

## Accenting the Trans Voice, Echoing Audio-Dysphoria

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*Third Body* (Zohar Melinek-Ezra and Roey Victoria Heifetz, 2020) is a transnational audiovisual artwork that lies at the intersection between an art exhibit, video art, and a feature film, portraying a day in the life of a trans woman living in Berlin.<sup>1</sup> *Third Body* can be divided into two main narrative parts: In the first half, the protagonist cares for her German-speaking mother and eats dinner with her Hebrew-speaking father. The second half is marked by a short visit to a karaoke bar, followed by a lengthy and intimidating sexual encounter with a cis man in his apartment. In both parts of the film the protagonist is silent. In the first, she is spoken to as though she were a passive object or receptacle; in the second, actions are exerted on her passive body. Throughout both parts, she offers no resistance and instead accepts the use of her body for the gratification of others. The karaoke scene, which takes place in the middle of the film, stands out as the only one in which her voice is audible.

Watching the karaoke scene in which the protagonist sings the chorus of Tina Turner's *Private Dancer* ("I'm your private dancer, a dancer for money / I'll do what you want me to do . . . / And any old music will do"), I, as an accented trans spectator craving audible validation, found myself compulsively trying to detect familial sonic traces, listening for the accent and the trans voice. However, they seemed to have been magically muffled by the karaoke machine and by Roey Victoria Heifetz's singing.

As in the sequences that surround it, the karaoke scene centers passivity and various degrees of dependency. It is the only scene in which the film's audience gets to hear the protagonist's voice, and yet she stands alone, framed by the shot to make it seem as though she is set in a tiny booth, echoing someone else. The scene is absent of any celebration of the accented trans voice, as well as absent of any call to action, initiative, or agency. And yet, despite that, the karaoke scene is filled with trans joy, and more specifically the experience of what I call "audio-euphoria."

Audio-euphoria depends on the on-screen presence of the trans body as well as the assistive technology that muffles the accented trans voice. Both the visible trans body and the voice's technological mediation through the karaoke machine alleviate the audio-dysphoria by protecting the accented trans voice from the cis-sexist and ableist desires for coherency that the trans voice evokes as well as from the linguistic profiling that accented speech invokes. The distinction between communication that involves visible bodies versus disembodied trans voices and accented speech is key to my discussion of the audio-euphoric karaoke machine in comparison with the audio-dysphoric disembodied phone call. The embodiment of the trans voice and accented trans speech is crucial in how others make sense of a voice.

There is something inherently euphoric about the awareness that one can intentionally and consciously change one's voice. This is often done through processes such as voice feminizing therapy and/or surgery, or voice masculinizing therapy and/or hormone-affirming therapy (particularly using testosterone). These processes are not entirely euphoric and may be dysphoric at times; other components also often play a part in changing one's voice (for example, the duration of the therapy, any breaks, and the time of day; there can also be periods of hoarseness, whispering, and voicelessness).<sup>2</sup> The ability to control one's voice and accent through focused attention is nonetheless central to understanding audio-euphoria.

Audio-euphoria as shown in *Third Body* is an intentional, effortful, and temporary break from cissexist and ableist audits, from linguistic profiling, and from audio-dysphoria (the state of elevated anxiety triggered by expected or unexpected sonic events). In what follows, I first discuss audio-dysphoria as aggravated by the disembodiment of the telephone. I then explore the audio-euphoria offered to the accented trans voice through the mediation of the assistive technology of the karaoke machine. As I argue in this chapter, *Third Body* suggests the karaoke machine as the counterobject to the telephone, replacing its dysphoria provocation with the possibility of accessing trans joy.

#### THE AUDIO-DYSPHORIC PHONE CALL AND THE DISEMBODIED TRANS VOICE

In 2014 *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* published its inaugural double issue as the first nonmedical journal about transgender studies. The issue featured an extensive introduction by editors Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, complete with nearly ninety keywords and concepts, including the "Voice."<sup>3</sup> Andrew Anastasia suggests the voice as a keyword for the next generation to demand "that we listen, like musicians, to the voice qua voice—not merely the message. This is not to say that our trans\* voices can or wish to escape the gridding act of 'making sense'; the voice certainly has something to say about the body's age, sex, race, nationality, or ability." Anastasia explains the need for an in-depth discussion of the voice as a response to

its frequent metaphoric use as it is “invoked to narrate the struggles of transgender studies’ formation as a field. . . . In the struggle for coherence, however, metaphorical references to ‘voice’ privilege its discursive connotations, which relegates *the embodied voice* to a service role of rendering audible the coherent thought.”<sup>4</sup>

The embodied trans voice and the sociocultural processes that shape its production and perception have been studied by linguistics scholar Lal Zimman. “Trans people emphasize that the body matters,” Zimman argues, “but that its matter is far more complex than tends to be imagined when the focus is on cisgender people.”<sup>5</sup> Their research shows that it’s insufficient to say that one’s larynx directly determines the gender of the voice because speakers use only a small range of their abilities. Focusing on trans voices, “bodily sex remains important but can no longer be seen as static, asocial, homogenous, or deterministic.”<sup>6</sup> Zimman shows that trans voices push us to reconsider the very concept of the gendered voice.

The trans voice accents the possibility of transformation through intentionality. The practical voice training guide *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People* (2017), suggests a link between the trans voice and accented speech in vocal presentation:

Our voice reveals where we come from through our language, dialect and accent, and may say something about our age, education and culture through our choice of words. When we speak, we reveal our vulnerability: sometimes we feel free, easy and confident in communicating, and at other times we withdraw into ourselves and hide—voice reveals these things in the energy of sound. . . . In effect, our voice brings us into social relationship, and the cues we make both in sound and with our body contribute to our own and other people’s perception of our identity, gender and communicative competence.<sup>7</sup>

At the core of this guidebook, as in the lived experiences of trans people, is the conviction that the voice can be changed. Such instructional books presume that trans voices, like accented speech, force a disclosure of one’s identity and suggest that it is not a desirable or safe reveal. Thus audio-euphoria derives from an awareness of the possibility of vocal change that instills a sense of control over one’s body and what, when, and who to disclose one’s identity to.

While guidebooks describe the possibility of vocal transformation, artist and scholar Adriana Knouf’s vocal self-experimentation as a form of onto-poiesis (“being” and “coming into being”) complicates the material bodily transition by focusing on the poetic infrastructure of creation. In her art and scholarship, Knouf challenges the perceived stability of the voice: “Now the voice is conceptualized as a stable signifier of identity, something that is so fixed that it can be used to authenticate yourself to a digital system. We expect this stability as we use the voice to make quick determinations of gender: is that a male voice, or a female voice? The ways we do this unconscious ordering involve subtle differences in pitch and resonance of the voice.”<sup>8</sup> Audio-euphoria relies on the joy of vocal

becoming, and, similar to Knouf's experimentations, *Third Body* suggests "that the voice is in fact mutable, unstable, and capable of being consciously changed—but only with considerable effort. This fluidity thus conflicts with systems—human, algorithmic—that assume the aural output of a body will remain relatively fixed." This cissexist desire for coherency and a voice that matches one's apparent gender results not only in the individual experience of audio-dysphoria but also the ableist denial of access to trauma-related hotlines and services based on voice recognition that I will explore further in what follows.

Before unpacking the T4T (trans for trans) use of the term *dysphoria*, I want to begin by insisting on a connection between cissexism and ableism. By focusing on audio-dysphoria and its euphoric counterpart, I endeavor to rewrite trans and nonbinary voices back into the history of the disability rights movement. Though the American Psychiatric Association specifically describes gender identity disorder as "distress" and a "disability,"<sup>9</sup> trans and nonbinary people are excluded from the protections provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Susan Stryker defines gender dysphoria as a sense of unhappiness about the incongruence between how one subjectively understands one's experience of gender and how one's gender is perceived by others. This shifts the emphasis from the person experiencing such feelings, instead suggesting that dysphoria itself (rather than the trans person) is unhealthy and transient. This form of de-pathologization echoes the social model of disability offered by critical disability studies, thereby binding trans issues to disability politics.<sup>10</sup> Alison Kafer uses "the toilet" as both a physical space and a potential political meeting point between disability and trans research and activism: "Attending to the space of the toilet not only makes room for coalitions between trans\* and disability concerns, it continues the crip theory move of keeping the meanings and parameters of disability, access, and disability studies open for debate and dissent."<sup>11</sup> In 2013, the same year in which Kafer published these words, "Gender Identity Disorder" was finally removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and replaced with "Gender Dysphoria," the very term that was suggested for protection under the ADA. Revised terminology for describing gender dysphoria appears in the DSM, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR), were released by American Psychiatric Association Publishing in May 2022.<sup>12</sup> Despite minor revisions, gender dysphoria remains an accepted term by both trans and non binary people and the medical institution.

Applying the "composite model of disability" to trans studies, Alexandre Baril both problematizes cissexist oppression and acknowledges trans people's subjective experiences of suffering from gender dysphoria.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as dysphoria is used by trans and nonbinary folks to describe their own experiences, the term has become integral to trans culture and T4T social media discourses. Furthermore, I take inspiration from Baril's proposed term "trans-crip-t time" as a framework by which to examine the possibilities created by a permeable, interconnected conceptualization of disabled, trans, and linguistic identities—not as analytically and empirically discrete, but as overlapping categories.<sup>14</sup>

Viewed through a medical gaze (or the medical/rehabilitative/individual model of disability), the synonymous use of “people with gender dysphoria” and “trans people” is intended to facilitate the provision of necessary accommodations. Gender dysphoria is at the heart of the Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People, Version 7 (SOC-7), published by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH).<sup>15</sup> The SOC-7 provides clinical guidance intended to assist trans people in achieving health, well-being, and self-fulfillment. It lists voice therapy ahead of gender-affirming hormone therapy (GAHT) and surgery in a list of the types of assistance health professionals may provide: “primary care, gynecological and urological care, reproductive options, voice and communication therapy, mental health services (e.g., assessment, counseling, psychotherapy), and hormonal and surgical treatments.”<sup>16</sup>

Following disability studies’ anti-pathologizing, social, and phenomenological theory and activism, and particularly the “composite model of disability,” I lowercase and hyphenate dysphoria with specific experiences reported by trans and nonbinary folks (e.g., voice-dysphoria, height-dysphoria, facial-dysphoria), as opposed to using the medicalized and capitalized Gender Dysphoria. Audio-dysphoria and audio-euphoria can serve as means to de-medicalize trans experience. The broader phenomenon of audio-dysphoria or the more specific voice-dysphoria may be experienced by people of various gender modalities.<sup>17</sup> However, it has more direct—and even life-threatening—implications for gender-nonconforming bodies.

Therefore, I refrain from using dysphoria as metaphor or “narrative prosthesis” (as per Mitchell and Snyder) to describe a general state of anxiety or incongruence experienced by cis people toward their bodies or voices. Instead, I utilize this term solely to describe the experience of trans and nonbinary individuals under cissexist and ableist social structures. Instances of audio-triggered dysphoria are ubiquitous. They can result from hearing one’s deadname, particular pronouns, a mispronunciation of one’s name, or the sound of one’s own voice.<sup>18</sup> Though any of the above may crop up in many situations, in my personal experience the phone call encompasses them all.

During phone calls I am often asked where I am from *originally*, yet I can’t help but hear the “who” behind the “where.” Regardless of their response to this question, accented people are made to know that the desired answer to this question is a concise, coherent, and singular geographic location (preferably one known to the asker). My own response tends to be triggered by sensing the listener’s underlying tension around the traces of my elsewhere-ness. Furthermore, as an accented trans man, I often hear another layer demanding me to disclose the origins of my audible elsewheres, elsewhens, and elsewhos. The plurals are meant not only to stress that a singular origin is irrelevant, as I have immigrated multiple times and am continuously transitioning through GAHT, but also to emphasize the effortful and effortless transformation of the voice over space, time, and gender.

Some of the traces in my voice most audible to me are products of various accents and assimilative struggles to conceal them as well as the trans-joy/audio-euphoria of experiencing my voice change on testosterone. Such traces may be less apparent in face-to-face encounters—the presence of other physical and non-verbal cues means I am less frequently misgendered or complimented on my fluency. On the phone, however, I get routinely “ma’amed,” and when asked to repeat myself I often feel that the noise in communication is caused by my accent, which the phone seems to ruthlessly amplify. The disembodied nature of the phone call becomes a source of dread for the way it strips gender intentionality, narrowing my identity down to my voice.

Despite having experienced firsthand many audio-dysphoric and at times discriminatory events during phone conversations, I have nevertheless written extensively in praise of the semi-disembodied voice in animated documentaries about disability.<sup>19</sup> In these works I have relied on the *acousmètre*, a concept proposed by composer and sound researcher Michel Chion to describe a voice entity that is not visible on screen. According to Chion, the *acousmatic* is called an *acousmètre* when the voice is human, especially before that voice is revealed on screen, as it haunts the film like a shadow.<sup>20</sup> Based on this idea, I maintained that the voice-over in this subgenre functions as a semi-*acousmètre* by refraining from exposing the source of the voice. In this way it prevents the audience from stripping the voiced entity of its power while also allowing partial audiovisual representations of the body.

Yet in the case of the accented trans voice, its connection to the intentionality and performativity of the body invites audio-euphoria rather than the dysphoric nature in which Chion describes *de-acousmétrization*, the binding of the *acousmètre* through the visible body: “Here is your body; you will be here and not in another place.”<sup>21</sup> The accented trans voice seeks this grounding in order to derail the cissexist and ableist desires for a coherent origin and a possible rehabilitation or cure.

Beyond cinematic voices, the disembodied communication over the phone has actual ramifications on trans and gender-nonconforming people. In August 2021, trans artist and activist Leroy Bar-natan posted on his social media account a call to the Israeli emergency hotline for victims of sexual assault to act in making the service accessible to trans and nonbinary people. Bar-natan articulates the problem:

Let’s take a moment to talk about how sexual trauma hotlines do not accommodate the trans\* spectrum. When I say hotlines, I mean the telephone lines. From conversations I’ve had with representatives, the separation between the 1202 (women) line and the 1203 (men) line is not meant to erase the gender spectrum but rather to allow the caller to speak to either a woman (1202) or a man (1203). In reality, what happens most times . . . if you don’t vocally “pass” as the gender you’re speaking in they’ll just use the pronouns that they hear with complete disregard to those you’re using in the conversation. . . . So I suggest to just take off the line

anyone who hasn't learned [not to assume gender via voice and/or to respect pronouns], because as long as you don't, you're telling the trans community that they are not your target audience.

Despite Bar-natan's efforts to address the issue with the people answering the calls by presenting his pronouns as well as with their superiors by requesting that those answering the phones be trained to not assume gender according to the callers' voices and to respect callers' pronouns, the phenomenon is repeated.

Approaching this hotline example through the lens of the composite model of disability, audio-dysphoria includes both the phenomenological experience of voice-dysphoria and the cissexist and ableist desires for coherency. At the same time, thinking audio-dysphoria through disembodied accented speech over the telephone allows for the acknowledgment in the linguistic profiling of the trans voice. Like immigration, transition accents the voice and exposes its bearers to various forms of questioning, doubting, profiling, and violence. John Baugh has conceptualized "linguistic profiling" as the auditory equivalent of visual racial profiling. According to him, both "can have devastating consequences for those US residents who are perceived to speak with an undesirable accent or dialect."<sup>22</sup> Baugh describes discriminatory linguistic profiling as based on auditory cues, which may include racial identification, but which can also be used to identify other linguistic subgroups within a speech community.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, he centers his argument on the disembodiment of the telephone (or, rather, the intercom system) in linguistic discrimination. Voice-dysphoria and the broader audio-dysphoria are intensified and complicated by linguistic profiling, which most forcefully affects trans accented speakers and speakers of linguistic minorities. Thus, by focusing on the disembodied trans voice, one might reveal various levels of audio-dysphoria alongside the vulnerability of trans, accented, and linguistic minority speakers to linguistic profiling and discrimination.

In defining the genre of the call center documentary, Pooja Rangan shows that the embodied dimensions of voicing are considered obstacles, except when social and political norms render them neutral and allow them to disappear.<sup>24</sup> In reading the contradictions in the film *Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* (Sonali Gulati, 2005), Rangan asks, "What disappears or is neutralized at the level of the speaking voice and the listening ear when we sense such a textual voice in documentary, and what can the 'placelessness' of accented speech in the age of the call centre tell us about the stakes of this disappearing act?"<sup>25</sup> This disappearance is a result of the dynamics of neoliberal, Anglo-globalizing capital:

An era in which *voice*, and not image, has become a vehicle of the ongoing objectification and fragmentation of the (post)colonial other. The phenomenon of accent is enabling in this context: it introduces a spectrum and hierarchy of cultural values in relation to the "how" of voicing (grain, tone, inflection etc.) and its linguistic "contents" where Trinh sees a dualistic gridlock.<sup>26</sup>



Similarly, the accented trans voice reveals the sonic roots of cissexist and ableist hierarchies and desires for coherency. The accented trans voice is a vehicle of objectification as well as linguistic profiling, and thus in a documentary film focusing on visibility, *Disclosure* (Sam Feder, 2020), it also offers a rare insight into the trans voice, and particularly the dangers that lie in its disembodiment. In the documentary, actress Candis Cayne is introduced by Laverne Cox through a historic milestone: “It wasn’t until 2007 that we saw an openly trans woman being celebrated for doing it out loud.” This is followed by a video of a reporter announcing, “Candis Cayne makes history on *Dirty Sexy Money*.”

According to Cayne, this role marked a televised linguistic offense: “My first episode of *Dirty Sexy Money*, I had a big gathering with all of my friends and was so excited I was going to be on ABC, and there was like ten of us, and we were all sitting around having a glass of wine.” The talking head cuts to an archival scene from the episode while her voice continues to play over the clip: “And I come on, and everybody’s like, ‘Yay!’ [clapping] And then my first line . . .” The clip is unmuted, and we hear the words spoken by Cayne/Carmelita, “I missed you,” which have been digitally deepened to masculinize her voice.

The scene cuts back to Cayne speaking on screen—“They lowered it two octaves,” she says—and then shows another muted clip of Cayne as Carmelita while sounding her in voice-over, explaining, “They did it for one line to get the idea that Carmelita was a trans woman.” Similarly, the one line that transmasculine actor Travis Clough has in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (Mark Waters, 2009) was manipulated to exaggerate the transition in postproduction and dubbed in a deep male voice without his consent.<sup>27</sup> Despite the excessive vulnerability of the trans voice, and in particular as it intersects with race and class, this is not yet recognized as a human rights issue or as part of a broader struggle for protection from accent discrimination and linguistic profiling.

The nonconsensual disembodiment of the accented trans voice is by any definition discriminatory. However, in addition to these social and political aspects, I am interested in the phenomenological experience of audio-dysphoria as it is articulated by trans and nonbinary people. Therefore, in the following section I move on to thinking about voice-dysphoria in the spirit of the trans-crip-t perspective by listening for the echoes in accented trans voices, especially when they’re muffled or mediated by assistive technologies.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE KARAOKE SONG AND ECHOES IN THE ACCENTED TRANS VOICE

Thus far I have focused on the trans voice and its linguistic profiling as well as on the phenomenology of voice-dysphoria, especially when it is mediated by the phone call. In contrast with the medicalized and capitalized Gender Dysphoria, intracommunal references are often made to the lowercase hyphenated dysphoria specifying situations that alleviate or trigger various types of dysphoria (e.g.,



bottom-dysphoria, forehead-dysphoria). Temporary experiences alleviating these types of dysphoria, known within the community as trans-joy or gender-euphoria, are similarly hyphenated and specified. Despite the rhetorical convenience of countering dysphoria with euphoria, I do not mean to use *euphoria* to denote a heightened sense of elation or ecstasy. Instead, this type of hyphenated euphoria is a response to dysphoria in the way that “crip time” allows the simultaneous existence of the whole range of experiences between them—alongside dysphoria, despite it, before and after it, without eliminating, eradicating, or curing it.

*Third Body* positions this particular strategy at the heart of the film. Although it allows spectators visual glimpses into the protagonist experiencing haptic joy—for example, meditatively and utilizing her entire body, she touches the sand, the water, and a trans masc body at a beach in a short scene—the film suggests that it is audio-euphoria that is the most prominent experience of accented trans vocal joy. This is not an ecstatic moment, nor is it set on a big stage. Rather, it is a fleeting, private moment, in a karaoke bar.

The karaoke-mediated trans voice—in contrast with the telephone-mediated accenting of the vocal traces of immigration and transition—allows for audio-euphoria because it echoes those very traces blurring them into one another. These echoes are not enabled by the mere technology of the karaoke machine but rather simultaneously rely on the visibility of the trans body, the singing accented trans voice, former singers of the song, and the muffling effect of the karaoke machine. In what follows I analyze the karaoke scene in *Third Body* as a means of reflecting on audio-euphoria as a celebration of a temporary break from audio-dysphoria. At a time where trans visibility has exposed trans women (especially Black, Indigenous, and women of color) to violence, and accountability is considered to accept the call to “speak up” and “raise your voice,” *Third Body* centers on a nameless, silenced, passive, and submissive trans woman. The film’s most striking effect is its almost complete silence. Save for two monologue scenes and one brief karaoke scene, it is absent of any dialogue. In critiquing the liberal axiom of “having a voice,” Rangan analyzes Leslie Thornton’s experimental films and argues that “in her films, the condition of being voiceless—that is, being mute, speechless, inarticulate, inchoate, or unresponsive—offers a sonic portal to altogether unexpected ways of being in the world. Instead of speaking in defense of the voiceless, her work offers a perverse but ultimately enlightening defense of voicelessness.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in *Third Body* the presence of the protagonist’s singing voice does not interrupt the film’s devotion to sustaining her voicelessness. Rather, as I demonstrate in what follows, her singing voice in fact serves to protect her voicelessness rather than expose it.

The film can be divided into two parts: the first, in which the protagonist spends time with her mother and has dinner with her father, and the second, depicting a violent one-night stand, the two separated by the scene of singing at a karaoke bar (see figure 12.1). In both, which are almost equal in their run time, the protagonist remains in complete silence. During the first part, her mother speaks to her in



FIGURE 12.1. Karaoke scene in *Third Body* (2020), written and directed by Zohar Melinek-Ezra and Roey Victoria Heifetz.

German while misgendering her—after which, without uttering a word, she cares for her mother, bathing and massaging her. Only after this is done does she attend to her own body, carefully cleaning, shaving, tucking, padding, getting dressed, and putting on jewelry. At the end of this scene the protagonist first introduces a form of assistive technology to alleviate facial-dysphoria, mediating her mirror image by looking at her own face through a facial feminization app.

The following sequence, when she arrives at her father's apartment, leans into her serving as an auditory receptacle, despite beginning with mutual silence. She silently listens to her father speak in Hebrew about his penile surgery, hormonal treatment, and overall loneliness—all while he is misgendering her. The final physical gesture that sums up both parental monologues arrives as the father leans over to comfort himself by hugging his daughter. She doesn't speak nor hug him back, nor does she turn away. She seems to remain there for as long as she can bear it.

The karaoke scene follows these dysphoric sequences and offers the audience the first audible connection with the protagonist and the only chance to hear her voice. This scene's placement as a transitional mark between the halves of the film showing her objectification and misgendering by her parents and her sexual submission serves to reflect one silence into the other. Fully comprehending the significance of the karaoke scene—as well as the accented trans voice at its core—requires an analysis of the enforced and elective silences surrounding it. In *Third Body*, forty minutes transpire before the protagonist's voice becomes audible. This is an interval we've experienced before, most famously in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980).

*The Elephant Man* shows the film's protagonist, John Merrick, caged and humiliated in a circus freak show. He is then discovered by Dr. Frederick Treves, who keeps him in a hospital under medical supervision for no apparent reason. Merrick's treatment as a monster only changes after the doctor decides to recognize the gentle *speaking* soul behind it. Merrick is kept in a hospital, studied but not treated for anything, until he becomes a celebrity among the aristocratic Victorian society for writing prose, poetry, and his autobiography. Lynch's Merrick not only goes from an elongated period of voicelessness to speech, but he also transitions into a privileged English linguistic style, associated with royalty and the upper class—an accent that Baugh observed to be consequential in favorable linguistic profiling, serving as a tool for class mobility. Similarly, Ani Maitra interprets the “gay accent” as another form of higher-class coding, thus also serving as a tool of class mobility (see chapter 14 of this volume). Thus, the class assumptions projected onto Merrick's speech and accent grant him the humanity he was deprived of as a result of ableism.

While Lynch's Merrick overcomes silence, the protagonist of *Third Body* leans into it with her entire submissive body. Merrick's super-crippness, in a narrative prosthesis, substitutes his humanity with an ableist imagination of a divine spirit in a monstrous body. This type of transformation narrative is rooted in both ableism and cissexism, seen through the constructed imperative for rehabilitation, for having articulate speech, preferably with a high-class accent or for attaining “the right vocal presentation” to be qualified for humanity.

Unlike *The Elephant Man* and its medicalizing gaze, *Third Body* avoids the cissexist gaze by portraying a trans woman who refuses to transform her physicality or seek medical rehabilitation. She does not regain or change her voice and remains voiceless, and yet when she makes it audible, she does so under her conditions, muffling the cissexist ear's ability to trace her accented trans voice. The cissexist ear—much like its visual counterpart, defined by media scholar McKenzie Wark as “a looking that harbors anxiety about the slippages and transformations between genders, but which also harbors desires for those transitions as well”—is a listening for the traces that accent these transformations.<sup>30</sup> *Third Body* also repudiates rehabilitative/transformation narratives by deferring the audience's desire to hear her voice. After leaving her father's apartment, the nameless protagonist walks through the streets of Berlin. She then walks into a gay/dive bar, enters a private karaoke booth, and sings Tina Turner's “Private Dancer.” In this scene the audience is supposedly afforded the anticipated opportunity to satisfy this desire. However, it takes care not to strip her down to her bare voice as the disembodiment phone call does, and instead she uses the assistive technology of the karaoke machine to provide shelter.

Karen Tongson has written about the transnational uses and material history of the karaoke machine. Examining karaoke as a queer theoretical and aesthetic mode, Tongson writes, “Karaoke's origin story also suggests that the ‘copy’ or

'copier' is not necessarily guided by a master rhythm produced by an expert . . . , but that the rhythm itself is forced to accompany or copy the one who is copying." Furthermore, Tongson asserts, "The amateurism in queer performance modes such as drag, for example, walks a fine line between homage and critique, not so much of the 'original' performer or musical number, but . . . of the very forms, aesthetic and otherwise, that legislate the divide between the 'real' and the 'copy,' such as style, tone, gesture, gender, and genre." Alongside queer practices, trans experiences with vocal feminization/masculinization as discussed in the first section of this chapter require similar self-experimentations and repetitions, some of which rely on copying or mimicking other voices and rhythms.

The karaoke scene in *Third Body* is not a classical performance in front of an audience, but rather more of a private vocal practice as well as an example of the use of assistive technology to echo the accented trans voice. "Private Dancer" (Heifetz's own favorite song) was first recorded by a white male singer with a British accent, only to be performed later by a Black woman with a U.S. accent. Thus, in this scene the protagonist is echoing Tina Turner, whose performance itself can be viewed as an echo of Dire Straits' first recording of the song.<sup>31</sup> Through her singing voice, the protagonist achieves a temporary relief from voice-dysphoria and is safe from the cissexist ear's obsession with the body's "realness" or the sex assigned at birth.<sup>32</sup>

When asked about the scene, the directors expressed different yet complementary intentions.<sup>33</sup> Zohar Melinek-Ezra described the scene as not only the first time the protagonist's voice is audible, but also the first time her body is free from external gazes:

It's actually one of my favorite scenes. . . . I think there's something so moving there, because you feel a sense of home for the first time for the character—even though you [supposedly accompanied her] in her apartment in the beginning, and then to her father's apartment, and you were very intimate with her in front of the mirror in a . . . home environment—[this is] the first time. . . you see her soul [as she] sings, expressing something so . . . deep, almost like a dream. . . . It's not [taking place] on a big stage [or] a big kind of a thing, but [rather] in this little bubble, in this little booth, she's allowing herself, in a very intimate, private way, to be [joyful]—and [this scene is] exactly in the middle.

Melinek-Ezra cinematically frames the protagonist in an intimate space—which he calls home—to protect her from cissexist gazes and audits.<sup>34</sup>

For Roey Victoria Heifetz, the scene carries multiple layers of significance, as it is her personal favorite karaoke song:

There are two layers there: one is taking the character outside of the intimacy [of the previous scenes] and bringing some [laughs and gestures air quotes] fun [into] this film. . . . I don't know if the viewer [finds] entertainment or fun [here, but] we thought that we [needed] to show another side of the character. But, at the same

time . . . the character shows more vulnerability because it's the first time that you can hear [her, as well as] the song that she chooses, which is my song, in a way—"Private Dancer." . . . I think that there are two layers. . . . One is to take [a step back], but at the same time what happened . . . is also a step forward, because it's the first time that you can really hear the character, and when you hear [her, what] she's singing is . . . this intense song.

Thus, while Melinek-Ezra was attuned to protecting the character from the cissexist ear—listening for the traces of her journey in her accented trans voice to make binary sense—Heifetz tended to the trans joy that her protagonist deserves in the form of a moment of audio-euphoria.

The audio-euphoria represented in the *Third Body's* central scene is a response to the cissexist audits and (consequent?) voice-dysphoria as well as the cissexist nonaudition that assigns her position as a silent passive object or receptacle. At the same time, in the alleviation of the first, the film suggests the karaoke machine is a trans assistive technology allowing the user to direct and distract audition. According to Tongson's analysis of the karaoke, the copying or echoing of another's voice allows for the potential audio-euphoria:

To become an echo of someone else's music is to surrender to a mild form of madness activated by something outside of one's self that has burrowed its way, parasitically, within (in your head, in your gut, in your ear). It requires capitulating to the compulsion to repeat the same lines over and over again from the chorus, verse, refrain.<sup>35</sup>

*Third Body* does this while simultaneously creating a home protected by the framed booth created by the camera in which to safely expose this vulnerability.

In this chapter I have proposed thinking with an accent about the trans voice through the audio-dysphoric phone call and the audio-euphoric echoes of karaoke. I argued that the former strips accented trans voices of their embodiment and leaves them bare to cissexist and ableist audits. In contrast, the latter offers the protagonist of *Third Body* relief and self-expression while still avoiding her use as a narrative prosthesis and denying a cure or rehabilitation from her voicelessness. The film's seamless act of refusal to "give her a voice" to satisfy the audience's desires and expectations stands in contrast not only with Lynch's Merrick but also films like *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010), which deals with similar themes. Despite both films' subversive queer and crip qualities,<sup>36</sup> they still choose rehabilitative resolutions shown through grand speeches.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, the protagonist of *Third Body* blends into a loud subway crowd, becoming one among other accented and muffled voices.

Here's what the film could have done but didn't. In a narrative prosthesis about an accented trans woman finding her voice, the karaoke scene could have been utilized as a turning point. However, the protagonist continues to maintain her silence throughout the rest of the film. In particular, the last sequence, which shows her blending into a crowd in a subway station, muffles her accented trans

voice and depicts her as an echo among the others, and by doing so the film decidedly chooses voicelessness over rehabilitative, cissexist, Anglocentric narratives.

*Third Body's* karaoke scene allows us to heed audio-euphoria and join in trans-crip-t joy. The scene begins with the singing voice of the accented trans protagonist framed by the camera to protect her from the cissexist gaze and moves on to shield her from its audit. Her accented trans voice is protected both by the echoing nature of the karaoke machine and its consensual muting in postproduction editing to further disrupt the audience's possibility of listening for the traces. The accented trans voice is gifted to the audience for a fleeting moment in small bits interrupted by silences in a manner akin to trans-crip-t joy, that is, through interdependencies of embodied voices and gender-euphoric possibilities in assistive technologies. To be included in this cinematic sigh the audience's ear has been trained to attend to the accented trans voice and its embodied intentionality throughout the silences and echoes.

## NOTES

1. The film was made through collaboration between a documentary filmmaker and an artist, who also serves as the film's leading actress. This project began with a separate thirteen-minute-long documentary, which was presented at the Venice Biennale and won Heifetz the Rosenblatt Prize. Following this, she and Melinek-Ezra started shooting what later became the violent sex sequence.

2. It is important to note that many trans and nonbinary people do not seek or desire a voice change. For those using their voice professionally, their decisions regarding vocal transition become more urgent, and whether they decide to take testosterone or not, they often require retraining. The documentary film *Riot Acts: Flaunting Gender Deviance in Music Performance* (Angelo Madsen Minax 2010) presents multiple trans and gender-nonconforming musicians talking about their fears of testosterone destroying their singing voices and the ways in which they coped with it.

3. Stryker and Currah, "Introduction."

4. Anastasia, "Voice," 262–63.

5. Zimman, "Transgender Voices," 11.

6. Zimman, "Transgender Voices," 11.

7. Mills and Stoneham, *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People*, 21–22.

8. Knouf, "Aliens-Ontopoetics Self-Experimentation-Molecular-Matrix-Voice."

9. Meyer-Bahlburg, "From Mental Disorder to Iatrogenic Hypogonadism," 467.

10. Stryker, "Context, Concepts, and Terms," 17–18.

11. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 157.

12. "Gender Dysphoria," in *Highlights of Changes from DSM-IV-TR to DSM-5*, American Psychiatric Association, [www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/DSM-5-TR/APA-DSM5TR-GenderDysphoria.pdf](http://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/DSM-5-TR/APA-DSM5TR-GenderDysphoria.pdf).

13. Disability studies scholars have identified limits of both the medical and social models of disability and developed an alternative model, which Baril terms the "composite model of disability," to theorize ableist norms and structures along with the phenomenological experience of disability. Baril, "Transness as Debility," 69.

14. Baril, "Doctor, Am I an Anglophone Trapped in a Francophone Body?," 155–72.

15. Dhejne et al., "Mental Health and Gender Dysphoria," 44–45.

16. Dhejne et al., "Mental Health and Gender Dysphoria," 45.

17. Ashley, "'Trans' Is My Gender Modality."

18. The audio-dysphoric encounter of listening to your own voice played back has become common because of the prevalence of the use of Zoom technology during COVID-19.
19. See my "(Dis)Abling the Spectator"; "Disorienting the Past, Crippling the Future in Adam Eliot's Claymation"; and my forthcoming *Animated Film and Disability: Crippling Spectatorship*.
20. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21–22.
21. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23.
22. Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling," 155.
23. Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling," 158.
24. Rangan, "Auditing the Call Centre Voice," 32–33.
25. Rangan, "Auditing the Call Centre Voice," 32.
26. Rangan "Auditing the Call Centre Voice," 37.
27. I thank Omer Elad for introducing me to this story.
28. I use the term *assistive technology* to describe both times the protagonist makes use of a device to alleviate dysphoria; first, facial dysphoria with the smartphone app and, second, voice dysphoria with the karaoke machine. Assistive technology has been defined in the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 as "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities" (P.L. 100–407).
29. Rangan, "In Defense of Voicelessness," 110.
30. Wark, "The Cis Gaze and Its Others (for Shola)."
31. The title track on Tina Turner's *Private Dancer* was composed by Mark Knopfler when he was writing new songs for Dire Straits' *Love over Gold*. However, he decided the song was more suited to a female vocalist, written, as it was, from a woman's point of view. Not only did he give Tina Turner the song to record, but his Dire Straits bandmates are the backing band on the track.
32. Film scholar Cael M. Keegan articulates the cissexist gaze as "the investment in the realness, perceptibility, and meaningfulness of assigned sex." See the chapter "Sensing Transgender" in Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, 24.
33. In a screening event for USC's Queer School of Cinematic Arts Student Organization, Ellen Seiter asked the directors about the karaoke scene, and the quote is their answer to her question. "QSCA Post-Screening Discussion of 'Third Body' by Zohar Melinek Ezra and Roey Victoria Heiftz [sic]," YouTube (1:01:56).
34. See Rangan "Auditing the Call Centre Voice."
35. Tongson, "Karaoke Queer Theory, Queer Performance."
36. These are analyzed by Robert McRuer in his book *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*, 35–44.
37. McRuer, "Introduction," *Crip Times*, 35–44.

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