

Everything Is Accented

Labor and the Weight of Things Unsaid

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

—TILLIE OLSEN, “I STAND HERE IRONING”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

. . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Temporary. People.
 Illegal. People.
 Ephemeral. People.
 Gone. People.
 Deported. Left.
 More. Arriving.¹⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

1. See Starosta, “Accented Criticism: Translation and Global Humanities” and “Perverse Tongues, Postsocialist Translations.”
2. Thomson, “Measurement of Accentedness, Intelligibility and Comprehensibility,” 3.
3. Hamacher, “For—Philology,” 104.
4. Frohman, “Accents.”
5. De Man, “The Concept of Irony.”
6. Kafka, “The Building of the Temple,” 47.
7. We have statistics and figures but no consciousness.
8. Olsen, *Silences*, 6.
9. Olsen, *Silences*, 39.
10. Olsen, *Silences*, 8.
11. For one instance of this, see Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, which starts with the observation that the migrant “has been predominantly understood from the perspective of *stasis* and perceived as a secondary or derivative figure. . . . Place-bound social membership in a society is assumed as primary” (3), regardless of the increasing numbers of migrants.
12. Olsen, *Silences*, 21.
13. Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 5.
14. Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 25–26.
15. Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 119, 121.
16. Menon, “*Pravasi* Really Means Absence,” 198.
17. Menon, “*Pravasi* Really Means Absence,” 198 (italics added). It’s worth noting that at the same time as Menon insists on such an identity-specific reading, she also leaves an opening for other readings, such as mine: “While my own reading of *Temporary People* emphasises the spectres of *pravasis* as a historical recovery to better explain the complexities of Gulf migration, others may find ghosts of different compelling forces in the same text” (196).
18. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*.

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

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