

PART ONE

Accent as Expertise

Taking Accents beyond Identity Politics?

Thinking Through Two Paradigms

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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).¹ 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.² 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*.³ 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.⁴

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*].⁵

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,”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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 makeover 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.”¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.¹³

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.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶ “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.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²²

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.²³

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?²⁴ 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.*”²⁵ 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).²⁶ 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.²⁷ (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.²⁸

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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*?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Arielle Kirven for her excellent assistance with the research for this essay. My thanks also to Pooja Rangan and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan for their engaging and enabling editorial comments.

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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