

Introduction

Thinking with an Accent

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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.¹ 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."² 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.³

The event of accent happens through us, by us, and between us, but how do we describe what accents are, and what they do?⁴ 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.⁵ Accent reduction programs tacitly accept and reinforce racism by framing the accented voice as deficient.⁶ Accented speakers are not protected equally or consistently under the law.⁷ On TV and film screens, they are turned into humorous punchlines, rendered as noisemakers as opposed to signifying meaning-making subjects.⁸ At the level of literary representation, accents are typographically marked, serving to racialize speakers and turn language into "eye dialect."⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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."¹² 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ In linguist Rosina Lippi-Green’s much-cited definition, accent is “a way of speaking,” tethered, of course, to the body that speaks.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ To borrow a phrase from Mladen Dolar, a neutral accent is a “vanishing mediator,” one that effaces its own sonic materiality.²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²² 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.”²³ 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.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ Accent takes form in (and permeates) not just speech but also text exchanges, cinematic and literary forms, and voice recognition and transcription algorithms.³⁰ 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."³¹ 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."³² 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 fields 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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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