

PART THREE

A Desire Called Accent

Stereo Accent

Reading, Writing, and Xenophilic Attunement

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A SCANDAL CALLED ACCENT

Thinking back now, there's at least a little irony to the controversy around the poem "How To" (2018), written by Anders Carlson-Wee, author of *The Low Passions* (2019). A short persona poem in the voice of a homeless man, it manipulates speech to sound the experience of invisibility. The poem dramatizes how members of marginalized groups are "asked, or required, to perform the work of marginalization."¹ It begins with the suggestion, "If you got hiv, say aids. If you a girl, / say you're pregnant—nobody gonna lower / themselves to listen for the kick." The null copula of these sentences continues through the rest of the ten lines as the poem recommends claiming greater and greater precarity. Nonetheless, the poem advises against categorically identifying oneself as "homeless" or "flaunting" one's disability. The addressee can see the speaker and already knows all this. The harsh truth is that the addressee neither cares nor can be bothered to listen to the speaker. The addressee is concerned with his own sense of charity and not the speaker's experience of hardship. "It's about who they believe / they is. You hardly even there." The visual order of the speaker's body is self-evident but tragically in excess of its corporeality as it is conjured by the listener's hearing of her voice. Overdetermined by what Jennifer Stoeber has called the listening ear, the dominant listening practice by which sounds come to us already heard, both the body and the voice remain unimportant.

Ironically, this reflection on the performance of one's marginalization came under attack for robbing marginalized voices of dignity. Only a few weeks after the poem was published in *The Nation*, it was prefaced by an editorial note on the magazine's website that permanently identified it as a "serious mistake."² Editors Stephanie Burt and Carmen Giménez Smith apologized for choosing to publish it. Readers were informed that the poem contained "disparaging and ableist language

that ha[d] given offense and caused harm to members of several communities.” The editors closed out their note with the assurance that they were revising the process of submission. “But more importantly, [they were] listening, and [they were] working.”

Although not explicitly stated anywhere in the editorial note, there was something else—beyond the poem’s use of the word “crippled”—that was also obviously offensive and harmful. The poem is in Black vernacular. Anders is white. As a friend said over text, “White dude can’t conjugate verbs like that.” Numerous readers concurred. On *The Nation’s* website, a few readers even offered Standard American English and second person translations of the poem, essentially saying to Carlson-Wee, “Look, your poem could be written, your point made, without the indefensible minstrelsy.”³ The realization that the poem was an example of literary blackface was as “horrifying” to Carlson-Wee as to his readers.⁴ The racialized linguistic stereotypes and throwaway slurs suggested that the poet himself was extracting the performance he wanted to censure. Not only did Carlson-Wee not make his subjects visible, he himself didn’t see them. *They were hardly even there*. Carlson-Wee was “profoundly regretful.” He issued a public apology, invoking his own responsibility and plans for “listening closely.” No subject was specified.

It is no surprise that *The Nation’s* editors and Carlson-Wee turned to listening in the wake of a literary scandal. Listening is a common response of contrition and apology. With its underlying intention to give attention, it conveys humility and respect for one’s interlocutor. Listening thwarts snap judgments based on what is visible with the promise of some deeper knowledge. Listening is thus paradigm shifting. It implies that I am going to shut up. I’ll center the other, follow their lead. It helps, if you are managing a scandal, that the future-oriented temporality of listening also deflects attention from what *has* been said to what will be.

And yet, listening is also what’s at issue in this controversy. “How-To” imagines an interlocutor who cannot be bothered to listen to the speaker and engages her through preconceived stereotypes, so it recommends leaning into those stereotypes and mirroring the abject picture the interlocutor holds of marginalized people. Within the logic of the poem, what is seen colors what is heard. The Black vernacular serves as a visual index of the speaker of the poem. Thus, spoken language—the poem’s diction and rhetoric printed on the page—conjures the racialized body of the homeless speaker with ethnographic certainty. The use of lowercase for *hiv* and *aids* and the omission of apostrophes in contractions minimize and further specify the poet persona. Ironically, as a result, the speaker is made invisible in the scene that’s dramatized in the poem. The poem’s awkwardness draws directly from the poet’s ventriloquism of Black vernacular to spell out racial difference. It is “problematic” because it maps the debilitation of the human onto a language the poet hears as debilitated. Without the use of Black vernacular, “How-To” would itself not be implicated in the coercive performance of marginality.

To use the terms of this volume, the controversy around “How-To” is a controversy about literary accent. An accent is usually understood as the vocal or visual

stress “in a way of speaking” that presumes to index the speaker’s race, location, or language.⁵ In common parlance, an accent that refers to a style of speech also refers to orthographical and typographical markers. When reading a literary text, it is the orthographical accents that stand as and for spoken accents. Accented speech is represented by phonetic and nonphonetic signs that portray differences in pronunciation, diphthongs, word stressors, syllables, and pitch. Thus, conventions, fonts, syntax, and spelling inscribe and mark what the auditory apparatus of the reader hears—or *has heard* before encountering the page.

Textual accents have offered legible and reliable ways of knowing linguistic difference in literature, from Shakespeare to Zora Neale Hurston to Junot Díaz. This capacity of accents to mean something relies, as Friedrich Kittler demonstrated in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1990), on an understanding of written language as representative, as carrying within it a racialized and gendered voice. In his study of the audiobook, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (2016), Matthew Rubery also argues that “word recognition relies on both vision and audition. Mapping sounds to letters is an essential step in literacy.” If Deaf children struggle to learn to read, it is because of lack of access to spoken language.⁶ Silent reading is not silent, he argues, and there is a culturally shaped “inner voice” that guides the reader’s pronunciation of written text. Once recognized by the reader, accented speech sets up circular expectations about the speaker. And yet, until the accent is made audible, until it is sounded out of the silence of standardized prose by unconventional spellings or italics or narrative description, we don’t know it. As readers, we exert more than one sense to *hear* an accent, which may be felt or apprehended visually in script. We read within an acoustic ecology, reading what we hear and listening to what we read.

The trajectory of a literary accent is thus circular. The knowledge that an accent betrays is presumed to name it in the first place. The description of the hermeneutic process as a betrayal is itself worth noting—what’s the secret that an unfaithful turncoat ally has let out in the world? As readers (at least of English), we have come to expect that written language should tell us about both the character and the body that writes. The phonetic English language thus lends an ethnographic character to what is written.⁷ Social realism grounds literary sounds and produces textual embodiment. The tension we witnessed above—between identity and perception, between the spoken, the seen, and the heard—is at the heart of accent in literature. Who did the editors hear when they first listened to (*saw*?) the Black vernacular on the page? What or who will they listen to now—and how—that might yield different results? The subject was missing all along.

As literary scholars, we are used to asking “who speaks?” but rarely ask “who listens?” or “how?” These latter questions motivate Julie Beth Napolin’s book, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (2020), which explores the “acoustics” of the modernist novel. Napolin pointedly notes that the presence of a linguistic difference—be it a foreign language or dialect—in a literary work requires description, transcription, and translation. Each of these practices is marked by cultural power relations that “focalize” or home in on an ethnographic

difference. The questions of who listens and how are particularly resonant in literary texts that are oral and aural, providing at least two iterations of address and at least two layers of the speaker/listener dynamic: there is diegetic action with characters, and then there is the reader as listener and the narrator as speaker. With proliferating bodies—the tangible ones of the author and reader and the imaginary ones of the speaking characters and listening characters—from which body does a textual accent actually originate? Who speaks whom?

This chapter launches a preliminary exploration of the textual and political possibilities of listening to accents in literary works. Far from a straightforward course of attunement (and atonement), listening is a profoundly mediated modality of perception and relation. As scholars of auditory cultures have reminded us time and again, “although often deemed an unmediated physical act, listening is an interpretive, socially constructed practice conditioned by historically contingent and culturally specific value systems riven with power relations.”⁸ While in commonplace terms we tend to think of listening as the opposite of speaking, Lisbeth Lipari argues that it is more accurately a part of an integrated plural of listening, speaking, and thinking that precedes any ethical response. In *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* (2014), Lipari writes that it “requires courage to listen for the not-already-known, and in so doing, reveal our own particular vulnerability and weakness.”⁹ In fact, she suggests that listening is itself a form of speaking because “each utterance and action of listening and speaking resonates with a background context where an always already existing universe of prior dialogic relations vibrates.”¹⁰

Taking the ethical charge of listening seriously, I have two objectives in this chapter. First, I want to make substantive—to trace on the page—the ethical project of listening by asking how do we literally hear what’s written. Second, and relatedly, I am eager to imagine how we can “listen otherwise . . . a listening that speaks—a listening that is awakened and attuned to the sounds of difference rather than to the sounds of sameness.”¹¹ If listening is always relational, a resounding of diverse acoustic ecologies, what are the political possibilities of relationality forged in the event of accent?

To answer this question I want to bring in another text as a sounding board. Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy (2008–12) also emphasizes a careful listening of accents—language spoken and remembered—with respect to the political project of affective attachments on the page and subaltern historiography beyond it. Yet it is a very different kind of literary text from Carlson-Wee’s “How-To,” and it is their dissimilarity that motivates my methodological decision to read them together. The historical fiction of Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy offers an illuminating contrast to poetry that comes with little expectation of verisimilitude. “How-To” is a persona poem. Within the conventions of the form, it speaks *as* a homeless person. Ghosh’s ethnographic and historical fiction, by contrast, seeks to represent with a high degree of fidelity how the characters must have spoken during the nineteenth

century. In fact, Ghosh situates himself as a listener from the very beginning. In a lecture titled “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh describes his political project as xenophilic, “a *desire* to reclaim the globe in my own fashion, a *wish* to *eavesdrop* on an ancient civilizational conversation.”¹²

In both “How-To” and the Ibis trilogy, accents appear at the level of plot, where they belong to the character/poet persona and exist as a marker of the text to be perceived by the reader. Read alongside each other, the Ibis trilogy and “How-To” dramatize the comparative aspect of accents, which are most often (only?) heard in relation to another. But, importantly, the accentedness of Ghosh’s novels interrupt the communicational impulse of his realist description. Like the rest of Ghosh’s oeuvre, the Ibis trilogy is a work of “archival reconstruction” of a historical moment, an imaginative process of recovery.¹³ Like many of his other works, the trilogy is also characterized by a vast historical and transregional sweep. Language plays an important role in reconstructing the British East India Company’s opium trade between India and China, and the trafficking of indentured labor from India to Mauritius. Yet, while Ghosh’s novels are noted for their use of the vernacular, these works also destabilize any truth value of those accents, which are acknowledged as profoundly slippery. Instances of accentedness—of which there are many—only draw attention to the construction of difference and relations that *listening* for the accent makes possible.

ACCENT AS METHOD: STEREOTYPIC TO STEREOPHONIC

In comparative literary studies, literary accent has often been figured as the final frontier of the linguistic, narrative, or literary standard. Accent has appeared in scholarly conversations about multilingualism and comparativism with seductive possibilities. Scholars such as Emily Apter, Lital Levy, Julie Napolin, Vicente Rafael, and Rebecca Walkowitz have invited us to engage with the profound challenge accent poses to monolingualism and/or the national model of languages. Apter and Rafael highlight the “insurgent potential” of accent, figuring it as an act of war against the language one is forced to speak. Similarly, Napolin explores lip-synching in literature as a postcolonial strategy. Levy has compared accented speech to silence as both, she argues, push language to its limits, where it ceases to sound (like) itself. Accent, Levy suggests, fractures and rewires the relation between a signifier and the signified. Accents wear you, the reader, down, argues Rebecca Walkowitz, in an evocative essay on typographic multilingualism and how it makes language less than itself.¹⁴

In several of these works, accent is sometimes used interchangeably with dialect, sometimes with style. As dialect and style, accent can conjure an experience, feeling, or politics. Accents in literary works bring literal voices to the page and rupture Standard American English. Speaking “not like a native speaker,” as Rey

Chow discusses in her work by that name, is itself a resistance to the hegemonic standard, an assertion of identity and history. When one is forced to speak a dominant language, one's residual traitorous accent disrupts that language.

And yet, if accentedness is a site of conflict between the language spoken and the language that is spoken over, then this contentious and discrepant nature of accents assumes that languages are countable and distinguishable. Far from disrupting monolingualism as the natural condition, this approach reifies monolingual models of literature and language and paints accents as the exception. An accent is not silence, nor is it the Deleuzian "stutter" (not fluent, a speech disorder) or even a murmur (soft, indistinct, unclear, far away, not audible).¹⁵ Instead of being inaudible or indistinct, it is very much heard. In fact, as I argued in the previous section, accents only make sense—only register—when they are self-ethnographic, even as they are never quite that. Speaking with an accent does not disrupt monolingualism or a standard pronunciation. Speaking with an accent is the very condition of monolingualism and standard pronunciation.

I share Michael Allan's assessment in his 2021 essay "Translating Whispers: Recitation, Realism, Religion," in which he argues that as a discipline shaped by comparative grammar and philology, comparative literature "takes the fundamental status of language as a given." He goes on to conclude that in comparative literary studies, conventionally "there is no reading beyond language. Language is the material basis for what is called literature, or so it might seem."¹⁶ In response, he presents what he calls "whisper as a method," arguing that "language matters as embodied utterance."¹⁷ In this minor detail, Allan writes, "we can begin to imagine world literature beyond the scope of textuality to consider how we make literature speak. And here, an alternate philological practice emerges: less as a matter of translation than remediation, less language-as-such than language-in-use, less a message to be deciphered than the word embodied."¹⁸

I would argue that accent, considered similarly as a method, illuminates the seams of the comparative method. Indeed, new scholarship on postlingual aesthetics (of which Allan's scholarship is a foundational part) has turned attention to sound as both an object of and a method for literary studies. Accent has emerged as pivotal here because it reminds us that the shape and sound of language are not distinct from its sense. In a special issue of *SubStance* titled "The Postlingual Turn," Rebecca Walkowitz and Yasser Elhariry focus on the lingual instead of the linguistic to highlight the shape and meanings of language as it happens around the tongue. This embodied polysemic nature of language allows a valuation of language without counting languages toward the acquisitive and imperialistic impulse of comparative literary studies.¹⁹

Allan's suggestion that we consider how we "face language" and how we "make literature speak" involves attending to the role of the critic as reader and to accent as method. Reading aloud, as we know, is itself an act of interpretation, and the voice we hear on the page is our own (broadly understood). Accent is not a hidden

aspect of the text for a knowledgeable reader to sound out but an inevitable and necessary part of the reader's relation to the text. The perception of accent relies on the reader's embodied engagement with a text. An accent constitutes a moment of continuity, and attunement to the text and to the other. An accent does not defamiliarize a language but is actually a relation forged in familiarity. None of the representational accents register and make sense until we are ourselves implicated in listening to them and sounding them as a reader. An accent becomes intelligible in relations of speaking and listening. Rather than an instance where something—a sound, affect, style—sticks out, accent is at first a recognition, a moment of resonance, that emerges from a place of unknowing as a desire for familiarity. It is a bestowal of attention. In addition to defamiliarizing a dominant language, the detection of accent is also a fraught—definitely fraught—performance of a kind of xenophilic attunement.

In xenophilic attunement an accent still has the potential to conjure a body, but a collective body, not an ethnographic body marked by race, class, or caste. Accent gives the reader's voice and breath to the text. It interrupts silent reading, and it supplies a different voice—our own—to the text. In her study of transatlantic solidarity of the Black diaspora, *Africa in Stereo* (2013), Tsitsi Jaji offers the stereo as a metaphor of solidarity, "one which could bear witness to difference and respond to it in joyful creativity, one which values individual listening as much as enunciation as (pro)active dimensions of expressivity."²⁰ Jaji describes stereo as an effect that creates the impression of "being surrounded by the contours of a voluminous, extensive, three-dimensional body."²¹ In audio engineering, a stereophonic system creates the illusion of being surrounded by a three-dimensional shell of sound. In printing, it produces an impression of an original solid object. "Stereo in these technologies refers to tools for experiencing the phenomenon of solidity. And stereo as a metaphor indicates a means of experiencing solidarity, the choice to work en bloc."²² Accent reminds us that listening is plural but not identical, creating a stereophonic effect in the reading of the sounds of the writer, narrator, reader and the text, where the accent belongs to all of us.

What if we probed accent from a place of unknowing, as a desire for familiarity? What might it mean to hear and read accent lovingly?

UNRELIABLE SUTURE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY

In the three novels of the Ibis trilogy—*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—accent is both the story and the style. The trilogy is set in the years leading up to the First Opium War in the nineteenth century. It is named after the slave-turned-trading ship *Ibis*, on board of which most of the characters meet for the first time. The story of capitalism and imperialism is told through a cast of ordinary people. These include an American sailor, Bihari peasants of different

castes, Parsi businessmen, British and Chinese traders, a botanist of French origin, Cantonese boat people, and a disgraced Bengali aristocrat. Calcutta, where the *Ibis* is docked, is the hub of British colonialism as well. The ship was brought there by Zachary Reid, a mixed-race American sailor from Baltimore. He is assisted by a Rohingya man named Serang Ali. In Calcutta, Reid falls in love with Paulette Lambert, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist and a Mauritian-French mother, and who was raised with her Muslim Indian nanny's son. Mr. Doughty is a midlevel bureaucrat who serves as a liaison between the East India Company and the American shipping firm Burnham and Co. The firm is slowly shifting its interests in opium trade to the transport of indentured labor to Mauritius. Burnham's prime investor is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the symbol of a crumbling feudal order of landed gentry.

Together, these novels present a subaltern history of global migration in the nineteenth century, where accent appears as what Lawrence Abu Hamdan has called a "biography of migration" rather than "an immediately distinguishable sound that avows its unshakable roots neatly within the confines of a nation-state."²³ In "*Ibis* Chrestomathy"—a paratextual aid found on Ghosh's blog—Ghosh uses the same word, *girmityas*, for the indentured laborers as the loan words that find use in different languages. *Girmityas* are so called because their names were "on 'girmits'" (agreements) for the exchange of money that was paid to their families before "they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld."²⁴ If, in the world of people, "migration becomes the great equalizer for the people . . . ripping apart all existing hierarchies"²⁵ of caste and class, then, in the linguistic world, words seem to intermingle with disregard for linguistic distinctions, far away from what was ever home.

Ghosh's use of *girmitya*, an English word that is (mis)heard and then (mis)pronounced by Indian speakers, highlights how foundationally worlds novelistic and real are shaped by the sounds of spoken words as well as the attachments forged through them.²⁶ The polyphony and multilingualism of the novels makes Ghosh's prose stand out, which itself attains a kind of distinguishable accent. This accent is born of what B. Venkat Mani, drawing on Jahan Ramazani, calls "code-stitching."²⁷ The novels suture different languages together rather than switch between them or translate from one minor language into a dominant language. Such linguistic hybridity befits both the novel form, the region, and the story Ghosh is telling. Accent has shaped these worlds, and the novels' accented and multilingual telling enable an immersive stylistic conjuring of the ship.

Accent as the inflection of one language by another—language of the character, the writer, the narrator, and the reader—is the moment of suture. The sense of feeling around for kinship is part of Ghosh's linguistic and narrative style throughout the *Ibis* trilogy, as it is in his other works. These stylistic choices are political, shaped by what Ghosh—borrowing from Leela Gandhi's study of affective attachments between the colonizer and the colonized—has called his "xenophilia." The

word xenophilia literally means a love of the other and an affinity for strangers. Casting it in affective terms, Ghosh ascribes to it an “anti-colonial impulse.” In “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh variously describes it as “a *wish* to acknowledge the ways in which both the West and we ourselves have been irreversibly changed by our encounter with each other” and “a *yearning* not for a universalism of principles and philosophy, but one of face-to-face encounters, of everyday experience.”²⁸

Ghosh specifically invokes listening to describe xenophilia, as I noted above. Eavesdropping is different from a face-to-face encounter. In the Levinasian tradition, writes Lipari, the face is the sign of the other that transcends social categories of identity, and ethics derives from the recognition of this face in all its otherness.²⁹ Eliminating the face altogether emphasizes listening and attunement as the means of an ethical response to the other. Accent—as the heard—gains greater ethical implications. Mediated in the xenophilic and wishful eavesdropping, the accented English of the novels seeks familiarity—“the ways in which we are changed by our encounter with each other”—to forge political relations in that knowledge. Such xenophilic attunement makes hearing accent an homage to the “interrupted cosmopolitanism” of an idea like the Non-Aligned Movement, which Ghosh also mentions in that essay.

This linguistic polyphony—heard by different ears—infuses the novel with the quiet movement of a ship on water. The prose feels heaving and rhythmic, almost as if alive with the sounds and breath of its human inhabitants. The dominant language—the linguistic medium—of the novels is English, but over the course of the trilogy this English is sounded through all the other languages the characters speak and the regions they belong to. The novels can feel verbose and sometimes indulgent as the author marshals a truly wide variety of languages, from recorded contemporary to ancient languages—in standardized forms as well as unformalized pidgins and creoles. The languages included are English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Latin, Cantonese, and French Creole. Hybrid dialects and pidgin like American slang and Laskari are also mentioned, as are many other Indian languages like Hindustani, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Tamil, Marathi, Kachhi, Konkani, Telugu, and Oriya.

Yet this linguistic polyphony does not enhance the trilogy’s verisimilitudinous claims but instead undermines them. It renders the project of “reclaiming the globe in my fashion” constitutively suspect. Some of the languages that appear in the Ibis trilogy are anachronistic, and these linguistic inventions trouble the realist and ethical claims of the novels. Vedita Cowaloosur writes that there is little evidence of the way people actually spoke in India in the mid-nineteenth century. “Before recordings were made in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following George Abraham Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India (conducted between 1894 and 1928), there was little documentation of actual demotic speech in that era.”³⁰ Likewise, toward the end of the trilogy, especially in *Flood of Fire*, Ghosh

has Deeti speaking in Mauritian Creole, which would not have been the language she spoke as a first-generation immigrant, since it developed as the language of the region only with the subsequent generations of language practitioners.³¹

The novels seem to consciously dispense with a hierarchy among the many languages and accents. These different invented and existing languages are usually not distinguished. They have the effect of bleeding into each other and inflecting the English of Ghosh's Anglophone novel, especially since most of the trilogy is written phonetically but left graphically unmarked.³² Looking at the page, the reader encounters the roman script, which may or may not immediately seem phonetic depending on the reader's familiarity with any of the languages above. In this way the trilogy indexes the experiences of ordinary people—indeed, ordinariness itself—in vast networks of oceanic and maritime cultures.

Take this example of the effect created by the lack of orthographical markers. Languages seem leveled here, and neither Serang Ali nor Zachary Reid nor Rajoo is marked as sounding different. There is no optical index of linguistic difference. Serang Ali's Laskari-language statements are rendered phonetically, not italicized to mark their deviation from standard English. The italics, when they do appear, only distinguish his vocal inflection and emphasis on certain syllables as Rajoo sings the psalm. The absent orthographical emphasis belies the phonic stresses in this conversation that are only produced if the reader sounds the words out loud.

"Nebba mind," said Serang Ali. "One-piece song-bugger hab got." He beckoned to a tall, spidery ship's-boy called Rajoo. "This launder blongi one-time Mission-boy. Joss-man hab learn him one-piece saam."

"Psalm?" said Zachary, in surprise. "Which one?"

As if in answer, the young lascar began to sing: "Why *do* the heathen so furious-ly rage together . . . ?"³³

If an accent is a stress, there is not much that is emphasized or singled out in the novel except the cadence of Rajoo's singing. Still, the language of the novel is certainly *stressed*, tense, and burdened. This unmarked orthography and a rife internal tension mimic the plot of the novels. Zachary's puzzlement at Rajoo's knowledge of biblical hymns might position him as someone who knows more or commands greater authority. However, it is actually Serang Ali who helps Zachary settle into his eventual role as an officer on the ship and as a "white" man in India.³⁴ Thus, these relations to knowledge are also reversed. Earlier in the novel, it is Zachary who must learn to "wrap his tongue around words like 'dal,' 'masala.'" "He has to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became the 'ringeen,' 'avast!' was 'bas!,' and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from 'all's well' to 'alzbel,'" and so on.³⁵ In both instances, the sound of words heard through others' mouths are then committed to memory without any tinge of discomfort or authority, offering yet another example of how words—their languages and sounds—travel in the Ibis trilogy.

While English is the dominant language in the trilogy, it is also transformed in colonial and capitalist circuits. Power is often associated with linguistic knowledge manifested not in a standard English but in the invented and accented English that absorbs other languages, signaling reach, adaptability, and history. This fact is perhaps most visibly borne out in the use of *zubben*, which itself is an Anglicized pronunciation of the Urdu word *zubaan* (language or tongue) by the British residents of Calcutta, who speckle English with Hindustani expressions. Before this accented English is taken as an unconditional celebration of hybrid languages, we would be wise to remember Mr. Doughty's recommendation to "mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn't sound too good: don't want the world to think you've gone native."³⁶ In this manipulation of a "vernacular" language in the service of colonial governance, there is such a thing as being too native. Indeed, what "gub-brows"—frightens—the native is the accent. It is the uncanny sound of one's own language coming out of the mouths of those who are racialized differently and in positions of authority. While minimal orthographic accents have created the sense of the demotic, the polyphony of the novelistic world as of the colonial world is highly controlled. For instance, in contrast to the British *zubben* that ruled the land, the natives who spoke correct English were humiliated and mocked. In a reversal of stereotypes, hybrid English is associated with power and standard English is laughable.

TWO SCENES OF LISTENING

The *Ibis* carries a large number of people from different backgrounds. This fact prompts everyone to try and figure out what they share in common. Aboard the *Ibis*, characters try to place each other by their accents. There's a lot of "you are one of us" and "you aren't one of us." These moments are tender, eager, and attentive as well as presumptuous. Thrown together on the ship and traveling to unknown lands, the characters are seeking the comfort of familiar sounds. The narrator assists in this process by describing some accents as "raffish" and others as "refined and silky." Still, despite this mesmerizing attention to linguistic detail—especially to how languages are spoken—the characters' accents repeatedly prove to be deceptive or inadequate as identity markers. Mishearing and misidentifying are running conceits in the novels; no characters really sound like they should. Their accents are always surprising and unexpected. Characters like Ah Fatt and Zachary Reid look one way ethnically, but any assumptions about their ethnicity are challenged when they speak. The narrator revels in these moments of identitarian complexity, and the misrecognized accents are a key part of Ghosh's flourish as a writer of transregional breadth. Yet these invariably misleading accents serve as grounds for affective associations between people move toward a new land where presumably their accents won't matter anymore.

For instance, Neel is accorded linguistic authority in the trilogy, a role he really comes into in *River of Smoke*, in which he works as a “linkister,” a kind of translator. He is also supposed to be the author of the “*Ibis* Chrestomathy” found on Ghosh’s blog. Neel channels the anxiety of the male critic as he tries to place people. Despite his vast knowledge, Neel often gets things wrong. A man of many languages, Neel starts off as a character obsessed with speaking refined English before becoming one who is most at home in the pidgin of Canton. Indeed, he emerges as the source of a stereophonic effect here. As his character becomes one with the acoustic ecology of the ship, the situation highlights the mediated and embodied aspects of listening.

Two scenes of listening in the *Ibis* trilogy dramatize how xenophilic listening, while critical to the politics of the subaltern historiographical project of eavesdropping, is not ethnographic or reliable. The first instance of listening is a familiar colonial scene. When, by a twist of fate, Neel is arrested for forgery and boards the *Ibis* as a convict, he pleads for mercy in English. He requests that the orderlies not hit him or tear his clothes, but he is neither heard nor afforded the privilege and familiarity that he expects from speaking English. All he gets is the sergeant’s accented Hindustani—which the narrator marks in italics—asking him to take off his clothes, “*Kapra utaro.*” The Hindustani expression *kapra utaro* stands out visually and linguistically on the page. Such a theatricalization of these words creates a sense of violence on the page. Much like in the scene described in “How-To,” the sergeant does not even look at Neel or acknowledge his humanity. “Without a glance in his direction,” he ticks off whether Neel has “Syphilis? Gonorrhoea?”³⁷ By not hearing and recognizing Neel, the officer categorizes and racializes Neel while refusing to “see” him.

Standing naked with his hands raised, Neel asks, “Can you not afford me the dignity of a reply? Or is it that you do not trust yourself to speak in English?”³⁸ As the sergeant looks visibly agitated, Neel is pleased to extract some response. He decides that for as long as he is a convict he will speak only in English. However, even though he really wants to keep talking in English, his mind fails him. Instead of addressing the sergeant, he starts reciting Shakespeare: “His voice rose till the words were echoing off the stone walls.”³⁹ The echoing resounds his voice over the ship. It dramatizes a kind of stereophonic navigational process that helps Neel connect with other characters on the ship. This is the start of his attunement that assumes greater centrality as the trilogy progresses, culminating in his diegetic role as a linkister and his extradiegetic role as the compiler of the chrestomathy. Neel becomes the one figure who brings the different bodies on the *Ibis* into resonance.

Now take the interaction between Neel and Paulette (who is in disguise as a Bihari woman, Putli, in order to run away to Mauritius), in which both are eavesdropping on the other. Once they are all on the *Ibis*, the men and women are separate. Neel is in a completely different part of the ship because he is a convict. Over time, Neel finds himself catching the muffled sounds of conversation in the

women's section and notices that someone has been eavesdropping on his conversations. Paulette, like the other women, is behind a veil, a ghunghta. Based on how Paulette looks—"her henna-darkened hands and alta-reddened feet"—Neel eliminates English as one of the languages she can speak and understand, classifying her as one of the peasant women. Yet, "from the intonations of her voice, he had surmised that she differed from the other migrants in that her language was Bengali rather than Bhojpuri."⁴⁰ He is intrigued by his own assessments because he has also felt her listening in on his English-language conversations.

When he overhears Paulette knowingly responding to other indentured laborers' questions about what awaits them in Mauritius, he attempts to talk with her. I would like to cite this passage in full to show how much of the human connection in the trilogy rests on listening even when the other cannot be seen.

Neel put his lips to the air duct. Then addressing her ghunghta-draped head, he said, in Bengali: One who has been so courteous in dealing with her interlocutors will have no objection, surely, to answering yet another query? The silky phrasing and refined accent put Paulette instantly on her guard: although her back was turned toward the chokey, she knew exactly who had spoken and she understood immediately that she was being put to some kind of test. Paulette was well aware that her Bengali tended to have a raffish, riverfront edge to it, much of it having been acquired from Jodu; she was careful now in choosing her words. Matching her tone to the convict's, she said: There is no harm in a question; should the answer be known it will certainly be provided.

The accent was neutral enough to deny Neel any further clues to the speaker's origins.⁴¹

Paulette matches her tone to Neel's tone as a strategy to disarm him by performing her similarity with him. But after a page of conversing with Neel, she thwarts his continued attempts to place her by virtue of her accent.

I'm not of your kind, said Paulette. That is all you need to know.

Yes, indeed it is, he said, in a tone of mockery—for in uttering her final retort, Paulette's tongue had betrayed just enough of the waterfront sibilance for the mystery to be solved. Neel had heard Elokeshi speak of a new class of prostitute who had learnt English from their white clients—no doubt this was one such, on her way to join some brothel.⁴²

The two characters cannot see each other's faces; Paulette is sitting with her back to the air duct. She is alert to the silkiness of Neel's voice and to the raffish edges of her own. To avoid "betraying" her accent, she further matches the tone of her voice to that of Neel's. Still, while Paulette's ghunghta-draped head and inscribed-upon extremities heighten the difficulty of knowing his interlocutor, Neel is able to listen by making his body one with the ship and highlighting the mediational quality of listening. Prior to this conversation Neel had only "peered" through the air duct. As he puts his lips and ear to the air duct, his breath becomes a part of

the flow of air and his speech itself possible through the humming of the vessel. There is a scriptural abundance and yet what Neel seeks is the voice behind it, a voice he is certain he has heard before.

The unmarked character of Bhojpuri words that are made into verbs is an example of the accentedness of Ghosh's prose, but this episode is ironic because even though Neel tries to extract information from Paulette to solve the mystery of her accent, and even though Paulette understands the charge of that interrogation, he turns out to be wrong. All his linguistic knowledge does not help him fathom the biography of Paulette's speaking style. It is only the slightest betrayal that leads Neel to the wrong conclusion, which he then feels very smug about. She is not exposed, no truth is revealed, but nevertheless a relation is forged between Neel and Paulette. The lack of orthographic markers suggests an immediacy, that the way the conversation is staged is how it is heard and read. Paulette's response to Neel and the reader thus baldly states that she is different while actively matching Neel's voice to conceal any difference. This approach turns the ethnographic logic of literary accents on its head.

Arguably, the novel prizes a different framework of audibility in this moment. The body and structure of the ship, like the English language, are part of the attunement and coming into harmony and understanding. There's an element of surprise and the humility of error. The mistakes one makes in ascertaining the other are more or less irrelevant as long as they do not originate in fear or authority. They help people bond and aid their survival and kinship. Neel's quest for mastery is met with failure even though he does not realize it. The reader knows that Paulette is not who or what Neel diagnoses. Similarly, the other women on the ship believe Paulette to be one of them, knowing no better. Different individual receptions forge affective bonds, but none of the others on the ship are "accurate" in their knowledge of Paulette's biography.

XENOPHILIC ATTUNEMENT

Both Neel and the sergeant perform their racialized, caste-marked, regional, and gendered authority by presuming to know the speaker. Both turn out to be wrong, with a slight difference. The sergeant refuses to engage with Neel. On the other hand, Neel's motivation comes from wanting to suture a connection amid the violence of the migration journey. He is motivated by curiosity and an eagerness to connect while solidifying his intellectual preeminence. Both the conversations dramatize the embodied nature of listening as a modality, but the one between Neel and Paulette dramatizes how the "sound waves of speech enter the listener, becoming a part of them by vibrating through their body."⁴³ It is the vulnerability of Neel's own body and his implication in the way he understands Paulette that distinguishes him for the sergeant.

Can hearing an accent be an orientation in love and affinity toward strangers, a kind of attentive listening to the sounds of another body? It is dangerous to cast the movement of people and capital in the shadow of the opium empire as a site of unconditional mutual transformation. Accent indeed becomes a way to set aside; according to John Mowitt, "In hearing an accent we attach ourselves to the language that others us to one another and to ourselves. The accent 'records' language and keeps it outside."⁴⁴ Yet the uneven accentedness of the novels models a listening that allows accent to be the grounds of observation, attention, and affective attachment. Ghosh's authorial practice and his idea of xenophilia hold the moment of listening and reading in suspension to probe the mode of relations enabled precisely in the politically uneven and multiply mediated elusiveness of accent.

The echolocational impulse of Neel's observation gives Paulette's accent (spoken and heard) a stereophonic effect. Echolocation, writes Peter Szendy, is "the slight interaural discrepancy, from one ear to the other." It highlights the structurally binaural character of listening, how it is always divided. Accent and punctuation become a way of "collecting echoes" that "punctuates and percusses his environment, allowing him to detect everything that happens in it."⁴⁵ Before we know accent as identitarian and ethnographic, before we label it as L1 or L2, to borrow useful terminology from Lippi-Green, we must register a moment of encountering something familiar in the face of unknowing. As an affective and cognitive experience of familiarity, accent seeks to locate the speaker by their sounds heard by oneself. The performative and affective charge of accent forges attachment between the subject and the object, the reader and the text.

A comparative—and necessarily accented—reading of "How-To" and scenes from the Ibis trilogy reframes accent not as a relation of knowing but the moment before it, the moment of unknowing difference. Recognizing accents constitutes a reversal of silent reading. In the Ibis trilogy, the aural world is accessible to the reader through the script and print. The unmarked leveled language of Ghosh's prose presents these moments of suture that are still shaped by power relations. But, they invite the reader to place the accent. The novel's plot and style destabilize the truth value of accents, requiring the reader/critic to implicate themselves in the process.

Reading requires a risky ventriloquism, giving one's breath to another's body. The accented language of the novels makes the *reader* accented. The reader must sound the accented voices and read the phonetically written language out loud to hear any accent or risk missing the point and character details. Different readers will bring different kinds of knowledges to the text. Punctuated thus in the ear of the reader/writer/listener, the Ibis trilogy appears unevenly accented. Reading becomes an act of reconstructing the whole out of the heteroglossia, a kind of reading that implicates the body of the reader and the critic. The text does not

represent a voice because that voice has been effaced in phonetic language. There is continued tension between seeing and hearing as the meaning emerges only when the reader voices the words on the page, ventriloquizes them rather than trusting them as they are visible. Some of what readers hear is their own voice, joined with a stereophonic chorus of many others.

NOTES

1. Carlson-Wee, "How-To."
2. "Editor's Note," *The Nation*.
3. See McWhorter, "There's Nothing Wrong with Black English."
4. In a tweet that is no longer available, Carlson-Wee wrote this: "To all who have voiced questions and concerns about my poem in *The Nation*: I am listening closely and I am reflecting deeply. I am sorry for the pain I have caused, and I take responsibility for that. I intended for this poem to address the invisibility of homelessness, and clearly it doesn't work. Treading anywhere close to blackface is horrifying to me and I am profoundly regretful. The fact that I did not foresee this reading of the poem and the harm it could cause is humbling and eye-opening. I am beginning a process of talking to people and reevaluating what it means to make art in this world from a place of privilege, and the responsibility and accountability that comes with it. As someone suggested, I will be donating my publication honorarium to Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness. I am grateful to all of you for voicing your thoughts and feelings and I will be thinking hard about this for a long, long time. I continue to listen."
5. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44.
6. Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, 14.
7. I am grateful to Hongwei Thorn Chen for the description of the knowledge produced by accent as ethnography.
8. Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 14.
9. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 206.
10. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 187.
11. Lipari, "Listening Otherwise," 45.
12. A. Ghosh, "Confessions of a Xenophile" (italics added).
13. B. Ghosh, "On Grafting the Vernacular," 203.
14. Elhariry and Walkowitz, "The Postlingual Turn," 7.
15. In *Not Like a Native Speaker*, Rey Chow compares an accent to a murmur.
16. Allan, "Translating Whispers," 14.
17. Allan, "Translating Whispers," 21.
18. Allan, "Translating Whispers," 24.
19. See Rey Chow's "In the Name of Comparative Literature" for more on multilingualism in comparative literary scholarship.
20. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 9.
21. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 11.
22. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 12.
23. Abu Hamdan, *Aural Contract*.
24. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 72.
25. Mani, "Multilingual Code-Stitching in Ultraminor World Literatures," 384.
26. While *Sea of Poppies* features a lot of Laskari and *Flood of Fire* and *River of Smoke* feature a lot of French and Mauritian Creole—all of which are aurally shaped—these are still languages in their own right.
27. See Ramazani, "Code-Switching, Code-Stitching."

28. A. Ghosh, "Confessions of a Xenophile" (italics added).
29. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 191.
30. Cowaloosur, "Language in Ibis Trilogy."
31. Cowaloosur, "Language in Ibis Trilogy."
32. Ganguly, "Angloglobalism, Multilingualism, World Literature."
33. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 24.
34. Zachary is not white but biracial. As an official of the British Empire in India, he has to learn to perform his racial and ethnic superiority to the natives.
35. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 15.
36. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 48.
37. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 283.
38. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 283.
39. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 283.
40. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 381.
41. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 391.
42. A. Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 393.
43. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 194.
44. John Mowitt, personal communication, April 2020.
45. Szendy, *Stigmatology*, 57.

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