

Listening with an Accent—or How to Loeribari

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Each foreigner's spoken English, determined by a mother tongue, each person's noise, fell on a coloring ear, which bent the listener's eye and, consequently, the speaker's countenance; it was a kind of narrowing, and unconscious on the part of the listener, who listens in judgment, judging the speaker even before the meaning or its soundness were attended to.

—LI-YOUNG LEE, *THE WINGED SEED: A REMEMBRANCE*

[Speaking nearby is] a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. . . . To say therefore that one prefers not to speak about but rather to speak nearby, is a great challenge. Because actually, this is not just a technique or a statement to be made verbally. It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world.

—TRINH T. MINH-HA, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY CHEN

INTRODUCTION

As I ponder Li-Young Lee's words in the first epigraph above, I think of the blank stares and silences I sometimes encounter while out shopping in rural central New York. *What is a brown woman doing here, and why is she moving her lips?* I think of the email I received from a career advisor at the elite liberal arts college where I work, inquiring whether a student of mine needed additional "language resources" (read: accent training). The student, who hails from Beijing, had lived in the United States for at least three years at the time and had graduated from a high school in the States. *I want to help this kid, but I have no idea what he is saying.* I think of the bar in Chicago's O'Hare airport, where Akshya and I paused on our way back from the Accent Research Collaborative's first rendezvous. Her English

hinting at years spent in Eastern Europe, the German waitress asked where we were from (*India?*) and then pronounced our speech acceptable, *not like those Pakistanis*. I think of the mandatory testing and training program to which graduate students from “non-English medium undergraduate educational backgrounds” are subject as a condition of employment at my alma mater.¹ Raciolinguistic pedagogy couched as acculturation and teaching support. *Yes, it’s xenophobic and racist, but we have a responsibility to accommodate students, do we not?* I think also of the feminist music conference I attended years ago where the audience roundly rejected my analysis of timbral difference. My primarily white, American colleagues could not hear what I was describing because they were unfamiliar with the music, the “noise [that] fell on [their] coloring ear.” *It all sounds foreign to me. It all sounds the same to me.*

That which is not part of one’s sensorium, that which one encounters only rarely, can seem inscrutable. Sounds that unsettle our expectations—the voice that appears mismatched with the body that produces it, the accent that doesn’t hew close to one’s skin color, the word or phrase that betrays knowledge of other tongues—can feel out of place.² Sometimes, such disruptions to the aural and visual field are received with delight. *Where did you learn to speak English so well?* A backhanded compliment, soft in its sting. At other times sonic surprises are pointedly weaponized. *You’re not from here. You do not belong here. Go back to where you came from.*

Many foundational texts on accent and linguistic discrimination begin as Lee’s quotation in the epigraph above does, with the “foreigner’s spoken [language], determined by a mother tongue.” The very notion of L1 and L2 accents, for example, rests on the idea that early language acquisition involves the construction of a “sound house,” a set of phonological building blocks from one’s native tongue that becomes the basis for all future linguistic endeavors.³ Childhood education in vocalization shapes how one sounds out not just one’s primary language(s) but also those languages acquired later in life. Listeners make judgments about whether an individual’s speech is native sounding (L1 accent) or foreign sounding (L2 accent). In this formulation, it is the speaker and her speech that are accented by her “mother tongue.” Left unmarked—unaccented, if you will—is the “listening ear.” Theorizing the aurality of race in the United States, Jennifer Stoevers proffers the listening ear as a “figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line’s norms.”⁴ In elaborating how a perceptual regime takes form and how it molds the way we listen, Stoevers conceptualizes the listening ear as an instrument of racialization. It is a product of a long history of racial subjection, and it racializes what falls upon our ears.

Lee’s reference to the “coloring ear” does similar work. Starting there—instead of the foreigner’s speech—clarifies that listening is not passive. It *does* things, and

what it does is far from neutral or inconsequential. The ear colors what it hears, thereby bending the listener's eye such that the speaker's visage itself is now (perceived as) "bent." Listening thus precedes accent. One listens in judgment "even before" the interlocutor speaks. The listener's *a priori* assessment is a narrowing not just of the aural field, but of perception more generally—it shapes both sound and sight—and it affects those who are judged (as "accented") as well as those doing the judging. Thus, what Roshanak Kheshti says of the world music industry is true of other contexts, too: "The consumer is called upon to sonically construct the other in the aural imaginary through listening. The body is essentially remapped and the ear is interpellated as the main site for the production of the (aural) other and the (listening) self."⁵ As the "coloring ear" makes sense of the unfamiliar, it positions the listener in relation to, and against, the source of linguistic and sonic alterity.⁶ All the bodies in the encounter are remapped and placed in particular ways.

To name the ear as that which "colors" what it hears is to take stock of how and from whence we listen. Place, I will argue, is crucial to undoing the alleged passivity and neutrality of the listening ear. If, as Trinh Minh-ha explains in the second epigraph above, we cannot deny our location as speaking subjects, then we cannot claim to be "absent from the [listening] place" either. Location is important not just to locution, but also to listening. Acknowledging the historical and social situatedness of the listening ear—indeed, acknowledging that we listen from *a* place (any place!)—may be the first step in dismantling the social expectations that affirm some accents as "neutral" and others as departures from the aural norm.

Nina Sun Eidsheim introduces the term "accented listening" in her contribution to this volume, highlighting how an ostensibly benign and objective practice in fact accentuates that which it recognizes (read: categorizes) as "accent."⁷ In this piece as well as her prior work, Eidsheim notes that we make such vocal assessments all the time—we often presume to know speakers' race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth the instant we hear their voices—but rarely do we cast those judgments as acts of interpretation, that is, as *accent-making* endeavors.⁸ As Pooja Rangan explains, this practice of "auditing" others indulges the "fantasy of an autonomous, 'neutral' listening body that can detect an accent without participating in its construction."⁹ To counter this "myth of neutral listening" and the static notions of identity and place associated with speech, Rangan calls for "accented interlistening," a reflexive practice that foregrounds the power dynamics that structure the interconnected and relational practices of speaking, listening, and interpreting. In introducing the prefix "accented" to Lisbeth Lipari's notion of interlistening, Rangan tempers the liberal euphoria that sometimes surrounds concepts like dialogism and polyphony (Bakhtin), listening otherwise and interlistening (Lipari), and listening out (Lacey).¹⁰ Any answer to the question "How do we listen beyond ourselves?" must take into account the lopsided structures that bear upon social interactions, auditory and otherwise.

Thinking in concert with these colleagues and with poet Aracelis Girmay, I propose *listening with an accent*. My use of this phrase is similar to that of my interlocutors, but it inflects the theoretical terrain a bit differently. In my telling, listening with an accent is a mode of audition that is keenly aware of its own vantage point, that is, it is an embodied practice attuned to the pressures of the listening ear.¹¹ It is mindful of how we listen, how we have been *taught* to listen. Equally, though, listening with an accent seeks to listen differently. It represents a departure from one's "listening habitus" in two senses: it departs and it departs *from*.¹² Even as it takes the habitus as its inevitable point of departure, it attends to vocal difference in ways that undermine habitual ways of listening and, by extension, the imaginary those practices sustain. To listen thus is to go to, and listen from, a new or different place. In other words, listening with an accent is a traveling metaphor. I mean this not in the Saidian sense (though I hope it will become that too!) but in that such listening takes one away from one's habitus, however temporarily.¹³ Such a move reconfigures the relationship of the listening self to others, and thereby to itself. At its best, listening with an accent is an affiliative and coalitional praxis, for it entails listening *with* others and perhaps *like* others, not (just) *to* others.¹⁴

My conception of listening with an accent springs from my reading of Aracelis Girmay's "For Estefani Lora, Third Grade, Who Made Me a Card," which appears in her stunning debut collection *Teeth* (Curbstone Press, 2007). Being a poet and having grown up around Amharic, English, Spanish, and Tigrinya, among other tongues, Girmay revels in the multiplicity of language.¹⁵ She plays not just with the excess of linguistic connotations and denotations, but also with the wonders and vagaries of sounds. In "For Estefani Lora," the speaker receives a card with a word she does not know how to pronounce. As she deciphers the word, the accent of the letter writer becomes the accent of the speaker and the reader. In these and other poems by Girmay, to speak and write and read in an unconventional manner is rendered at once a challenge and a joy. Her poems engage difference not by identifying and reifying otherness, but by being open to it—whatever that "it" may be. They wait for, even court, that which sounds unfamiliar. They imagine other iterations of a single letter, a single string of letters, a single word. They put writing, reading, speaking, trying, waiting, inventing, and a host of other gerunds in the service of listening anew. Listening with an accent thus emerges as a dwelling in uncertainty. It is a deliberate embrace of the "disorientation" that Sara Ahmed writes of, that familiar feeling of being unmoored. As my litany of examples at the start of this chapter suggests, encountering new accents and sounds can be disorienting, and "bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive [and conservative] . . . as they search for a place to reground and reorientate their relation to the world."¹⁶ "For Estefani Lora" challenges us to respond differently to disorientation. In the face of words we cannot read, pronounce, or understand, we must listen with an accent. Dynamic and unbounded, such listening is a mode of relating to others (and to language itself) that is at once xenophonic and xenophilic.¹⁷ Just as

Trinh's "speaking nearby" inspires a "[re]positioning [of] oneself in relation to the world," the auditory practice I theorize in this chapter heightens our awareness of our location vis-à-vis others and prompts a reimagining of our affiliative bonds.¹⁸ It aspires to a wholly new and different orientation to the world. Listening with an accent, then, is a queer kind of listening. It is a queer kind of love. And it may just teach us to *loeribari*.

A CURIOUS WORD

"For Estefani Lora" begins with certainty. The speaker of the poem is a teacher who has just received a hand-drawn card from her student. On the cover is an "Elephant on an orange line, underneath a yellow circle / meaning sun. / 6 green, vertical lines, with color all from the top / meaning flowers." Birds fill the sky, too. The confidence with which the speaker reads these iconic representations ("meaning sun . . . meaning flowers.") falls away as she turns the page. There she encounters a long, cryptic word— "*Loisfoeribari*"—followed by Estefani's signature. Baffled, the speaker spends the rest of the poem attempting to unpack the word.¹⁹ First she crafts definitions that foreground its ostensible etymology and associations with the natural world and science. Perhaps it is "the scientific, Latinate way of saying *hibiscus*." Or perhaps it is "A direction, as in: Are you going / North? South? East? West? *Loisfoeribari*?" Thwarted by this line of inquiry, she plays with the sonic dimensions of the word. She tries saying it out loud, varying which syllable(s) she stresses each time: "*Loisfoeribari. LoISFOeribari. / LoISFOERibari. LoisFOERib-ARI.*" Unable to land on the right accent, she tries placing the word in sentences, changing the context and content with each utterance:

What is this word?
I imagine using it in sentences like,

"Man, I have to go back to the house,
I forgot my *Loisfoeribari*."

or

"There's nothing better than rain, hot rain,
open windows with music, & a tall glass
of *Loisfoeribari*."

or

"How are we getting to Pittsburgh?
Should we drive or take the *Loisfoeribari*?"

In each of her attempts to define and deploy the curious word, the speaker takes *loisfoeribari* to be a noun. It is an object such as a wallet or a drink or a vehicle, something concrete and tangible. She also expects a one-to-one correspondence between the word and its meaning. That is, she treats the word as a textual icon.

Even as grammatical and punctuational choices begin to suggest alternate possibilities—question marks and conjunctions undo the finality of periods (full stops!)—the speaker remains focused on her search for a single, clear answer: “What is this word?”

This desire for clarity dovetails with the speaker’s firm sense of the time and space she herself occupies: “I am in my living room. / It is June.” This being the end of the school year, the card is a thank-you note. The poem reciprocates Estefani’s gratitude in that it is dedicated to the young girl: “*for Estefani Lora, PS 132, Washington Heights*.” The dedication places the writer of the card in a specific borough and public school in New York City. At first glance, these references to time and place might seem like an excessive investment in fixity or an anxious response to the disorientation that *loisfoeribari* effects. However, we might also read in these temporal and spatial markers an admirable self-consciousness. The speaker understands that reading and listening are situated practices—that where she is matters to how and what she understands—and that her position is at some distance from Estefani’s.

The speaker also intuits that in order to hear Estefani’s message, she must leave the comfort of her home and reach for other people and other places. Her first stab at a definition casts *loisfoeribari* as a genus, a botanical family unit. It places the word within linguistic (Linate) and organic webs, seeking to understand it in relation to other entities. The second definition attempts to orient her in space. The speaker hasn’t left her living room yet, but perhaps she turns to face the direction she may be headed. The sentences she crafts around *loisfoeribari* build on the definitions’ gestures to the world beyond. Enclosed in quotation marks, each sentence is explicitly addressed to an unnamed listener. The person may be a fellow traveler, whom she consults about a mode of transportation, or one who has to wait as she doubles back to retrieve the important item left at home (in her sound house?). Or perhaps the listener is one who shares in the sensuous pleasures of music, rain, and a favorite cocktail. Thus, if the poem begins with the idea that reading happens in and from a particular location, it quickly gathers other people and places in its quest to understand Estefani’s neologism.

Aptly, it is when the speaker imagines herself in dialogue with her student that she begins to understand *loisfoeribari*. She composes a letter to Estefani Lora that praises her and her drawing, and then asks what the mysterious word means. Her affection for the little girl is apparent in the way she peppers her note with Spanish and English colloquialisms (“*Hola, querida*,” “I believe that you are *chula*, / *chulita*, and *super fly!*”). This shift in register continues the speaker’s conversation with herself and with the unnamed listener, but in a more intimate and loving key. The speaker (now also a writer, like Estefani) attends to her young friend’s linguistic habits and inhabitations. In writing to Estefani, she speaks (a bit) like her. This imagined epistolary conversation even prompts the speaker to return to the card in Spanish:

I try the word in Spanish.
Loisfoeribari

Lo-ees-fo-eh-dee-bah-dee
Lo-ees-fo-eh-dee-bah-dee

& then, slowly,

Lo is fo e ri bari
Lo is fo eribari

Whereas the speaker had previously taken loisfoeribari to be a single word, now she creates room between syllables. She pulls apart the phonemes and holds them in tension, as a set of hyphenated sounds.²⁰ Then, she puts them back together in a slightly different way, with spaces (pauses) now marking distinctions between words. Over the course of a just few lines, in the move from “Loisfoeribari” to “Lo is fo eribari,” new words and a sentence are born. Out of one word, many. *E Uno Plures*.

But just as one grasps loisfoeribari, it merrily slips out of reach. From here on out the poem has no punctuation marks. Even line breaks cannot stop or slow the rush of sounds and words and meanings that pour forth as the speaker understands (that) love is for everybody. The last stanza, composed of nineteen lines and enjambments and repetitions galore, rearranges loisfoeribari into countless configurations. Here, for example, are lines seven through twelve of the poem’s closing stanza:

love love for love
for everybody
for love is everybody
love is forevery
love is forevery body
love love love for body

Once the speaker “tr[ies] the word in Spanish”—that is, once she pronounces loisfoeribari as if it were a Spanish word—she realizes that the problem was that she had been listening with an Anglophone ear. Thinking in Spanish allows her to listen to Estefani with an accent, which in turn initiates a veritable explosion of love. Not only does the linguistic switch unlock four (or five or more) words where there had been just one, it arranges them into ever more surprising relationships. Some lines offer multiple riffs on the theme (“love is body every body is love”). Some answer rhetorical questions posed in other lines (“is love everybody/everybody is love”). Some craft new words or split existing ones (“forevery,” “every body”). What we make of this playful and prolific translation of loisfoeribari depends on whether we pause within a line or at a line break or not at all. The reader is thus invited into this joyous celebration of love, language, and listening. The poem

returns in its last line to a one-word formulation—*loveisforeverybody*—but we hear and read and speak the word differently now. The end, moreover, is not the end: without a full stop to close out the poem, we are left to ponder ever more creative renderings of *loisfoeribari*.

It is critical that “For Estefani Lora” does not close with the speaker having solved the “problem” that was *loisfoeribari*, the “problem” of the L2 accent on the page. Instead, it basks in the complexity of Estefani’s note. What could have been merely an exercise in frustration becomes a meandering exploration of linguistic possibilities. The speaker’s initial disorientation leads to many different (and fun) ways of speaking and hearing *loisfoeribari*. And it is precisely when she arrives at the “right” pronunciation that she conjures a dizzying but delightful array of further possibilities. Thus, rather than directing the reader to follow a single path to (and from) *loisfoeribari*, the poem celebrates being unmoored.

Ruminating on the promise of (dis)orientation, Sara Ahmed writes, “The hope of changing directions is that we don’t always know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even become queer.”²¹ A poem that centers love, body, love of body, love of every body / everybody, love for everybody / every body, “For Estefani Lora” is eminently readable as a queer text. “Queer” here specifies not an identity category or a set of sexual practices so much as an off-kilter orientation to the world, an orientation attuned to how the world throws some of us off kilter. No doubt Estefani’s is a permissive note to love beyond heteronormative strictures. Equally, it sanctions love across the borders of caste, class, ethnicity, nation, race, and religion. It is also queer in that it revolves around an “odd” word—a word whose very oddness lays bare the normative functions of the listening ear. In eschewing “straight and narrow” pronunciations and understandings of its key word, “For Estefani Lora” points to a contingent and capacious understanding of accent, one that involves all manner of bodily engagements. In reading a prior draft of this chapter, Pooja Rangan astutely asked me, “Could we think of accent, then, [as] a queering of ears and tongues bent into the rigid linguistic family trees of fatherlands and mother tongues?” Yes! Where accent is typically imagined as a filial mode of speech, I propose accent as an affiliative and coalitional practice, one that reaches beyond the limits of the listening ear. For Ahmed, “moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the world from its ground.”²² This is exactly what happens in Girmay’s poem. “For Estefani Lora” begins with a moment of aural, oral, visual, and epistemic disorientation. Its splendor lies in the fact that it never leaves that moment. Rather, it extends the initial moment of disorientation *ad infinitum*. Drawing on and crafting a richer, more expansive sensorium, the poem ushers the speaker (and the reader) to a new place from which to listen.²³ Inspiring a newly embodied relationship to the word/world, this disoriented and disorienting poem makes possible new futures.

DISORIENTING ACCENT

Here, in three movements, is how loisfoeribari “disorients” accent:

I.

Loisfoeribari is accented and so the speaker of the poem does not understand it.
 Loisfoeribari is accented and (~~so~~) the speaker does not understand it.
 Loisfoeribari is accented because the speaker does not understand it.

II.

Loisfoeribari accents the speaker as she learns to pronounce it.
 Loisfoeribari bends and stretches and moves the speaker’s ear.
 Loisfoeribari bends and stretches and moves the listener’s tongue.

III.

To grasp (how) loisfoeribari, the speaker must listen with an accent.
 To loeribari, we must listen with an accent.
 To listen with an accent is to loeribari.

I

Loisfoeribari might commonly be understood as an example of accented speech, what a linguist might call Estefani’s L2 accent. But accent is hardly the property of a speaker. It only emerges in the encounter between the speaker and the listener. Whether or not one speaks “with an accent,” one is only *heard* as speaking with an accent in certain contexts, by certain listeners.²⁴ Thus, accent does not distinguish Estefani’s speech; it is what distinguishes the encounter between various speakers, readers, listeners, and/or writers. It is the speaker’s impoverished ear that accents loisfoeribari. That monolingual ear uses a standardized American English accent to read and pronounce loisfoeribari and hence does not understand it.²⁵ Not understanding casts the word (the world!) as accented. The speaker’s ear assumes a “neutral” listening posture—rather, the speaker assumes that she hears from a neutral place. In fact, there is nothing neutral about the listening ear and the way it relegates loisfoeribari to the domain of nonmeaning. Such relegation is an example of what Nina Sun Eidsheim dubs “aural redlining.”²⁶

“For Estefani Lora” exposes us all, at first, as clueless—and thus unwittingly dangerous—readers and listeners. It then guides us toward a different mode of listening. We learn, along with the speaker of the poem, to listen with an accent. To listen thus is to understand how our listening is accented in the first place. To listen with an accent is also to tune our ears and tongues to a different place.

II

“For Estefani Lora” teaches us to listen with an accent by coaxing us to speak with an accent. From the start, it is impossible to name (just) Estefani’s accent as accented, for it is not her with whom we dwell. We sit instead with the speaker of the poem, who attempts to say *loisfoeribari* over and over. She speaks the word in different ways, experimenting with rhythm, pacing, and length with each utterance. If accent names patterns of stress in speech, then it is the *speaker’s* accented attempts, her myriad pronunciations of the word—and, by extension, our own pronunciations—that come to the fore. *Loisfoeribari* accents the reader as she hears the word/sentence, the listener as she reads it. The poem makes accented speakers of us readers.²⁷ Whether or not we are moved to read aloud as the speaker does, we do have to sound out the letters with her. We try out different accents until we find one that seems to fit the word. This, we decide, is how Estefani would pronounce *loisfoeribari*. This is how we must say it, too. As Akshya Saxena puts it, reading accent “requir[es] the reader/critic to implicate themselves in the process. Reading requires a risky ventriloquism, giving one’s breath to another’s body.”²⁸ Reading “For Estefani Lora” entails taking on the voice of the speaker of the poem, which is also a giving of our voice to the speaker: we listen (and speak) *like* and *as* the speaker of the poem. Trickier still is that in accepting the speaker’s invitation to read Estefani’s card with her, we are moved to speak *like* Estefani and *as* her, too. If listening to Estefani with an Anglophone ear is a dangerous proposition, then so, too, is ventriloquizing her. At what point does the attempt and desire to speak like her lapse into “Mock Spanish”?²⁹ To what extent is speaking *like* another name for speaking *as*, speaking *for*, or speaking *over*—actions that potentially erase or subsume Estefani?

Such ethical predicaments and bodily entanglements play out not just via accented speech, but also in the various positions and practices we encounter in “For Estefani Lora.” While the entire poem is rendered as a first-person account, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between:

“speakers”: Estefani, the speaker of the poem, and us readers;

“readers”: the speaker of the poem, readers of the poem, and Estefani, for she may yet become a reader of the letter that the speaker imagines sending her;

“writers”: Estefani and the speaker of the poem, for they write to each other; and

“listeners”: the speaker of the poem, unnamed listeners in the poem, and readers of the poem.

Each position in the communicative exchange is occupied by several people at once, and each is linked to the next. The multiplicity in each of the positions noted above is crucial, for it generates a certain kind of “multivocality,” which in turn keeps the poem from being an exercise in mockery or erasure.³⁰ Commenting on the ethics of reading aloud, Jaimie Baron argues that “to read another’s words aloud is to give them renewed substance and authority. . . . A dialectic is set up

between past and present, writer and speaker, ventriloquist and dummy, self and other. All are given voice; no one is privileged.”³¹ While Baron’s argument refers to recitations of first-person perspectives that are not one’s own (someone else’s “I”), it helps clarify the import of the many linguistic and “acoustic alignment(s)” at play in Girmay’s poem. In “For Estefani Lora,” we encounter many ways of engaging with texts—speaking, reading, writing, and listening—and many individuals who perform these various activities. As readers of the poem, we inhabit a space in which a host of others speak, read, write, and listen alongside us.

In multiplying bodies and bringing them closer together, in traversing and diminishing (but not altogether erasing) the distance between them, “For Estefani Lora” enacts an affiliative politics reminiscent of Trinh Minh-ha’s “speaking nearby.” Trinh’s important formulation, quoted in the second epigraph above, names a methodological practice that seeks to avoid the epistemic violence animating much documentary and ethnographic work. Speaking nearby is a “speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.”³² It is a reflexive and relational orientation that leaves room for dialogue and dissonance. Following Trinh, we might say that the speaker of Girmay’s poem listens nearby Estefani. After all, if she or the reader *were* Estefani, she would not be baffled by the word on the page. It takes her the length of the poem to learn to truly listen like and speak nearby her dear student. The poem takes seriously the challenge that Estefani’s deceptively simple note poses.³³ If *loisfoeribari*, then what might that mean for the ways in which we engage with others? How might it change our orientation to the world?

One answer is that in order to listen with an accent, the speaker must move—metaphorically and imaginatively, if not literally so. She must listen from a place that is different from the one from which she started. She may not have to travel very far from where she first peels open Estefani’s handmade card, but she must move nonetheless. She must listen *not* from this place (her living room, say) but from somewhere else, somewhere adjacent. It is in going to that other place—in departing from her *habitus*—that the speaker is able to embrace Estefani’s wisdom and go still other places with *loisfoeribari*. Another answer lies in the fact that the many activities to which the poem gestures (traveling, letter writing, conversing) are all social or dialogic in some fashion. We often undertake them in concert with others. “For Estefani Lora” thus illustrates Lisbeth Lipari’s argument that all listening is interlistening. Closing the space between subjects in dialogue, and between speaking, listening, and thinking, Lipari uses the term interlistening to cast “listening itself as a form of speaking that resonates with echoes of everything we have ever heard, thought, seen, touched, said, and read throughout our lives.”³⁴ The temporality of listening thus spans past and present—and, I argue, the future. How one listens is a function of the gradual accretion of listening practices that becomes one’s *habitus*. I argue in this chapter for a listening that is aware of its *habitus*, even as it moves toward other, more hopeful and generous horizons. Since

speaking, listening, reading, and writing are thoroughly entwined, listening with an accent entails much more than attention to sound.

If to listen is to speak is to read is to write (and so on), then where precisely do we locate accent? What might other activities such as speaking, imagining, and writing—or texting, as Sara Veronica Hinojos argues in her contribution to this volume—teach us about listening? How might they teach us to listen with an accent? How might knowledge of other languages and other modes of communication shape the way we hear? How might the listener's eye and tongue bend the listener's ear? How might reading and pronouncing words in unfamiliar ways teach us to listen more kindly, more humbly, more expansively, and more self-consciously?

III

My theorization of listening with an accent intersects with Akshya Saxena's concept of "xenophilic attunement."³⁵ Keenly aware of the uneven inscription of accents in literary texts, Saxena asks, "Can hearing an accent be an orientation in love and affinity toward strangers, a kind of attentive listening to the sounds of another body?" My reading of Girmay's poem suggests that this can be so—with the caveat that the sounds of another body are often inextricable from one's own.³⁶ Say it with me: to listen with an accent is to *loeribari*. This is a love that, in the words of Amitav Ghosh (on whom Saxena builds), "acknowledge[s] the ways in which both the West and we ourselves have been irreversibly changed by our encounter with each other . . . [and] that in matters of language, culture and civilization, their heritage, like ours, is fragmented, fissured and incomplete."³⁷ For Roshanak Kheshti, such a radical engagement with the sounds of difference exists as potential, as a kind of queer futurity. What we have in the present is a modern listening self marked by racialized and gendered desires for the exotic "other." Both Ghosh and Kheshti—and indeed, several other scholars of sound, from Eidsheim to Lacey to Lipari to Stoeve—push against the overdetermined aural imaginary of their specific contexts. They attempt to keep listening from being an inevitable exercise in aural hegemony. Listening with an accent is my iteration of this resistant and utopian desire.

Listening with an accent is akin to xenophilic attunement in that it, too, is attentive to questions of history, power, and privilege. It is an orientation to, and a reaching for, those cultures, languages, and civilizations deemed other, despite—and with—a historical awareness of the auditor's implication in the operations of power. It pushes back against a sedimented aural imaginary by calling attention to the reified notions of identity and place on which that imaginary rests. Roshanak Kheshti teaches us that in the capitalist marketplace of global musics and in its academic precursor, comparative musicology, field recordings stand as crucibles of authentic otherness: "Field recordings begin with the notion of an authenticity

in sound as tied to a fixed *place* naturally populated by a discrete notion of a *people*.³⁸ Accent is similar in that it, too, is construed as a mark of where one “comes from.” It is commonly understood as the sound of place in one’s speech, which in turn is linked to race, ethnicity, class, citizenship, and so on. As is evident in the introduction and several chapters in this volume, one of the problems with accent as a construct is its tendency to fix language to place. It makes place a defining feature of one’s identity. Moreover, as my opening anecdotes demonstrate, accent becomes a way of putting one in one’s place.

In theorizing listening with an accent as a traveling metaphor, I draw on a cluster of concepts—habitus, orientation, and speaking nearby—that trouble the relationship between language, identity, and place. Taking my cue from “For Estefani Lora,” I offer a theory of accent that coaxes listeners to jettison our habitual modes of perception. Divesting thus from the asymmetrical and hierarchical linguistic structures we inherit and unwittingly perpetuate demands a decentering of the self. As Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan eloquently put it when echoing my argument back to me, “Listening with an accent [functions] as a form of leave-taking, as a form of leaving oneself (even as a form of departure from identity?).”³⁹ That is exactly right. In unsettling the “place” of accent, we admit that neither place nor family nor body nor identity determines how we speak or how we listen. We can and must reorient our listening habits and linguistic relationships such that they conjure other ways of being with others. For Lipari, “the compassion of listening otherwise takes us beyond the self and out into the groundlessness and ambiguity of the radical alterity of the other.”⁴⁰ My own emphasis is not on the otherness of the “other” so much as the recognition of the embodied practices that cause some to be heard *as other*. The point is neither to (simply) respect difference nor deny it. Instead, listening with an accent acknowledges the contingency and the dynamism of aural/oral differences and is open to being changed by it. It even hopes to be changed by the encounter with that which is new or unfamiliar, or newly unfamiliar. It is a welcoming of the disorientation that comes from eschewing one’s habitual modes of listening and speaking and writing. Juxtaposing Sara Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz, and Akshya Saxena, we might conceptualize listening with an accent as a disidentificatory orientation to the world. It is a xenophilic disorientation—a disorientation borne of a xenophilic orientation to the world.

Listening with an accent is inventive, as inventive as speaking, writing, and texting with an accent is. It revels in unhomeliness—rather, it revels in being at home, but elsewhere, in being at home in multiple places, multiple times. It seeks to hang out in unfamiliar linguistic spaces, in unfamiliar sounds. It listens knowing it may not understand. It may not even seek to understand all that it hears. It may call for more expansive linguistic resources than we otherwise use. It may demand that we sound words (as if) in different languages. It may necessitate listening with other tongues—not “mastering” other tongues so much as listening with other languages at the tip of one’s tongue and fingertips.⁴¹ It may require sitting with the

unknown. It may involve accepting an invitation to elsewhere. No matter what, it entails patience, openness, and vulnerability. It entails effort.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Aracelis Girmay's "For Estefani Lora" enacts the kind of dwelling in disorientation that I am calling listening with an accent. Even as the poem unfolds as a search for meaning, it does not move from ignorance to knowledge. Rather, it starts with disorientation and sustains that feeling throughout. Disorientation leads to a kind of purposeful unmooring and wandering and wondering. Sara Ahmed writes, "to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering."⁴³ The politics of disorientation I have charted in this chapter also sustains wonder about the forms of *linguistic* gathering, the congregation of sonic and linguistic traces in our tongues. It thrives in "listening out," Kate Lacey's descriptor for an open and eager orientation to the world.⁴⁴ Conceived thus, listening registers a fundamental curiosity about the world. Curiosity turns to embodied practice when one consciously and carefully inhabits positions not (necessarily) one's own. Straining against textual and aural conventions, "For Estefani Lora" reveals the listening ear as that which creates otherness. In place of such othering, it pronounces a different relationship to difference. It teaches us not to listen for accents, but to listen with an accent.

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NOTES

1. A quality assurance workshop that introduces participants to the U.S. undergraduate educational system and its pedagogical norms, the University of Michigan's training and testing program is primarily concerned with "competence in classroom English [which] includes the ability to understand the English spoken by the undergraduates in their classrooms and the ability to speak comprehensibly in interactions with their students." "Policy for Training & Testing Prospective GSIs in LSA."

2. See, for instance, Jennifer Fleege, *Mismatched Women*, and Sundar, "Usha Uthup and her Husky, Heavy Voice."

3. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 48.

4. Stoeve, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7. Lisbeth Lipari offers a parallel theorization using Bourdieu: "Each of us habitually inhabits and perform[s] ways of listening that are shaped by the social worlds we inhabit and that inhabit us." This is our "listening habitus." Lipari, *Listening, Thinking Being*, 37.

5. Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear*, 61.

6. Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear*, 13–14.

7. See Nina Sun Eidsheim's chapter in this volume, "Rewriting Algorithms for Just Recognition: From Digital Aural Redlining to Accent Activism."

8. See, for example, Eidsheim's introduction to *The Race of Sound*, "Introduction: The Acousmatic Question," 13.

9. Rangan, "Listening with an Accent, Or, Learning to Hear Documentary's Audit," 1. I am grateful to Pooja for sharing her chapter draft with me, and for her indulgence and enthusiasm as I built from her ideas—and her chapter title, no less!

10. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*; Lacey, *Listening Publics*.

11. Stoever distinguishes the listening ear from what she calls the "embodied ear," which describes "how individuals' listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power." Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 15.

12. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 39. Elsewhere I theorize the project of listening to aural difference anew as "listening with a feminist ear" in my eponymously titled book.

13. Said, "Traveling Theory."

14. I am riffing here on Pooja Rangan's call to think of "accent as crip curb cut." See Rangan's contribution to this volume, "From 'Handicap' to Crip Curb Cut: Thinking Accent with Disability." Inspired by Pooja's theorizing of a *coalitional* mode of thinking accent with disability," I set out to write an essay juxtaposing my acquaintance Ara's poems "For Estefani Lora" and "Ode to the Letter B" (both of which appear in her first collection, *Teeth*) and a brilliant cycle of poems on disfluency by my colleague Adam Giannelli, "Stutter," "How to Hear a Stutter," and "Stutterfied." (The first of Adam's poems appears in his award-winning debut collection *Tremulous Hinge* [University of Iowa Press, 2016] and the others in *The Kenyon Review* [special issue on Literary Activism, Nov./Dec. 2019].) Juxtaposing Ara's and Adam's poems might have suggested an all-too-easy analogy between immigrant and stutterer, accent and disability. I wanted to risk the very move that disability scholars caution against because I sensed the productive and pleasurable affinities between them. I sought to demonstrate that while neither poet focuses on accent per se, their work could teach us to listen with an accent. I was convinced—and still am—that thinking accent and disability alongside each other could lead not just to a more sympathetic ear but a more imaginative one. I ended up hanging out with Estefani so much that I did not get to the other poems I intended to discuss. Kabhi aur, shaayad.

15. Girmay talks extensively about her relationship to language(s) in her *Bennington Review* interview, "Aracelis Girmay in Conversation with Claire Schwartz." "My mom's side of the family speaks English peppered with Spanish. And different kinds of Englishes—different syntax, speech, pace. English always has felt like the most homespace for me. I feel obviously fluent in English. I can speak Spanish, but there's always a reaching. Tigrinya, I don't speak. So, there's fluency, but I'm also very at home on the outside of language, in a space where I don't understand." My reading of "For Estefani Lora" and my notion of "listening with an accent" mobilize just such a varied and complex understanding of the languages and identities we call "home."

16. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 158.

17. See Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, and Saxena's chapter in this volume, "Stereo Accent: Reading, Writing, and Xenophilic Attunement."

18. Trinh, quoted in Chen, "Speaking Nearby," 87. Thank you to Pooja Rangan for reminding me of this gorgeous piece.

19. In an interview with the poet, Claire Schwartz comments that translation in Girmay's work (and in "For Estefani Lora" in particular) operates not like "decoding or deciphering" a product so much as a "process of reaching." Girmay agrees and explains her process in this way: "In Spanish, if I'm reaching for a word, the reaching turns into a kind of walking around the word, or—if I can't find that word—trying to get at it from different angles. I think in English that happens, too, in different ways. Certainly, writing poems feels like that process to me. Tweaking or the chiropractic movements

of revision or conjugations of a verb—all of that is interesting to me.” Turns out, listening with an accent is like writing a poem. “Aracelis Girmay in Conversation with Claire Schwartz.”

20. For more on language as sound, see chapter 3 of my forthcoming book, *Listening with a Feminist Ear*.

21. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 21.

22. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

23. At the Matters of Voice Workshop at the Stanford Humanities Center (February 2, 2021), Nina Sun Eidsheim asked the audience to imagine how we might expand our sensorium. I returned to my writing with her inspiring call ringing in my ears.

24. Thanks to Akshya Saxena for helping me grasp the vast implications of this point.

25. I follow sociolinguists in specifying that the American English considered the norm is a “standardized” form of the language.

26. See Eidsheim’s chapter in this volume.

27. Thanks again to Akshya Saxena, whose presentation at the Thinking with an Accent conference (May 3, 2020) got me hooked on this idea. See her chapter in this volume.

28. See Saxena’s chapter in this volume.

29. Jane Hill uses the term “Mock Spanish” to describe the way in which white (Anglo) English speakers “incorporat[e] Spanish-language materials into English in order to create a jocular or pejorative ‘key.’” Drawing on Bonnie Urciuoli’s scholarship on Puerto Ricans’ experience of language hierarchies and prejudice, Hill argues that Mock Spanish sustains “White public space, an arena in which linguistic disorder on the part of Whites is rendered invisible and normative, while the linguistic behavior of members of historically Spanish-speaking populations is highly visible and the object of constant monitoring.” Hill, “Language, Race, and White Public Space,” 682, 684.

30. Trinh, quoted in Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” 85.

31. Baron, “Inhabiting the Other’s Voice.” This is another reference I owe to Pooja Rangan.

32. Trinh, quoted in Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” 87.

33. Thanks to Maureen McDonnell for framing the poem thus and asking me to imagine Estefani as the reader of this poem.

34. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 9.

35. See Saxena’s chapter in this volume.

36. For a different take on “bodies as sites through which the other’s sounds resonate,” see Kheshti’s incisive critique of the gendered and racialized aural imaginary of the world music industry in her book *Modernity’s Ear*.

37. Ghosh, “Confessions of a Xenophile.”

38. Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear*, 135 (italics in the original).

39. I am grateful to Pooja Rangan and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan for pushing me to develop this line of my argument.

40. Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 184.

41. Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

42. Lisbeth Lipari, too, identifies “several recurring themes that may shape an ethics of attunement: interconnection and generosity, impermanence and humility, iteration and patience, and invention and courage.” Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, 6.

43. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 24.

44. Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 7–8.

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