborers' questions about what awaits them in Mauritius, he attempts to talk with her. I would like to cite this passage in full to show how much of the human connection in the trilogy rests on listening even when the other cannot be seen.

Neel put his lips to the air duct. Then addressing her ghunghta-draped head, he said, in Bengali: One who has been so courteous in dealing with her interlocutors will have no objection, surely, to answering yet another query? The silky phrasing and refined accent put Paulette instantly on her guard: although her back was turned toward the chokey, she knew exactly who had spoken and she understood immediately that she was being put to some kind of test. Paulette was well aware that her Bengali tended to have a raffish, riverfront edge to it, much of it having been acquired from Jodu; she was careful now in choosing her words. Matching her tone to the convict's, she said: There is no harm in a question; should the answer be known it will certainly be provided.

The accent was neutral enough to deny Neel any further clues to the speaker's origins.<sup>41</sup>

Paulette matches her tone to Neel's tone as a strategy to disarm him by performing her similarity with him. But after a page of conversing with Neel, she thwarts his continued attempts to place her by virtue of her accent.

I'm not of your kind, said Paulette. That is all you need to know.

Yes, indeed it is, he said, in a tone of mockery—for in uttering her final retort, Paulette's tongue had betrayed just enough of the waterfront sibilance for the mystery to be solved. Neel had heard Elokeshi speak of a new class of prostitute who had learnt English from their white clients—no doubt this was one such, on her way to join some brothel.<sup>42</sup>

The two characters cannot see each other's faces; Paulette is sitting with her back to the air duct. She is alert to the silkiness of Neel's voice and to the raffish edges of her own. To avoid "betraying" her accent, she further matches the tone of her voice to that of Neel's. Still, while Paulette's ghunghta-draped head and inscribed-upon extremities heighten the difficulty of knowing his interlocutor, Neel is able to listen by making his body one with the ship and highlighting the mediational quality of listening. Prior to this conversation Neel had only "peered" through the air duct. As he puts his lips and ear to the air duct, his breath becomes a part of

the flow of air and his speech itself possible through the humming of the vessel. There is a scriptural abundance and yet what Neel seeks is the voice behind it, a voice he is certain he has heard before.

The unmarked character of Bhojpuri words that are made into verbs is an example of the accentedness of Ghosh's prose, but this episode is ironic because even though Neel tries to extract information from Paulette to solve the mystery of her accent, and even though Paulette understands the charge of that interrogation, he turns out to be wrong. All his linguistic knowledge does not help him fathom the biography of Paulette's speaking style. It is only the slightest betrayal that leads Neel to the wrong conclusion, which he then feels very smug about. She is not exposed, no truth is revealed, but nevertheless a relation is forged between Neel and Paulette. The lack of orthographic markers suggests an immediacy, that the way the conversation is staged is how it is heard and read. Paulette's response to Neel and the reader thus baldly states that she is different while actively matching Neel's voice to conceal any difference. This approach turns the ethnographic logic of literary accents on its head.

Arguably, the novel prizes a different framework of audibility in this moment. The body and structure of the ship, like the English language, are part of the attunement and coming into harmony and understanding. There's an element of surprise and the humility of error. The mistakes one makes in ascertaining the other are more or less irrelevant as long as they do not originate in fear or authority. They help people bond and aid their survival and kinship. Neel's quest for mastery is met with failure even though he does not realize it. The reader knows that Paulette is not who or what Neel diagnoses. Similarly, the other women on the ship believe Paulette to be one of them, knowing no better. Different individual receptions forge affective bonds, but none of the others on the ship are "accurate" in their knowledge of Paulette's biography.

#### XENOPHILIC ATTUNEMENT

Both Neel and the sergeant perform their racialized, caste-marked, regional, and gendered authority by presuming to know the speaker. Both turn out to be wrong, with a slight difference. The sergeant refuses to engage with Neel. On the other hand, Neel's motivation comes from wanting to suture a connection amid the violence of the migration journey. He is motivated by curiosity and an eagerness to connect while solidifying his intellectual preeminence. Both the conversations dramatize the embodied nature of listening as a modality, but the one between Neel and Paulette dramatizes how the "sound waves of speech enter the listener, becoming a part of them by vibrating through their body."<sup>43</sup> It is the vulnerability of Neel's own body and his implication in the way he understands Paulette that distinguishes him for the sergeant.

Can hearing an accent be an orientation in love and affinity toward strangers, a kind of attentive listening to the sounds of another body? It is dangerous to cast the movement of people and capital in the shadow of the opium empire as a site of unconditional mutual transformation. Accent indeed becomes a way to set aside; according to John Mowitt, “In hearing an accent we attach ourselves to the language that others us to one another and to ourselves. The accent ‘records’ language and keeps it outside.”<sup>44</sup> Yet the uneven accentedness of the novels models a listening that allows accent to be the grounds of observation, attention, and affective attachment. Ghosh’s authorial practice and his idea of xenophilia hold the moment of listening and reading in suspension to probe the mode of relations enabled precisely in the politically uneven and multiply mediated elusiveness of accent.

The echolocational impulse of Neel’s observation gives Paulette’s accent (spoken and heard) a stereophonic effect. Echolocation, writes Peter Szendy, is “the slight interaural discrepancy, from one ear to the other.” It highlights the structurally binaural character of listening, how it is always divided. Accent and punctuation become a way of “collecting echoes” that “punctuates and percusses his environment, allowing him to detect everything that happens in it.”<sup>45</sup> Before we know accent as identitarian and ethnographic, before we label it as L1 or L2, to borrow useful terminology from Lippi-Green, we must register a moment of encountering something familiar in the face of unknowing. As an affective and cognitive experience of familiarity, accent seeks to locate the speaker by their sounds heard by oneself. The performative and affective charge of accent forges attachment between the subject and the object, the reader and the text.

A comparative—and necessarily accented—reading of “How-To” and scenes from the Ibis trilogy reframes accent not as a relation of knowing but the moment before it, the moment of unknowing difference. Recognizing accents constitutes a reversal of silent reading. In the Ibis trilogy, the aural world is accessible to the reader through the script and print. The unmarked leveled language of Ghosh’s prose presents these moments of suture that are still shaped by power relations. But, they invite the reader to place the accent. The novel’s plot and style destabilize the truth value of accents, requiring the reader/critic to implicate themselves in the process.

Reading requires a risky ventriloquism, giving one’s breath to another’s body. The accented language of the novels makes the *reader* accented. The reader must sound the accented voices and read the phonetically written language out loud to hear any accent or risk missing the point and character details. Different readers will bring different kinds of knowledges to the text. Punctuated thus in the ear of the reader/writer/listener, the Ibis trilogy appears unevenly accented. Reading becomes an act of reconstructing the whole out of the heteroglossia, a kind of reading that implicates the body of the reader and the critic. The text does not

represent a voice because that voice has been effaced in phonetic language. There is continued tension between seeing and hearing as the meaning emerges only when the reader voices the words on the page, ventriloquizes them rather than trusting them as they are visible. Some of what readers hear is their own voice, joined with a stereophonic chorus of many others.

## NOTES

1. Carlson-Wee, "How-To."
2. "Editor's Note," *The Nation*.
3. See McWhorter, "There's Nothing Wrong with Black English."
4. In a tweet that is no longer available, Carlson-Wee wrote this: "To all who have voiced questions and concerns about my poem in *The Nation*: I am listening closely and I am reflecting deeply. I am sorry for the pain I have caused, and I take responsibility for that. I intended for this poem to address the invisibility of homelessness, and clearly it doesn't work. Treading anywhere close to blackface is horrifying to me and I am profoundly regretful. The fact that I did not foresee this reading of the poem and the harm it could cause is humbling and eye-opening. I am beginning a process of talking to people and reevaluating what it means to make art in this world from a place of privilege, and the responsibility and accountability that comes with it. As someone suggested, I will be donating my publication honorarium to Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness. I am grateful to all of you for voicing your thoughts and feelings and I will be thinking hard about this for a long, long time. I continue to listen."
5. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44.
6. Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, 14.
7. I am grateful to Hongwei Thorn Chen for the description of the knowledge produced by accent as ethnography.
8. Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 14.
9. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 206.
10. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 187.
11. Lipari, "Listening Otherwise," 45.
12. A. Ghosh, "Confessions of a Xenophile" (italics added).
13. B. Ghosh, "On Grafting the Vernacular," 203.
14. Elhariry and Walkowitz, "The Postlingual Turn," 7.
15. In *Not Like a Native Speaker*, Rey Chow compares an accent to a murmur.
16. Allan, "Translating Whispers," 14.
17. Allan, "Translating Whispers," 21
18. Allan, "Translating Whispers," 24
19. See Rey Chow's "In the Name of Comparative Literature" for more on multilingualism in comparative literary scholarship.
20. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 9
21. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 11
22. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 12.
23. Abu Hamdan, *Aural Contract*.
24. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 72.
25. Mani, "Multilingual Code-Stitching in Ultraminor World Literatures," 384.
26. While *Sea of Poppies* features a lot of Laskari and *Flood of Fire* and *River of Smoke* feature a lot of French and Mauritian Creole—all of which are aurally shaped—these are still languages in their own right.
27. See Ramazani, "Code-Switching, Code-Stitching."

28. A. Ghosh, "Confessions of a Xenophile" (italics added).
29. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 191.
30. Cowaloosur, "Language in Ibis Trilogy."
31. Cowaloosur, "Language in Ibis Trilogy."
32. Ganguly, "Anglo-globalism, Multilingualism, World Literature."
33. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 24.
34. Zachary is not white but biracial. As an official of the British Empire in India, he has to learn to perform his racial and ethnic superiority to the natives.
35. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 15.
36. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 48.
37. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 283.
38. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 283.
39. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 283.
40. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 381.
41. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 391.
42. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 393.
43. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 194.
44. John Mowitt, personal communication, April 2020.
45. Szendy, *Stigmatology*, 57.

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## Accenting the Trans Voice, Echoing Audio-Dysphoria

Slava Greenberg

*Third Body* (Zohar Melinek-Ezra and Roey Victoria Heifetz, 2020) is a transnational audiovisual artwork that lies at the intersection between an art exhibit, video art, and a feature film, portraying a day in the life of a trans woman living in Berlin.<sup>1</sup> *Third Body* can be divided into two main narrative parts: In the first half, the protagonist cares for her German-speaking mother and eats dinner with her Hebrew-speaking father. The second half is marked by a short visit to a karaoke bar, followed by a lengthy and intimidating sexual encounter with a cis man in his apartment. In both parts of the film the protagonist is silent. In the first, she is spoken to as though she were a passive object or receptacle; in the second, actions are exerted on her passive body. Throughout both parts, she offers no resistance and instead accepts the use of her body for the gratification of others. The karaoke scene, which takes place in the middle of the film, stands out as the only one in which her voice is audible.

Watching the karaoke scene in which the protagonist sings the chorus of Tina Turner's *Private Dancer* ("I'm your private dancer, a dancer for money / I'll do what you want me to do . . . / And any old music will do"), I, as an accented trans spectator craving audible validation, found myself compulsively trying to detect familial sonic traces, listening for the accent and the trans voice. However, they seemed to have been magically muffled by the karaoke machine and by Roey Victoria Heifetz's singing.

As in the sequences that surround it, the karaoke scene centers passivity and various degrees of dependency. It is the only scene in which the film's audience gets to hear the protagonist's voice, and yet she stands alone, framed by the shot to make it seem as though she is set in a tiny booth, echoing someone else. The scene is absent of any celebration of the accented trans voice, as well as absent of any call to action, initiative, or agency. And yet, despite that, the karaoke scene is filled with trans joy, and more specifically the experience of what I call "audio-euphoria."



Audio-euphoria depends on the on-screen presence of the trans body as well as the assistive technology that muffles the accented trans voice. Both the visible trans body and the voice's technological mediation through the karaoke machine alleviate the audio-dysphoria by protecting the accented trans voice from the cis-sexist and ableist desires for coherency that the trans voice evokes as well as from the linguistic profiling that accented speech invokes. The distinction between communication that involves visible bodies versus disembodied trans voices and accented speech is key to my discussion of the audio-euphoric karaoke machine in comparison with the audio-dysphoric disembodied phone call. The embodiment of the trans voice and accented trans speech is crucial in how others make sense of a voice.

There is something inherently euphoric about the awareness that one can intentionally and consciously change one's voice. This is often done through processes such as voice feminizing therapy and/or surgery, or voice masculinizing therapy and/or hormone-affirming therapy (particularly using testosterone). These processes are not entirely euphoric and may be dysphoric at times; other components also often play a part in changing one's voice (for example, the duration of the therapy, any breaks, and the time of day; there can also be periods of hoarseness, whispering, and voicelessness).<sup>2</sup> The ability to control one's voice and accent through focused attention is nonetheless central to understanding audio-euphoria.

Audio-euphoria as shown in *Third Body* is an intentional, effortful, and temporary break from cissexist and ableist audits, from linguistic profiling, and from audio-dysphoria (the state of elevated anxiety triggered by expected or unexpected sonic events). In what follows, I first discuss audio-dysphoria as aggravated by the disembodiment of the telephone. I then explore the audio-euphoria offered to the accented trans voice through the mediation of the assistive technology of the karaoke machine. As I argue in this chapter, *Third Body* suggests the karaoke machine as the counterobject to the telephone, replacing its dysphoria provocation with the possibility of accessing trans joy.

#### THE AUDIO-DYSPHORIC PHONE CALL AND THE DISEMBODIED TRANS VOICE

In 2014 *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* published its inaugural double issue as the first nonmedical journal about transgender studies. The issue featured an extensive introduction by editors Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, complete with nearly ninety keywords and concepts, including the "Voice."<sup>3</sup> Andrew Anastasia suggests the voice as a keyword for the next generation to demand "that we listen, like musicians, to the voice qua voice—not merely the message. This is not to say that our trans\* voices can or wish to escape the gridding act of 'making sense'; the voice certainly has something to say about the body's age, sex, race, nationality, or ability." Anastasia explains the need for an in-depth discussion of the voice as a response to

its frequent metaphoric use as it is “invoked to narrate the struggles of transgender studies’ formation as a field. . . . In the struggle for coherence, however, metaphorical references to ‘voice’ privilege its discursive connotations, which relegates *the embodied voice* to a service role of rendering audible the coherent thought.”<sup>4</sup>

The embodied trans voice and the sociocultural processes that shape its production and perception have been studied by linguistics scholar Lal Zimman. “Trans people emphasize that the body matters,” Zimman argues, “but that its matter is far more complex than tends to be imagined when the focus is on cisgender people.”<sup>5</sup> Their research shows that it’s insufficient to say that one’s larynx directly determines the gender of the voice because speakers use only a small range of their abilities. Focusing on trans voices, “bodily sex remains important but can no longer be seen as static, asocial, homogenous, or deterministic.”<sup>6</sup> Zimman shows that trans voices push us to reconsider the very concept of the gendered voice.

The trans voice accents the possibility of transformation through intentionality. The practical voice training guide *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People* (2017), suggests a link between the trans voice and accented speech in vocal presentation:

Our voice reveals where we come from through our language, dialect and accent, and may say something about our age, education and culture through our choice of words. When we speak, we reveal our vulnerability: sometimes we feel free, easy and confident in communicating, and at other times we withdraw into ourselves and hide—voice reveals these things in the energy of sound. . . . In effect, our voice brings us into social relationship, and the cues we make both in sound and with our body contribute to our own and other people’s perception of our identity, gender and communicative competence.<sup>7</sup>

At the core of this guidebook, as in the lived experiences of trans people, is the conviction that the voice can be changed. Such instructional books presume that trans voices, like accented speech, force a disclosure of one’s identity and suggest that it is not a desirable or safe reveal. Thus audio-euphoria derives from an awareness of the possibility of vocal change that instills a sense of control over one’s body and what, when, and who to disclose one’s identity to.

While guidebooks describe the possibility of vocal transformation, artist and scholar Adriana Knouf’s vocal self-experimentation as a form of onto-poiesis (“being” and “coming into being”) complicates the material bodily transition by focusing on the poetic infrastructure of creation. In her art and scholarship, Knouf challenges the perceived stability of the voice: “Now the voice is conceptualized as a stable signifier of identity, something that is so fixed that it can be used to authenticate yourself to a digital system. We expect this stability as we use the voice to make quick determinations of gender: is that a male voice, or a female voice? The ways we do this unconscious ordering involve subtle differences in pitch and resonance of the voice.”<sup>8</sup> Audio-euphoria relies on the joy of vocal

becoming, and, similar to Knouf's experimentations, *Third Body* suggests "that the voice is in fact mutable, unstable, and capable of being consciously changed—but only with considerable effort. This fluidity thus conflicts with systems—human, algorithmic—that assume the aural output of a body will remain relatively fixed." This cissexist desire for coherency and a voice that matches one's apparent gender results not only in the individual experience of audio-dysphoria but also the ableist denial of access to trauma-related hotlines and services based on voice recognition that I will explore further in what follows.

Before unpacking the T4T (trans for trans) use of the term *dysphoria*, I want to begin by insisting on a connection between cissexism and ableism. By focusing on audio-dysphoria and its euphoric counterpart, I endeavor to rewrite trans and nonbinary voices back into the history of the disability rights movement. Though the American Psychiatric Association specifically describes gender identity disorder as "distress" and a "disability,"<sup>9</sup> trans and nonbinary people are excluded from the protections provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Susan Stryker defines gender dysphoria as a sense of unhappiness about the incongruence between how one subjectively understands one's experience of gender and how one's gender is perceived by others. This shifts the emphasis from the person experiencing such feelings, instead suggesting that dysphoria itself (rather than the trans person) is unhealthy and transient. This form of de-pathologization echoes the social model of disability offered by critical disability studies, thereby binding trans issues to disability politics.<sup>10</sup> Alison Kafer uses "the toilet" as both a physical space and a potential political meeting point between disability and trans research and activism: "Attending to the space of the toilet not only makes room for coalitions between trans\* and disability concerns, it continues the crip theory move of keeping the meanings and parameters of disability, access, and disability studies open for debate and dissent."<sup>11</sup> In 2013, the same year in which Kafer published these words, "Gender Identity Disorder" was finally removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and replaced with "Gender Dysphoria," the very term that was suggested for protection under the ADA. Revised terminology for describing gender dysphoria appears in the DSM, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR), were released by American Psychiatric Association Publishing in May 2022.<sup>12</sup> Despite minor revisions, gender dysphoria remains an accepted term by both trans and non binary people and the medical institution.

Applying the "composite model of disability" to trans studies, Alexandre Baril both problematizes cissexist oppression and acknowledges trans people's subjective experiences of suffering from gender dysphoria.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as dysphoria is used by trans and nonbinary folks to describe their own experiences, the term has become integral to trans culture and T4T social media discourses. Furthermore, I take inspiration from Baril's proposed term "trans-crip-t time" as a framework by which to examine the possibilities created by a permeable, interconnected conceptualization of disabled, trans, and linguistic identities—not as analytically and empirically discrete, but as overlapping categories.<sup>14</sup>

Viewed through a medical gaze (or the medical/rehabilitative/individual model of disability), the synonymous use of “people with gender dysphoria” and “trans people” is intended to facilitate the provision of necessary accommodations. Gender dysphoria is at the heart of the Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People, Version 7 (SOC-7), published by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH).<sup>15</sup> The SOC-7 provides clinical guidance intended to assist trans people in achieving health, well-being, and self-fulfillment. It lists voice therapy ahead of gender-affirming hormone therapy (GAHT) and surgery in a list of the types of assistance health professionals may provide: “primary care, gynecological and urological care, reproductive options, voice and communication therapy, mental health services (e.g., assessment, counseling, psychotherapy), and hormonal and surgical treatments.”<sup>16</sup>

Following disability studies’ anti-pathologizing, social, and phenomenological theory and activism, and particularly the “composite model of disability,” I lowercase and hyphenate dysphoria with specific experiences reported by trans and nonbinary folks (e.g., voice-dysphoria, height-dysphoria, facial-dysphoria), as opposed to using the medicalized and capitalized Gender Dysphoria. Audio-dysphoria and audio-euphoria can serve as means to de-medicalize trans experience. The broader phenomenon of audio-dysphoria or the more specific voice-dysphoria may be experienced by people of various gender modalities.<sup>17</sup> However, it has more direct—and even life-threatening—implications for gender-nonconforming bodies.

Therefore, I refrain from using dysphoria as metaphor or “narrative prosthesis” (as per Mitchell and Snyder) to describe a general state of anxiety or incongruence experienced by cis people toward their bodies or voices. Instead, I utilize this term solely to describe the experience of trans and nonbinary individuals under cissexist and ableist social structures. Instances of audio-triggered dysphoria are ubiquitous. They can result from hearing one’s deadname, particular pronouns, a mispronunciation of one’s name, or the sound of one’s own voice.<sup>18</sup> Though any of the above may crop up in many situations, in my personal experience the phone call encompasses them all.

During phone calls I am often asked where I am from *originally*, yet I can’t help but hear the “who” behind the “where.” Regardless of their response to this question, accented people are made to know that the desired answer to this question is a concise, coherent, and singular geographic location (preferably one known to the asker). My own response tends to be triggered by sensing the listener’s underlying tension around the traces of my elsewhere-ness. Furthermore, as an accented trans man, I often hear another layer demanding me to disclose the origins of my audible elsewheres, elsewhens, and elsewhos. The plurals are meant not only to stress that a singular origin is irrelevant, as I have immigrated multiple times and am continuously transitioning through GAHT, but also to emphasize the effortful and effortless transformation of the voice over space, time, and gender.

Some of the traces in my voice most audible to me are products of various accents and assimilative struggles to conceal them as well as the trans-joy/audio-euphoria of experiencing my voice change on testosterone. Such traces may be less apparent in face-to-face encounters—the presence of other physical and non-verbal cues means I am less frequently misgendered or complimented on my fluency. On the phone, however, I get routinely “ma’amed,” and when asked to repeat myself I often feel that the noise in communication is caused by my accent, which the phone seems to ruthlessly amplify. The disembodied nature of the phone call becomes a source of dread for the way it strips gender intentionality, narrowing my identity down to my voice.

Despite having experienced firsthand many audio-dysphoric and at times discriminatory events during phone conversations, I have nevertheless written extensively in praise of the semi-disembodied voice in animated documentaries about disability.<sup>19</sup> In these works I have relied on the *acousmètre*, a concept proposed by composer and sound researcher Michel Chion to describe a voice entity that is not visible on screen. According to Chion, the *acousmatic* is called an *acousmètre* when the voice is human, especially before that voice is revealed on screen, as it haunts the film like a shadow.<sup>20</sup> Based on this idea, I maintained that the voice-over in this subgenre functions as a semi-*acousmètre* by refraining from exposing the source of the voice. In this way it prevents the audience from stripping the voiced entity of its power while also allowing partial audiovisual representations of the body.

Yet in the case of the accented trans voice, its connection to the intentionality and performativity of the body invites audio-euphoria rather than the dysphoric nature in which Chion describes *de-acousmétrization*, the binding of the *acousmètre* through the visible body: “Here is your body; you will be here and not in another place.”<sup>21</sup> The accented trans voice seeks this grounding in order to derail the cissexist and ableist desires for a coherent origin and a possible rehabilitation or cure.

Beyond cinematic voices, the disembodied communication over the phone has actual ramifications on trans and gender-nonconforming people. In August 2021, trans artist and activist Leroy Bar-natan posted on his social media account a call to the Israeli emergency hotline for victims of sexual assault to act in making the service accessible to trans and nonbinary people. Bar-natan articulates the problem:

Let’s take a moment to talk about how sexual trauma hotlines do not accommodate the trans\* spectrum. When I say hotlines, I mean the telephone lines. From conversations I’ve had with representatives, the separation between the 1202 (women) line and the 1203 (men) line is not meant to erase the gender spectrum but rather to allow the caller to speak to either a woman (1202) or a man (1203). In reality, what happens most times . . . if you don’t vocally “pass” as the gender you’re speaking in they’ll just use the pronouns that they hear with complete disregard to those you’re using in the conversation. . . . So I suggest to just take off the line

anyone who hasn't learned [not to assume gender via voice and/or to respect pronouns], because as long as you don't, you're telling the trans community that they are not your target audience.

Despite Bar-natan's efforts to address the issue with the people answering the calls by presenting his pronouns as well as with their superiors by requesting that those answering the phones be trained to not assume gender according to the callers' voices and to respect callers' pronouns, the phenomenon is repeated.

Approaching this hotline example through the lens of the composite model of disability, audio-dysphoria includes both the phenomenological experience of voice-dysphoria and the cissexist and ableist desires for coherency. At the same time, thinking audio-dysphoria through disembodied accented speech over the telephone allows for the acknowledgment in the linguistic profiling of the trans voice. Like immigration, transition accents the voice and exposes its bearers to various forms of questioning, doubting, profiling, and violence. John Baugh has conceptualized "linguistic profiling" as the auditory equivalent of visual racial profiling. According to him, both "can have devastating consequences for those US residents who are perceived to speak with an undesirable accent or dialect."<sup>22</sup> Baugh describes discriminatory linguistic profiling as based on auditory cues, which may include racial identification, but which can also be used to identify other linguistic subgroups within a speech community.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, he centers his argument on the disembodied telephone (or, rather, the intercom system) in linguistic discrimination. Voice-dysphoria and the broader audio-dysphoria are intensified and complicated by linguistic profiling, which most forcefully affects trans accented speakers and speakers of linguistic minorities. Thus, by focusing on the disembodied trans voice, one might reveal various levels of audio-dysphoria alongside the vulnerability of trans, accented, and linguistic minority speakers to linguistic profiling and discrimination.

In defining the genre of the call center documentary, Pooja Rangan shows that the embodied dimensions of voicing are considered obstacles, except when social and political norms render them neutral and allow them to disappear.<sup>24</sup> In reading the contradictions in the film *Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* (Sonali Gulati, 2005), Rangan asks, "What disappears or is neutralized at the level of the speaking voice and the listening ear when we sense such a textual voice in documentary, and what can the 'placelessness' of accented speech in the age of the call centre tell us about the stakes of this disappearing act?"<sup>25</sup> This disappearance is a result of the dynamics of neoliberal, Anglobalizing capital:

An era in which *voice*, and not image, has become a vehicle of the ongoing objectification and fragmentation of the (post)colonial other. The phenomenon of accent is enabling in this context: it introduces a spectrum and hierarchy of cultural values in relation to the "how" of voicing (grain, tone, inflection etc.) and its linguistic "contents" where Trinh sees a dualistic gridlock.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the accented trans voice reveals the sonic roots of cissexist and ableist hierarchies and desires for coherency. The accented trans voice is a vehicle of objectification as well as linguistic profiling, and thus in a documentary film focusing on visibility, *Disclosure* (Sam Feder, 2020), it also offers a rare insight into the trans voice, and particularly the dangers that lie in its disembodiment. In the documentary, actress Candis Cayne is introduced by Laverne Cox through a historic milestone: “It wasn’t until 2007 that we saw an openly trans woman being celebrated for doing it out loud.” This is followed by a video of a reporter announcing, “Candis Cayne makes history on *Dirty Sexy Money*.”

According to Cayne, this role marked a televised linguistic offense: “My first episode of *Dirty Sexy Money*, I had a big gathering with all of my friends and was so excited I was going to be on ABC, and there was like ten of us, and we were all sitting around having a glass of wine.” The talking head cuts to an archival scene from the episode while her voice continues to play over the clip: “And I come on, and everybody’s like, ‘Yay!’ [clapping] And then my first line . . .” The clip is unmuted, and we hear the words spoken by Cayne/Carmelita, “I missed you,” which have been digitally deepened to masculinize her voice.

The scene cuts back to Cayne speaking on screen—“They lowered it two octaves,” she says—and then shows another muted clip of Cayne as Carmelita while sounding her in voice-over, explaining, “They did it for one line to get the idea that Carmelita was a trans woman.” Similarly, the one line that transmasculine actor Travis Clough has in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (Mark Waters, 2009) was manipulated to exaggerate the transition in postproduction and dubbed in a deep male voice without his consent.<sup>27</sup> Despite the excessive vulnerability of the trans voice, and in particular as it intersects with race and class, this is not yet recognized as a human rights issue or as part of a broader struggle for protection from accent discrimination and linguistic profiling.

The nonconsensual disembodiment of the accented trans voice is by any definition discriminatory. However, in addition to these social and political aspects, I am interested in the phenomenological experience of audio-dysphoria as it is articulated by trans and nonbinary people. Therefore, in the following section I move on to thinking about voice-dysphoria in the spirit of the trans-crip-t perspective by listening for the echoes in accented trans voices, especially when they’re muffled or mediated by assistive technologies.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE KARAOKE SONG AND ECHOES IN THE ACCENTED TRANS VOICE

Thus far I have focused on the trans voice and its linguistic profiling as well as on the phenomenology of voice-dysphoria, especially when it is mediated by the phone call. In contrast with the medicalized and capitalized Gender Dysphoria, intracommunal references are often made to the lowercase hyphenated dysphoria specifying situations that alleviate or trigger various types of dysphoria (e.g.,



bottom-dysphoria, forehead-dysphoria). Temporary experiences alleviating these types of dysphoria, known within the community as trans-joy or gender-euphoria, are similarly hyphenated and specified. Despite the rhetorical convenience of countering dysphoria with euphoria, I do not mean to use *euphoria* to denote a heightened sense of elation or ecstasy. Instead, this type of hyphenated euphoria is a response to dysphoria in the way that “crip time” allows the simultaneous existence of the whole range of experiences between them—alongside dysphoria, despite it, before and after it, without eliminating, eradicating, or curing it.

*Third Body* positions this particular strategy at the heart of the film. Although it allows spectators visual glimpses into the protagonist experiencing haptic joy—for example, meditatively and utilizing her entire body, she touches the sand, the water, and a trans masc body at a beach in a short scene—the film suggests that it is audio-euphoria that is the most prominent experience of accented trans vocal joy. This is not an ecstatic moment, nor is it set on a big stage. Rather, it is a fleeting, private moment, in a karaoke bar.

The karaoke-mediated trans voice—in contrast with the telephone-mediated accenting of the vocal traces of immigration and transition—allows for audio-euphoria because it echoes those very traces blurring them into one another. These echoes are not enabled by the mere technology of the karaoke machine but rather simultaneously rely on the visibility of the trans body, the singing accented trans voice, former singers of the song, and the muffling effect of the karaoke machine. In what follows I analyze the karaoke scene in *Third Body* as a means of reflecting on audio-euphoria as a celebration of a temporary break from audio-dysphoria. At a time where trans visibility has exposed trans women (especially Black, Indigenous, and women of color) to violence, and accountability is considered to accept the call to “speak up” and “raise your voice,” *Third Body* centers on a nameless, silenced, passive, and submissive trans woman. The film’s most striking effect is its almost complete silence. Save for two monologue scenes and one brief karaoke scene, it is absent of any dialogue. In critiquing the liberal axiom of “having a voice,” Rangan analyzes Leslie Thornton’s experimental films and argues that “in her films, the condition of being voiceless—that is, being mute, speechless, inarticulate, inchoate, or unresponsive—offers a sonic portal to altogether unexpected ways of being in the world. Instead of speaking in defense of the voiceless, her work offers a perverse but ultimately enlightening defense of voicelessness.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in *Third Body* the presence of the protagonist’s singing voice does not interrupt the film’s devotion to sustaining her voicelessness. Rather, as I demonstrate in what follows, her singing voice in fact serves to protect her voicelessness rather than expose it.

The film can be divided into two parts: the first, in which the protagonist spends time with her mother and has dinner with her father, and the second, depicting a violent one-night stand, the two separated by the scene of singing at a karaoke bar (see figure 12.1). In both, which are almost equal in their run time, the protagonist remains in complete silence. During the first part, her mother speaks to her in



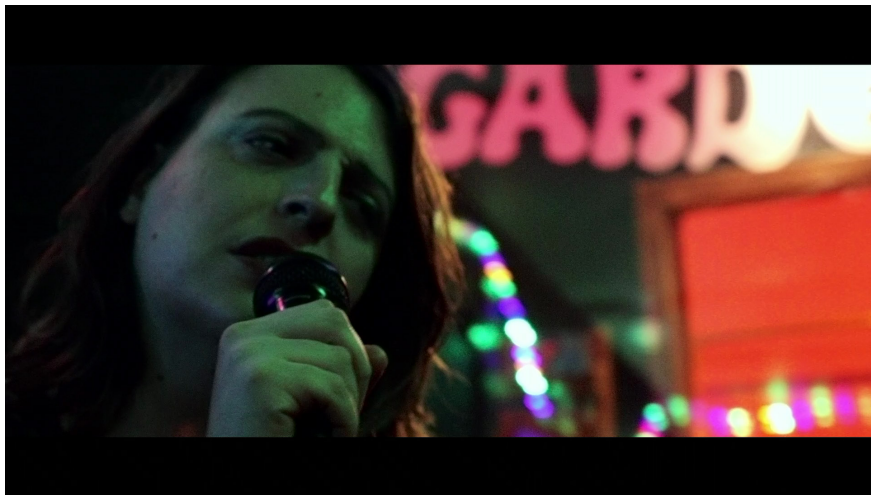


FIGURE 12.1. Karaoke scene in *Third Body* (2020), written and directed by Zohar Melinek-Ezra and Roey Victoria Heifetz.

German while misgendering her—after which, without uttering a word, she cares for her mother, bathing and massaging her. Only after this is done does she attend to her own body, carefully cleaning, shaving, tucking, padding, getting dressed, and putting on jewelry. At the end of this scene the protagonist first introduces a form of assistive technology to alleviate facial-dysphoria, mediating her mirror image by looking at her own face through a facial feminization app.

The following sequence, when she arrives at her father's apartment, leans into her serving as an auditory receptacle, despite beginning with mutual silence. She silently listens to her father speak in Hebrew about his penile surgery, hormonal treatment, and overall loneliness—all while he is misgendering her. The final physical gesture that sums up both parental monologues arrives as the father leans over to comfort himself by hugging his daughter. She doesn't speak nor hug him back, nor does she turn away. She seems to remain there for as long as she can bear it.

The karaoke scene follows these dysphoric sequences and offers the audience the first audible connection with the protagonist and the only chance to hear her voice. This scene's placement as a transitional mark between the halves of the film showing her objectification and misgendering by her parents and her sexual submission serves to reflect one silence into the other. Fully comprehending the significance of the karaoke scene—as well as the accented trans voice at its core—requires an analysis of the enforced and elective silences surrounding it. In *Third Body*, forty minutes transpire before the protagonist's voice becomes audible. This is an interval we've experienced before, most famously in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980).

*The Elephant Man* shows the film's protagonist, John Merrick, caged and humiliated in a circus freak show. He is then discovered by Dr. Frederick Treves, who keeps him in a hospital under medical supervision for no apparent reason. Merrick's treatment as a monster only changes after the doctor decides to recognize the gentle *speaking* soul behind it. Merrick is kept in a hospital, studied but not treated for anything, until he becomes a celebrity among the aristocratic Victorian society for writing prose, poetry, and his autobiography. Lynch's Merrick not only goes from an elongated period of voicelessness to speech, but he also transitions into a privileged English linguistic style, associated with royalty and the upper class—an accent that Baugh observed to be consequential in favorable linguistic profiling, serving as a tool for class mobility. Similarly, Ani Maitra interprets the “gay accent” as another form of higher-class coding, thus also serving as a tool of class mobility (see chapter 14 of this volume). Thus, the class assumptions projected onto Merrick's speech and accent grant him the humanity he was deprived of as a result of ableism.

While Lynch's Merrick overcomes silence, the protagonist of *Third Body* leans into it with her entire submissive body. Merrick's super-crippness, in a narrative prosthesis, substitutes his humanity with an ableist imagination of a divine spirit in a monstrous body. This type of transformation narrative is rooted in both ableism and cissexism, seen through the constructed imperative for rehabilitation, for having articulate speech, preferably with a high-class accent or for attaining “the right vocal presentation” to be qualified for humanity.

Unlike *The Elephant Man* and its medicalizing gaze, *Third Body* avoids the cissexist gaze by portraying a trans woman who refuses to transform her physicality or seek medical rehabilitation. She does not regain or change her voice and remains voiceless, and yet when she makes it audible, she does so under her conditions, muffling the cissexist ear's ability to trace her accented trans voice. The cissexist ear—much like its visual counterpart, defined by media scholar McKenzie Wark as “a looking that harbors anxiety about the slippages and transformations between genders, but which also harbors desires for those transitions as well”—is a listening for the traces that accent these transformations.<sup>30</sup> *Third Body* also repudiates rehabilitative/transformation narratives by deferring the audience's desire to hear her voice. After leaving her father's apartment, the nameless protagonist walks through the streets of Berlin. She then walks into a gay/dive bar, enters a private karaoke booth, and sings Tina Turner's “Private Dancer.” In this scene the audience is supposedly afforded the anticipated opportunity to satisfy this desire. However, it takes care not to strip her down to her bare voice as the disembodied phone call does, and instead she uses the assistive technology of the karaoke machine to provide shelter.

Karen Tongson has written about the transnational uses and material history of the karaoke machine. Examining karaoke as a queer theoretical and aesthetic mode, Tongson writes, “Karaoke's origin story also suggests that the ‘copy’ or

'copier' is not necessarily guided by a master rhythm produced by an expert . . . , but that the rhythm itself is forced to accompany or copy the one who is copying." Furthermore, Tongson asserts, "The amateurism in queer performance modes such as drag, for example, walks a fine line between homage and critique, not so much of the 'original' performer or musical number, but . . . of the very forms, aesthetic and otherwise, that legislate the divide between the 'real' and the 'copy,' such as style, tone, gesture, gender, and genre." Alongside queer practices, trans experiences with vocal feminization/masculinization as discussed in the first section of this chapter require similar self-experimentations and repetitions, some of which rely on copying or mimicking other voices and rhythms.

The karaoke scene in *Third Body* is not a classical performance in front of an audience, but rather more of a private vocal practice as well as an example of the use of assistive technology to echo the accented trans voice. "Private Dancer" (Heifetz's own favorite song) was first recorded by a white male singer with a British accent, only to be performed later by a Black woman with a U.S. accent. Thus, in this scene the protagonist is echoing Tina Turner, whose performance itself can be viewed as an echo of Dire Straits' first recording of the song.<sup>31</sup> Through her singing voice, the protagonist achieves a temporary relief from voice-dysphoria and is safe from the cissexist ear's obsession with the body's "realness" or the sex assigned at birth.<sup>32</sup>

When asked about the scene, the directors expressed different yet complementary intentions.<sup>33</sup> Zohar Melinek-Ezra described the scene as not only the first time the protagonist's voice is audible, but also the first time her body is free from external gazes:

It's actually one of my favorite scenes. . . . I think there's something so moving there, because you feel a sense of home for the first time for the character—even though you [supposedly accompanied her] in her apartment in the beginning, and then to her father's apartment, and you were very intimate with her in front of the mirror in a . . . home environment—[this is] the first time. . . you see her soul [as she] sings, expressing something so . . . deep, almost like a dream. . . . It's not [taking place] on a big stage [or] a big kind of a thing, but [rather] in this little bubble, in this little booth, she's allowing herself, in a very intimate, private way, to be [joyful]—and [this scene is] exactly in the middle.

Melinek-Ezra cinematically frames the protagonist in an intimate space—which he calls home—to protect her from cissexist gazes and audits.<sup>34</sup>

For Roey Victoria Heifetz, the scene carries multiple layers of significance, as it is her personal favorite karaoke song:

There are two layers there: one is taking the character outside of the intimacy [of the previous scenes] and bringing some [laughs and gestures air quotes] fun [into] this film. . . . I don't know if the viewer [finds] entertainment or fun [here, but] we thought that we [needed] to show another side of the character. But, at the same

time . . . the character shows more vulnerability because it's the first time that you can hear [her, as well as] the song that she chooses, which is my song, in a way—"Private Dancer." . . . I think that there are two layers. . . . One is to take [a step back], but at the same time what happened . . . is also a step forward, because it's the first time that you can really hear the character, and when you hear [her, what] she's singing is . . . this intense song.

Thus, while Melinek-Ezra was attuned to protecting the character from the cissexist ear—listening for the traces of her journey in her accented trans voice to make binary sense—Heifetz tended to the trans joy that her protagonist deserves in the form of a moment of audio-euphoria.

The audio-euphoria represented in the *Third Body's* central scene is a response to the cissexist audits and (consequent?) voice-dysphoria as well as the cissexist nonaudition that assigns her position as a silent passive object or receptacle. At the same time, in the alleviation of the first, the film suggests the karaoke machine is a trans assistive technology allowing the user to direct and distract audition. According to Tongson's analysis of the karaoke, the copying or echoing of another's voice allows for the potential audio-euphoria:

To become an echo of someone else's music is to surrender to a mild form of madness activated by something outside of one's self that has burrowed its way, parasitically, within (in your head, in your gut, in your ear). It requires capitulating to the compulsion to repeat the same lines over and over again from the chorus, verse, refrain.<sup>35</sup>

*Third Body* does this while simultaneously creating a home protected by the framed booth created by the camera in which to safely expose this vulnerability.

In this chapter I have proposed thinking with an accent about the trans voice through the audio-dysphoric phone call and the audio-euphoric echoes of karaoke. I argued that the former strips accented trans voices of their embodiment and leaves them bare to cissexist and ableist audits. In contrast, the latter offers the protagonist of *Third Body* relief and self-expression while still avoiding her use as a narrative prosthesis and denying a cure or rehabilitation from her voicelessness. The film's seamless act of refusal to "give her a voice" to satisfy the audience's desires and expectations stands in contrast not only with Lynch's Merrick but also films like *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010), which deals with similar themes. Despite both films' subversive queer and crip qualities,<sup>36</sup> they still choose rehabilitative resolutions shown through grand speeches.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, the protagonist of *Third Body* blends into a loud subway crowd, becoming one among other accented and muffled voices.

Here's what the film could have done but didn't. In a narrative prosthesis about an accented trans woman finding her voice, the karaoke scene could have been utilized as a turning point. However, the protagonist continues to maintain her silence throughout the rest of the film. In particular, the last sequence, which shows her blending into a crowd in a subway station, muffles her accented trans

voice and depicts her as an echo among the others, and by doing so the film decidedly chooses voicelessness over rehabilitative, cissexist, Anglocentric narratives.

*Third Body's* karaoke scene allows us to heed audio-euphoria and join in trans-crip-t joy. The scene begins with the singing voice of the accented trans protagonist framed by the camera to protect her from the cissexist gaze and moves on to shield her from its audit. Her accented trans voice is protected both by the echoing nature of the karaoke machine and its consensual muting in postproduction editing to further disrupt the audience's possibility of listening for the traces. The accented trans voice is gifted to the audience for a fleeting moment in small bits interrupted by silences in a manner akin to trans-crip-t joy, that is, through interdependencies of embodied voices and gender-euphoric possibilities in assistive technologies. To be included in this cinematic sigh the audience's ear has been trained to attend to the accented trans voice and its embodied intentionality throughout the silences and echoes.

## NOTES

1. The film was made through collaboration between a documentary filmmaker and an artist, who also serves as the film's leading actress. This project began with a separate thirteen-minute-long documentary, which was presented at the Venice Biennale and won Heifetz the Rosenblatt Prize. Following this, she and Melinek-Ezra started shooting what later became the violent sex sequence.

2. It is important to note that many trans and nonbinary people do not seek or desire a voice change. For those using their voice professionally, their decisions regarding vocal transition become more urgent, and whether they decide to take testosterone or not, they often require retraining. The documentary film *Riot Acts: Flaunting Gender Deviance in Music Performance* (Angelo Madsen Minax 2010) presents multiple trans and gender-nonconforming musicians talking about their fears of testosterone destroying their singing voices and the ways in which they coped with it.

3. Stryker and Currah, "Introduction."

4. Anastasia, "Voice," 262–63.

5. Zimman, "Transgender Voices," 11.

6. Zimman, "Transgender Voices," 11.

7. Mills and Stoneham, *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People*, 21–22.

8. Knouf, "Aliens-Ontopoetics Self-Experimentation-Molecular-Matrix-Voice."

9. Meyer-Bahlburg, "From Mental Disorder to Iatrogenic Hypogonadism," 467.

10. Stryker, "Context, Concepts, and Terms," 17–18.

11. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 157.

12. "Gender Dysphoria," in *Highlights of Changes from DSM-IV-TR to DSM-5*, American Psychiatric Association, [www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/DSM-5-TR/APA-DSM5TR-GenderDysphoria.pdf](http://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/DSM-5-TR/APA-DSM5TR-GenderDysphoria.pdf).

13. Disability studies scholars have identified limits of both the medical and social models of disability and developed an alternative model, which Baril terms the "composite model of disability," to theorize ableist norms and structures along with the phenomenological experience of disability. Baril, "Transness as Debility," 69.

14. Baril, "Doctor, Am I an Anglophone Trapped in a Francophone Body?," 155–72.

15. Dhejne et al., "Mental Health and Gender Dysphoria," 44–45.

16. Dhejne et al., "Mental Health and Gender Dysphoria," 45.

17. Ashley, "'Trans' Is My Gender Modality."

18. The audio-dysphoric encounter of listening to your own voice played back has become common because of the prevalence of the use of Zoom technology during COVID-19.
19. See my "(Dis)Abling the Spectator"; "Disorienting the Past, Crippling the Future in Adam Elliot's Claymation"; and my forthcoming *Animated Film and Disability: Crippling Spectatorship*.
20. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21–22.
21. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23.
22. Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling," 155.
23. Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling," 158.
24. Rangan, "Auditing the Call Centre Voice," 32–33.
25. Rangan, "Auditing the Call Centre Voice," 32.
26. Rangan "Auditing the Call Centre Voice," 37.
27. I thank Omer Elad for introducing me to this story.
28. I use the term *assistive technology* to describe both times the protagonist makes use of a device to alleviate dysphoria; first, facial dysphoria with the smartphone app and, second, voice dysphoria with the karaoke machine. Assistive technology has been defined in the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 as "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities" (P.L. 100–407).
29. Rangan, "In Defense of Voicelessness," 110.
30. Wark, "The Cis Gaze and Its Others (for Shola)."
31. The title track on Tina Turner's *Private Dancer* was composed by Mark Knopfler when he was writing new songs for Dire Straits' *Love over Gold*. However, he decided the song was more suited to a female vocalist, written, as it was, from a woman's point of view. Not only did he give Tina Turner the song to record, but his Dire Straits bandmates are the backing band on the track.
32. Film scholar Cael M. Keegan articulates the cissexist gaze as "the investment in the realness, perceptibility, and meaningfulness of assigned sex." See the chapter "Sensing Transgender" in Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, 24.
33. In a screening event for USC's Queer School of Cinematic Arts Student Organization, Ellen Seiter asked the directors about the karaoke scene, and the quote is their answer to her question. "QSCA Post-Screening Discussion of 'Third Body' by Zohar Melinek Ezra and Roey Victoria Heiftz [sic]," YouTube (1:01:56).
34. See Rangan "Auditing the Call Centre Voice."
35. Tongson, "Karaoke Queer Theory, Queer Performance."
36. These are analyzed by Robert McRuer in his book *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*, 35–44.
37. McRuer, "Introduction," *Crip Times*, 35–44.

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## The Demonstration of Accent

### *Media, Manif, Monstrosity*

Naomi Waltham-Smith

On July 5, 2020, Assa Traoré posted a short IGTV video to her Instagram feed in which she and other members of the Comité Adama announced they were continuing their struggle and called on followers to join a second event—*Marche et Festival Adama*—on Saturday, July 18, after an earlier call to action for truth and justice on June 13. Adama Traoré was a young Malian-French man who died in police custody after the violence of the ID check to which Black and Arab men are excessively subjected was laid bare, demonstrated in all its monstrosity, on his twenty-fourth birthday, July 19, 2016. With experts initially unable to agree on the cause of death, an autopsy commissioned by the family found that it resulted from asphyxiation from excessive pressure applied by the police, contradicting the picture painted by magistrate-commissioned reports. His older sister, Assa, has been the driving force behind and spokeswoman for a tireless campaign for

What difference does an accent make? I frame this question quite deliberately to bring out two different accentuations. What are the stakes—social, political, economic, juridical, life-and-death—of speaking with this or that accent? And in what sense does accent produce or constitute difference? In the epilogue to *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Derrida ponders precisely this question. The accent referred to, however, is not immediately a phonological index of race, class, or other lingual difference held to be the property of a speaking subject. Rather, the accent he has in mind is the orthography or transcription of a distinguishing feature of pronunciation not otherwise representable. More precisely, Derrida is pointing to a diacritic, *l'accent aigu* to be specific. The broader context of the passage, though, situated as it is within a book that reflects on the philosopher's own Franco-Maghrebi accent, makes it clear that *accent* here should be understood in all its polysemy—



justice for her brother, but it had received comparatively little attention outside sections of the French left.

The events of May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, broadcast around the world and decried on social media, changed that. Only in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd did the ongoing struggle for justice for Adama Traoré in Paris register in the consciousness of international—that is to say, Anglophone—media. George Floyd lost his life at the hands of racist police brutality in circumstances similar to Adama's just four days before the three officers responsible for that earlier killing were formally cleared of wrongdoing. The juxtaposition of the two scenes, each exemplifying the other, the two cries of "I can't breathe" echoing one another, sparked renewed protests in Paris, with tens of thousands taking to the streets on July 18. The echoes reverberated across the Atlantic. Assa Traoré seized the opportunity to popularize the antibrutality campaign of the *quartiers populaires* in an interview with *The New Yorker*, highlighting the "echoes" between the two struggles, declaring "We are Black Lives Matter. Justice pour Adama, Justice pour George Floyd, Justice pour Tous!"<sup>1</sup> The article depicts a striking scene of Assa aboard a truck, clenched fist held up high in front a row of police vans in the Place de la République, declaring that in showing their faces all over the world the protestors manifested their power.

At stake was this making manifest by standing in—George for Adama, the women's voices of the campaign for

vowel quality, tone, pitch, metrical accentuation, the disciplinary technology of elocution, and so forth. But it also should be understood, I shall argue, to refer to a generalized *corps-à-corps* combat (hand-to-hand in the sense of a duel, but literally a body-to-body struggle, both individual and corporate or political bodies, as well as the sexual connotation of physical contact) with language that invades all writing (*écriture*) in Derrida's generalized sense of that term.

Let us then look more closely at this *accent aigu*, which in French does not indicate stress, as it does in a number of other Romance languages, but solely a change in the quality of the vowel. Originally, the acute accent was used in the polytonic orthography of ancient Greek to show an *oxia*, a higher or "sharpened" pitch, and *aigu* comes from the same word calqued into Latin as *acutus*. In French, as in a number of other European languages, *l'accent aigu* indicates increased vowel height, which is defined by a certain constriction of the mouth whereby the tongue comes up closer to the palate to produce a more closed quality to the sound. Derrida, though, is interested in more than this strictly *lingual* difference and observes that the presence or absence of the accent is, moreover, the index of an *interlingual* difference between English and French. And the accent therefore makes, furthermore, a difference in sense.

Je viens peut-être de faire une  
"démonstration," ce n'est pas sûr,  
mais je ne sais plus dans quelle

the Black and Arab men more likely to be singled out for police brutality. Among the crowd gathering on July 18, the final words of the two men were held up in English and French on side-by-side placards, “Je n’arrive plus à respirer” translated into “I can’t breathe.” And the list of names of mainly young Black and brown men who have died as a result of French police violence was bound together with the litany in the United States as a series of singularities, each standing in for and manifesting one another, each giving voice to an other, striking a chord with one another—but *each with a different accent*.

Two scenes, then, two parallel demonstrations, yet spoken in two accents, one of activism, the other of philosophy, one specific and local, the other abstract and general. And yet these distinctions are immediately complicated. It is the philosopher who is in the streets. The scene collapses before your eyes, like the gap separating the two columns on these pages. Accent perhaps just is that entangled betrayal, the folding and twisting around one another of singular and universal, each falling short of the other.

What, then, does it mean to pronounce BLM, for there to be a demonstration of Black Lives Matter, *with an accent*? Notwithstanding the universalist character of her public pronouncements (in the past she has also declared “nous sommes des ‘Gilets Jaunes’ depuis notre naissance” [we’ve been *gilets jaunes* since our birth]), the book she coauthored with sociologist and philosopher Geoffroy de

langue entendre ce mot. Sans accent, la démonstration n’est pas une argumentation logique imposant une conclusion, c’est d’abord un événement politique, une manifestation dans la rue (j’ai dit, tout à l’heure, comment je descends dans la rue tous les matins, jamais sur la route mais dans la rue), une marche, un acte, un appel, une exigence. Une scène encore. Je viens de faire une scène. En français aussi, avec un accent, la démonstration peut être avant tout un geste, un mouvement du corps, l’acte d’une “manifestation.” Oui, une scène. Sans théâtre mais une scène, une scène de rue. À supposer qu’elle ait quelque intérêt pour qui que ce soit, ce dont je doute, ce serait dans la mesure où elle me trahit, cette scène, dans la mesure où tu y entendas, depuis une écoute dont je n’ai pas idée, ce que je n’ai pas voulu dire ni enseigner ni faire savoir, en bon français.<sup>2</sup> (MA 134–34/72–73)

(Perhaps I have just made a “demonstration”; it is not certain, but I no longer know in what language to understand that word. Without an accent, a demonstration is not a logical argumentation that imposes a conclusion; it is, first of all, a political event, a demonstration in the street (a short while ago, I mentioned how I take to the streets every morning; never to the highway, but to the streets), a march, an act, an appeal, a demand. That is, one more scene. I have just made a scene. In French, too, the demonstration, with an accent, can be, first and foremost, a gesture, a movement of the body, the act of a “manifestation.” Yes, a scene. A street scene without a theater, yet a scene all the same.

Lagasnerie gives a much more nuanced account of the singularity of political struggles.<sup>3</sup> A portion of the book is devoted to explicating a model of politics starting from the local whose force derives from being anchored in local conditions and organizing even as the struggle assumes a national or international significance. Lagasnerie argues that if every movement carries within it something transposable to other struggles, Le Combat Adama aspires to transform not only society but also the forms and discourses that politics adopts (CA 207). At the heart of this lies a reconfiguration of the relation between singularity and universality. This struggle does not present itself as a general struggle against police violence or racism but starts from the specific set of events of July 19, 2016, and what has transpired since then, building an analysis of the present and of the systems of power to overthrow from that site. This approach is contrasted with a somewhat caricatured depiction of the French left as overly attached to grand abstractions (economic class reduction) whose generality excludes the specific experiences of oppression of the inhabitants of the *quartiers populaires* and is thus nothing but “du racism en col blanc” (white-collar racism) (CA 209).

It is for these reasons that Assa Traoré and the Adama Committee reject the classic call for a “convergence des lutes” (convergence of struggles) that wagers its power on their generalization against a common enemy in favor of an “alliance” that would not dilute their specificity in the name of

What I am entertaining doubts about, supposing it is of interest to anyone at all, would be the extent to which that scene betrays me, the extent to which, from one listening about which I have no idea, you will hear from it what I meant neither to say, nor to teach, nor to make known, in good French.)

Everything in this rich passage turns on the term *démonstration* and on the presence or absence of the *accent aigu* that inflects not only the sound of the word but also its meaning. Without an accent, the word *démonstration* in English names a political event in the streets designed to make public a collective demand or make a show of collective will or solidarity—a *manifestation*, or *manif* for short, as it is typically called in France. With the *accent aigu* in French, a *démonstration* is a proof or logical argument, but it is also a bodily gesture, the act of making public, and thus a manifestation of sorts. The demonstration with or without accent *makes a scene*.

And this is precisely what Derrida is doing in this stagey passage. He is making a scene, directing himself in the very act of demonstrating the theme of his text. More than simply telling us as readers about the monolingualism of the other, he is *showing* us that monolingualism and its effects. A number of issues complicate this scene, two of which have to do with the way in which demonstrating turns on itself. In the first instance, what Derrida seeks to demonstrate is demonstration, the very demonstrability of language, the fact of its showing aside from its potential to signify.

an abstract totality but would offer strength and impetus through mutual solidarity and respect for that specificity, each standing on an equal footing (CA 216–17). But she is uncompromising when it comes to backing the fight to obtain justice for her brother. At a recent event with environmental, labor, and Indigenous activists, she insisted, “On ne peut pas parler d’écologie sans parler des violences policières” (One cannot talk about ecology without talking about police violence).<sup>4</sup> Her model of an *alli-ance* (in Old French *allier* means to bind or tie together) suggests an interlacing of threads more or less tightly knotted together without the series of singularities being absorbed into an abstract totality.

To this extent it has something in common with the vast networks of subterranean telecommunications cables whose differential rhythms and vibrations are the perfect metaphor for the more or less loose entanglement of singular and universal.<sup>5</sup> Such networks were a principal technology of European expansionism, and in today’s digital age they function as conduits of U.S. empire facilitating a renewed domination of the Global South. If entangled wires of interlaced singularities are the highways of mediatized globalization, Traoré seeks to tell the story of a colonial violence interiorized within the metropole from the specific locality of the *quartiers populaires*. In this way, Le Combat Adama resists the indifference of speedier-than-speed telegraphic transfers and transferences. It were as if the *trans* resisted itself in the process of translation across borders

As I shall argue, accent just is this demonstration of language—understood as a double genitive in the sense both of what shows language, what makes it manifest, and also of a concept of demonstration as it is produced by language, how language conceptualizes demonstration, conjures it up like a fable or phantasm. In the second instance, this demonstration is inherently at risk of failure, the scene threatening to betray the manifestation of what it seeks to make manifest. If demonstration is the showing of language, in a logic that the later Derrida characterizes as autoimmune, it thus becomes a de-monstration that undoes the showing of language in the act of showing. It is precisely this undoing that allows lingual difference to splinter into *interlingual* difference.

Before returning to this demonstration of demonstration in the next section, I want to point to two further complications. First, there is the oblique reference to media and mediatization. Derrida recounts that he takes to the streets daily but “jamais sur la route” (never to the highways), recalling the previous paragraph in which he describes the highways of globalization and mediatization on which translation takes place and confronts its limits. Earlier in the text, in a passage that sums up the argument of the book and to which I shall return later, he figures translation as an “autoroute de je ne sais quelle information” (superhighway of goodness knows what information) (MA 81/61). In addition to the specificities of contemporary globalization, one should also hear in

and oceans. The solidarity with the Black and Arab men that Assa Traoré calls “our brothers” perhaps partakes of what Hélène Cixous, in a playful riff on the Freudian resistance of transference, calls “résistances de transfères” (*frères* meaning brothers in French).<sup>6</sup> Accent is both the mark of translation’s passage and the obstacle on which it founders. Its de-monst(er)ization cannot be thought apart from the global media networks on which it is carried around the world and from the complicity of such tele-technology in European expansionism and the coloniality of language.

Lagasnerie points out the political stakes of resisting such fraternal universality in order to hold onto the specificity of the postcolonial demand:

Il ne s’agit pas de monter en généralité mais au contraire en singularité. . . . Si l’on part de ce qui est arrivé à Adama, qu’on en déploie la singularité, on peut poser des questions puissantes. À l’inverse, si on noie cette lutte dans un combat très général contre la “le répression” ou contre “a police,” on risque de tout perdre, de passer à côté de ce qui se joue concrètement, et de ne plus savoir quoi revendiquer. (CA 212–13)

(It’s not a question of assembling in generality but, on the contrary, in singularity. . . . If we start from what has happened to Adama, we deploy singularity. Conversely, if we drown this struggle in a very general fight against “repression” or “the police,” we risk losing everything, missing what takes place concretely, and not knowing any more what to demand.)

this metaphor a reference to how telecommunications technologies have served and continue to serve as conduits and instruments of Western imperialism.

Second, to grasp the significance of accent here, it is necessary to understand exactly what the object is of Derrida’s more or less successful demonstration. To do so one needs to reckon with how Derrida arrives at this meditation on “demonstration.” Just beforehand he has been speaking of “le miracle de la traduction” (the miracle of translation) and how the crossing between languages comes up against the limits of unreadability even as it makes itself readable. This impossibility stems from the singularity of the linguistic idiom. Think of those turns of phrase so specific to a particular source language that a translator cannot render them in the target language without a certain displacement or violence. This often happens when a text relies upon sonorous effects, such as homonymy, as Peggy Kamuf observes of her experience translating the highly poetic and amphibological writing of Hélène Cixous.<sup>7</sup> And yet these instances, far from retreating into the world of a private language, demand to be taken up and carried over into other languages if their singularity is to be felt. Derrida’s preoccupation with the idiom is generalized beyond these specific instances and points to the condition of (un)translatability that belongs to language in general. It is in this sense, too, that accent is singular. It is not something inscrutable but calls

He moreover observes that the universalization of convergence excludes from the space of politics all those who are not readily seen as universal and thus reduces politics to that of the white middle classes (CA 211).

The Comité Adama, though, has notably made much of showing or demonstrating its support for other struggles from students, railway workers, cleaners, postmen, and McStrikers to migrants and antifascists, and more controversially has marched alongside fractions of the *gilets jaunes*. More recently, there has been a promising alliance with the working-class environmental movement Alternatiba. Lagasnerie characterizes this work of composition as a transversal or lateral movement (CA 219). Every movement inevitably spills over into other movements without being contained within a movement of movements and enters into entanglements with other struggles to which it more or less tightly binds itself in a joint bid for liberation. This yields a disseminatory, uncontainable spatiality of accent that is sutured to the temporal singularity or eventality of the *manif*. Accent likewise is indexed to the textuality that Rebecca Walkowitz describes as born translated in that it speaks in multiple tongues and for multiple ears at once.<sup>8</sup> Accent is never reducible to a point in space for it only shows up as accent by virtue of a certain migration. It accents itself as it spaces itself. Likewise, it is always fractured by the minimal temporal displacement of listening in the ear of the other that gives

out to be heard and understood, and then relayed in other accents.

Derrida's anxiety about this demonstration, then, is whether everything that he will have said about translatability and the untranslatability of the idiom in this book will be intelligible given precisely this irreducible untranslatability. What he performs with the undecidability of the *accent aigu* is, of course, a passage or translation of sorts that shows the possibility of crossing over between French and English in such a way that meaning is lost but also enriched through the porosity of the encounter between two senses that cannot be held apart. The accent is what marks this translatability. It shows translation taking place. At a higher level, however, Derrida's doubts concern the intelligibility of that demonstration. He wonders whether his own discourse might, on the contrary, offer a demonstration of unreadability and whether his words might therefore be betrayed in the very act of demonstration. In other words, is the making manifest of translation betrayed by the very accent that makes it manifest?

If it is, furthermore, that *accent aigu* that marks the possibility and impossibility of translation, that makes a *démonstration* of demonstration and at the same time turns it into the demonstration of its self-betrayal, then this shows how linguistic demonstration is in advance compromised by an accent that has always already contaminated language from the outset. Another way to say this is that there is no pure manifestation



rise to a *Nachträglichkeit* or after-the-eventness. Media fantasize about out-speeding speed across these distances even as every phantasm of liveliness and immediation is shot through by the traces of reportage such that accent is always heard as reported speech. At the same time, if such a thing were possible, each incident arrives over digital networks as if it came up as a surprise from behind, unanticipated, but also incidental to the flow of the information highway and accidental in that it appears when the app is opened and can at any moment shoot down the feed out of sight.

This spatial and temporal dispersal and flight reflect how *manifests* tend to overspill and scatter into the *déborderements* of a *manifest sauvage* (the unauthorized or apparently spontaneous actions of small groups of protestors splintering off to engage in distracting the police with cat-and-mouse games, in acts of property damage, or in other black-bloc tactics at the spatial, temporal, and legal margins of demonstration). Such scenes are seized upon as justifications for the demonization of the *banlieue* youth. This translation of demands into inarticulate rage is perpetuated by the media spectacles of *manifests* on our screens that offer us a demonstration of supposedly uncivilized and hence incomprehensible monstrosity untranslatable into any legible demand.

The political demands from the internal colony are recast as the murmurs, cries, onomatopoeia, and rustling of (non-)animal life that inhabit the dark margins of language, teetering between raw noise and meaningful

or de-monstration of language that is not always already monstrous in the sense of being absolutely untranslatable and unreadable. To the extent that the monstrous singularity of accent is radically decipherable and thus breaks with all the rules of readability, it inaugurates its own rules of readability by which it then becomes intelligible, and can thus be domesticated, mocked, or expelled. To rephrase Thomas Clément Mercier's elegant gloss on Derrida's argument in "Some Statements and Truisms," every de-monstration of accent's monstrosity *de-monsterizes* it.<sup>9</sup> This is another sense in which demonstration has an autoimmune quality by which it loses what it manifests in the very manifesting of it. This is how we should understand accent—as that which, to the extent that it manifests itself as irreducibly other, allows itself more readily to be incorporated as exoticism or rejected as an object of ridicule or contempt.

Translation belongs to that domain of speech that does not signify or, more precisely, does not immediately signify without supplement or detour. One can say or mean the same thing in the same language but with a different accent. To that extent, accent has something in common with those other vocalizations suspended between pure sound and sense. It diverts speech into the realm of sensation. At first blush, accent, like other sonorous traces in speech, might appear to be inessential or incidental, as Steven Connor has argued, but the import of the Derridean analysis I want to develop is that accent is, on

speech. They are also spoken—or yelled—in an unrecognizable accent. Their apparent monstrosity stems not only from the militant tactics of protest adopted but also from the way in which the content of the struggle from the standpoint of the ruling class can only be heard in an undecipherable accent, poised for misconstrual and (mis)appropriation.

Insofar as an accent is never mine but always the accent of the other (for I don't hear "my" accent as an accent), accent is always monstrous. It has the character of something exotic or even barbaric, marked for colonization. The quintessential demand of liberal identity politics for recognition and inclusion presupposes that disenfranchisement consists simply in excluding the inarticulate cry of the indigene, in silencing or turning a deaf ear to the voice of the subaltern, when, in fact, in censuring it as noisy brouhaha it aims to reincorporate this irrationality as an interiorized foreignness to contain its disruptive force—which is merely another form of silencing. In short, monstrosity, by virtue of its demonstration, is rendered capable of assimilation, domestication, and correction.

In his study of language's imbrication in French colonialism, Laurent Dubreuil analyzes the different overlapping strategies by which the language of the other might be colonized: it was not simply a matter of denying the subaltern the faculty of language but, moreover, that elements of indigenous speech—Maghrebi-Arabic loanwords or phonemes, nonconforming usages

the contrary, necessary and even that accent just is this necessity of accident, provided that accident is not an afterthought but "there" from the very outset.<sup>10</sup> Accent, in short, demonstrates the trace-structure that Derrida exposes at work in language, deconstructing any opposition between origin and supplement to show that what is originary is nothing but this supplementarity. Similarly, one cannot speak *without* an accent, but more than this, one does not speak *with* an accent either, as if it were an accessory, for speech simply is this singular swerve and corruption that is accent.

Besides Derrida's autobiographical reflections—and I shall return to why accent impels this autobiographical drift—accent has received far less philosophical attention than categories such as shifters or glossolalia, which have fascinated theorists of language. Accent perhaps bears closest resemblance to the latter, which refers to speaking in glosses—that is, in a foreign or "barbaric" tongue which remains mysterious to the listener. Unlike raw noise, glossolalia shows that it intends to signify regardless of whether that meaning is understood. This leads Giorgio Agamben to conclude that it exemplifies the event of language, the very taking place of language.<sup>11</sup> It is to this extent that glossolalia and accent resemble shifters—those elements of language, such as pronouns and other deictic parts of speech (here, now), that remain undetermined without referring to the act of speaking as such. In those instances, a very generic meaning—any "I" or any



of French—would be incorporated into the language of the metropole as exotic savageries and barbarisms. Dubreuil's use of the distinctive—even exotic—term “encysted” suggests that these two forms of colonization are to be understood by analogy with the distinction between introjection and incorporation that Derrida tracks in the thought of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok.<sup>12</sup> He first develops the notion of a “crypt” or “cyst” in “*Fors*,” the foreword he wrote to their *Cryptonymie: Le verbier de l'Homme aux loups*, but the significance of the concepts is reflected in its encyusting as it were in a variety of later texts, including most notably “*Cartouches*.” Whereas introjection describes the complete assimilation of the lost object into the self via healthy mourning, to introject the other into the interior pocket of a cyst is a bid to keep the other safe yet isolated. A Eurocentric perspective might suppose that Traoré's aspirations for alliances emanate from the French republican fantasy of assimilation into universal humanism and equality of legal rights, and yet *laïcité* (secularism) readily twists into a “monster” of identitarian Islamophobia that renders (post)colonial citizens “foreign bodies” within the nation.<sup>13</sup>

As the widespread police brutality inflicted upon Black and brown populations in the *quartiers populaires* shows, this internalized colonialism keeps them anything but safe and sound and instead treats them as what Derrida in *Glas* describes as “*le vomis du système*” (the system's vomit),

“now”—is filled in only once the particular speaker or the moment of speaking is taken into account.

Something similar is at work in accent, which likewise diverts speech away from the domain of signification, but with two crucial differences. First, unlike glossolalia, accent is not an unknown language that can signify for speakers and listeners familiar with the language but is inherently at one remove from the sphere of signification even in the guise of the mere intention to signify that Agamben isolates. It does not *want* to say anything. But accent can be made to signify indirectly insofar as its qualities are taken, for example, as indications of ethnic, geographical, or class origin. In this indexical operation, though, accent does not so much mean anything as it *shows* or makes manifest. Second, unlike shifters, with which it shares this deictic character, accent does not proceed from the universal but negotiates the tension between general and particular by starting from the specificity of an individual's accent whose composite features, while reflecting a series of more commonly held characteristics, are in their totality unique to the individual. In this way, accent *makes difference* and makes a difference among differences. It demonstrates and makes audible the self-differentiating character of language and the voice.

Medieval grammarians argued that empty pronouns, in order to be made determinate so that they can signify something, require a supplement that they called *demonstratio* (or *relatio*

absorbed into the metropole as (r)ejects expelled only to the extent that they may be better re-incorporated into the system of carceral capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Again, however, like accent, this liminal status is not an accident. This position of being “one *and* the other,” “speaker and outsider,” is part of colonialism without being unique to it, Dubreuil argues, while also noting how colonization accommodates itself to physical anthropology’s preoccupation with monsters and teratology.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, “so-called Western thought was *never* confined to an exclusively rational logic,” so that the cry and the scream, as much as they are “powerful signs of refusal,”<sup>17</sup> in themselves do not disrupt logocentrism: “Its supposed irrationality is not productive in and of itself.”<sup>19</sup> This is because the voice, far from being sovereign, is always already in deconstruction. The monstrous, irrational cry posited or thrown outside the *logos* does not precede the colonial metaphysics of the voice but is its effect.

This monstro/asity moreover announces a loss of tongue. It *mourns*. A little sharper than the diacritic accent in *démonstration*, it nonetheless still turns on a subtle shift in pronunciation and a small yet decisive difference between French and English. The absence of the *u* in French mimics the English spelling, but this passage from one language to the other already precipitates a vowel change in English with which the French catches up. The French with its multiple vowel sounds exhibits a dissemination unintelligible in English, while

in the case of relative pronouns). Agamben’s gloss on this body of thought notes that while almost every demonstration was understood to refer to either the senses or the intellect, a further category, later explored extensively by linguists such as Émile Benveniste, referred only to the instance of discourse.<sup>15</sup> Demonstration (without an accent) is thus not a logical process of deduction, moving from general to particular, but simply a singular event. Agamben, moreover, observes that in the metaphysical tradition this kind of demonstration is characterized as a kind of negation in which the specificity of the sounding voice has always already fled the scene.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the demonstration of accent is necessarily a betrayal. What links accent to glossolalia is the combination of something barbarian with this “showing” dimension of language—the co-articulation of monstration and (its) monstrosity—its monstro/asity. When Assa Traoré refuses to know or accept her place and fills the public spaces of Paris with accented voices speaking, as David Palumbo-Liu puts it, “out of place,” her crime is this monstro/asity.<sup>20</sup>

This helps to pinpoint the demonstrosity of accent more precisely. On the one hand, in the exergue to *De la grammatologie*, Derrida characterizes monstrosity as the future anterior “pour ce monde à venir et pour ce qui en lui aura fait trembler les valeurs de signe, de parole et d’écriture” (for that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word,

the translation from German into French shows that very intelligibility as the *monstre* announces a loss of (mother) tongue in a foreign land. This de-monstrocity<sup>22</sup> describes the originary experience of bereavement that characterizes monolingualism—of having no tongue besides the one that is not my own and hence of mourning what one ever had (*MA* 60–61/33). Besides this originary alienation and impropriety according to which every language is the language of the other, it might also explain Derrida's ambivalent relation to his "own" accent and a certain staging of its loss.

Starting from the claim that one enters French literature only by losing one's accent, Derrida goes on to confess his shame at his "French Algerian" accent which, even if its intonations sound in private anger or exclamation, he finds incompatible with the dignity of public speech or publication.<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly for a thinker who has done more than any other to call into question every phantasm of purity, the irreducible *corps-à-corps* struggle with which accent invades language strikes him as painfully unjust. The irony is not lost on Derrida, who seems to experience an added shame in being tempted by a certain censoriousness, confessing to a purity that turns out not to be very pure in that it is hyperbolic. If he surrenders himself to (the French) language, it is not to anything given but only to what remains to come in language and hence to every violation of grammatical, syntactical, and lexical norms—in short, to what we might call monstrosity. The

and writing).<sup>21</sup> Derrida later returns to the question of monstrosity in the course of a discussion of Saussure's defense of natural living—which is to say sounding or phonological—language from the "tyrannie de la lettre" (tyranny of writing), the perversion of whose artifice "engendre des monstres" (engenders monsters) (*G* 57/38). Saussure laments that introducing the exactitude of rationality into ordinary phonetic writing, far from protecting the spontaneity of natural language, would bring "de mort, de désolation et de monstrosité" (death, desolation, and monstrosity). And, fortuitously for the analysis at hand, he continues: "C'est pourquoi il faut tenir l'orthographe commune à l'abri des procédés de notation du linguiste et éviter de multiplier les signes diacritiques" (That is why common orthography must be kept away from the notations of the linguist and *the multiplying of diacritical signs must be avoided*) (*G* 57/26; italics in original). If "L'écriture comme toutes les langues artificielles . . . participe de la monstrosité" (writing, like all artificial language . . . participates in the monstrosity), Derrida's gloss on Saussure clarifies that that monstrosity is not something beyond orthographical capture but is the effect of its intensification in phonological writing—the effect of a proliferation of diacritics. Could the same be said of the monstrosity at stake in the passage from *Le monolinguisme* on demonstration? To assess that, it is instructive to continue to track Derrida's reading of Saussure.

*corps-à-corps* (hand-to-hand combat) of accent is surrendered—translated—into a *tête-à-tête* (head-to-head) with the idiom in the demand “pour ‘écouter’ le murmure impérieux d’un ordre dont quelqu’un en moi se flatte de comprendre, même dans des situations où il serait tout seul à le faire, en tête-à-tête avec l’idiome, la visée dernière: la dernière volonté de la langue” (to “listen” to the domineering murmur of an order which someone in me flatters himself to understand, even in situations where he would be the only one to do so, in a *tête-a-tête* with the idiom, the final target: a last will of the language) (*MA* 79/46–47).

This imperative gives him a pronounced taste for a certain soft pronunciation which poses a challenge for a “pied noir” and which nonetheless reveals what is held in reserve, held back by a floodgate. At this point, the floodgates give way to a lyrical meditation on timbre and tone.

Je dis “écluse”, écluse du verbe et de la voix, j’en ai beaucoup parlé ailleurs, comme si un manoeuvrier savant, un cybernéticien du timbre gardait encore l’illusion de gouverner un dispositif et de veiller sur un niveau le temps d’un passage. J’aurais dû parler de barrage pour des eaux peu navigables. Ce barrage menace toujours de céder. J’ai été le premier à avoir peur de ma voix, comme si elle n’était pas la mienne, et à la contester, voire à la détester.

Si j’ai toujours tremblé devant ce que je pourrais dire, ce fut à cause du ton, au fond, et non du fond. Et ce que, obscurément, comme mal-

Derrida quotes Saussure’s reflections on the possibilities of a universal phonetic writing only to conclude that a page encumbered with diacritics would obscure what it sought to elucidate.

Y a-t-il lieu de substituer un alphabet phonologique à l’orthographe usuelle ? Cette question intéressante ne peut être qu’effleurée ici ; selon nous l’écriture phonologique doit rester au service des seuls linguistes. D’abord, comment faire adopter un système uniforme aux Anglais, aux Allemands, aux Français, etc. ? En outre un alphabet applicable à toutes les langues risquerait d’être encombré de signes diacritiques; et sans parler de l’aspect désolant que présenterait une page d’un texte pareil, il est évident qu’à force de préciser, cette écriture obscurcirait ce qu’elle veut éclaircir, et embrouillerait le lecteur. Ces inconvénients ne seraient pas compensés par des avantages suffisants. En dehors de la science, l’exactitude phonologique n’est pas très désirable.<sup>24</sup>

(Are there grounds for substituting a phonologic alphabet for a system already in use? Here I can only broach this interesting subject. I think that phonological writing should be for the use of linguists only. First, how would it be possible to make the English, Germans, French, etc. adopt a uniform system! Next, an alphabet applicable to all languages would probably be weighed down by diacritical marks; and—to say nothing of the distressing appearance of a page of technical writing—it is evident that by dint of its precision that writing would obscure what it seeks to clarify, and would confuse the

gré moi, je cherche à imprimer, le donnant ou le prêtant aux autres comme à moi-même, à moi comme à l'autre, c'est peut-être un ton. Tout se met en demeure d'une intonation.

Et plus tôt encore, dans ce qui donne son ton au ton, un rythme. Je crois qu'en tout c'est avec ce rythme que je joue le tout pour le tout.

Cela commence donc avant de commencer. Voilà l'origine incalculable d'un rythme. Le tout pour le tout mais aussi à qui perd gagne. (MA 80–81/48; translation modified)

(I say “floodgate,” floodgate of the verb and of the voice. I have spoken a great deal about this elsewhere, as if a clever boatswain, a cybernetician of timbre still had the illusion of governing an apparatus and of watching over a gauge for the time of a turn. I should have spoken of a boom for waters difficult to navigate. This boom is always threatening to give way. I was the first to be afraid of my voice, as if it were not mine, and to contest it, even to detest it.

If I have always trembled before what I could say, it was at bottom because of the tone, and not the substance. And what, obscurely, I seek to impart as if in spite of myself, to give or lend to others as to myself, to myself as to the other, is perhaps a tone. Everything is put on stay-at-home notice with an intonation.

And even earlier still, in what gives its tone to the tone, a rhythm. I think that altogether it is with this rhythm that I gamble everything.)

The singularity of language, the idiom, thus turns out to be timbre or tone, the

reader. The advantages would not be sufficient to compensate for the inconveniences. Phonological exactitude is not very desirable outside science.)

Derrida does not contest Saussure's reasoning on its own terms but instead points out that he excludes a monstrosity more radical and a priori necessary on account of which there could never be any faithful phonetic writing. To this monstrosity that is of a different order from diacritical demonstration Derrida gives the name *écriture* (writing). Far from being a supplementary, secondary, or accidental aberration, the “usurpation” that Saussure associates with writing is already at work within speech. My contention is that *accent* is another non-synonymous substitution for *écriture*, which, without coinciding with it, de-monstrates it.

We must, then, interrogate this sense of (de-)monstration further. At the beginning of *Le monolinguisme*, Derrida sets up his scene of demonstration: “Il est possible d'être monolingue (je le suis bien, non ?), et de parler une langue qui n'est pas la sienne” (It is possible to be monolingual [I thoroughly am, aren't I?] and speak a language that is not one's own) (MA 19/5). Cunningly, Derrida demonstrates in the very form of this scene—with the apostrophe that seeks recognition from the other—the very paradox of demonstration he goes on to elucidate. It is necessary that one first understands what one seeks to demonstrate. One is meant to know what one means or wants to mean precisely where what demonstrates has no

rhythm of a vibration beating against itself and against the discipline of coloniality and its interdict of monolingualism. Accent, too, as something heard is like the syncopated beats of piano strings as they are tuned. It is in this way that we should “listen” to the subtle change in tone marked by the diacritic—the accent—in Derrida’s later scene of demonstration.

Assa Traoré’s strategy of alliance consists not in situating a singularity in the whole series but in understanding the singularity in its vibrational totality and from there being able to discern practical syntheses and resonances with other places (CA 224). Underlying this approach is a sympathetic critique and measured defense of identity politics related to that advanced by Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi from an autonomist perspective.<sup>27</sup> For Lagasnerie and Traoré, identity politics risks succumbing to the same errors of abstract generalization—and thus exclusion—inherent in any politics of representation.

Contrairement à ce que l’on dit parfois, l’intersectionnalité n’incite pas à remédier à cet écueil en invitant à croiser les variables abstraites et les dimensions (race + genre). Elle incite à changer nos formes de problématisation. L’intersectionnalité est in préoccupation qui invite à rompre avec les catégories abstraites et à substituer à une pensée par généralité une pensée par synthèses concrètes. (CA 221)

(Contrary to what is often said, intersectionality does not urge one to remedy this pitfall by inviting us to

meaning or means something else. This aporia is, in fact, a feature of all monstration. The monster, as an aberrant exception exceeding every rule and norm, manifests *itself* as exception. It inaugurates its own principle of intelligibility. Whence Derrida’s doubts later in *Le monolinguisme* as to whether his demonstration will have been intelligible. The monster cannot manifest *itself* because *as* monster it is absolutely unreadable. And yet, once it is read and understood according to the principle of intelligibility it finds, this monstrosity—which Derrida dubs “une monstruosité normale” (a normal monstrosity)—is to a degree normalized and hence no longer monstrous.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, “les monstruosités monstrueuses . . . ne se montrent jamais, comme telles” (monstrous monstrosities never show themselves as such).<sup>26</sup> Since a monster cannot be addressed or faced *as* monster, Derrida’s apostrophe is an invitation to betray the scene of demonstration or, rather, it marks and *shows up* the very necessity of betrayal of any such demonstration. This is no accidental accent in the sense of a mark or a tonal inflection. What cannot be demonstrated is the monster as self-manifestation, the manifesting, the demonstrating of the monster. Demonstration just is this de-monst(e)ration.

This sense of de-monstration is advanced by Derrida in *Geschlecht II*, where he examines the (de-)monstrating function of the hand apropos of a translation of a Hölderlin poem discussed by Heidegger in *Was heißt Denken?* The key point is that the reference to



link abstract variables and dimensions (race + gender). It urges us to change our forms of problematization. Intersectionality is a preoccupation that urges us to break with abstract categories and to *substitute thought through generality with thought through concrete syntheses.*)

Identity politics, as it appears in its liberal guise, is therefore not too specific but *too general, too abstract*. It creates fixed essentialized categories where there is in fact a complex intermingling. But with this “mêlée” one must still be careful to avoid a pluralization susceptible to universalization or to atomization. The risk would be that, far from allowing the voice of women of color to remake urban space, it assimilates their dis/misplaced tones to a white, bourgeois feminism. For this reason, French feminist and decolonial theorist Françoise Vergès, coincidentally echoing Derrida’s metaphors of seriatage, argues that the word *enchevêtrement* (entanglement, with *enchevêtré* literally meaning “enbridled”) is more useful than intersection.

J’ai trouvé importante l’idée d’enchevêtrement, que je préfère à celle d’“intersection.” Car, parfois, c’est assez difficile de trouver la racine d’un élément tant les choses sont enchevêtrées : c’est un mot qui conserve une certaine plasticité. “Intersection” semble supposer que des catégories existent déjà, et que l’on peut savoir ce qu’il adviendra de telle ou telle chose.<sup>29</sup>

(I’ve found important the idea of entanglement, which I prefer to

monstrosity is introduced in the act of translation—that is, in the very demonstration of intelligibility at stake in Derrida’s scene in *Le monolinguisme*. The translator renders *Zeichen* (sign) with *monstre* so that the poem now asserts, “Nous sommes un monstre prive de sens . . . Et nous avons perdu/Presque la langue à l’étranger” (We are a monster void of sense . . . And have nearly lost/Our tongue in foreign lands). What emerges from this overly gallicizing or latinizing translation is a direct reference to an indexicality without referent, to showing without saying. It is a demonstration of pure demonstrating without anything to be shown or understood. This monster “montre rien” (shows nothing) and as such shows a gap that inheres in the sign’s relation to itself—that is, to “une monstruosité de la monstruosité, une monstruosité de la monstration” (a monstrosity of monstrosity, a monstrosity of monstration).<sup>28</sup>

What is interesting is that Derrida’s account of his shameful accent is not simply describing the monstrosity of *métissage* or linguistic hybridity that has been wielded in a tradition of hostility to colonial racism as a measure of resistance against the politics of purity. *Métissage*, though, stands in a highly ambivalent relationship to colonialism. Especially as it has been mobilized by contemporary consumerism, *métissage* proposes to dilute, even erase, race via a universalizing gesture. Given that *métis* is a term to describe people born of racial mixing, of European expansionism and its rape, metaphoric

that of “intersection.” For sometimes, the things are so entangled it is quite difficult to find the root of an element: it’s a word that retains a certain plasticity. “Intersection” appears to suppose that the categories already exist, and that one can know what will become of this or that thing.)

The new form of politics to which this demonstration of singularity aspires is also crucially a matter of forging a new *language* of struggle—one, I might suggest, that speaks with a different *accent* or different accents in that it places the accent on specific experiences of hope and oppression and “faire circuler des signifiants transversaux, latéraux, qui captent des situations concrètes où toutes les dimensions de l’existence sont mêlées” (puts in circulation transversal, lateral signifiers which capture concrete situations where all the dimensions of existence are mingled together)” (CA 224). With this demonstration of accent, we thus return to the question of circulation and of capitalist exchange and globalized highways of translation that stand in stark contrast to the *quartier* where Black and Arab youth might find refuge from overcrowded apartments. The specter of colonialism appears again, as Traoré recognizes.

Tout a été fait avec les jeunes de quartier. Quand on dit que les jeunes de quartier ne savent pas s’organiser, bah on sait s’organiser, mais la parole ne nous est jamais donnée. Leur voix n’est même pas entendue ou écoutée. Construire avec eux un mouvement où ils prennent la parole et où ils

and literal, of Indigenous people and lands, the violence of colonialist appropriation lurks within its universalizing gesture. All idioms, to the extent that they make use of loan words, exhibit an irreducible hybridity. It is this generalization of monstrous miscegenation that threatens to render that monstrous singularity equal to any other and thus to engender the other monstrosity of indifference and capitalist equivalence.

It would therefore not be enough to advocate for a mere multiplication of accents, for in this gesture colonialism already partakes of a certain opening to the other. If Derrida’s philosophy is a thought of irreducible mixture, of contamination, of *métissage*, it is not a celebration of that plurality (as a common misreading has it) but the insistence that this gesture is inextricably *mixed up* with the colonial violence it claims to oppose. The other is still rendered just monstrous enough for ventriloquizing domination insofar as it is made into an example or demonstration of the other. To this extent, demonstration as exemplarity—as the necessary passage of translation and substitution by which singularity shows itself—is always necessarily a betrayal. If each and every accent is exemplary of a more universal structure of alienation in language, it is still important not to misrecognize differential expropriations that can be fought on multiple fronts as a homogeneous violence. A similar risk of theoretical colonization exists with the denunciation of police violence or even “violences policières” in the plural in French.



jouent un rôle, c'est ce qui fait la force du Combat Adama. (CA 224)

(Everything was done with the youth of the neighborhood. When they say the youths of the hood don't know how to organize, they know how to organize, but the floor is never given to us. Their voice isn't even understood or heard. Constructing with them a movement where they speak and play a role, that's what makes of the force of the Adama Fight.)

This problem of going unheard either by silencing or by the stigma of the outraged cry—which is simply another form of silencing—is one of accent. Only what is said in the proper accent—which is to say, without an accent marked as such—is audible. The global mediatization of demonstrations whereby one can stand on the edges of one protest and be watching another streaming live on one's phone—as I did on July 18, 2020, unable to travel to my field-work site in Paris and nervous about the extent of far-right violence taking place before me in Trafalgar Square—exacerbates this problem of underaccentuating voices with an accent. The mainstream media, whose interests align with those of the ruling class, prefer to reduce the manifestation of discontent to a homogeneous global spectacle of violence, deaccentuating the demonstration of locality and singularity. The result is to level the differential forces and rhythms of protest, dissolving, for example, the specific complicity of *métissage* (mix, but also miscegenation) in the erasure of race in French republicanism in a way that

The first danger is to count only those explosions of physical brutality that shock without recognizing that these are incandescent manifestations of that systemic violence that structures the socio-economic as much as the juridico-penal spheres. The second theoretical one is to reduce each of these blows to mere manifestations of a single structural violence and in so doing to do violence to the multiple and differential accents in which violence is modulated in each instance.

Derrida's insistence on the impurity of his surrender to the French idiom guards precisely against confusing the language of the colonizer with the more radical coloniality of having no language to speak that is not one's own. This coloniality is *demonstrated* tonally by accent and is therefore experienced each time in its irreducible singularity.

Comment cette fois décrire alors, comment désigner cette unique fois ? Comment déterminer ceci, un ceci singulier dont l'unicité justement tient au seul témoignage, au fait que certains individus, dans certaines situations, attestent les traits d'une structure néanmoins universelle, la révèlent, l'indiquent, la donnent à lire "plus à vif," plus à vif comme on le dit et parce qu'on le dit surtout d'une blessure, plus à vif et *mieux que d'autres*, et parfois seuls dans leur genre ? Seuls dans un genre qui, ce qui ajoute encore à l'incroyable, devient à son tour exemple universel. (MA 40/20; translation modified)

(How then this time are we to describe, how to designate, this

is not echoed in American constructions of hybridity.<sup>30</sup>

One should be careful to distinguish a critique of global mediatization's indifference from a metaphysical fetishization of live presence and contact. It is not solely a question of solidarity among accents but also of the self-differentiation of accent. Its demonstration or *manifestation* would thus need to move away from the scene of touching bodies not onto the "auto-route de je ne sais quelle information" (superhighway of goodness knows what information) but to the contingency that touches each of these struggles, the contingency that is just simply what happens to Adama or George, the contingency of accent as that part of speech that is only ever arriving. These contingencies tap out a certain rhythm that ties together these demonstrations pronounced in multiple accents without reducing them to an abstract homogeneity or to an entirely disjunct series of occurrences.<sup>32</sup> Accent, which sharpens or strikes more searingly, would be a name for that demonstration of demonstrations.

unique time? How to determine this, a singular this whose uniqueness depends on witnessing alone, on the fact that certain individuals, in certain situations, attest to the features of a structure that is nonetheless universal, reveal it, indicate, give it to be read more "à vif," as we say and because we say it especially of a wound, more *à vif* and *better than others*, and sometimes alone of their sort? Alone in a sort which (and thus makes it more incredible) becomes in turn a universal example.)

It is no coincidence that this demonstration is an aural scene (il suffit de m'entendre/it's enough to hear me) and that this *à vif* that takes the chance of cutting through the Gordian knot of differential intonations, rhythms, and vibrations that binds singularities into a series should therefore be *heard*.<sup>31</sup> This searing *à vif* is, in short, the sharpening of accent to which the diacritic in the later scene attests. It is also this sharpening that makes the murder of a Black Malian in Paris carry and resonate across the Atlantic with the murder of a Black African American in Minneapolis without dissolving the difference that accent makes.

## NOTES

1. Collins, "Assa Traoré."
2. Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, 134–35/72–73; hereafter cited as *MA*.
3. Traoré and Lagasnerie, *Le Combat Adama*; hereafter cited as *CA*. Translations are mine.
4. "Social, climat, reprendre nos vies en main," panel in Bagnolet (Saint-Denis), November 12, 2021, organized by Verdragon, Maison d'écologie populaire and *Reporterre*, at which Assa Traoré spoke alongside Gabriel Mazzolini (Amis de la terre), Kamel Guemari (L'Après-M), Goudo Diawara (Front de mères), Salah Amokrane (Tactikollectif), and Adrien Cornet (CGT Total Grandpuits).
5. Derrida, *Negotiations*, 30–31.
6. Cixous, *Ananké*, 131.
7. Kamuf, "Hélène Cixous."
8. Walkowitz, *Born Translated*.

9. Mercier, "Resisting the Present," 111.
10. Connor, "Accidence."
11. Agamben, *Categorie Italiane*, 65–70/66–71.
12. Dubreuil, *Empire of Language*, 104.
13. Wahnich and Ajari, "L'universalisme nuit-il à la lutte contre le racisme?"; Balibar, "Laïcité ou identité?"
14. Derrida, *Glas*, 183a (the pagination is the same in the English translation). On this notion of (r)ect highlighted by Jean-Luc Nancy in a back-cover endorsement that foregrounds a ject without junction, see Goh, *The Reject*.
15. Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 39/28.
16. Dubreuil, *Empire of Language*, 109–10, 149.
17. Dubreuil, "Notes Towards a Poetics of *Banlieue*," 102.
18. Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 50–51/36–37.
19. Dubreuil, *Empire of Language*, 110.
20. Palumbo-Liu, *Speaking Out of Place*.
21. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 14/5; hereafter cited as *G*.
22. Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, 60–61/33. I attempt to capture here in English the effect of Derrida's neologism *monstrosité*, which, as Laurent Milesi observes, attempts to capture the aporia of trying to name the monster without assimilating it ("De-monstrating Monsters," 276).
23. On Derrida's "self-flagellating candor" in this passage, see Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," 218–20.
24. Saussure, *Les mots sous les mots*, 57; cited in *G* 57–58/38–39 (translation modified).
25. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms," 237–38/79–80.
26. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms," 237/79 (translation slightly modified).
27. Haider, *Mistaken Identity*; Mohandesi, "Identity Crisis."
28. Derrida, "Le main de Heidegger (*Geschlecht II*)," 422/34.
29. Vergès, "La question du métissage m'a toujours interrogé."
30. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
31. Derrida, *Negotiations*, 30–31.
32. On this thinking of rethinking in Derrida's thought, see Bennington, "The Democracy to Come," 116–34, and "In Rhythm," 18–19, where he argues that "part of the logic of rhythm is that this can and must be said in so many other ways too, and that possibility must, as part of its rhythm, also syncopate and disrupt rhythm to the point of arrhythmia and perhaps just noise."

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## What Does It Mean to “Sound Gay”?

### *The (Accented) Voice as Surplus Jouissance*

Ani Maitra

What does it mean to “sound gay”? Can one’s voice or speech really turn into an index, a “tell-all” for individual desires and identities that may not otherwise be obvious? David Thorpe’s 2014 documentary *Do I Sound Gay?* (*DISG*) tackles these uncomfortable questions and their essentialist implications head-on. It does so in a touching, humorous, and self-reflexive fashion while following the gay-identifying filmmaker’s own journey to better understand and develop a more salutary relationship with his own voice. This journey begins with Thorpe’s admission of his growing aversion toward his voice, and indeed, the “gay” voice in general. But by the end of the film, Thorpe is able to overcome his own internalized homophobia and reconnect with his voice, which he comes to see as a reflection of his individual and unique gay subjectivity. What *DISG* documents is this change in Thorpe’s attitude toward his voice. Initially a reason for the filmmaker’s homophobic self-deprecation, the physical voice finally becomes a means for a restorative gay self-assertion.

In this chapter, however, I argue that Thorpe’s documentary also contains a critical textual “voice” that offers a far more ambivalent account of the gay voice. In fact, in my reading, this account remains quite resolutely at odds with the film’s celebratory ending. I contend that, even as Thorpe ends his journey with a redemptive reading of the *individual* gay voice, the journey itself prompts a rethinking of the materiality of that voice as a raced, classed, and gendered “prosthesis”—an attached or implanted object that comes from outside the (socially situated and speaking) body but also becomes a part of that body. The critical textual voice of *DISG* further demonstrates that this prosthetic quality of this raced, classed, and gendered gay voice—whose materiality takes shape both *outside* and *through*

*the utterance of the speaking body*—is inextricable from capitalism’s thoroughly exploitative system of value production.

One illuminating lesson offered by Thorpe’s film is that the materiality of the gay (or “gay-sounding”) voice comes primarily from its *accent*—acquired speech habits that are often read as “not-straight” even as such readings frequently do not align with the speaker’s sexual identity. That is, if the physical voice seemingly offers up “truths” about the (male) speaker’s sexuality, it is the speaker’s accent that becomes the actual bearer of these truths. While the accent and its truths are heard in and through the physical voice, they are not reducible to that voice.

Here the critical textual voice of Thorpe’s film goes even further. It also reveals why the gay-sounding accent needs to be heard as a prosthetic object that is simultaneously vilified and emulated, denigrated and commodified through U.S. capitalist mass media—from Hollywood cinema to prime-time television to Disney cartoons. While every gay-sounding voice has an accent, that accent does not belong uniquely to any one voice. On the contrary, mass-mediated commodification ensures that the gay-sounding accent becomes a portable object, a seemingly superfluous entity that carries a certain surplus value and surplus enjoyment that one voice can extract from another voice. And the extraction of this value and enjoyment becomes possible not despite but because of the partially otherized and contradictory status of the gay-sounding accent, which at once signifies a feminine or “unmasculine” alterity and the promise of racial and class privilege. In its most trenchant moments, then, *DISG* asks its viewers to think of the multiply mediated and ideologically complex gay-sounding accent as a useless and yet essential vocal excess that is repeatedly staged and sold to feed an entropic system of capitalist exchange.

To make this argument, this chapter proceeds in three sections. In the first, I demonstrate that although the film closes with a celebration of the individual gay voice, the interviews that the filmmaker collects along his journey (and the manner in which he organizes them) collectively create a powerful textual voice that urges us to interpret accent as a racialized, gendered, and classed prosthetic object that is distinct from the physical voice to which it attaches itself. In my reading, the film’s approach to the accented voice as a prosthesis converges strikingly with psychoanalytic and Marxist theorizations of the “partial object,” specifically Jacques Lacan’s concept of the *objet petit a* (object little) *a*. A brief second section then dwells on the *objet a* and outlines its role as surplus value in the context of commodity capitalism. Finally, the third section returns to *DISG* to examine how its textual voice represents the gay-sounding accent as a mass-mediated *objet a*, one that generates surplus value and surplus *jouissance* (enjoyment) through decades of cinematic and televisual tropes and labors of queerness that are also regulated by the inequities of race and class. This section also reflects on the critical exposition that the film leaves unfinished as well as its ideological elisions.

## THE GAY ACCENT AS A PROSTHESIS

In his well-known essay “The Voice of Documentary,” Bill Nichols makes an important distinction between the voices “recruited” or “observed” by a documentary film and the film’s “textual voice.” If the recruited/observed voices are typically those of the subjects interviewed by the filmmaker, the textual voice is less an actual voice and more “the style of the film as a whole (how its multiplicity of codes, including those pertaining to recruited voices, is orchestrated into a singular, controlling pattern).”<sup>1</sup> For Nichols, an aesthetically and socially powerful film is one that does not conflate its textual voice with its interviewed voices. The textual voice, as the edited and structured “argument” of the film, emerges through but is also at a critical distance from the recruited voices.

This relationship between the two kinds of voices, however, takes a more complex and paradoxical form in *DISG*’s part-autobiographical and part-sociolinguistic exploration of the gay voice. On the one hand, the film asserts its critical textual voice by organizing a range of recruited voices in a manner that unsettles hetero- and homonormative assumptions about the gay voice, even as some of the recruited voices mirror these assumptions. On the other hand, the on-camera presence of the filmmaker and his voice-over together function as a recruited voice that ultimately also becomes a textual voice championing the individuality represented by every gay voice. This ideological contradiction within *DISG* needs to be acknowledged and explored further simply because what I am calling the unsettling of the gay voice—or, more specifically, the treatment of a particular *accent* as a socioeconomically driven prosthesis that is distinct from the physical voice (more on this below)—is both suggested by the film’s textual voice and kept in check by its individualist ending.

The film’s desire to unsettle the essentialism behind its titular question can be gleaned from its opening montage of recruited voices. As several interviewees (located in London, New York, and Paris) respond to this question posed off camera, what stands out is a lack of consensus. Even as a number of interviewees agree that Thorpe’s voice *does* sound gay, several others separate this voice from the filmmaker’s sexual identity, hearing it instead as “artsy-fartsy,” “intellectual,” “metrosexual,” “nasal,” “slightly melodic,” or “creative.” The fact that these responses vary by location and the sociocultural backgrounds and identities of the interviewees also draws our attention to the crucial role that listening or reception plays in the naming of this voice.<sup>2</sup> The critical textual voice inviting us to interrogate the “essence” of the gay voice emerges through the film’s careful juxtaposition of these varied (albeit urban and Anglophone) recruited voices.

For a significant portion of the film, the filmmaker also positions himself as a recruited voice that viewers must distinguish from the film’s critical textual voice. As a recruited voice, Thorpe begins by admitting to the self-loathing linked with his perception of the gay voice. “Why did we all insist on sounding like a pack of



braying ninnies?" he asks in a voice-over right after we see a group of men—in this instance, actors playing gay men—chatting loudly on a train to a beach town on Fire Island. This "reenactment" of stereotypical gay speech early in the film separates Thorpe's voice from the textual voice that unfolds through the filmmaker's intellectual and analytical efforts to move past his self-loathing and internalized homophobia. And the interviews that Thorpe conducts with speech therapists Susan Sankin and Bob Corff, speech scientist Benjamin Munson, and linguist Ron Smyth best represent these efforts to distinguish the textual voice from the anxieties and normative assumptions that Thorpe articulates in his own voice.

The interactions with Sankin and Corff together reveal the exclusionary and homogenizing ideologies lurking behind exercises designed to make so-called gay speech (or *any* speech for that matter) "normal." If Sankin's advice that Thorpe avoid rising inflections (or "upspeak") and nasality to make his speech more "neutral" initially sounds harmless, Hollywood voice coach Corff's description of that neutral speech as the "standard American melody" that "middle America" associates with the authoritative male voice reveals the heavily gendered nature of these exercises. Here *DISG*'s textual voice teaches us (and Thorpe) that the heterosexist valorization of the "straight" voice and the naming of the "gay" voice are heavily reliant on a masculine/feminine binary.

If the recruited voices of Sankin and Corff represent social agents that facilitate conformity to the norm, those of Munson and Smyth are deployed more directly in the service of the critical textual voice. Munson and Smyth represent sociolinguistic expertise that reveals why the gay voice (in the U.S. context at least) does not solely emanate from gay-identifying men. For instance, Smyth points out in his interview that a man *sounds* gay in both straight and gay social contexts when he makes vocal choices typically associated with women—especially using "clearer vowels . . . *s*'s longer, *p*'s clearer, overarticulating the *p*'s, *t*'s, and *k*'s." Gay-sounding male speech is thus speech modeled on this "typical" female speech and vocal habits. The gay-sounding male speaker, for overdetermined sociofamilial reasons, has learned and/or chooses to speak by giving more weight to normalized female speech and vocal habits.<sup>3</sup>

Here we begin to see the role that the concept of accent plays in the naming of the gay-sounding voice. If "voice" (among other things), names an embodied sonic utterance that may or may not be meaningful, "accent" names an acquired "way of speaking" that includes a recognizable style of pronunciation, stress pattern, and tempo of speaking. Crucially, the specificity (and, frequently, the social marginalization) of *an* accent emerges only through its comparison with "unaccented" speech. In reality, this unaccented speech also has an accent that is "inaudible" because its particularities have been privileged and naturalized as the "norm."<sup>4</sup> What Munson and Smyth identify for Thorpe's viewers, then, is *the accent that makes possible the naming of the gay-sounding voice*. This gay-sounding accent that seemingly "outs" the speaking voice is the product of a set of linguistic and vocal



habits as well as their comparison with a “neutral” accent, or vocal habits that heteronormativity reads as “straight” and “masculine.” Implicit in these expositions of both the normative masculine accent and its feminine or gay-sounding deviation is also an assumption of whiteness, to which I will turn shortly.

After both Munson and Smyth emphasize the formative role that conscious and unconscious emulation plays in an individual’s fabrication of a recognizable gay accent, Thorpe is compelled to rethink his desire to alter his own voice. His quest for a straight voice has to grapple with the fact that the straight *and* gay aversion toward gay-sounding speech is not just internalized homophobia but also a form of misogyny. It is here that *DISG* acquires a textual voice that argues for a nonnormative and nonessentialist approach to accent as an acquired prosthesis, as something that is simultaneously inside and outside the body that speaks or “dons” that accent.

Indeed, such an approach also surfaces in the film through the recruitment of several nonexpert voices. For instance, in a segment where Thorpe interviews subjects who witnessed his coming out, a friend notes, “Right when you first came out, you were sounding super queen and it reminded me of when I first came out. I went and bought a black leather jacket.” Another friend admits that she was annoyed when Thorpe took on this entirely new voice, this new accoutrement to display his sexual identity: “I didn’t give a shit that you were gay. But it bothered me that you had changed your voice. . . . And so, for me, this was like an imposter’s voice.” Toward the end of the segment, Thorpe himself confesses to this imposturing in voice-over, noting that, as an out gay man, he made a conscious effort to sound like a “witty aristocratic homosexual.” The artifice that Thorpe’s friend had noted in his voice was, in fact, his survival strategy. Accent was the vocal elitism that Thorpe felt he could perform as a defense against homophobic derision and violence: “I had spent so long feeling scorned. It was time to scorn back.” Because of the class position and potential socioeconomic freedom it connoted, Thorpe’s gay accent became, paradoxically, the means of being not merely the object of contempt but also the object of envy of a less privileged straight majority. This diagnosis of the gay accent as the donning of a pleasurable and dandy “costume”—which Thorpe not only narrates but, also, performs visually by putting on a white dress shirt, bow tie, cummerbund, and wig before proceeding to pose elegantly with a lit cigarette—suggestively places its prostheticization within complex social hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and class.

Additionally, I would argue that the image of Thorpe—a visibly *white* gay man who is emulating an aristocrat who also appears to be white—brings to the surface an insight that is implicit at various other points in the film, which is that racial hegemony plays a significant role in the social construction of both the straight and gay accent. We should note here that the “standard American melody” associated with “masculinity” is also upheld by a largely white “middle America.” As well, the vocal habits deviating from this norm, and associated with upper-class

femininity and/or homosexuality, are represented as the habits of white bodies. It isn't entirely clear if the filmmaker reinforces or exposes this hegemony when, shortly after the film starts, he casts only white men to represent the “pack of braying ninnies” on the train to Fire Island. We can thus say that, with the appearance of the “witty aristocratic homosexual,” the textual voice of *DISG*—positioning itself at a significant distance from the voices we actually hear on the screen—provocatively argues for the need to see the gay-sounding accent as a product of multiple inequities that characterize the U.S. social structure. Racial, gendered, classed, and sexual hierarchies shaping this structure also inflect the construction of this accent as a prosthetic entity.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the critical textual voice also makes clear that the prosthetic gay-sounding accent plays contradictory roles within the highly stratified social structure. While the accent can certainly be a cause for social stigma or derision, it can also signify a predominantly white subcultural capital that counters that derision. By the same token, alongside being the source of injury, the gay accent-as-prosthesis can also become a subcultural commodity and therefore a source of pleasure and capital-bound enjoyment, or *jouissance*.

Unfortunately, the textual voice that presents the accent as this paradoxical object is silenced or buried when the film finally closes on a surprisingly individualist note. Moving away from its own radically queer efforts to see the gay-sounding accent as something that is at once subjective and social—and therefore not merely a property of the gay subject—*DISG* ends with a rather homonormative message, with Thorpe claiming his voice as a sign of his gay individuality. After months of normalizing speech therapy, about which he has been ambivalent throughout the film, Thorpe enthusiastically tells his friends that he has finally moved past his aversion toward his voice, regained his confidence, and is now able to “get into that head space of like, rah-rah-rah, sound gayer, be gayer, go gay.” Somewhat inexplicably, meticulous self-governance in the form of vocal training leads to an individualist “solution” to the inequities of gender, class, and race that give rise to and sustain the gay accent. A friend reassures Thorpe that “your voice is who you are. It's from your personality, and we love that.” Several gay male interviewees—including the white activist Dan Savage, the white TV personality Tim Gunn, and the Asian American actor and activist George Takei—rally around the filmmaker to similarly reassure him of the authenticity and uniqueness of his voice. Savage, for instance, asks Thorpe, “What's wrong with sounding like you are who you are? Sounding like a gay man? Having a gay voice?” In this way, the essentialism stirred up by the film's titular question is partially put to rest through a collective lionization of the singular gay accent. This is where the textual voice becomes indistinguishable from the neoliberal humanism that the edited arrangement of the recruited voices evokes. This is a humanism that celebrates the gay filmmaker's individuality by disavowing his racial and class privileges. The relationship between Thorpe's voice and his social positionality—his whiteness,

metropolitan location, and Anglophone cultural capital—suddenly and inexplicably becomes irrelevant.

But what would happen if, instead of capitulating to the ending of the film, we linger in the space where the nonnormative textual voice alerts us to the double valence of the gay-sounding accent, to the derision and the enjoyment that it produces as a commodity? From within that contradictory space, how might we begin to see accent as an object that does not so much “belong” to the individual as it is put to work prosthetically in a commodity economy? Before addressing these questions through Thorpe’s film, I will ask the reader to bear with me as I digress a bit and introduce briefly the seemingly unrelated psychoanalytic concept of the “partial object,” or what Lacan calls the *objet (petit) a*. More specifically, it is the role of the *objet a* in the production of *jouissance* or enjoyment under commodity capitalism that I would like to tease out before returning to the prosthetic gay-sounding accent in Thorpe’s film.

#### THE VOICE AS THE *OBJET A*: FROM THE “VOID” TO “SURPLUS *JOUISSANCE*”

In his book *A Voice and Nothing More*, cultural theorist Mladen Dolar offers a striking formulation of the voice that is somewhat contiguous with *DISG*’s representation of the accent as a prosthesis. Drawing on Lacan’s notion of the *objet a*—which represents idealized qualities that a lover sees in the beloved and that are often tied to “organs” or “partial objects” such as the breast, the penis, and the voice—Dolar asks us to see the “object voice” as an appendage that lies between the body and language without being subsumed by either of them. As Dolar writes, “What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body.”<sup>6</sup> The first clause in Dolar’s sentence resonates with our ongoing discussion of the prosthetic accent—the voice as *objet a* is a shared material entity, at once individual-physical and sociocultural. But in the second clause in Dolar’s formulation, the voice as *objet a* is quite unlike the accent as prosthesis since it turns into a dematerialized entity, an emptiness that is between the body and the language but does not actually exist in either of them.

Indeed, Dolar’s second assertion relies heavily on Lacan’s theorization in the 1960s of the voice as *objet a* as an ontological blankness or emptiness that makes speech possible but also remains outside speech. In fact, from this position the voice as *objet a* cannot be reduced to empirical voices. As Dolar goes on to explain, “For what Lacan called *objet petit a* . . . does not coincide with any existing thing, although it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them . . . it is just a void . . . the voice is not somewhere else, but it does not coincide with voices that are heard.”<sup>7</sup> The *objet a*, therefore, is a nonhistorical or transcendental “void” that appears to be removed from sociopolitical norms and thus the materialities of the

empirically uttered or heard accent, timbre, and intonation. The regional accent, for instance, becomes merely "a norm which differs from the ruling norm" that can be codified and described.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the voice as *objet a* remains utterly incompatible with such norms and illusions of identity, meaning, and self-presence.

Such an asocial and nonhistorical approach to the *objet a* is, however, untenable if we turn to Lacan's later writings. By the late 1960s Lacan had become interested in aligning his own thinking on enjoyment, or *jouissance*, with Marxist critiques of commodity capitalism as an oppressive and a self-generating system. And a redefinition of the concept of the *objet a* was central to Lacan's dialogue with Marxism.

The redefinition begins in *Seminar XVII*, where Lacan also rethinks the relationship between *jouissance*, or enjoyment, and the (in)ability of signification to produce enjoyment. If, in Lacan's earlier thinking, the signifier and enjoyment were frequently opposed to each other, from this seminar onward, *jouissance* becomes a culturally mediated experience that results from the subject's encounter with signifiers—the physical manifestations of signs, such as sound, the printed word, the image, and especially the body.<sup>9</sup> That is why in this text Lacan refers to the signifier as "an apparatus of *jouissance*."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, for Lacan, *jouissance* is an effect of a certain inadequacy or incompleteness of the signifier. In fact, what is experienced as *jouissance* comes from a surplus remainder, or "waste," that is produced *because the signifier is lacking or not enough*. The signifier produces the desire for an excessive or surplus enjoyment because it does not fully satisfy and, in fact, evokes a sense of loss or deprivation. And, for that very reason, the desiring subject keeps returning to that which elicits only a partial satisfaction. As Lacanian psychoanalyst Alenka Zupančič puts it, "What it [*jouissance*] does...is necessitate repetition, the repetition of the very signifier to which this waste is attached in the form of an essential by-product."<sup>11</sup>

At this juncture, the *objet a* becomes another name for the waste or surplus *jouissance* generated through the subject's continual movement in the signifying chain of commodities. No longer the dematerialized void that we see in earlier Lacan (or in Dolar), the redefined *objet a* is very much a product of the material effects of the repetition of socially grounded signification. As Lacan describes it in *Seminar XVII*, "It is in the place of this loss introduced by repetition that we see the function of the lost object emerge, of what I am calling the *a*."<sup>12</sup> Effectively, signifiers that stand in for commodities or idealized objects beyond reach also evoke the *objet a*, engendering a feeling of loss and a desire for enjoyment at the same time.

It bears repeating that under capitalism the *objet a* is surplus *jouissance* that *must be converted into surplus value*. That is to say, it cannot simply be a waste or a loss that remains unaccounted for. As Lacan writes, "On a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called accumulation of capital begins."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the final analysis, the *objet a* emerges as that which appears to be a form of waste, excess, or unassimilable otherness but is, in fact, smoothly integrated into capital's regime of surplus value. As philosopher

Samo Tomšič points out in his reading of Lacan, “In capitalism, object *a* becomes the defining feature of every commodity on the market and makes the exchanged objects appear as vessels of surplus-value.”<sup>14</sup> The *objet a* becomes that which masks the incompleteness of the signifier. As surplus enjoyment, it shifts the consumer’s focus from the exchange value of the object to pleasure from the surplus value of the object.

But how, exactly, is the *objet a* manufactured by the hierarchical signifying operation that is commodity capitalism? What is the relationship between the surplus value that the *objet a* generates or becomes and the social inequities that also characterize capitalism? We can now address these questions by returning to Thorpe’s film and taking a closer look at its representation of the gendered, classed, and racialized production and reproduction of the gay-sounding accent.

#### SURPLUS JOUISSANCE FROM THE MASS-MEDIATED GAY ACCENT

As noted earlier, the critical textual voice of Thorpe’s film invites a reading of the gay-sounding accent as a prosthesis, as something that the individual takes on or acquires through repetition and mimicry. But this mimicry, *DISG* suggests, is heavily mediated through mass cultural objects and the capitalist ideologies they reify. For instance, in the segment where Thorpe admits to imitating what he heard as the accent of an elite gay man, the linguist Ron Smyth recalls how he started being called a “sissy” as a child once he began to “talk like the little rich boys on television shows.” Smyth’s sound bite is followed by a clip from the famous “gin scene” in the 1958 film Hollywood film *Auntie Mame*, where the orphaned but wealthy and white Patrick Dennis (played by the child actor Jan Handzlik) precociously asks his trustee Dwight Babcock if he would like his martini “dry or extra dry.” On display in this scene are both an opulent living room and Dennis’s verbal sophistication and clear enunciation as he offers bartending advice to Babcock: “Stir, never shake, bruises the gin.” Thorpe’s own performance as a dandy in *DISG* immediately follows the clip from *Auntie Mame*, along with his voice-over confession that “I was too naive to note that by embracing an upper-class voice, I was embracing a well-worn stereotype.” Inserted between the two confessions, Handzlik’s speech and accent—which are, in fact, not his alone but also the product of Hollywood’s ideological imperatives—are thus posited as representatives of a white “upper-class voice” that is created, in part, *by* mass media. Part of the work of this boyish “queer” accent, Thorpe’s viewers gather, is to communicate whiteness, class privilege, and class mobility as emulative ideals to young and adolescent viewers.<sup>15</sup>

*DISG*, however, goes further, alerting us to two popular cinematic tropes through which male homosexuality in particular comes to be repeatedly audiovisually coded and commodified as social refinement and urbanity on the fringes

of the heteronormative social order. Film historian Richard Barrios acts as the expert recruited voice here, introducing Thorpe's viewers first to the figure of the "pansy" and then to the sexually ambiguous villain of classical Hollywood cinema. The pansy, Barrios points out, emerges in the 1920s and 1930s as the "wise knowing character" whose voice was "something to emulate because he did seem to be on top of most situations." And the stereotype of the dangerous queer, Barrios observes, took its shape from the character of Waldo Lydecker (played by Clifton Webb) in the 1944 Hollywood film *Laura*: "Snide, supercilious, superior . . . it's sort of this torturous jealousy. Is he jealous of the male character or of the woman character? But he does it all kind of through his voice as much as anything else." Again, even as neither the filmmaker nor the recruited voice of Barrios mentions race, it is noteworthy that these gay-sounding villains, as bearers of class privilege, are all white.

The interview with Barrios also reveals how Webb's character continued to influence even the voices of highly popular and well-remembered villains in several Disney animated features, such as the bloodthirsty Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (1953). Some of these voices also represented "nonwhite" cultures, like the ferocious but suave Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book* (1967), who was, in fact, voiced by the white British actor George Sanders. Barrios's sound bite in this segment is followed by carefully chosen clips from more recent Disney films, further suggesting that the stereotype of the evil and sophisticated queer was alive and well even in the '80s and '90s and continued through the voices of the pernicious Ratigan in *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), the power-hungry Jafar in *Aladdin* (1992), and the nefarious Scar in *The Lion King* (1994). In this way, Thorpe's film clearly delineates the mass-mediated commodification of what is heard as the white, privileged, gay-sounding voice, one that consumers—queer and straight—have learned to enjoy and render as other at the same time. Implicit here are the centrality of accent, intonation, and delivery to the construction and reception of these voices.

In the context of our discussion of the *objet a*, *DISG*'s emphasis on the popularity and enjoyment of this genre of accented voices raises the crucial question of the capacity to commodify labor, or what Marx calls "labor power." When the Hollywood or Disney spectator enjoys the vocal performance of a gay-sounding and frequently white actor, what they consume is the commodified labor power of these actors. Put differently, it is by consuming the labor power of these actors that the spectator can enjoy, desire, and extract value from the actor's voice. But given that the non-heteronormativity of these voices remains entirely at the level of connotation—something that is not explicit but must be heteronormatively decoded through the vocal habits that, combined with the character's physical appearance, mannerisms, and/or costumes, are read as queer—labor power here is required to produce an intangible and affective *excess* for which it is not paid. It is the white-sounding elite accent that carries this excess, producing spectatorial enjoyment and attraction to the performing voice, the character whose voice it

is, and, by extension, the commodity that is the Hollywood or Disney film. This, we might say, is an indescribable affective *surplus* value that the gay-sounding accent—attached either to the elite-appearing white body or to the white-sounding voice—adds to the film-as-commodity. Thus, if the *objet a* is that which makes the commodity appear as the container of surplus value, *DISG* begins to signal to us how the mediatized gay-sounding accent tacitly operates as one such container in a predominantly white and heteronormative Anglophone mass culture. Effectively, the textual voice of the film begins to narrativize how the gay-sounding accent as the *objet a* is constructed as otherness that also can be covertly converted into surplus value through its promise of class privilege and/as whiteness.

Also significant here are the reflexive performances in Thorpe's film that render unstable the distinction between the mediatized accented voice and the empirical accented voice. There are several moments where Thorpe mimics in voice-over the upspeak and lisp of some of the Hollywood actors—such as Webb in *Laura* and Tyrell Davis (another white British actor) as the “effete” dance instructor Ernest in *Our Bitters* (1933)—as we see and hear them on screen. This performative mimicry, which simultaneously puts on display the Hollywood actor's voice and Thorpe's voice, is not simply parodic or self-deprecating. Instead, it comes across as a laying bare of Thorpe's consumption and emulation of the accent as the *objet a*. Effectively, what Thorpe performs is a kind of self-commodification by prosthetically donning the *objet a* as surplus value. As Barrios also points out in his discussion of these mediated vocal stereotypes, “Consciously or not, we still use these or parts of these voices and these images in our everyday lives in our persona, without knowing.” *DISG*'s textual voice here seems to echo Mara Mills's recent provocation that “mediated queer voices have been naturalized along with their technological platforms” as well as Sarah Kessler's invitation to hear the “sonic materiality” of the gay-sounding voice as a mediatized trope.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, one question that is also “silently” raised by Thorpe's mimicry and Barrios's interview: would this “donning” of the voice be as smooth or straightforward for the queer spectator-consumer who lacks the racial and/or class privileges of the filmmaker and the film critic?

Limited as it might be in its reflexivity, this account of the accent as the *objet a* also continues into *DISG*'s segment on “camp” as a subcultural style. The segment, where Smyth defines “camp speech” as “acting very gay on purpose for fun,” begins by reminding viewers that (white) U.S. comedians like Wayland Flowers, Paul Lynde, and Rip Taylor became popular through their non-heteronormative performances on prime-time television. These are actors who, as Barrios notes, “mainstreamed the whole idea of camp” in the 1970s and 1980s. Several clips of these television actors—of, for example, Flowers performing with (and speaking as) his female puppet Madame; Taylor sashaying through a crowd in a feathery coat; and Lynde playing an ambisexual sheikh in a 1976 Christmas special—foreground the mainstream commodification of the camp aesthetic. In all these



examples, camp speech emanating from white male bodies is another name for the gay-sounding accent: vocal habits that most commonly combine with linguistic content, bodily gestures, and/or costumes of white actors to create an audiovisual ensemble that audiences are encouraged to read as gay or non-heteronormative. Here, too, accent is the white queer excess that prime-time television simultaneously others and celebrates.

*DISG*'s critical reading of camp speech, however, begins to morph once Thorpe's own voice intervenes to claim a subversive space for these camp celebrities for their ability to disrupt the normativity of mass media and to embolden gay men of his generation. As we watch home video footage of Thorpe talking over the phone in his drag persona, the filmmaker's voice-over recalls how, as a "freshly liberated gay man," he realized that "camping it up could be liberating." That is, while seeing camp as labor power that has been crucial to the production of mass culture, *DISG* also suggests that we hear camp accent as a means of exposing a certain instability or indeterminacy *within* the "normativity" of mass culture. The "straight accent" of mainstream culture, the film seems to argue at this point, is not that straight after all, especially if we take into account all the individual camp accents acting as labor power behind that culture.<sup>17</sup>

And, yet, such a celebration of camp's individuality and volatility, we should also note, ignores how playful parodies of or performative "disidentifications" with mainstream values are not necessarily inimical to the workings of racialized capitalism.<sup>18</sup> It is true that camp—and especially camp represented by U.S. drag ball culture and performed by doubly or triply marginalized subjects such as working-class queers of color simultaneously emulating and parodying white femininity, as chronicled by the well-known documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990)—creates meaningful localized acts of resistance and subversion. At the same time, as Phillip Brian Harper compellingly argues, these acts "do not represent the same investment of capital—both economic and social-symbolic—as do other types of cultural production, of which [the middle-class white filmmaker] Jennie Livingston's film is a primary instance."<sup>19</sup> In other words, an abiding hierarchy persists between the value of the camp labor and the value of the mainstream commodification of that labor, a hierarchy that both reflects and keeps intact the same racial and classed inequities the camp labor sought to critique. As bell hooks points out in her critique of Livingston's film, it is the ruling-class patriarchal whiteness subtending consumer capitalism and mainstream media culture that ultimately "undermines the subversive power of the drag balls, subordinating ritual to spectacle."<sup>20</sup>

Thorpe's film, whose representation of the mediated gay-sounding accent as the *objet a* initiates a penetrating analysis of this hierarchy between the value of camp labor and the value of its spectacular commodification, could have avoided the final pitfall of redemption if its textual voice dug deeper into the question of enjoyment. For the surplus *jouissance* extracted by gay-identifying spectators from the gay-sounding accent as *objet a*—regardless of whether they occupy Thorpe's



exact positionality or not—isn't enjoyment in any simple sense. Commenting on the relationship between capitalism and surplus *jouissance*, Tomšič writes:

Surplus-*jouissance* is not some *jouissance* that would reach beyond another *jouissance*, in the sense that there would be a certain quantity of *jouissance* to which something more is added. The actual correlate to the surplus-*jouissance*, produced by the same discursive cut, is the lack of *jouissance*. . . . The capitalist relations of domination build on this double face of the surplus. Production goes hand in hand with renunciation, the "more" with the "no more."<sup>21</sup>

Surplus *jouissance* (and therefore the *objet a*) is produced in response to a cutting deprivation, dispossession, or negation that *defines* capitalist productivity. Capitalism's profoundly asymmetrical expansion of value is invariably accompanied by the marginalization and devaluation of certain groups and populations that are made more precarious and deemed more superfluous than others. Surplus *jouissance*, or what appears as the *objet a* for the devalued population, is derived from this precarity and, in that sense, from the very absence of any unadulterated *jouissance* without limits under capitalism. Thus, the mass-mediated gay-sounding accent that *DISG* brings into relief also generates enjoyment in camp-oriented viewers by implicitly inflicting on them (or reminding them of) abiding social exclusions and proscriptions, even as the material attributes of the accent congeal in the form of a spectacular aural commodity. Here we are forced to confront the fact that the ambivalent decoding of the mass media text—the messy "queer" combination of spectatorial pleasures and pains that media scholars often seem eager to defend—is, in fact, quite systemic and normative.

Finally, while considering the ideological boundaries of Thorpe's film, it is also worth noting its necessary omission of the non-metropolitan, non-Anglophone *subaltern* voice whose non-heteronormativity may or may not be legible as "gay" or "queer." How does one "sound" non-heteronormative without having access to the culturally commodified accoutrement called the gay-sounding accent? The working-class queer of color immigrant who has migrated to the Global North but does not speak English, or the non-Anglophone queer subject in the Global South—what are their sources of the *objet a* and means of voicing their queerness at home and/or in diaspora? I am not suggesting that the film should have answered these questions, but merely that the whole business of "sounding gay"—as reflective as it is of the workings of (U.S.) capitalism—is still socially and geospatially quite limited in its queerness.

#### NOTES

1. Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," 27.
2. On this, see below as well as the editors' discussion of the "relations of listening" in the introduction to this volume.

3. Mara Mills has argued that this sexualized, gendered, and often racialized labeling and hierarchization of vocal habits date back to the “scientific” pronouncements made by Anglophone speech pathologists in the early decades of the twentieth century. See Mills, “Lessons in Queer Voice.”

4. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 41–42. See also the editors’ discussion of the “neutral accent” in the introduction to this volume.

5. We should note that the simultaneously racialized, gendered, and sexualized connotation of accent in these moments is distinct from the film’s more obvious attention to accent as a form of racialization. Examples of the latter come from recruited voices like U.S. journalist Don Lemon commenting on his own “code-switching” from a “lazy” southern (Black) accent to a more “standard” (white) accent on television, and U.S. comedian Margaret Cho noting the efforts her father made to “rid himself of an Asian accent.”

6. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 73 (italics in the original).

7. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 73–74.

8. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 20.

9. On this earlier opposition between the signifier and enjoyment, see Zupančič, “When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value,” 155; and Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 47.

10. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 49.

11. Zupančič, “When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value,” 158.

12. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 48.

13. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 177.

14. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 215.

15. Daniel Harris makes a very similar observation while analyzing his own fascination with (white) refined British and Hollywood voices as a gay teenager in “homophobic, redneck” North Carolina. Like Thorpe, however, Harris avoids any explicit discussion of race. See Harris, “The Death of Camp,” 168.

16. Mills, “Lessons in Queer Voice”; Kessler, “The Voice of Mockumentary,” 149.

17. This approach to camp cultural production closely resembles that of Matthew Tinkcom in his book *Working Like a Homosexual*.

18. I am referring to José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification” as a politically enabling and performative strategy that neither fully accepts nor strictly opposes dominant ideology. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

19. Harper, “The Subversive Edge,” 97.

20. hooks, “Is Paris Burning?,” 155.

21. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 67.

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## Listening with an Accent—or How to Loeribari

Pavitra Sundar

Each foreigner's spoken English, determined by a mother tongue, each person's noise, fell on a coloring ear, which bent the listener's eye and, consequently, the speaker's countenance; it was a kind of narrowing, and unconscious on the part of the listener, who listens in judgment, judging the speaker even before the meaning or its soundness were attended to.

—LI-YOUNG LEE, *THE WINGED SEED: A REMEMBRANCE*

[Speaking nearby is] a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. . . . To say therefore that one prefers not to speak about but rather to speak nearby, is a great challenge. Because actually, this is not just a technique or a statement to be made verbally. It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world.

—TRINH T. MINH-HA, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY CHEN

### INTRODUCTION

As I ponder Li-Young Lee's words in the first epigraph above, I think of the blank stares and silences I sometimes encounter while out shopping in rural central New York. *What is a brown woman doing here, and why is she moving her lips?* I think of the email I received from a career advisor at the elite liberal arts college where I work, inquiring whether a student of mine needed additional "language resources" (read: accent training). The student, who hails from Beijing, had lived in the United States for at least three years at the time and had graduated from a high school in the States. *I want to help this kid, but I have no idea what he is saying.* I think of the bar in Chicago's O'Hare airport, where Akshya and I paused on our way back from the Accent Research Collaborative's first rendezvous. Her English

hinting at years spent in Eastern Europe, the German waitress asked where we were from (*India?*) and then pronounced our speech acceptable, *not like those Pakistanis*. I think of the mandatory testing and training program to which graduate students from “non-English medium undergraduate educational backgrounds” are subject as a condition of employment at my alma mater.<sup>1</sup> Raciolinguistic pedagogy couched as acculturation and teaching support. *Yes, it’s xenophobic and racist, but we have a responsibility to accommodate students, do we not?* I think also of the feminist music conference I attended years ago where the audience roundly rejected my analysis of timbral difference. My primarily white, American colleagues could not hear what I was describing because they were unfamiliar with the music, the “noise [that] fell on [their] coloring ear.” *It all sounds foreign to me. It all sounds the same to me.*

That which is not part of one’s sensorium, that which one encounters only rarely, can seem inscrutable. Sounds that unsettle our expectations—the voice that appears mismatched with the body that produces it, the accent that doesn’t hew close to one’s skin color, the word or phrase that betrays knowledge of other tongues—can feel out of place.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, such disruptions to the aural and visual field are received with delight. *Where did you learn to speak English so well?* A backhanded compliment, soft in its sting. At other times sonic surprises are pointedly weaponized. *You’re not from here. You do not belong here. Go back to where you came from.*

Many foundational texts on accent and linguistic discrimination begin as Lee’s quotation in the epigraph above does, with the “foreigner’s spoken [language], determined by a mother tongue.” The very notion of L1 and L2 accents, for example, rests on the idea that early language acquisition involves the construction of a “sound house,” a set of phonological building blocks from one’s native tongue that becomes the basis for all future linguistic endeavors.<sup>3</sup> Childhood education in vocalization shapes how one sounds out not just one’s primary language(s) but also those languages acquired later in life. Listeners make judgments about whether an individual’s speech is native sounding (L1 accent) or foreign sounding (L2 accent). In this formulation, it is the speaker and her speech that are accented by her “mother tongue.” Left unmarked—unaccented, if you will—is the “listening ear.” Theorizing the aurality of race in the United States, Jennifer Stoeber proffers the listening ear as a “figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line’s norms.”<sup>4</sup> In elaborating how a perceptual regime takes form and how it molds the way we listen, Stoeber conceptualizes the listening ear as an instrument of racialization. It is a product of a long history of racial subjection, and it racializes what falls upon our ears.

Lee’s reference to the “coloring ear” does similar work. Starting there—instead of the foreigner’s speech—clarifies that listening is not passive. It *does* things, and

what it does is far from neutral or inconsequential. The ear colors what it hears, thereby bending the listener's eye such that the speaker's visage itself is now (perceived as) "bent." Listening thus precedes accent. One listens in judgment "even before" the interlocutor speaks. The listener's a priori assessment is a narrowing not just of the aural field, but of perception more generally—it shapes both sound and sight—and it affects those who are judged (as "accented") as well as those doing the judging. Thus, what Roshanak Kheshti says of the world music industry is true of other contexts, too: "The consumer is called upon to sonically construct the other in the aural imaginary through listening. The body is essentially remapped and the ear is interpellated as the main site for the production of the (aural) other and the (listening) self."<sup>5</sup> As the "coloring ear" makes sense of the unfamiliar, it positions the listener in relation to, and against, the source of linguistic and sonic alterity.<sup>6</sup> All the bodies in the encounter are remapped and placed in particular ways.

To name the ear as that which "colors" what it hears is to take stock of how and from whence we listen. Place, I will argue, is crucial to undoing the alleged passivity and neutrality of the listening ear. If, as Trinh Minh-ha explains in the second epigraph above, we cannot deny our location as speaking subjects, then we cannot claim to be "absent from the [listening] place" either. Location is important not just to locution, but also to listening. Acknowledging the historical and social situatedness of the listening ear—indeed, acknowledging that we listen from *a* place (any place!)—may be the first step in dismantling the social expectations that affirm some accents as "neutral" and others as departures from the aural norm.

Nina Sun Eidsheim introduces the term "accented listening" in her contribution to this volume, highlighting how an ostensibly benign and objective practice in fact accentuates that which it recognizes (read: categorizes) as "accent."<sup>7</sup> In this piece as well as her prior work, Eidsheim notes that we make such vocal assessments all the time—we often presume to know speakers' race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth the instant we hear their voices—but rarely do we cast those judgments as acts of interpretation, that is, as *accent-making* endeavors.<sup>8</sup> As Pooja Rangan explains, this practice of "auditing" others indulges the "fantasy of an autonomous, 'neutral' listening body that can detect an accent without participating in its construction."<sup>9</sup> To counter this "myth of neutral listening" and the static notions of identity and place associated with speech, Rangan calls for "accented interlistening," a reflexive practice that foregrounds the power dynamics that structure the interconnected and relational practices of speaking, listening, and interpreting. In introducing the prefix "accented" to Lisbeth Lipari's notion of interlistening, Rangan tempers the liberal euphoria that sometimes surrounds concepts like dialogism and polyphony (Bakhtin), listening otherwise and interlistening (Lipari), and listening out (Lacey).<sup>10</sup> Any answer to the question "How do we listen beyond ourselves?" must take into account the lopsided structures that bear upon social interactions, auditory and otherwise.

Thinking in concert with these colleagues and with poet Aracelis Girmay, I propose *listening with an accent*. My use of this phrase is similar to that of my interlocutors, but it inflects the theoretical terrain a bit differently. In my telling, listening with an accent is a mode of audition that is keenly aware of its own vantage point, that is, it is an embodied practice attuned to the pressures of the listening ear.<sup>11</sup> It is mindful of how we listen, how we have been *taught* to listen. Equally, though, listening with an accent seeks to listen differently. It represents a departure from one's "listening habitus" in two senses: it departs and it departs *from*.<sup>12</sup> Even as it takes the habitus as its inevitable point of departure, it attends to vocal difference in ways that undermine habitual ways of listening and, by extension, the imaginaries those practices sustain. To listen thus is to go to, and listen from, a new or different place. In other words, listening with an accent is a traveling metaphor. I mean this not in the Saidian sense (though I hope it will become that too!) but in that such listening takes one away from one's habitus, however temporarily.<sup>13</sup> Such a move reconfigures the relationship of the listening self to others, and thereby to itself. At its best, listening with an accent is an affiliative and coalitional praxis, for it entails listening *with* others and perhaps *like* others, not (just) *to* others.<sup>14</sup>

My conception of listening with an accent springs from my reading of Aracelis Girmay's "For Estefani Lora, Third Grade, Who Made Me a Card," which appears in her stunning debut collection *Teeth* (Curbstone Press, 2007). Being a poet and having grown up around Amharic, English, Spanish, and Tigrinya, among other tongues, Girmay revels in the multiplicity of language.<sup>15</sup> She plays not just with the excess of linguistic connotations and denotations, but also with the wonders and vagaries of sounds. In "For Estefani Lora," the speaker receives a card with a word she does not know how to pronounce. As she deciphers the word, the accent of the letter writer becomes the accent of the speaker and the reader. In these and other poems by Girmay, to speak and write and read in an unconventional manner is rendered at once a challenge and a joy. Her poems engage difference not by identifying and reifying otherness, but by being open to it—whatever that "it" may be. They wait for, even court, that which sounds unfamiliar. They imagine other iterations of a single letter, a single string of letters, a single word. They put writing, reading, speaking, trying, waiting, inventing, and a host of other gerunds in the service of listening anew. Listening with an accent thus emerges as a dwelling in uncertainty. It is a deliberate embrace of the "disorientation" that Sara Ahmed writes of, that familiar feeling of being unmoored. As my litany of examples at the start of this chapter suggests, encountering new accents and sounds can be disorienting, and "bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive [and conservative] . . . as they search for a place to reground and reorientate their relation to the world."<sup>16</sup> "For Estefani Lora" challenges us to respond differently to disorientation. In the face of words we cannot read, pronounce, or understand, we must listen with an accent. Dynamic and unbounded, such listening is a mode of relating to others (and to language itself) that is at once xenophonic and xenophilic.<sup>17</sup> Just as

Trinh's "speaking nearby" inspires a "[re]positioning [of] oneself in relation to the world," the auditory practice I theorize in this chapter heightens our awareness of our location vis-à-vis others and prompts a reimagining of our affiliative bonds.<sup>18</sup> It aspires to a wholly new and different orientation to the world. Listening with an accent, then, is a queer kind of listening. It is a queer kind of love. And it may just teach us to loeribari.

#### A CURIOUS WORD

"For Estefani Lora" begins with certainty. The speaker of the poem is a teacher who has just received a hand-drawn card from her student. On the cover is an "Elephant on an orange line, underneath a yellow circle / meaning sun. / 6 green, vertical lines, with color all from the top / meaning flowers." Birds fill the sky, too. The confidence with which the speaker reads these iconic representations ("meaning sun . . . meaning flowers.") falls away as she turns the page. There she encounters a long, cryptic word—"Loisfoeribari"—followed by Estefani's signature. Baffled, the speaker spends the rest of the poem attempting to unpack the word.<sup>19</sup> First she crafts definitions that foreground its ostensible etymology and associations with the natural world and science. Perhaps it is "the scientific, Latinate way of saying hibiscus." Or perhaps it is "A direction, as in: Are you going / North? South? East? West? Loisfoeribari?" Thwarted by this line of inquiry, she plays with the sonic dimensions of the word. She tries saying it out loud, varying which syllable(s) she stresses each time: "Loisfoeribari. LoISFOeribari. / LoisFOERibari. LoisFOERib-ARI." Unable to land on the right accent, she tries placing the word in sentences, changing the context and content with each utterance:

What is this word?  
I imagine using it in sentences like,

"Man, I have to go back to the house,  
I forgot my Loisfoeribari."

or

"There's nothing better than rain, hot rain,  
open windows with music, & a tall glass  
of Loisfoeribari."

or

"How are we getting to Pittsburgh?  
Should we drive or take the Loisfoeribari?"

In each of her attempts to define and deploy the curious word, the speaker takes loisfoeribari to be a noun. It is an object such as a wallet or a drink or a vehicle, something concrete and tangible. She also expects a one-to-one correspondence between the word and its meaning. That is, she treats the word as a textual icon.



Even as grammatical and punctuational choices begin to suggest alternate possibilities—question marks and conjunctions undo the finality of periods (full stops!)—the speaker remains focused on her search for a single, clear answer: “What is this word?”

This desire for clarity dovetails with the speaker’s firm sense of the time and space she herself occupies: “I am in my living room. / It is June.” This being the end of the school year, the card is a thank-you note. The poem reciprocates Estefani’s gratitude in that it is dedicated to the young girl: “*for Estefani Lora, PS 132, Washington Heights.*” The dedication places the writer of the card in a specific borough and public school in New York City. At first glance, these references to time and place might seem like an excessive investment in fixity or an anxious response to the disorientation that *loisfoeribari* effects. However, we might also read in these temporal and spatial markers an admirable self-consciousness. The speaker understands that reading and listening are situated practices—that where she is matters to how and what she understands—and that her position is at some distance from Estefani’s.

The speaker also intuits that in order to hear Estefani’s message, she must leave the comfort of her home and reach for other people and other places. Her first stab at a definition casts *loisfoeribari* as a genus, a botanical family unit. It places the word within linguistic (Linate) and organic webs, seeking to understand it in relation to other entities. The second definition attempts to orient her in space. The speaker hasn’t left her living room yet, but perhaps she turns to face the direction she may be headed. The sentences she crafts around *loisfoeribari* build on the definitions’ gestures to the world beyond. Enclosed in quotation marks, each sentence is explicitly addressed to an unnamed listener. The person may be a fellow traveler, whom she consults about a mode of transportation, or one who has to wait as she doubles back to retrieve the important item left at home (in her sound house?). Or perhaps the listener is one who shares in the sensuous pleasures of music, rain, and a favorite cocktail. Thus, if the poem begins with the idea that reading happens in and from a particular location, it quickly gathers other people and places in its quest to understand Estefani’s neologism.

Aptly, it is when the speaker imagines herself in dialogue with her student that she begins to understand *loisfoeribari*. She composes a letter to Estefani Lora that praises her and her drawing, and then asks what the mysterious word means. Her affection for the little girl is apparent in the way she peppers her note with Spanish and English colloquialisms (“*Hola, querida,*” “I believe that you are *chula*, / *chulita*, and *super fly!*”). This shift in register continues the speaker’s conversation with herself and with the unnamed listener, but in a more intimate and loving key. The speaker (now also a writer, like Estefani) attends to her young friend’s linguistic habits and inhabitations. In writing to Estefani, she speaks (a bit) like her. This imagined epistolary conversation even prompts the speaker to return to the card in Spanish:

I try the word in Spanish.

Loisfoeribari

Lo-ees-fo-eh-dee-bah-dee

Lo-ees-fo-eh-dee-bah-dee

& then, slowly,

Lo is fo e ri bari

Lo is fo eribari

Whereas the speaker had previously taken *loisfoeribari* to be a single word, now she creates room between syllables. She pulls apart the phonemes and holds them in tension, as a set of hyphenated sounds.<sup>20</sup> Then, she puts them back together in a slightly different way, with spaces (pauses) now marking distinctions between words. Over the course of a just few lines, in the move from “*Loisfoeribari*” to “*Lo is fo eribari*,” new words and a sentence are born. Out of one word, many. *E Uno Plures*.

But just as one grasps *loisfoeribari*, it merrily slips out of reach. From here on out the poem has no punctuation marks. Even line breaks cannot stop or slow the rush of sounds and words and meanings that pour forth as the speaker understands (that) love is for everybody. The last stanza, composed of nineteen lines and enjambments and repetitions galore, rearranges *loisfoeribari* into countless configurations. Here, for example, are lines seven through twelve of the poem’s closing stanza:

love love for love  
 for everybody  
 for love is everybody  
 love is forevery  
 love is forevery body  
 love love love for body

Once the speaker “tr[ies] the word in Spanish”—that is, once she pronounces *loisfoeribari* as if it were a Spanish word—she realizes that the problem was that she had been listening with an Anglophone ear. Thinking in Spanish allows her to listen to Estefani with an accent, which in turn initiates a veritable explosion of love. Not only does the linguistic switch unlock four (or five or more) words where there had been just one, it arranges them into ever more surprising relationships. Some lines offer multiple riffs on the theme (“love is body every body is love”). Some answer rhetorical questions posed in other lines (“is love everybody/ everybody is love”). Some craft new words or split existing ones (“forevery,” “every body”). What we make of this playful and prolific translation of *loisfoeribari* depends on whether we pause within a line or at a line break or not at all. The reader is thus invited into this joyous celebration of love, language, and listening. The poem

returns in its last line to a one-word formulation—*loveisforeverybody*—but we hear and read and speak the word differently now. The end, moreover, is not the end: without a full stop to close out the poem, we are left to ponder ever more creative renderings of *loisfoeribari*.

It is critical that “For Estefani Lora” does not close with the speaker having solved the “problem” that was *loisfoeribari*, the “problem” of the L2 accent on the page. Instead, it basks in the complexity of Estefani’s note. What could have been merely an exercise in frustration becomes a meandering exploration of linguistic possibilities. The speaker’s initial disorientation leads to many different (and fun) ways of speaking and hearing *loisfoeribari*. And it is precisely when she arrives at the “right” pronunciation that she conjures a dizzying but delightful array of further possibilities. Thus, rather than directing the reader to follow a single path to (and from) *loisfoeribari*, the poem celebrates being unmoored.

Ruminating on the promise of (dis)orientation, Sara Ahmed writes, “The hope of changing directions is that we don’t always know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even become queer.”<sup>21</sup> A poem that centers love, body, love of body, love of every body / everybody, love for every-body / every body, “For Estefani Lora” is eminently readable as a queer text. “Queer” here specifies not an identity category or a set of sexual practices so much as an off-kilter orientation to the world, an orientation attuned to how the world throws some of us off kilter. No doubt Estefani’s is a permissive note to love beyond heteronormative strictures. Equally, it sanctions love across the borders of caste, class, ethnicity, nation, race, and religion. It is also queer in that it revolves around an “odd” word—a word whose very oddness lays bare the normative functions of the listening ear. In eschewing “straight and narrow” pronunciations and understandings of its key word, “For Estefani Lora” points to a contingent and capacious understanding of accent, one that involves all manner of bodily engagements. In reading a prior draft of this chapter, Pooja Rangan astutely asked me, “Could we think of accent, then, [as] a queering of ears and tongues bent into the rigid linguistic family trees of fatherlands and mother tongues?” Yes! Where accent is typically imagined as a filial mode of speech, I propose accent as an affiliative and coalitional practice, one that reaches beyond the limits of the listening ear. For Ahmed, “moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the world from its ground.”<sup>22</sup> This is exactly what happens in Girmay’s poem. “For Estefani Lora” begins with a moment of aural, oral, visual, and epistemic disorientation. Its splendor lies in the fact that it never leaves that moment. Rather, it extends the initial moment of disorientation *ad infinitum*. Drawing on and crafting a richer, more expansive sensorium, the poem ushers the speaker (and the reader) to a new place from which to listen.<sup>23</sup> Inspiring a newly embodied relationship to the word/world, this disoriented and disorienting poem makes possible new futures.

## DISORIENTING ACCENT

Here, in three movements, is how *loisfoeribari* “disorients” accent:

## I.

*Loisfoeribari* is accented and so the speaker of the poem does not understand it.  
*Loisfoeribari* is accented and (so) the speaker does not understand it.  
*Loisfoeribari* is accented because the speaker does not understand it.

## II.

*Loisfoeribari* accents the speaker as she learns to pronounce it.  
*Loisfoeribari* bends and stretches and moves the speaker’s ear.  
*Loisfoeribari* bends and stretches and moves the listener’s tongue.

## III.

To grasp (how) *loisfoeribari*, the speaker must listen with an accent.  
 To *loeribari*, we must listen with an accent.  
 To listen with an accent is to *loeribari*.

## I

*Loisfoeribari* might commonly be understood as an example of accented speech, what a linguist might call Estefani’s L2 accent. But accent is hardly the property of a speaker. It only emerges in the encounter between the speaker and the listener. Whether or not one speaks “with an accent,” one is only *heard* as speaking with an accent in certain contexts, by certain listeners.<sup>24</sup> Thus, accent does not distinguish Estefani’s speech; it is what distinguishes the encounter between various speakers, readers, listeners, and/or writers. It is the speaker’s impoverished ear that accents *loisfoeribari*. That monolingual ear uses a standardized American English accent to read and pronounce *loisfoeribari* and hence does not understand it.<sup>25</sup> Not understanding casts the word (the world!) as accented. The speaker’s ear assumes a “neutral” listening posture—rather, the speaker assumes that she hears from a neutral place. In fact, there is nothing neutral about the listening ear and the way it relegates *loisfoeribari* to the domain of nonmeaning. Such relegation is an example of what Nina Sun Eidsheim dubs “aural redlining.”<sup>26</sup>

“For Estefani Lora” exposes us all, at first, as clueless—and thus unwittingly dangerous—readers and listeners. It then guides us toward a different mode of listening. We learn, along with the speaker of the poem, to listen with an accent. To listen thus is to understand how our listening is accented in the first place. To listen with an accent is also to tune our ears and tongues to a different place.

## II

“For Estefani Lora” teaches us to listen with an accent by coaxing us to speak with an accent. From the start, it is impossible to name (just) Estefani’s accent as accented, for it is not her with whom we dwell. We sit instead with the speaker of the poem, who attempts to say *loisfoeribari* over and over. She speaks the word in different ways, experimenting with rhythm, pacing, and length with each utterance. If accent names patterns of stress in speech, then it is the *speaker’s* accented attempts, her myriad pronunciations of the word—and, by extension, our own pronunciations—that come to the fore. *Loisfoeribari* accents the reader as she hears the word/sentence, the listener as she reads it. The poem makes accented speakers of us readers.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not we are moved to read aloud as the speaker does, we do have to sound out the letters with her. We try out different accents until we find one that seems to fit the word. This, we decide, is how Estefani would pronounce *loisfoeribari*. This is how we must say it, too. As Akshya Saxena puts it, reading accent “requir[es] the reader/critic to implicate themselves in the process. Reading requires a risky ventriloquism, giving one’s breath to another’s body.”<sup>28</sup> Reading “For Estefani Lora” entails taking on the voice of the speaker of the poem, which is also a giving of our voice to the speaker: we listen (and speak) *like* and *as* the speaker of the poem. Trickier still is that in accepting the speaker’s invitation to read Estefani’s card with her, we are moved to speak *like* Estefani and *as* her, too. If listening to Estefani with an Anglophone ear is a dangerous proposition, then so, too, is ventriloquizing her. At what point does the attempt and desire to speak like her lapse into “Mock Spanish”?<sup>29</sup> To what extent is speaking *like* another name for speaking *as*, speaking *for*, or speaking *over*—actions that potentially erase or subsume Estefani?

Such ethical predicaments and bodily entanglements play out not just via accented speech, but also in the various positions and practices we encounter in “For Estefani Lora.” While the entire poem is rendered as a first-person account, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between:

“speakers”: Estefani, the speaker of the poem, and us readers;

“readers”: the speaker of the poem, readers of the poem, and Estefani, for she may yet become a reader of the letter that the speaker imagines sending her;

“writers”: Estefani and the speaker of the poem, for they write to each other; and

“listeners”: the speaker of the poem, unnamed listeners in the poem, and readers of the poem.

Each position in the communicative exchange is occupied by several people at once, and each is linked to the next. The multiplicity in each of the positions noted above is crucial, for it generates a certain kind of “multivocality,” which in turn keeps the poem from being an exercise in mockery or erasure.<sup>30</sup> Commenting on the ethics of reading aloud, Jaimie Baron argues that “to read another’s words aloud is to give them renewed substance and authority. . . . A dialectic is set up

between past and present, writer and speaker, ventriloquist and dummy, self and other. All are given voice; no one is privileged.”<sup>31</sup> While Baron’s argument refers to recitations of first-person perspectives that are not one’s own (someone else’s “I”), it helps clarify the import of the many linguistic and “acoustic alignment(s)” at play in Girmay’s poem. In “For Estefani Lora,” we encounter many ways of engaging with texts—speaking, reading, writing, and listening—and many individuals who perform these various activities. As readers of the poem, we inhabit a space in which a host of others speak, read, write, and listen alongside us.

In multiplying bodies and bringing them closer together, in traversing and diminishing (but not altogether erasing) the distance between them, “For Estefani Lora” enacts an affiliative politics reminiscent of Trinh Minh-ha’s “speaking nearby.” Trinh’s important formulation, quoted in the second epigraph above, names a methodological practice that seeks to avoid the epistemic violence animating much documentary and ethnographic work. Speaking nearby is a “speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.”<sup>32</sup> It is a reflexive and relational orientation that leaves room for dialogue and dissonance. Following Trinh, we might say that the speaker of Girmay’s poem listens nearby Estefani. After all, if she or the reader *were* Estefani, she would not be baffled by the word on the page. It takes her the length of the poem to learn to truly listen like and speak nearby her dear student. The poem takes seriously the challenge that Estefani’s deceptively simple note poses.<sup>33</sup> If *loisfoeribari*, then what might that mean for the ways in which we engage with others? How might it change our orientation to the world?

One answer is that in order to listen with an accent, the speaker must move—metaphorically and imaginatively, if not literally so. She must listen from a place that is different from the one from which she started. She may not have to travel very far from where she first peels open Estefani’s handmade card, but she must move nonetheless. She must listen *not* from this place (her living room, say) but from somewhere else, somewhere adjacent. It is in going to that other place—in departing from her habitus—that the speaker is able to embrace Estefani’s wisdom and go still other places with *loisfoeribari*. Another answer lies in the fact that the many activities to which the poem gestures (traveling, letter writing, conversing) are all social or dialogic in some fashion. We often undertake them in concert with others. “For Estefani Lora” thus illustrates Lisbeth Lipari’s argument that all listening is interlistening. Closing the space between subjects in dialogue, and between speaking, listening, and thinking, Lipari uses the term interlistening to cast “listening itself as a form of speaking that resonates with echoes of everything we have ever heard, thought, seen, touched, said, and read throughout our lives.”<sup>34</sup> The temporality of listening thus spans past and present—and, I argue, the future. How one listens is a function of the gradual accretion of listening practices that becomes one’s habitus. I argue in this chapter for a listening that is aware of its habitus, even as it moves toward other, more hopeful and generous horizons. Since

speaking, listening, reading, and writing are thoroughly entwined, listening with an accent entails much more than attention to sound.

If to listen is to speak is to read is to write (and so on), then where precisely do we locate accent? What might other activities such as speaking, imagining, and writing—or texting, as Sara Veronica Hinojos argues in her contribution to this volume—teach us about listening? How might they teach us to listen with an accent? How might knowledge of other languages and other modes of communication shape the way we hear? How might the listener's eye and tongue bend the listener's ear? How might reading and pronouncing words in unfamiliar ways teach us to listen more kindly, more humbly, more expansively, and more self-consciously?

### III

My theorization of listening with an accent intersects with Akshya Saxena's concept of "xenophilic attunement."<sup>35</sup> Keenly aware of the uneven inscription of accents in literary texts, Saxena asks, "Can hearing an accent be an orientation in love and affinity toward strangers, a kind of attentive listening to the sounds of another body?" My reading of Girmay's poem suggests that this can be so—with the caveat that the sounds of another body are often inextricable from one's own.<sup>36</sup> Say it with me: to listen with an accent is to *loeribari*. This is a love that, in the words of Amitav Ghosh (on whom Saxena builds), "acknowledge[s] the ways in which both the West and we ourselves have been irreversibly changed by our encounter with each other . . . [and] that in matters of language, culture and civilization, their heritage, like ours, is fragmented, fissured and incomplete."<sup>37</sup> For Roshanak Kheshti, such a radical engagement with the sounds of difference exists as potential, as a kind of queer futurity. What we have in the present is a modern listening self marked by racialized and gendered desires for the exotic "other." Both Ghosh and Kheshti—and indeed, several other scholars of sound, from Eidsheim to Lacey to Lipari to Stoeber—push against the overdetermined aural imaginary of their specific contexts. They attempt to keep listening from being an inevitable exercise in aural hegemony. Listening with an accent is my iteration of this resistant and utopian desire.

Listening with an accent is akin to xenophilic attunement in that it, too, is attentive to questions of history, power, and privilege. It is an orientation to, and a reaching for, those cultures, languages, and civilizations deemed other, despite—and with—a historical awareness of the auditor's implication in the operations of power. It pushes back against a sedimented aural imaginary by calling attention to the reified notions of identity and place on which that imaginary rests. Roshanak Kheshti teaches us that in the capitalist marketplace of global musics and in its academic precursor, comparative musicology, field recordings stand as crucibles of authentic otherness: "Field recordings begin with the notion of an authenticity

in sound as tied to a fixed *place* naturally populated by a discrete notion of a *people*.<sup>38</sup> Accent is similar in that it, too, is construed as a mark of where one “comes from.” It is commonly understood as the sound of place in one’s speech, which in turn is linked to race, ethnicity, class, citizenship, and so on. As is evident in the introduction and several chapters in this volume, one of the problems with accent as a construct is its tendency to fix language to place. It makes place a defining feature of one’s identity. Moreover, as my opening anecdotes demonstrate, accent becomes a way of putting one in one’s place.

In theorizing listening with an accent as a traveling metaphor, I draw on a cluster of concepts—*habitus*, orientation, and speaking nearby—that trouble the relationship between language, identity, and place. Taking my cue from “For Estefani Lora,” I offer a theory of accent that coaxes listeners to jettison our habitual modes of perception. Divesting thus from the asymmetrical and hierarchical linguistic structures we inherit and unwittingly perpetuate demands a decentering of the self. As Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan eloquently put it when echoing my argument back to me, “Listening with an accent [functions] as a form of leave-taking, as a form of leaving oneself (even as a form of departure from identity?).”<sup>39</sup> That is exactly right. In unsettling the “place” of accent, we admit that neither place nor family nor body nor identity determines how we speak or how we listen. We can and must reorient our listening habits and linguistic relationships such that they conjure other ways of being with others. For Lipari, “the compassion of listening otherwise takes us beyond the self and out into the groundlessness and ambiguity of the radical alterity of the other.”<sup>40</sup> My own emphasis is not on the otherness of the “other” so much as the recognition of the embodied practices that cause some to be heard *as other*. The point is neither to (simply) respect difference nor deny it. Instead, listening with an accent acknowledges the contingency and the dynamism of aural/oral differences and is open to being changed by it. It even hopes to be changed by the encounter with that which is new or unfamiliar, or newly unfamiliar. It is a welcoming of the disorientation that comes from eschewing one’s habitual modes of listening and speaking and writing. Juxtaposing Sara Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz, and Akshya Saxena, we might conceptualize listening with an accent as a disidentificatory orientation to the world. It is a xenophilic disorientation—a disorientation borne of a xenophilic orientation to the world.

Listening with an accent is inventive, as inventive as speaking, writing, and texting with an accent is. It revels in unhomeliness—rather, it revels in being at home, but elsewhere, in being at home in multiple places, multiple times. It seeks to hang out in unfamiliar linguistic spaces, in unfamiliar sounds. It listens knowing it may not understand. It may not even seek to understand all that it hears. It may call for more expansive linguistic resources than we otherwise use. It may demand that we sound words (as if) in different languages. It may necessitate listening with other tongues—not “mastering” other tongues so much as listening with other languages at the tip of one’s tongue and fingertips.<sup>41</sup> It may require sitting with the



unknown. It may involve accepting an invitation to elsewhere. No matter what, it entails patience, openness, and vulnerability. It entails effort.<sup>42</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Aracelis Girmay's "For Estefani Lora" enacts the kind of dwelling in disorientation that I am calling listening with an accent. Even as the poem unfolds as a search for meaning, it does not move from ignorance to knowledge. Rather, it starts with disorientation and sustains that feeling throughout. Disorientation leads to a kind of purposeful unmooring and wandering and wondering. Sara Ahmed writes, "to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering."<sup>43</sup> The politics of disorientation I have charted in this chapter also sustains wonder about the forms of *linguistic* gathering, the congregation of sonic and linguistic traces in our tongues. It thrives in "listening out," Kate Lacey's descriptor for an open and eager orientation to the world.<sup>44</sup> Conceived thus, listening registers a fundamental curiosity about the world. Curiosity turns to embodied practice when one consciously and carefully inhabits positions not (necessarily) one's own. Straining against textual and aural conventions, "For Estefani Lora" reveals the listening ear as that which creates otherness. In place of such othering, it pronounces a different relationship to difference. It teaches us not to listen for accents, but to listen with an accent.

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### NOTES

1. A quality assurance workshop that introduces participants to the U.S. undergraduate educational system and its pedagogical norms, the University of Michigan's training and testing program is primarily concerned with "competence in classroom English [which] includes the ability to understand the English spoken by the undergraduates in their classrooms and the ability to speak comprehensibly in interactions with their students." "Policy for Training & Testing Prospective GSIs in LSA."

2. See, for instance, Jennifer Fleegeer, *Mismatched Women*, and Sundar, "Usha Uthup and her Husky, Heavy Voice."

3. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 48.

4. Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7. Lisbeth Lipari offers a parallel theorization using Bourdieu: "Each of us habitually inhabits and perform[s] ways of listening that are shaped by the social worlds we inhabit and that inhabit us." This is our "listening habitus." Lipari, *Listening, Thinking Being*, 37.

5. Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear*, 61.

6. Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear*, 13–14.

7. See Nina Sun Eidsheim's chapter in this volume, "Rewriting Algorithms for Just Recognition: From Digital Aural Redlining to Accent Activism."

8. See, for example, Eidsheim's introduction to *The Race of Sound*, "Introduction: The Acousmatic Question," 13.

9. Rangan, "Listening with an Accent, Or, Learning to Hear Documentary's Audit," 1. I am grateful to Pooja for sharing her chapter draft with me, and for her indulgence and enthusiasm as I built from her ideas—and her chapter title, no less!

10. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*; Lacey, *Listening Publics*.

11. Stoever distinguishes the listening ear from what she calls the "embodied ear," which describes "how individuals' listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power." Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 15.

12. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 39. Elsewhere I theorize the project of listening to aural difference anew as "listening with a feminist ear" in my eponymously titled book.

13. Said, "Traveling Theory."

14. I am riffing here on Pooja Rangan's call to think of "accent as crip curb cut." See Rangan's contribution to this volume, "From 'Handicap' to Crip Curb Cut: Thinking Accent with Disability." Inspired by Pooja's theorizing of a "coalitional" mode of thinking accent with disability, I set out to write an essay juxtaposing my acquaintance Ara's poems "For Estefani Lora" and "Ode to the Letter B" (both of which appear in her first collection, *Teeth*) and a brilliant cycle of poems on disfluency by my colleague Adam Giannelli, "Stutter," "How to Hear a Stutter," and "Stutterfied." (The first of Adam's poems appears in his award-winning debut collection *Tremulous Hinge* [University of Iowa Press, 2016] and the others in *The Kenyon Review* [special issue on Literary Activism, Nov./Dec. 2019].) Juxtaposing Ara's and Adam's poems might have suggested an all-too-easy analogy between immigrant and stutterer, accent and disability. I wanted to risk the very move that disability scholars caution against because I sensed the productive and pleasurable affinities between them. I sought to demonstrate that while neither poet focuses on accent per se, their work could teach us to listen with an accent. I was convinced—and still am—that thinking accent and disability alongside each other could lead not just to a more sympathetic ear but a more imaginative one. I ended up hanging out with Estefani so much that I did not get to the other poems I intended to discuss. Kabhi aur, shaayad.

15. Girmay talks extensively about her relationship to language(s) in her *Bennington Review* interview, "Aracelis Girmay in Conversation with Claire Schwartz." "My mom's side of the family speaks English peppered with Spanish. And different kinds of Englishes—different syntax, speech, pace. English always has felt like the most homespace for me. I feel obviously fluent in English. I can speak Spanish, but there's always a reaching. Tigrinya, I don't speak. So, there's fluency, but I'm also very at home on the outside of language, in a space where I don't understand." My reading of "For Estefani Lora" and my notion of "listening with an accent" mobilize just such a varied and complex understanding of the languages and identities we call "home."

16. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 158.

17. See Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, and Saxena's chapter in this volume, "Stereo Accent: Reading, Writing, and Xenophilic Attunement."

18. Trinh, quoted in Chen, "Speaking Nearby," 87. Thank you to Pooja Rangan for reminding me of this gorgeous piece.

19. In an interview with the poet, Claire Schwartz comments that translation in Girmay's work (and in "For Estefani Lora" in particular) operates not like "decoding or deciphering" a product so much as a "process of reaching." Girmay agrees and explains her process in this way: "In Spanish, if I'm reaching for a word, the reaching turns into a kind of walking around the word, or—if I can't find that word—trying to get at it from different angles. I think in English that happens, too, in different ways. Certainly, writing poems feels like that process to me. Tweaking or the chiropractic movements

of revision or conjugations of a verb—all of that is interesting to me.” Turns out, listening with an accent is like writing a poem. “Aracelis Girmay in Conversation with Claire Schwartz.”

20. For more on language as sound, see chapter 3 of my forthcoming book, *Listening with a Feminist Ear*.

21. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 21.

22. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

23. At the Matters of Voice Workshop at the Stanford Humanities Center (February 2, 2021), Nina Sun Eidsheim asked the audience to imagine how we might expand our sensorium. I returned to my writing with her inspiring call ringing in my ears.

24. Thanks to Akshya Saxena for helping me grasp the vast implications of this point.

25. I follow sociolinguists in specifying that the American English considered the norm is a “standardized” form of the language.

26. See Eidsheim’s chapter in this volume.

27. Thanks again to Akshya Saxena, whose presentation at the Thinking with an Accent conference (May 3, 2020) got me hooked on this idea. See her chapter in this volume.

28. See Saxena’s chapter in this volume.

29. Jane Hill uses the term “Mock Spanish” to describe the way in which white (Anglo) English speakers “incorporat[e] Spanish-language materials into English in order to create a jocular or pejorative ‘key.’” Drawing on Bonnie Urciuoli’s scholarship on Puerto Ricans’ experience of language hierarchies and prejudice, Hill argues that Mock Spanish sustains “White public space, an arena in which linguistic disorder on the part of Whites is rendered invisible and normative, while the linguistic behavior of members of historically Spanish-speaking populations is highly visible and the object of constant monitoring.” Hill, “Language, Race, and White Public Space,” 682, 684.

30. Trinh, quoted in Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” 85.

31. Baron, “Inhabiting the Other’s Voice.” This is another reference I owe to Pooja Rangan.

32. Trinh, quoted in Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” 87.

33. Thanks to Maureen McDonnell for framing the poem thus and asking me to imagine Estefani as the reader of this poem.

34. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 9.

35. See Saxena’s chapter in this volume.

36. For a different take on “bodies as sites through which the other’s sounds resonate,” see Kheshti’s incisive critique of the gendered and racialized aural imaginary of the world music industry in her book *Modernity’s Ear*.

37. Ghosh, “Confessions of a Xenophile.”

38. Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear*, 135 (italics in the original).

39. I am grateful to Pooja Rangan and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan for pushing me to develop this line of my argument.

40. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 184.

41. Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

42. Lisbeth Lipari, too, identifies “several recurring themes that may shape an ethics of attunement: interconnection and generosity, impermanence and humility, iteration and patience, and invention and courage.” Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 6.

43. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 24.

44. Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 7–8.

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