

Interrogating Accents: Brendan Fernandes, Katarina Zdjelar and Nicoline van
Harskamp

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Abstract

This MRP explores accent as an indicator of difference in three contemporary art works: *Foe* (2008) by Brendan Fernandes, *The Perfect Sound* (2009) by Katarina Zdjelar and *English Forecast* (2013) by Nicoline van Harskamp. I demonstrate how these artists utilise visual media to scrutinise the embodied accent and its relationship with individual identity, notions of race and place and the nature of English as a Lingua Franca. Through investigating how accent is deployed in these artists' works, I explore the relation of race and ethnicity to the "marked" (accented) sound of a voice. In so doing, I draw attention to audible markers of difference, which often remain hidden within the universalising language of English communication, and through a postcolonial reading of audible difference as decolonial gesture, analyse how this audible difference is embedded into visible markers of difference.

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Introduction

We fashion ourselves always in a present articulation of language...This is our plight: to conceive selves and to bear others, subjects of some national chronotope, en route to some ethnic telos.

Alfred Arteaga¹

The focus of this research paper is a close reading of three artworks: *Foe* (2008), by Brendan Fernandes, *The Perfect Sound* (2009) by Katarina Zdjelar and *English Forecast* (2013) by Nicoline van Harskamp. Through my exploration of English accents in these works, I consider how language is an indicator of identity in an ever more globalised and diasporic/postcolonial world. Specifically, I examine how these artists unmask accent as a marker of difference (race, ethnicity and class) through their focus on both the aural and embodied dimensions of language and accent. I argue that accent is under-theorised as a marker of difference and that it has the capacity to mask and/or unmask identity, stereotype and difference. In so doing, this paper explores how race, class and “origins” are evoked through the sound of a voice. The combined visual and audio components present in video and performance work lend themselves to this investigation of the embodied speaking subject.² While reference will be made to the intersections between the visual and the auditory as visible racial markers that both reinforce and, at other times, mask the accent of the speaker, this paper primarily

¹ Alfred Arteaga, “Introduction,” in *An Other Tongue : Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 2–3.

² I choose to use Julia Kristeva’s term, “the speaking subject” when referring to the accented speaker. Julia Kristeva, “The System and the Speaking Subject,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 24–33.

addresses these artists' interrogations of accent.

Foe, *The Perfect Sound*, and *English Forecast* all highlight the sound of the speaker's voice as their primary subject by foregrounding the audio component of their videos through various visual techniques. For example, in both *Foe* and *The Perfect Sound*, the viewer is invited to recognise the physicality of speech through extreme close-ups of the speaker's mouths. Another technique that is employed specifically by Zdjelar is the insertion of black screens that act as a visual interruption, encouraging the viewer/listener to pay attention to the continuing, uninterrupted soundtrack. These works, despite their different emphases, all explore issues tied to accent and language. My key areas of focus in examining these issues include a consideration of how language/accents recall space and place; the relationship between the oral (and aural) and the textual within a postcolonial space; how speaking with an accent is both empowering or disempowering; and whether it is possible (or desirable?) to liberate language/accents from place or race. The main question that undergirds my analysis is: what is at stake when speaking with or losing an accent.

The critical discourses I draw upon to frame this question and my comparative analysis of *Foe*, *The Perfect Sound*, and *English Forecast* follow the trajectory established by critical theorist and writer, Edouard Glissant, who demonstrates how speech is an embodied practice and addresses creolisation, mimicry and the tension between the oral and the textual.³ The other key theorist that I draw on is postcolonial literary critic

³ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989).

and theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who theorises mimicry and the stereotype.⁴ Both theorists provide productive ways of approaching issues such as the tension between the written versus the oral, mimicry, camouflage and stereotype that emerge through my analysis of these art works.

Postcolonial literary theorists who have theorised extensively around the presence of English in the colonies and English's subsequent contentious presence within postcolonial literature contribute to the paper's overall analytical framework. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul and Ben Okri have interrogated fixed notions of English as tied to a nation (England) and a culture (Englishness) by introducing more nuanced and flexible ways of employing the language. In so doing, they enable English to more accurately reflect and echo the culturally diffuse situations into which it has (often unnaturally) been transplanted. For example, Ngūgĩ Wa Thiong'o is a vocal proponent for writing in a native language rather than in the language of the coloniser due to the issues inherent (ethical, political and practical) in writing in the coloniser's tongue.⁵

In terms of the specific focus of this paper on the spoken, aural sound of language and how notions of race and place are recalled through the accented sound of a voice, translation theories in the field of postcolonial literature prove particularly useful as an interpretative frame that considers how culturally specific sounds, ideas

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ See Ngūgĩ Wa Thiong'o, "On the Abolition of the English Department," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 438–42; Ngūgĩ Wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 285–90.

and practices can more fluently be shifted from one language into another, whilst simultaneously keeping in mind the theoretical implications embedded within the act of translation. Literary theorists who investigate translation and postcolonial writing include Bill Ashcroft (most notably his ideas around the productivity of the “metonymic gap”) and Chantal Zabus who helpfully introduces the term, “relexification,” when theorising issues around postcolonial translation, as well as her consideration of what it means to write “with an accent”.⁶ Ismael S. Talib’s useful book, *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures* provides an extensive analysis of English within its postcolonial context (including issues around translation).⁷ Through an understanding of issues that emerge from studies in postcolonial translation, I am able to more clearly examine the position of spoken accent and what is at stake when a non-standard accent is spoken within a space. In this respect, the artworks that I consider are all engaging in translation – either translation of text into spoken words, or from the spoken back into the written (Fernandes and Van Harskamp); or “translating” sounds through repetition, gesture and mirroring (Fernandes, Zdjelar).

While postcolonial literary theorists can offer a framework for thinking through the relation of accent to translation, they do not directly address issues arising from the aurality of accent and dialect. For this reason I also draw upon academic disciplines such

⁶ Chantal Zabus, “Relexification,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 314–18; Chantal Zabus, “‘Writing with an Accent’: From Early Decolonization to Contemporary Gender Issues in the African Novel in French, English, and Arabic.,” in *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures: Multilingual Contexts, Translational Texts*, ed. Simona Bertacco (New York: Routledge, 2014), 32–47.

⁷ Ismail S. Talib, *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction*, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 2002).

as socio-linguistics and more pedagogically inclined areas of study that consider the spoken language in relation to its specific cultural contexts. English as a Lingua Franca is, for example, often discussed in relation to how it is best taught (e.g. debates around the question of standardisation) within second language situations.⁸ A consideration of research that has focused on globalisation's impact on English and on English as a Lingua Franca has provided me with the necessary context for an engaged discussion around Nicoline van Harskamp's work, *English Forecast* (2013).⁹ Van Harskamp considers the implications of English as a Lingua Franca in terms of accent and the impact of Englishes (multiple forms of English) on standardised English. I am interested in her representation of Englishes through which she unmasks assumptions that tie language to race, ethnicity and place. In so doing, she troubles notions around the "ownership" of a language.

In relationship to both the linguistic focus and the postcolonial lens of my analysis, a number of terms are deployed as follows. "Accent" is central to my paper, and is differentiated from "dialect." These words often refer to the same notion as they are closely aligned (accent is a subset of dialect), but in this research I will be referring specifically to accent, rather than to dialect. Accent is restricted to pronunciation (voice, distinction of vowels and consonants, stress and prosody), and is peculiar to a

⁸ For more on this see the English Language Teaching Journal: "ELT Journal," accessed May 10, 2015, <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>.

⁹ See, for example: Colin Sowden, "ELF on a Mushroom: The Overnight Growth in English as a Lingua Franca," *ELT Journal* 66, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 89–96, doi:10.1093/elt/ccr024; Kevin Hodgson, "Mismatch: Globalisation and Native Speaker Models of Linguistic Competence," *RELC Journal* 45, no. 2 (2014): 113–34; Rajend Mesthrie, "World Englishes and the Multilingual History of English," *World Englishes* 25, no. 3–4 (August 2006): 381–90; Rajend Mesthrie, "New Englishes and the Native Speaker Debate," *Language Sciences* 32, no. 6 (November 2010): 594–601.

region/location, social standing/class and possibly ethnicity/nation, whereas dialect is usually marked by a broader set of linguistic differences such as variations in grammar and vocabulary.

“Mother tongue” refers to the language learned by a speaker at birth (also referred to as native language). It is the language of the home and of the community, and it is usually the language within which a speaker is most proficient.¹⁰ Native language is related to “mother tongue” but I will use it to refer to speakers who speak the predominant language of a place (speakers of English in England and North America) where they have naturally acquired this language and accent through interaction with family and the surrounding community.¹¹

Standard English refers to “a relatively uniform variety of language that does not show regional variation, and which is used in a wide range of communicative functions...Standard varieties tend to observe prescriptive, written norms, which are codified in grammars and dictionaries.”¹² I would also add that there is an accepted standard English accent within England which sociolinguists refer to as Received Pronunciation (RP). There are currently two major “standard” English accents: one in the UK and one in North America. Much of this research will investigate “deviant” accents that differ from Received Pronunciation in England and the metropolitan standard

¹⁰ This is, of course, contentious: the language learnt at birth is not necessarily singular or, indeed, the language in which a speaker is most proficient. It could be posited that it is possible to have more than one mother tongue, depending on how this term is defined.

¹¹ I use “North America” to refer to the predominantly English speaking countries found on the North American continent. This would include Canada and the United States of America, where a similar form of English accent is in use.

¹² Joan Swann et al., *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

English spoken in North America.¹³ Standard English is often used as a comparative norm in relation to other accents.

“Space” and “place” are other terms that are regularly utilised throughout this MRP. Here I follow Ato Quayson’s thinking about “space” as opposed to “place.” He asserts that colonialism can be recognised through its complex “space making” mechanisms in which, “...a series of sociopolitical dimensions [are projected] onto a geographic space. These sociopolitical dimensions involve not just society and politics but also economy, culture, and a wide range of symbolic and discursive practices.”¹⁴ In this excerpt, Quayson refers to “place,” as “geographic space.” “Place” refers to a specific, geographical site, a site that is complex due to the profound interferences imposed on it through colonial intervention. I choose to use the word “space” as a means to reference the complex spatial negotiations described by Quayson, within the postcolonial theoretical, geographical and cultural “landscape.”

The first section of this paper considers accent through an examination of Brendan Fernandes’s work *Foe* (2008). Brendan Fernandes is a Canadian artist who is currently living and working in New York. He was born in Kenya to Goan parents, who then immigrated to Canada. Much of Fernandes’s work is concerned with identity, in

¹³ For more on “metropolitan” varieties of English see Rajend Mesthrie, “World Englishes and the Multilingual History of English.” *World Englishes* 25, no. 3–4 (August 2006): 382. Mesthrie points out that there are two major “standard” English accents: he refers to them as metropolitan standard varieties. There are currently two Metropolitan standard varieties of English - one in the UK, and another in North America. According to Mesthrie, metropolitan standard varieties originate in the metropolis and their “spoken formal models are provided by the radio and television networks based largely in London and in the US cities like Washington, Los Angeles, New York and Atlanta.”

¹⁴ Ato Quayson, “Periods versus Concepts: Space Making and the Question of Postcolonial Literary History,” *PMLA*, no. 127.2 (2012): 344.

large part due to his own complex diasporic background. His works deal with memory, language, stereotypes, cross-cultural (and cross disciplinary) translations of images and texts. Fernandes works primarily in video, installation and performance (most of his more recent works are performance and dance-based). In *Foe* Fernandes recites an excerpt from the novel, *Foe*, by J.M. Coetzee, in three different accents that represent his diasporic genealogy and through which he explores notions of authenticity and nationality/race as they relate to individual identity. My analysis considers how Fernandes employs various visual and linguistic techniques that investigate diasporic and transcultural identity as dislocated and decoupled from inflexible notions of race and place. His video highlights issues around mimicry and stereotype that are considered through the theoretical lenses of Edouard Glissant and Homi K. Bhabha, as well as exploring questions of how home and belonging are tied to constructions of “mother-tongue.” He also draws attention to the tenuous relationship that defines the gap between the written and the oral.

In the second section, my analysis of accent is extended to an investigation of Katarina Zdjelar’s video work, *The Perfect Sound* (2009). Katarina Zdjelar is a Serbian artist who is currently living and working in The Netherlands. She aims to situate her experience of dislocation by “investigating forms of regulated systems of communication and learning...Language learning is of particular significance for her as this is a codified method of cultural integration not only involving a symbolic ‘rite of passage’ of the uprooted individual, but also the corporeal *affect* shaping this ‘speaking

body’.”¹⁵ Her practice includes video, sound, and book projects. *The Perfect Sound* (2009, 14’30”) was created during a residency in Birmingham, UK in 2008. The work has subsequently been exhibited in the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009 (Serbian Pavilion) and most recently in London as a part of a group exhibition called *M/Other Tongue* curated by Sable Gavelton at Tenderpixel, London, UK (January – February 2015).

Katarina Zdjelar’s video work titled *The Perfect Sound* (2009) focuses on an immigrant in Birmingham (UK) during an accent removal lesson who is trying to erase the audible traces his mother tongue has left on his newly acquired English (i.e. erasing his “foreign” accent) in an attempt to more fully integrate into British society. *The Perfect Sound* is a video of this lesson in progress and “reads” as video documentation. The video emphasises the oral, aural and physical act of acquiring a new accent. Through a close examination of this work by Zdjelar, I explore how mimicry (and camouflage) as discussed by theorists Homi K. Bhabha and Edouard Glissant is used in this video as a pedagogical device, but more significantly, to show how notions of mimicry can provide a useful theoretical framework when considering what is at stake when a speaking subject gains or loses an accent. As the video also foregrounds how “mother tongue...shapes our anatomy,”¹⁶ I reflect on the way in which the speaking subject crosses multiple boundaries – physical, geographical and social – through the learner’s process of acquiring a “new” accent.

The third section of my paper analyses the use of accent in *English Forecast*

¹⁵ “At the 53rd Biennale Di Venezia | E-Flux,” April 23, 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/at-the-53rd-biennale-di-venezia/>.

¹⁶ Mladen Dolar, “Which Voice?,” in *Parapoetics Reader* (Rotterdam: TENT.10, 2010), 8.

(2013) by the artist, Nicoline van Harskamp. Van Harskamp is a Dutch artist whose recent works focus on the proliferation of English as a Lingua Franca, concomitant with an investigation into the future of English. *English Forecast* is a recorded and broadcasted live performance that considers the future of English as the new cross-border language of choice. In Van Harskamp's performance, four actors speak with multiple different English accents as they contemplate the future of this new Lingua Franca. As such, *English Forecast* shifts the focus of my examination of accents from the personal towards a larger debate around the future of English and the place of English accents within this "new" language space, where notions of the English as a nation are continually being severed from the separate but often conflated notion of English as a language.¹⁷ My analysis pivots around Van Harskamp's use of speech and text, in which the text (written in the International Phonetic Alphabet) favours the aural sounds of the speaker. I advance that she is decoupling "nation" from "accent" – a process of deterritorialisation, in which she ultimately reterritorialises English as a cross-border language that favours difference, multiplicity and process.¹⁸

Works by Van Harskamp that precede *English Forecast* are *New Latin* (2010) and *European English Exercise* (2012-2013). *New Latin* is a live performance in which Van Harskamp translates an English text (compiled by her from interviews that she conducted with a range of speakers) into Romanian. This text is structured as an

¹⁷ Talib, *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, 3.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari for the terms "deterritorialisation" and "reterritorialisation." See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Reprint edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1983); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

interview between herself and a Romanian actor, Daniel Popa, and performed by them at the Bucharest Biennial of 2010. The work is similarly concerned with English as a Lingua Franca. *European English Exercise* (2012 – 2013) is a series of performances that investigate the outcomes of English de-standardisation. Van Harskamp considers how, “in the future, all English speakers have to learn to make themselves understood outside their own communities of English; they need to pronounce new phonemes and make completely new sounds with their mouths and throats.” This is an interactive performance that combines soundtracks structured like a Linguaphone course in which participants are required to repeat the audio samples. It is accompanied by a projection of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Together these works function as the precursors to *English Forecast*, whilst simultaneously being a part of the artist’s larger, on-going project of which *English Forecast* is representative.¹⁹

The fourth and final concluding section addresses how Zdjelar, Van Harskamp and Fernandes are opening a new field of inquiry within visual art that is centred on language and the spoken word, and the embodied voice of the speaker. This section considers how their work confronts contemporary issues of globalisation,

¹⁹ Her most recent work that investigates the future of English is called *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes* (2015), which continues this investigation into linguistic phenomena associated with the global use of spoken English. See “Opening New Premises and Nicoline van Harskamp Exhibition | E-Flux,” accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/opening-new-premises-and-nicoline-van-harskamp-exhibition/>.

transculturality and the complex field of “identity-in-politics” through decolonialist gestures that (amongst other things) delinks language from notions of race and nation.²⁰

²⁰ “Identity-in-politics” is a term coined by Walter Mignolo in, “Decolonial Aesthetics (I),” *TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute*, 2011, <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>.

Section 1: Brendan Fernandes, *Foe* (2008)

"...Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech?" I asked. "Is that what you mean to tell me?" ...Cruso motioned Friday nearer. "Open your mouth," he told him, and opened his own. Friday opened his mouth. "Look," said Cruso. I looked, but saw nothing in the dark save the glint of teeth white as ivory. "La-la-la," said Cruso, and motioned to Friday to repeat. "Ha-ha-ha," said Friday from the back of his throat. "He has no tongue," said Cruso. Gripping Friday by the hair, he brought his face close to mine. "Do you see?" he said. "It is too dark," said I. "La-la-la," said Cruso. "Ha-ha-ha," said Friday. I drew away, and Cruso released Friday's hair. "He has no tongue," he said. "That is why he does not speak. They cut out his tongue."

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, as spoken by Brendan Fernandes.²¹

Postcolonial author J.M. Coetzee wrote his novel, *Foe* (1986) as a retelling/reimagining of the well-known novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe. In Coetzee's rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, Susan Barton (who is on a quest to find her missing daughter) is set adrift after a mutiny on a ship and finds herself on an island that is already occupied by the previously shipwrecked Cruso and his slave, Friday, whose tongue has been cut out, leaving him "incapable of speech." On her return to London, Susan Barton commissions Foe (in Coetzee's novel, Defoe becomes Foe) to write a novel about her experience on the island. The muteness of Friday is powerfully contrasted to the ever-present voice of Susan Barton, who through her ability to speak/enunciate is positioned as the only authority/witness of their joint experience. Friday remains a mystery throughout the novel: who he is, where he is from and how he came to be "without tongue" is a constant source of discomfort and confusion to the

²¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, Re-issue edition (London: Penguin, 2010), 22–23.

various protagonists and the reader (except possibly for Crusoe himself, who may know more, but he does not reveal the truth and does not prove to be a reliable witness). The novel eloquently speaks about the disempowered colonial subject who has been rendered literally and figuratively “speechless,” much like Edouard Glissant’s poetic theorisation of the “alienated body of the slave” who is “[deprived] of speech [in] an attempt at complete dispossession.”²² This colonial dispossession is comprehensive: it is more than just linguistic in nature, it is also physical, cultural and spatial.

Brendan Fernandes judiciously uses the excerpt by J.M. Coetzee with which this section begins as the basis for his video work titled, *Foe* (2008). In so doing, Fernandes shifts Coetzee’s central theme of language and power towards an interrogation of how language, specifically accent, is implicated in a subject’s self-articulation and identification. Fernandes creates a dialogue between the written text (J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*) and the spoken accent as his work makes text audible through the accented voice of the speaking subject. Fernandes’s physical, embodied articulation of this text constructs an additional layer of meaning as tension is generated between the content of the spoken text and the speaking subject, Fernandes himself, who is visibly (racially) “marked.” In *Foe*, Fernandes reads the above quoted excerpt from the novel in three different accents: Indian (his parents are Goan), African (he grew up in Kenya) and Canadian/North American (his current home). Through this embodied reading, meaning shifts from the original text’s interrogation of Friday’s lack of tongue, to that of Fernandes’s lack of an authentic mother tongue. Instead, Fernandes speaks in the

²² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 112.

multiple accents of his diasporic genealogy.²³ Fernandes's concern with accent, as opposed to language, is also reinforced through his choice to speak only English, rather than choosing to speak in different native languages like Marathi or Konkani (Goan languages), Swahili (from Kenya), and English (in reference to Canada). In so doing Fernandes underscores his own deterritorialised speech through his embodiment of these three accents.

The video of *Foe* is visually straightforward: Fernandes reads the excerpt by Coetzee, whilst holding a written script in his hand (see figure 1). The video cuts between extreme close-ups focusing on his mouth, to medium close-ups in which he is revealed to wear a white t-shirt. He has a script in his hands and he stands in front of a cleaned blackboard with visible streak marks. The extreme close-ups draw attention to the physicality of the speech-act through its focus on the movements of his mouth whilst he pronounces and repeats words and phrases. In the video, Fernandes is being coached/helped by an acting coach who is off-screen, but audible to the viewer. The high-key lighting is stable throughout the duration of the video and the mise-en-scène reads as a fly-on-the-wall style documentary structured around a pedagogical moment.

The video starts with an extreme close-up of Fernandes's mouth that repeats the sentence fragment: "is Friday an imbecile...is Friday an imbecile...is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech." Fernandes repeats these first sentences in an African-English accent. The viewer/listener hears "imbecile" (repeated three times) and

²³ When writing about *Foe*, Fernandes states that he is "not interested in the authenticity of these accents, but [rather] in the idea of being taught to speak in these voices." <http://vimeo.com/39946897>

“incapable of speech” within the first few seconds of the video. Speech and intelligence are glibly equated: having an accent and speaking “imperfectly” is paralleled with being disabled. The foreign, accented speaker risks being rendered a mute imbecile: the speaker is not listened to as their imperfect speech is devalued.

The “imperfect speech” of the accented speaker, is visually and audibly reinforced as both the language of the video (through cuts and edits) and the language of speech are made to stutter through the use of repetition.²⁴ This stutter echoes the struggle for the diasporic identity to construct a unified, non-hyphenated identity. As linguistic theorist Sandra Buckley has noted, “[t]he blockage of the stutter is not stable ground, it is a site of transition and transformation, a rich interval to be savoured in all its uncertainty.”²⁵ Friday represents the space created by a stutter – a space that cannot be filled.²⁶ In the novel, Susan Barton describes Friday as lacuna: “...the story of Friday, which is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative (I picture it as a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button).”²⁷ Fernandes’s performance is like a “button”: he steps into the space of the stutter and inserts into it his own, hyphenated identities through his performance of accent.

²⁴ Deleuze considers the stutter in relation to language. He removes the stutter from the realm of the purely vocal and considers writers who use various approaches to what he refers to as a linguistic stutter which is a part of the construction of the text itself: “stuttering [becomes] an affect of language and not an affectation of speech.” Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 110.

²⁵ Sandra Buckley, “An Aesthetics of the Stutter,” in *Cassandra: Voix Intérieures/Voices from the Inside* (Montreal: OBORO, 1998), 61.

²⁶ Friday becomes increasingly central to the narrative in *Foe*. He becomes an absence with enormous presence and continually refuses to be “filled in” (with language or text – he never learns to speak or write and is therefore never able to enunciate his own position).

²⁷ Coetzee, *Foe*, 121.

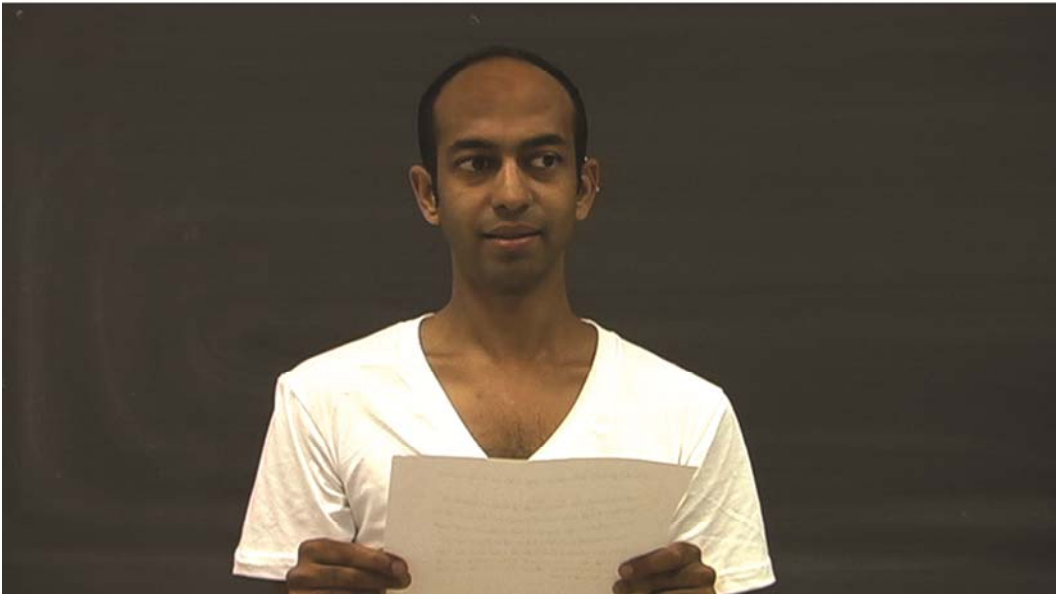


Figure 1. Brendan Fernandes, *Foe* (2008), Video Stills, 00:04:26, dimensions vary. Image courtesy of the artist

Fernandes is performing his own accent(s) and identity(ies).

The excerpt from *Foe* as it is spoken by Fernandes and subsequently filmed, is dismantled and fragmented. Coetzee's original narrative (already present only as a fragment of a whole) is obscured through Fernandes's performance of the text. Simultaneously, the viewer/listener is denied the satisfaction of hearing complete sentences as the repetition of phrases and words foreclose grammatical unity. The acting coach's voice further interrupts the flow of the narrative through her "corrections" and interjections. Not only is the narrative flow interrupted, but attention is shifted away from the content of the excerpt and refocused onto her teaching instructions. Fernandes pauses on individual words or phrase at the expense of uttering full, complete sentences. The listener is unable to hear or understand the excerpt as a whole due to the constant disruptions and interruptions imposed on the spoken text. These interruptions are also reminiscent of the strategies inherent in creolisation, in which the spoken language becomes the site for resistance through its obscuring of meaning through sound. A new identity is forged through this new language that emerges out of resistance. This excerpt becomes the site of resistance through a deconstruction of text and spoken word.

Fernandes demonstrates how speakers stumble over language through stutter and repetition: both stutter/repetition and accent (especially when the speaker is a second-language speaker who is still learning the language) potentially disrupts the flow of the language in ways that interrupt meaning making/communication. He repeats words like "Friday," "dark" and "Cruso," and sentence fragments like "teeth white as

ivory” and “he brought his face” to both emulate the learning process (that requires repetition) as well as drawing attention to specific words or phrases by separating them from their immediate textual context. It is during the second, sharp cut back to an extreme close-up of Fernandes’s mouth, that we see him repeat the word “dark.” In the text, Susan Barton stares into the “dark” that is his mouth, and all she sees are his teeth, “white as ivory.” In Fernandes’s video, the viewer is confronted by the dark hole of Fernandes’s mouth mouthing this word. “Dark” echoes Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as it conjures up not only issues of race, but also the “darkness” of the unknown (together with connected notions of the “dark continent” of Africa). The repetition of the word abstracts it slowly and removes it from its literal and connotative meanings to a point where the words are merely abstracted sounds. The chain of signification is slowly broken down through repetition as the word begins to move from familiar and meaningful, to strange and unrecognisable. Similarly, the edit of the video articulates a visual and auditory stutter. The images within the video as a whole abruptly shift between extreme close-ups and medium close-ups thereby creating a visual stutter.

It is in this particular segment, where the word “dark” is repeated, that the visual register most obviously collides with the auditory register: not only is the viewer confronted with audio associations of the word “dark,” as indicated above, but also with skin as a visual marker of difference. The word “dark” acknowledges Friday’s black body, whilst simultaneously alerting the viewer to the colour of Fernandes’s skin – the skin of the embodied speaking subject. Fernandes responds to the loss inscribed in the

postcolonial body (as represented by Friday) – a body that is silenced and split – through embodied speech.²⁸ Accent and race are intertwined through Fernandes’s physical embodiment of multiple differences that are situated in accent, genealogy and race. In each of these registers - accent, race and genealogy - origins are questioned and dismantled. Through the repetition of the word, “dark,” and the subsequent breaking down of the chain of signification, Fernandes both reinforces its multiple meanings (visual and textual) as well as potentially enabling it to become slowly uncoupled from its linguistic connotations.

Toward the end of the video Fernandes repeats the phrase, “they cut out his tongue”, and in doing so he draws parallels between Friday’s lack of tongue, losing a tongue (language) and the disability that is evoked and enacted through these violent acts of loss. Fernandes is inflecting the word “tongue” with notions of “mother-tongue” through his reading of the excerpt in the various “mother-tongues” of his ancestry.²⁹ Fernandes moves between the different accents (African, Indian and American) without any particularly recognisable structure and the viewer is left guessing (listening closely) at which accent is being spoken at any given moment. Fernandes struggles visibly and equally with all his chosen accents. None of the spoken accents function in the way that

²⁸ Here I follow Lacan’s notion of the split subject. Franz Fanon also writes about the black body that is fragmented and split by the gaze of the white boy and his mother. See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Routledge, 2001), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203995839>; Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 323–26.

²⁹ I use the term “mother-tongue” as a reference to the first language learned by a speaker, which is usually the language within which a speaker is most proficient. This is, of course, contentious: the language learnt at birth is not necessarily singular or, indeed, the language in which a speaker is most proficient.

we expect a “mother tongue” to be spoken/pronounced by a native speaker: that it is effortless and natural. Through his visible and audible struggle to pronounce words in his proclaimed “mother tongues,” Fernandes undermines the notion that determines that a mother tongue is an authentic indicator of an individual’s inherited ethnic identity.

Fernandes’s interrogation of identity is situated within this process of inhabiting three accents that metonymically represent his genealogy. He states that:

In my work I explore the thesis that identity is not static but enacted and that this challenges accepted ways of thinking about what it is to have an authentic identity. ... This reinforces the idea for me that identity is in a constant state of flux.³⁰

Fernandes is “learning” to speak all three of his genealogical accents; he does not assume fluency in any of those accents. Through the refusal to provide a hierarchy of accent (i.e. by choosing one accent as the “mother-tongue” and others as his second or third languages), he is insisting on the equality of those tongues in his genealogy. He is, in some way, collapsing time by refusing to isolate a single, originary, “authentic” accent (“mother-tongue”) through his insistence on speaking (and struggling with) all three accents.³¹ He is relearning the accents of his ancestry; he is relearning his mother-tongue(s). This learning process is further reinforced by the introduction of the diegetic sound of the off-screen acting coach that is teaching him his accents, as well being

³⁰ <http://vimeo.com/39946897>

³¹ Radhakrishnan, in his essay about Indian ethnicity, indicates that there is no one authentic “Indian” (African) identity, and that distance does not negate identity/authenticity – relationship to “home land” shifts, but it does not render this new “Indian” identity as any less authentic. The connection between authenticity and ethnicity is questioned. R. Radhakrishnan, “Ethnicity in the Age of Diaspora,” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 119–31.

indicated by his physical position in front of a blackboard that bespeaks pedagogy.

Fernandes engages in an “accented” genealogical accounting to remind the viewer of this diasporic identity.³² By not privileging one accent above the other, he slips between the accents without a specific order and without separating them out for the benefit of the viewer/listener.

Fernandes also engages in a dialogue around home and belonging through his use of accent. Each accent references a connected geographical space and the listener connects the speaker to these spaces through their own (stereotyped) associations with accent and its originary space/place e.g. as he speaks with an African inflected English accent, his accent is recognised as African, and through that recognition it is assumed that he is from Africa and thereby connected to the space of Africa. Here, “listening carefully” does not include listening to accent: the listener needs to listen to other indicators of home and belonging in order to more accurately understand the speaker. The listener inadvertently participates in this process of “homing.” Fernandes cautions the listener/viewer against the faulty assumptions that can be made concerning the location of an immigrant’s geographical “home.” Accent can become a barrier that prevents communication in more ways than literally not understanding due to unfamiliar sounds.

Stereotypes are also invoked by the way in which Fernandes speaks in non-

³² Ato Quayson defines genealogical accounting as: “Genealogical accounting involves questions of ancestry, ethnicity, tradition, and culture and provides a distinguishing past to the person or community.” Ato Quayson, “Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary,” in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Somerset, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 151, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10734642>.

specific accents that can be broadly defined as African-sounding or Indian-sounding. These accents do not attempt to be specific e.g. a middle-class, second-language, English speaking Kenyan who went to a British School. They are, instead, broad, sweeping stereotypes of what African, Indian or North American accents sound like. In some ways, this speaking in a non-specific accent stereotypes the African (or Indian or North American) in that it goes beyond the individual nation and begins to include the whole continent in its scope i.e. it sounds African, rather than Kenyan, Indian rather than Goan and North American rather than Canadian. As Homi K. Bhabha states:

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.³³

Fernandes is drawing attention to identities that are frozen into false representations of what it means to be “African,” “Indian” or “Canadian”. I posit that through his use of stereotyped accents, he is drawing attention to how otherness is constructed through stereotype. By “inhabiting” all three stereotyped accents, he is also acknowledging himself as a “split subject.” He is all of these identities simultaneously.

The way in which Fernandes deploys these accents relates to Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as a framework for understanding the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Bhabha notes that when the colonised mimics the

³³ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2004), 107.

coloniser, the language of the coloniser is “almost the same, but not quite.”³⁴ In the excerpt used by Fernandes, Crusoe instructs Friday to open his mouth. Crusoe opens his mouth to show Friday what to do and Friday follows suit by mirroring Crusoe. This mirroring hints at the mimicry that Bhabha speaks of. This difference (“almost the same, but not quite”) is situated not only through the visible difference that Crusoe later points out to Susan (that Friday has no tongue), but is also articulated through his inability to repeat the sounds that he is instructed to repeat: Crusoe says “La-la-la” and Friday responds, “Ha-ha-ha.”³⁵ These “imperfectly” mimicked sounds parallels spoken variations found in English accents. The “foreign” speaker’s accent is compared to the “standard” accent of the “native” speaker, and despite being able to speak the language, difference is situated in the inflection of the sounds spoken. Visible indicators of difference, like race, are replaced (or doubled in the case of visible racial difference) by difference of sound (accent).³⁶

In so doing, Fernandes is employing accent as a “formal mnemonic” device to activate his genealogy: it is an “accented” genealogical accounting that traces his hyphenated Indian-African-North American history, not through storytelling (as would be the case in a diasporic novel), but rather through the sound of the accent that

³⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” in *The Location of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 122.

³⁵ Friday is also marked as different through his race. “He is a Negro slave, his name is Friday” (39).

³⁶ Bhabha would posit that this “native” (I use “native” within this context to indicate generationally long-term inhabitants within a place – be it “settler” or monocultural “locals”) listener is confronted by the immigrant’s “foreign” accent and is then forced to rethink their notions of “ownership” of a language or culture. The scopic gaze of the coloniser/“native” inhabitant is turned back onto itself.

enables the listener to recall the associative spatial geographies of India, Africa and North America.³⁷ His video explores issues of accent and language (mother-tongue) and how these audible markers connect the speaker to an identity. It literally deconstructs language and text both visibly and audibly through cinematic techniques and linguistic stutters and repetitions, thereby exploring the intersections between text and image, and text and sound. Text, image and sound are all made visible and, in so doing, are interrogated through visible and audible strategies employed throughout the video performance. Throughout this video performance we are made aware of a process of deterritorialisation (in which accent as an indicator of geographical place and national identity is dismantled) and reterritorialisation (through which these multiple accents reground identity, albeit in a new, non-geographical “space” that accentuates a hybrid identity of language) Fernandes is drawing attention to accent and language and connected notions of authenticity and hybridity (as it relates to identity), which he is interrogating throughout this video performance.

The various installations of *Foe* have all included text in combination with the

³⁷ For “formal mnemonic” device see Ato Quayson; Vijay Mishra speaks of the hyphenated identity of the diasporic individual (“within a nation-state citizens are always unhyphenated, that is, if we are to believe what our passports have to say about us.”) and describes “the hyphen [as] that which signifies the vibrant social and cultural spaces occupied by diasporas in nation-states as well as their ever-present sense of the ‘familiar temporariness.’” It also reminds us of the “contaminated, border, hybrid experience of diaspora people for whom an engineered return to a purist condition is a contradiction in terms.” See Quayson, “Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary,” 151; Vijay Mishra, “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora,” *Textual Practice* 10, no. 3 (1996): 432–433, doi:10.1080/09502369608582254.

video recording.³⁸ The National Gallery and Guggenheim installations included a hand written wall text by Fernandes that surrounded the screen which projected/played Fernandes's performance. Double-sided printed and photocopied posters also were available for distribution to the viewers. On one side was an image of the ocean reminiscent of the ocean that forced Susan Barton together with Crusoe and Friday on that fateful island. This is the ocean that separates continents and peoples and that is referred to as the "Black Atlantic" by postcolonial writer Paul Gilroy (see figure 2). On the other side of the poster was the printed text of the excerpt that was read by Fernandes in the video (See figure 3). The text side of the poster mimics Fernandes's process of language acquisition that shifts and changes through use and repetition, in that the process of photocopying the same text repeatedly visually distorts the text through repetition. In turn, the distribution of these posters and the visible wall text that surrounds the video/projection screen enabled the viewer to participate in following the "script" and possibly to participate in the accented pronunciation of the words and sentences. Through this participation the viewer becomes physically implicated in this deconstruction of language/accent concomitant with colonial space-making and linguistic, ethnic identity formation.

Edouard Glissant speaks of the tension that arises between the written and the oral in colonial space-making. In the context of the colonised Caribbean, he differentiates between the physicality of the oral and the "nonmovement" of the

³⁸ *Foe*, by Fernandes, has been shown in various institutions including the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto in 2009, National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 2012, the Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York (2011) and the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin (2012).

written: this split between the body and what is spoken (what should be spoken) parallels the rupture of the colonised body that is deprived of speech.³⁹ For Glissant, creolisation in the Caribbean is a form of oral resistance to colonisation and a process of decolonisation that is situated within the body of the colonised individual. Glissant insists that the written word (in the Caribbean) requires an acknowledgement of the loss inscribed into the colonised past:

To move from the oral to the written is to immobilise the body, to take control (to possess it)... In this silent world, voice and body pursue desperately an impossible fulfilment...The word in the Caribbean will only survive as such, in a written form, if this earlier loss finds expression.⁴⁰

Contrary to Glissant's preference for the purely oral act, Fernandes moves from the written (the text by J.M. Coetzee) to the spoken (the acting coach's directions to him) and back to the written (as he phonetically writes the required pronunciation). The text that is originally written by Coetzee, is re-written by Fernandes with the help of the acting coach, through the creation of a personalised form of phonetic script (see figure 4). This phonetic script enables Fernandes to read and pronounce the text in his chosen accents. In so doing, the written text is rendered as subservient to the oral as the phonetic writing favours the spoken. Not only is the oral emphasised in the video and through the re-written text, but it is also physical (grounded in movement) as Fernandes performs the writing of the text onto the wall of the gallery. Through this we are made aware of the physicality of the act of writing. The active, expressive body that is lost

³⁹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 112.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.



Figure 2. Brendan Fernandes, *Foe* (2009), Poster Multiple, 16" x 20". Image courtesy of the artist

"EEZ FRRY DE EN EEM BAS EEL EEN CEP E BUL UV SPICH?" AY ASK ED.
"EEZ THAT WHAAT U MIN TU TELL MI?"

K1U**SO** MOA1 SHUNED F1Y**DE** N1**RER**.

"OAPIN YOA1 MOW1," HEE JOALD HIM, AND OAPEND HIZ OAN.

F**R**y day **O**apund hiz m**O**uuth. "L**U**k," sed **KR**oooa.

Ay **L**ukd, but saw nuthing in tha da**RR**k sayv tha glint uv teeth wayt az ayvary.

"LA-LA-LA," **SED** K1**USO**, **AEND** MOA SHUND F1Y**DE** JU1**I**PEE.

"HA-HA-HA," **SED** F1Y**DE** F1**UM** THA BEK **UR** HIZ HROAT.

"HEE HOZ **NOA** TUNG," **SED** K1**USO**.

GREEPEENG FRY DE **BY** DE HEER, **HI** **BRROT** HEEZ FES **KLOAS** TU **MYN**.

"DUYUSI?" HEE **SED**. "IT IZ TU DAARK," **SED** AY. "LA-LA-LA," **SED** KR**USO**. "HA-HA-HA," **SED** FRRY DE.

AY DRU U VEY, AND K1**USO** REL EESD F1Y DAYZ HE1.

"HEE HEZ NO JUNG," HEE **SED**.

"THOT IS VAI HEE DUZ NOT SPEEK."

THEY CAWT **OT** HEEZ **TAWNG**.

Excerpt from *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee, Viking Press: 1986.
© Brendan Fernandes 2009

Figure 3. Brendan Fernandes, *Foe* (2009), Poster Multiple, 16" x 20". Image courtesy of the artist

~~EEZ FRIDAY EN ANIMASIT EENDEPETHU SPICH~~
 "Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech?" I asked. "Is that what you mean to tell me?"

EEZ FRIDAY DE EN EEM EA SEEL EED CEP E RUL UV SPICH
 AY ASK ED EEZ THAAT WHAAT U MIIN TU TELL MI

'Cruso motioned Friday nearer. "Open your mouth," he told him, and opened his own.
 Kru^{so} moa ^{shund} Fryde ⁿⁱrer ^{Oa}pin ^{yoar} mo^{wt} hee ^{joalt} him

Friday opened his mouth. "Look," said Cruso. I looked, but saw nothing in the dark save
 Fry day ^{Op}und ^{hiz} mo'outh ^{Luk} sed ^{Kru}so^{sa} Ay ^{lukd} but
^{AND GAPEND HIZ EAN}
^{SAW NUTHING IN THE DARK SAYV}
 the glint of teeth white as ivory. "La-la-la," said Cruso, and motioned to Friday to repeat.
 the glint uv teeth wait az ivory. LA LA LA sed Kru^{so}and
 mo^{ashund} Fryde ^{tu} ^{ri}peat

"Ha-ha-ha," said Friday from the back of his throat. "He has no tongue," said Cruso.
 HA HA HA sed Fryde ^{frum} the ^{bek} uv ^{hiz} ^{thro}at

Hee ^{noz} ^{noa} ^{jung}
 Grippin Friday by the hair, he brought his face close to mine. "Do you see?" he said.
~~STREPPING~~ Fry DE BY DE HE ~~HI~~ BRROT HEEZ FES KLOAS
^{GRREEP} ~~STREPPING~~ ^{EENQ} TU ^{MIIN}. DU YU SI? HI SED?

"It is too dark," said I. "La-la-la," said Cruso. "Ha-ha-ha," said Friday. I drew away,
 IT IZ TU ^{dark} SED AY LA LA LA SED ^{Kru}so HA HA HA SED
 Fry day AY ^{DRU} ^{WEY} AND ^{Kru}so ^{RELEESD} Fry dayz
 and Cruso released Friday's hair. "He has no tongue," he said. "That is why he does not
 ? HEIR. ~~HEE HAZ NO TUNG HE~~
 HEE HEEZ ^{NO} ^{jung} HEE SED ~~THAT~~ IZ
 speak.. They cut out his Tongue. ~~VAI~~ HEE DUZ NOT SPEEK.

THEY CANT OT HEEZ TAWNG.

Capitalize + solo Canadian R's & L's

Kenyan - do no capitalize anything

Indian - link & pitch

Kru^{so} mo^{shund} Fry de ni rer oarⁱⁿ mo^{wt}.

Figure 4. Brendan Fernandes, *Foe* (2009), original script marked out by the accent specialist. Image courtesy of the artist

through the writing act that Glissant refers to, is re-inscribed into the writing act through this physical action.

Fernandes explores his own diasporic identity in this work through a nuanced construction of his genealogy through accent. Fernandes also highlights the physicality of the speech act, and how language physically shapes the speaker. Learning a new language or accent requires a physical shift as new muscle-memory has to be acquired. Fernandes is visibly and audibly struggling with the pronunciation of words. The next artist that I investigate is Katarina Zdjelar whose work, *The Perfect Sound* (2009), similarly emphasises the physical act of speaking through filmic close-ups that focus on the mouth, neck and jaw of the speaker. In *The Perfect Sound*, English is further broken down into its component sounds through another pedagogical moment: a speech therapist teaching a foreign speaker to lose his accent in order to gain a “neutral” (British) English accent.

Section 2: Katarina Zdjelar, *The Perfect Sound* (2009)

One must clear one's throat, clear a space, step away, spit out the mother tongue, write in French.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁴¹

In a conversation with Alfred Arteaga about Samuel Beckett, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that the second language writer who wants to be able to write in another “tongue,” must “spit out” their mother tongue in order to make room for the new tongue. Spivak further asserts that there is only space for a single tongue: a new tongue that ultimately threatens to displace the mother tongue. Spivak’s visual and visceral metaphor for the complex process that is required of a writer who wishes to acquire another “tongue” underscores the central issues raised by *The Perfect Sound* (2009) by Katarina Zdjelar. Firstly, what is the physical, embodied nature of voice;⁴² secondly, what is at stake when a speaker “spit[s] out the mother tongue;” and thirdly, whether this “spitting out” replaces the mother tongue with a foreign tongue or whether when a new language is learned the second language carries traces of the first. Through an analysis of Zdjelar’s artwork, I consider whether it is possible to completely “spit out” the mother tongue if the accent remains as a trace.

Gloria Anzaldúa claims that, “[e]thnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I

⁴¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Bonding in Difference,” in *An Other Tongue : Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 279.

⁴² See Caroline Bergvall, “A Cat in the Throat - On Bilingual Occupants,” in *Parapoetics Reader* (Rotterdam: TENT.10, 2010), 34–39.

am my language.”⁴³ If Anzaldúa’s words are to be heeded, then identity would be implicated in the losing of a language or an accent. Paralleling Anzaldúa’s concerns with language and identity, Katarina Zdjelar asserts in her investigation of speech that led to the *The Perfect Sound* that, “one never loses what one had, one develops a new skill. It is about creating additional parallel knowledge rather than infecting or rewriting an already existing one.”⁴⁴ Through my analysis of *The Perfect Sound* I consider her claim. I discuss how the video accentuates voice as physical and embodied. I also investigate how notions of “same” and “different” intersect with a complex web of class structure, race and culture. My investigation extends to the mechanisms of mimicry and mirroring that are at work within this video and I consider what mimicry and mirroring interrogates in relation to the narrative of becoming and unbecoming at play within a process of accent acquisition (and accent loss).

In *The Perfect Sound* (see figure 5 and 6), a speech therapist teaches a young man to speak English with a “neutral” British accent. The student is a young, white male who is being taught by a middle-aged, white male. The video documents a “foreign accent removal treatment;” the young immigrant wants to lose his accent in order to more easily integrate into his new British home. The video installation focuses on the faces of the teacher and student, their mouths and the teacher’s gesticulating hands. It is set in a grey, institutional-looking room which provides a “neutral” setting for this

⁴³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestisa*, 4 Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 81.

⁴⁴ Mariette Dölle and Katarina Zdjelar, *Katarina Zdjelar: Parapoetics. A Conversation*. (Rotterdam: TENT.10, 2010), 13.



Figure 5. Katarina Zdjelar, *The Perfect Sound* (2009) video DVD, 14'30, loop. Courtesy the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia



Figure 6. Katarina Zdjelar, *The Perfect Sound* (2009) video DVD, 14'30, loop. Courtesy the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia

attempt to learn a “neutral” sound. Sound is highlighted, as the video feed regularly cuts away to a black, blank screen, whilst the sound track continues over the top, thereby forcing the viewer/listener to listen rather than look. In these moments, the aural is reinforced through the absence of the visual. Sounds are sung, hummed and repeated, as emphasis is placed on cadence, pitch, mouth shape, tongue position and sound position within and outside of the mouth and body as language is broken down into its basic phonemes. The teacher/therapist models the sounds and describes them through hand gestures that make visible the invisible but audible nature of the sounds and the hidden positions and actions of the tongue within the mouth. There are no words, only sounds (voice and “word” are separated/split apart – this voice is not allowed to signify), until the therapist intones “father” which the student dutifully repeats. Extreme close-ups focus on the mouth and neck of the speaker. The truncated and fragmented face draws attention to the minute muscles that need to adjust in order to make the required sounds. The physicality of sound is emphasised as the voice is grounded in the body of the speaker. The video ends with the student looking at his own out-of-focus image in the mirror.

Zdjelar makes it clear that there is a physical connection to the immaterial voice.

In an interview with Mariette Dölle, Zdjelar notes that:

I found it very interesting that the sound of our mother tongue, which is something immaterial, shapes our anatomy, which is something physical. Foreign sounds make us use our body differently and we discover the unknown boundaries of our body.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Katarina Zdjelar in *Ibid.*, 8.

Voice is often considered as separate/split away from the body. The voice exists as sound and it has no noticeable physical presence; it is therefore easily disembodied. But, there is no voice without body. The two are inextricably linked as our physical body provides the space where sound and language are born. In the video Zdjelar accentuates this inextricable link by alternating between showing the instructor making the sounds, and a black screen that separates the voice from the body by focusing the viewers attention purely on the sounds that are sung. The instructor demonstrates these sounds through exaggerated facial expressions and gestures while he intones: “momomomomomommm; nenenenenenenene; eeeeeeeeng.” These linguistically isolated phonemes shift from being embodied to being disembodied and back again through the edits of the video.

The video by Zdjelar emphasises the physicality of the phoneme’s sound; it is dependent on muscles that shape lips, place tongues, position jaws and teeth, control breath and move air into specific spaces within and outside of our mouths. The video alternates between medium close-ups that, for example, show the head and gesticulating hands of the teacher, and extreme close-ups that are at times focused on only the student’s mouth. These close-ups draw attention to the student’s struggles to create the necessary sounds. Zdjelar also draws attention to hand gestures. Hand gestures that parallel and describe the sounds take up a central role within the video. We see hands and hear sounds and in so doing, sound is removed from its primary source, the mouth, and is embodied in the parallel gestures of the hands. Brendan Fernandes’s *Foe* also emphasises the physical nature of learning a new accent: the

struggle with relearning accents coupled with physical strategies that are meant to help him pronounce the words (like using his hands to stretch the corners of his mouth while speaking) highlight the physicality of the speech act and the physical changes that are required of the speaker to make the new “speaking” possible.⁴⁶ By separating the sounds (as phonemes) from the signifying words, Zdjelar further enables the viewer to consider the physical act of learning an accent, and in so doing, to begin to recognise that the body’s physical boundaries are shaped by language.

Zdjelar proposes that our body’s physical “boundaries” reflect our own social and cultural boundaries as “mother tongue...shapes our anatomy.”⁴⁷ In turn, gaining a new accent forces the speaker to create and then inhabit a new internal physical space. As Spivak noted: a new space needs to be cleared. Inhabiting a “new” accent or “tongue” not only requires an internal “space to be cleared” but also causes the speaker to be physically altered. Not only personal, physical boundaries are crossed when accents are spoken: geographical and social boundaries are equally implicated in the speaking of accents. Within the UK, accent is very closely associated, not just with place, but also with class.⁴⁸ Accent reveals class and place and social progression is, to some extent, either limited by or made possible through the sound of a voice.

In relation to these boundaries, Zdjelar asks: “What position does a foreigner’s voice occupy in this discussion? Does it contribute to, or stay outside, the class

⁴⁶ In an interview with Fernandes, he revealed to me how his facial muscles hurt following the making of *Foe*. The lesson had physical implications.

⁴⁷ Dölle and Zdjelar, *Katarina Zdjelar: Parapoetics. A Conversation.*, 8.

⁴⁸ In the UK it is possible to determine where someone is from by listening to their accent e.g. people from Birmingham have a “Brummy” accent.

system?”⁴⁹ The accuracy of the speaker’s accent could enable them to “pass” as a native speaker of a particular class. This “passing” potentially opens doors to a social and cultural field that would not be available to a voice that is recognised to be from another social class or place. The inability to socially “place” a speaker due to their foreign accent confuses the native listener, and either enables the speaker to avoid issues around class by staying outside of the class system, or alternatively, for foreignness to be folded into class and thereby subsequently doubling the effect as the speaker is disenfranchised for being from the wrong class and for being foreign – it is potentially a double “othering” process. The need for the speaker to mimic the socially mobile native speaker is therefore a conscious construction, on the speaker’s part, of social and cultural camouflage.

In Britain, native speakers who want to mask their class-mired accents also take accent removal classes. This masking is about presenting a neutral self to the surrounding society, about becoming invisible through sameness. Mladen Dolar notes that:

The ruling accent is an accent which is proclaimed to be non-accent; it is the decontaminated voice, obfuscating the process by which its particularity has been installed as universal. One voice is the voice of universality, the other is confined and limited by its [sic] origin, it shows the unerased traces of where it comes from. Its roots have to be deracinated.⁵⁰

Audible signs of difference (class, race or culture) are masked as the accent is neutralised. But masking is not the same as erasing. Additionally, this new “neutrality” is

⁴⁹ Dölle and Zdjelar, *Katarina Zdjelar: Parapoetics. A Conversation*. 12.

⁵⁰ Dolar, “Which Voice?,” 12.

only neutral within a particular space/place. British English is not neutral in North America where yet another accented English is spoken (American English). Total linguistic neutrality is never arrived at as it is still bound to a specific place.

Camouflaging an accent in order to mask an origin could have implications on the identity of a speaker, if identity is, as Brendan Fernandes explores through *Foe*, at least in part constructed through a place of origin and the connected sounds of the mother tongue (either a “foreign” tongue that inflects the English with an accent, or an already accented native/first language English). At the start of her project, Zdjelar was interested in investigating the challenges of: “...re-invention and (un)becoming of the self through the process of adopting a new language/culture.”⁵¹ This changed as her project developed and subsequently her interest shifted away from accent as a signifier of loss and unbecoming, to accent as a signifier of becoming. Zdjelar claims that, rather than limiting the speaker, acquiring a new accent enables the speaker to “shift between different accents and by that be able to move into different modes, occupy different zones and act ‘neutrally’ within them.”⁵² Zdjelar sees it as a process of becoming, rather than as a process of un-becoming or loss. In so doing, she is attempting to change how accent is viewed as connected to place and origin – an identity based on frozen notions ethnicity and race. This emphasis on the process of becoming enables the speaking subject to loose themselves from fixed notions of identity in favour of an identity in process. Zdjelar’s focus on becoming, and the positive outcomes of a speaker’s ability to

⁵¹ Dölle and Zdjelar, *Katarina Zdjelar: Parapoetics. A Conversation.*, 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

act “neutrally” within different “zones” is admirable, however, the question remains as to what the implications are of the visible and audible traces that remain. Is it, in fact, possible to achieve a “perfect sound”?

The Perfect Sound is mimesis enacted: the student is mimicking his teacher in order to speak with the accent of the teacher. Edouard Glissant speaks of this “mimetic impulse [as] a kind of insidious violence,” stating that “a people that submits to [the mimetic impulse] takes some time to realise its consequences collectively and critically, but is immediately afflicted by the resulting trauma.”⁵³ In contrast, the liminal moment in Zdjelar’s video in which one accent is replaced by another is presented as a process of transformation that is being willed into being through practice and repetition. Thus while for Glissant the enactment of mimesis is also the moment of trauma, Zdjelar’s performative mimesis masks the process of trauma and may even imply that trauma is absent. For instead of witnessing an overt trauma, what the viewer sees is a young man actively and positively engaging in this lesson: his desire to acquire this new accent is made visible through intense concentration and hard work.

Glissant identifies the mimetic impulse as following upon “reversion,” which is the first impulse or obsession of a transplanted population with finding a single origin.⁵⁴ When the group (or in Zdjelar’s case, the individual) realises that they have no recourse to return to their “ancestral country” and the obsession to revert has receded, they

⁵³ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

engage in what Glissant refers to as “diversion.”⁵⁵ Diversion relates to the impulse of a population who are dominated by an Other (this domination is concealed) to find alternative ways of undermining the Other. Glissant speaks of the Creole language as a form of diversion – one that engages in a “trickster strategy.”⁵⁶ Another form of enacting this strategy is through camouflage.⁵⁷ He goes on to say that this impulse is unnatural and futile. Zdjelar explores this process of camouflage - of gaining a new accent - whilst simultaneously pointing to the unnatural process involved in achieving a complete transformation. The student struggles to shake the accented traces of his mother tongue as he engages in the mimetic process of accent acquisition. In this context, the student can be seen to be engaging with Glissant’s notion of “diversion,” not through the creation of a subversive new “creole,” but rather by attempting to master the language of the Other (through mimesis and camouflage). Zdjelar leaves the success of this “diversion” open to debate as the final frame of the video pauses on the student gazing at his blurred reflection in a mirror: this implies a lack of self-recognition (and a loss of identity).

While Glissant focuses on the mimicry of the colonised subject, Homi K. Bhabha theorisation of colonial mimicry shifts the discussion towards that of the colonial power who is being mimicked by considering the destabilising effect that mimicry has on the coloniser. Bhabha notes that the ambivalence present in mimicry (the subject is “almost the same, but not quite”) produces both resemblance and menace when viewed by the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14–20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

coloniser.⁵⁸ This act of mimicry turns the gaze back onto the coloniser as “the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence.”⁵⁹ In the case of *The Perfect Sound*, the mimicry which is enacted underlines not only to the student’s struggle with becoming “the same,” but also, through the abstraction and isolation of the points of difference (the sound system is separated from and abstracted out of the language in which it usually resides and hides) on the strangeness of the accent itself. Both teacher and pupil are made strange through this uncanny, liminal encounter. The act of mimicry draws attention to difference, rather than away from difference towards sameness. Difference is, in fact, highlighted throughout this encounter. In Bhabha’s words, “mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness,’ which it disavows.”⁶⁰

Through articulating the liminal moment of accent acquisition as difference, *The Perfect Sound* also echoes the Lacanian moment of the subject being split. But rather than being about a moment structured around the acquisition of the originary mother-tongue, the video focuses on the moment in which a second language is being altered and “accented” in an attempt to more closely mimic a culturally accepted “neutral” sound. The teacher is the parent whom the student is mirroring. This is reinforced as being the “father,” as this is one of the few words that the teacher requires the student to repeat while all the other sounds are abstracted phonetic fragments, separated out from their signifying whole. Zdjelar’s implied nod to Lacan is also made visible through

⁵⁸ Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

the inclusion of a mirror as a part of the pedagogical tools used in the lesson.⁶¹ The speaking subject is gazing at his own (out of focus to the viewer) image in the mirror while he repeats sounds. The aim, for the speaker, is to see himself in the mirror as a means through which to compare his own physiognomy (the shape of his mouth, tongue, jaw and teeth when practicing/learning the various sounds) to that of the teacher. It is a process concerned with highlighting difference in order to eliminate difference.

Similar to Fernandes's *Foe*, in which the artist interrogates his diasporic identity through strategies predicated on accent, orality and mimicry, Zdjelar's *The Perfect Sound* emphasises accent, mimicry, the aural and oral. But unlike Fernandes, Zdjelar does not include any text in her video, not even a spoken text/script. Orality is foregrounded and voice is abstracted in a way that disallows (almost) any chain of signification connecting words with meanings. The viewer/listener hears very little that has specific linguistic meaning/significance except for the occasional sentence fragment spoken by the teacher (e.g. the word "father" that is intoned by the teacher and repeated by the student). As such, *The Perfect Sound* shares an affinity with Glissant's preference for the oral (and by implication, aural) in which incomprehensible sounds, screams and noises form the bedrock of the subversiveness inherent in processes of Creolisation. These incomprehensible sounds are in themselves revolutionary – the coloniser is not able to access the meaning in these sounds, and voice is given back to the colonised (in opposition to the silencing act of colonialism).

⁶¹ For more on the Mirror Stage, see Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, 1–6.

In *The Perfect Sound*, these incomprehensible sounds (the sounds made by the teacher and mimicked by the student) are the foundational elements for a spoken, understood and shared language base that is essential for survival, as speaking English when living and working in England (or other English speaking countries) is necessary for an immigrant's negotiation of a new cultural and social space and place. In turn, accessing a neutral English accent potentially enables an even deeper entry into these complex spaces as difference is momentarily masked when the speaker aims to camouflage their ethnic identity through accent. Thus *The Perfect Sound* documents the acquisition of accent through the pedagogical "moment" in which mimesis is aimed at camouflage. Zdjelar insists that this is not a reductive moment: one of losing a tongue in order to gain one (or "spitting out a tongue" as Spivak says). Instead, Zdjelar points to a process of becoming which is cumulative, rather than reductive. The new sounds (of the chosen accent) are added on to the existing newly learned language rather than somehow erasing the language (or erasing another mother tongue); the new sounds are mapped onto existing English words (English words already "owned" by the speaker through their existing knowledge of English). This "new" accent is as strange as the English that was learned by this speaker before he embarked on the process of acquiring a more "neutral" English accent, thus highlighting the artificiality of language.⁶²

⁶² In a recent (2015) exhibition catalogue, the curator's press release states: "Language is always an implant as much as it is a product of discipline and domestication. It is a foreign body within one's own body. The language we would like to refer to as native or maternal isn't, in fact, natural, proper, or inhabitable. A voice speaks through us but its source lies elsewhere." Sabel Gavaldon, "M/Other Tongue" (Tenderpixel, 23 January - 28 February), Zdjelar's speaking subject is disciplining his body to enable a new accent to inhabit his body – he is allowing the voice of what he has decided is a "perfect sound" to speak through him.

In viewing the *The Perfect Sound*, it is tempting, once one is alerted to the context of the lesson as one of accent neutralization, to speculate on the origin/ethnicity of the student (he could be from Eastern Europe) and to assume that the teacher is Anglo-Saxon.⁶³ Through the pared-down aesthetic of the video that centres on these two subjects, the viewer's gaze is focused on the physical and the audible differences between these two subjects. What would the impact be of a speaker who overcomes accent as a mark of difference, but who is still visibly marked by race? This is not the subject of Zdjelar's work, but it emerges as a question within the next work that I discuss: Noline van Harskamp's *English Forecast* (2013). In Van Harskamp's work, different accents inhabit four different racial and gendered actor's bodies throughout the performance. In relation to this demarcation of gender and race, I explore *English Forecast* as a work that shifts the viewer's scrutiny away from the individual and towards the global through Van Harskamp's particular interrogation of English as the new Lingua Franca.

⁶³ I acknowledge that I am making guesses as to these speaking subjects' ethnic origins and that it would be interesting to investigate how these racial markers are recognised/guessed.

Section 3: Nicoline van Harskamp, *English Forecast* (2013)

English Forecast documents an ongoing search for the future character, sound and structure of the English language world-wide. The USA has the same number of English speakers as India and, if one was to count English learners as English speakers, the same number as China too. Given English's redeployment as the world's most commonly used cross-border language, the native English speaker may soon disappear and a language of non-standards may emerge, the expressive abundance of which is worth exploring.

Nicoline van Harskamp⁶⁴

In her work, *English Forecast* (2013), Nicoline van Harskamp explores non-standard English(es) through an examination of the proliferation of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). She considers the impact of growing numbers of non-native, ELF English speakers on standard English. Van Harskamp's work interrogates these new forms of English, which have been dislocated from nation, in much the same way that Arjun Appadurai considers how ethnicity has been severed from locality in his seminal article on globalization when he states that, "...ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force, forever slipping through the cracks between states and borders."⁶⁵ Van Harskamp's performance, which consists of four racially/ethnically different speakers (two male and two female) speaking in multiple different English accents, is primarily concerned with the Englishes

⁶⁴ Nicoline van Harskamp, "English Forecast," accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.vanharskamp.net/newpages/ef.html>.

⁶⁵ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Colonial Discourse/ Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 332.

spoken by non-native English speakers, that is, with new “Englishes” severed from standard English and nation that slip “through the cracks between states and borders.” In so doing, she interrogates fixed notions of origins and contentious ideas around the “ownership” of a language by investigating the proliferation of English within our rapidly globalising world and the future of English as a Lingua Franca.

A Lingua Franca, “[r]efers to any form of language serving as a means of communication between speakers of different languages.”⁶⁶ Colonialism has greatly contributed to the global spread of English as a Lingua Franca, as in British colonies the colonised were forced to adopt the use of the English in administration, education and government and local languages were marginalised in favour of the “new” hegemonic language of the coloniser. After decolonisation, English remained a dominant language in countries that were formerly colonised by Britain. But, despite the English language’s roots in colonialism and its negative impact on local languages (for example, Ngūgī wa Thiong’o is a vocal advocate for the use of local languages to replace the imposed colonial “tongue” in fiction), English has, in many instances, served a useful function as a “bridge language” between different cultures and languages. As Braj Kachru notes regarding the neutrality of English in postcolonial India:

English does have one clear advantage, attitudinally and linguistically: It has acquired a neutrality in a linguistic context where native languages, dialects and styles sometimes have acquired undesirable connotations. Whereas native codes are functionally marked in terms of caste, religion, region, and so forth, English has no such ‘markers’, at least in the non-native context.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Swann et al., *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics*, 184.

⁶⁷ Kachru quoted in Talib, *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, 106.

English has the practical advantage of uniting diverse multilingual communities, and, as Ismail S. Talib contends, through wider usage “the English language itself is being decolonised, as it naturally becomes less closely associated with the former colonial power.”⁶⁸ This ability to bridge cultures and languages has enabled English to become a language that is spoken globally. It is estimated that there are approximately 350 million native English speakers, most of them in America and England, but also in other former settler colonies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In contrast to this, an estimated 2 billion speakers use English as a second (or third) language or *Lingua Franca*: this is an approximate ratio of 1:4 native speakers to non-native speakers.⁶⁹ English has subsequently become known as a *Lingua Franca*.⁷⁰

Nicoline van Harskamp explores the implications of the prevalence of English as a *Lingua Franca* through her performances. The Tate Modern BMW Performance Room commissioned *English Forecast* in 2013. It was a live, studio performance in front of an audience (see figure 7). The performance was also concurrently streamed as a live broadcast. The video of the performance is thirty-five minutes long and is structured around thirteen short “chapters.” Four actors, who are wearing headphones (two male and two female), speak about the present and future of English from the perspectives of non-native English speakers. At the end of each “chapter” the actors stop, lean forwards, and repeat words or phonemes gleaned from the preceding chapter. The

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

⁶⁹ “Centre for Global Englishes,” accessed March 13, 2015, <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/cge/>.

⁷⁰ Chinese is the next biggest language group, boasting with 982 million native speakers and 1100 billion speakers in total (i.e. including non-native speakers).

audience is invited to participate and to repeat after the actors (see figure 8). The words/sounds spoken by the actors are subtitled in the International Phonetic Alphabet throughout the length of the performance and appears on the bottom of the screen.

In the process of conceptualizing the content of the video, Van Harskamp interviewed a range of non-native speakers about their views on the future of English and then scripted these conversations for use in the performance. Their native language backgrounds were Arabic, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Dutch, Estonian, Ewe, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Icelandic, Igbo, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Jola, Luganda, Mandarin, Patois, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Singhalese, Singlish, Sheng, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Turkish, West African Creole and Yoruba.⁷¹ The opinions of these absent speakers are made present in the video performance as their various positions and views on English are communicated through the script spoken by the actors who do not speak with a single accent. Each sentence of the script is spoken with a different accent by a different speaker/actor. The actors act as “hosts” for the voices; they are, in effect, “speaking in tongues.” Through the course of the performance it becomes impossible to pin one accent to a speaker, or to connect it with their visual markers of difference.

Through this conceptual strategy, Van Harskamp is able to raise numerous issues. She exposes the difficulties faced by non-native speakers when pronouncing English words (one speaker intones, “we are trying to chase the perfect pronunciation”)

⁷¹ Van Harskamp, “English Forecast.”



Figure 7. Noline van Harskamp, *English Forecast* (2013), unique live performance as part of BMW Tate Live Performance Room, Tate Modern. Photo: Ana Escobar for Tate Photography. Photo courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. Noline van Harskamp, *English Forecast* (2013), unique live performance as part of BMW Tate Live Performance Room, Tate Modern. Photo: Ana Escobar for Tate Photography. Photo courtesy of the artist

and the need/imperative to speak English within our globalised world, given the scope of English as a cross-border language (another declares, “non-native English is very bad for your career”). She addresses the risks of speaking English and how these risks potentially impact on identity (“but there is a problem with attributing agency to a language; as if a language could kill a language”) and the risks/advantages of one “tongue” replacing another (“my mother tongue is just as affected by these other languages as these other languages are affected by my mother tongue”). She manifests opposing views around the need to either simplify English to make it more accessible, or alternatively, the need for an English which is complex and nuanced (“There are two poles to the argument: either you have got to make it really, really simple so that everyone can understand it, or you’ve got to make it complex and there are many varieties”) as well as thoughts on the proliferation and impact of English as a Lingua Franca.

In turn, viewers are implicated in these issues by being invited to participate remotely and to record themselves as they take part in the performance. Photos or videos can be shared on Twitter, Vine or Instagram. Audio and video recordings made by the audience can also be emailed to the artist, who plans to incorporate selected entries into the continuation of her work on this topic of International English.⁷² In this way, Nicoline van Harskamp considers the future of English given the recent global surge in non-native English speakers in a global arena of reception.

⁷² Nicoline van Harskamp, “English Forecast. BMW Tate Live: Performance Room,” accessed February 9, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpQzzW0_yqs.

In relation to the context of this global arena of reception, Ismael S. Talib discusses the often contradictory position that English occupies within postcolonial literature. In his book *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, he notes that:

The word 'English' refers to both ethnicity and language...The word *English* also has a link to *nationality*, viewed in terms of residence, a sense of belonging to a community, or the citizenship of an existing political state....The identity of an ethnic group which carries the language's name becomes more difficult or elusive because its language has become internationalised. What results is an *identity* problem created by the split between race and language.⁷³

It is in part due to our notion of a unified national identity, comprised by definable individual identities, that the English spoken by those who are not "native" to this linguistic nation (as a geopolitically and culturally specific space) come to be seen as not belonging within a space (e.g. Britain or America). Nicoline van Harskamp inserts her discussion about ELF into a geopolitically and culturally specific space associated with standard English: The Tate Modern is in London, England. The discussion about the future of English in her performance is a discussion that takes place within the "birthplace" of English where the Englishes spoken by those from the peripheries are brought into the centre of what has, until now, been the heart of Englishness itself. These peripheral accents are foregrounded in Van Harskamp's performative rupture of standard English at the centre of what it means to be English.

In relation to the foregrounding of this centre/periphery dynamic, Nicoline van Harskamp enables her speaking subjects to inhabit multiple accents. This distinguishes her strategy of performing accents from those of Katarina Zdjelar and Brendan

⁷³ Talib, *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, 3.

Fernandes, who both choose to emphasise a single speaker who performs and inhabits different accents. In *English Forecast*, despite the content of the spoken words being very personal (i.e. spoken from a specific subject position rather than being generalised statements), the speakers who are doing the speaking are actors who do not “own” the content of the utterances, but who merely speak the words of another speaking subject. The connection between accent and identity is troubled through this process in which the speaking subject is decoupled from the content of the utterance.

As such, the accent in *English Forecast* as physically part of the speaker (the speech act is an embodied act) is simultaneously separate from the speaker due to the speaker’s (actor’s) ability to shift between various accents. In Fernandes’s and Zdjelar’s work the acquisition or shedding of accent is portrayed as a struggle: a physical act that requires work and training. The process of disconnecting the embodied, native accent from the body by learning (or re-learning) a new accent is exposed as unnatural. In contrast, Van Harskamp shifts attention away from the struggle inherent in acquiring (or losing) a mother tongue to a concern with the multiplicity of sounds that are a part of contemporary spoken Englishes. English is the singular language into which the multiple accents are folded, thereby providing a conceptual and performative space in which the fruitful investigation of multiplicity and difference can occur.

In *English Forecast*, the domination of different accents in the audio register is mirrored by the diversity of hosts for these voices in the visual register. This generates a productive slippage between the visual and the audio register as the accents slip between the various actors. The sentences of the script rotate, without preference,

between the various speakers, and in so doing undermine fixed notions of race and ethnicity. Thus the content of the speech, together with the accent in which it is spoken, refuses to be connected to any one speaker. Instead, multiple speakers, who are all visibly marked by race or ethnicity, have their conjoined accents removed from them. An “Indian” speaker does not sound “Indian,” but speaks in various different tongues. There is no recognisable pattern to these various tongues, as accents, without prejudice, cycle through the mouths of the four different speakers. In so doing, visible indicators of difference are deracinated by speaking in accent. The visual and auditory markers of difference work together to disrupt and destabilise but not erase – there is always a trace that remains – notions of race and ethnicity.

Van Harskamp’s project, which focuses on the future of English, extends beyond the auditory and the visual registers by investigating the written form of oral English as opposed to the English of literature. In contradistinction to Brendan Fernandes, who chooses a personalised phonetic script to transcribe text in a way that echoes the spoken sounds/accents, Noline van Harskamp chooses to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) when transcribing and subtitling the performance of her actors. This shift of the textual from standard English into the International Phonetic Alphabet echoes the on-going debate within postcolonial fiction concerning how writing, whilst connected to the oral, exists in a separate space from that of the spoken language. Talib asserts that, “in many post-colonial societies, it was not the English language which had

the greatest impact, but the writing itself.”⁷⁴ Thus while postcolonial authors and literary critics and theorists have studied and debated the use and usefulness (or destructiveness) of English writing within the postcolonial literary landscape, they have not addressed English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as ELF is a largely spoken, not written, phenomenon. And whereas the written language still needs to cling more closely to standard English in order to function within the specific hierarchical and professional context within which it is found, spoken language can be more flexible in that it depends more strongly on a broader range of communication strategies employed in interpersonal negotiation.⁷⁵

In the context of these distinctions between spoken and written standard English, Van Harskamp’s use of The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) addresses the complexity of colonial legacies of writing and speech. The IPA is a system that is used to transcribe speech sounds; it is a “notational standard for the phonetic representation of all languages.”⁷⁶ Thus the choice to use the IPA (instead of standard written English) as a medium that is sympathetic to the variability of spoken varieties of English with its almost infinite accents decouples the written word from its colonial baggage. The IPA is strictly tied to the phonetic structures of the spoken word. It is, essentially, without rules (grammatical or structural) and is not tied to any specific language. In so doing, the IPA decolonises the written word; language is no longer tied to nation. In turn, Van

⁷⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁷⁵ Sowden, “ELF on a Mushroom,” 95.

⁷⁶ “International Phonetic Association | *intəˈnæʃənəl fəˈnetɪk əsoʊsiˈeɪʃn*,” accessed March 14, 2015, <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/>.

Harskamp gives preference to speech/orality by using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) rather than standard English text to subtitle the performance. And by privileging a phonetic space that is oral rather than textual, she affirms the diversity of speech rather than the sameness of writing.

In relation to Glissant's declaration that, "I am not far from believing that the written word is the universalising influence of Sameness, whereas the oral would be the organised manifestation of Diversity,"⁷⁷ *English Forecast* counters the "universalising influence of Sameness" of standard written English norms and a preference for a single English accent in favour of the oral "manifestation of Diversity" through an insistence on multiple accents. In relation to Glissant's assertion that "Sameness requires fixed Being, Diversity establishes Becoming..."⁷⁸ *English Forecast* highlights diversity through constantly shifting accents that are embodied by multiple different speakers and never, finally, owned by any one speaker. There is no "fixed Being;" rather, attention is drawn to "Diversity" and "Becoming" that enacts Glissant's notion of decolonisation as linked to a process in which diversity replaces sameness. This emphasis on diversity is not limited to the accents spoken within the performance, but is also accentuated through the artist's specific choice with regards to the use of subtitles written in IPA. These subtitles enable the listener to participate and, through the reading of the IPA, to inhabit the particular accent that is being spoken. Accents are not "owned" anymore by a particular speaker (or ethnicity or nation), but shared through their transcription into

⁷⁷ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 100.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

IPA.

What emerges from the experience of viewing *English Forecast* is the question of who owns a language: is it still tenable for language to be tied to notions of race and nation? In *English Forecast*, Van Harskamp separates spoken English from its native speakers by placing it into the mouths of non-native speakers. Each of the voices in the performance speaks an English that may or may not be recognisable as far as accent is concerned, but an English that is still understandable despite “imperfect” grammar and non-standard pronunciations of words and sounds. These words and sounds are heard and recognized by the native English speaker as hyphenated Englishes: Nigerian-English, French-English, Indian-English and so on. Vijay Mishra refers to the hyphen as “that which signifies the vibrant social and cultural spaces occupied by diasporas in nation-states as well as their ever-present sense of the ‘familiar temporariness’.”⁷⁹ In so doing, these accents become metonymic of a speaker’s ethnic identity. The speaker’s accent becomes a code that requires deciphering. As Stuart Hall notes:

The great collective social identities which we thought of as large-scale, all-encompassing, homogenous, as unified collective identities, which could be spoken about almost as if they were singular actors in their own right but which, indeed, place, positioned, stabilised, and allowed us to understand and read, almost as a code, the imperatives of the individual self: the great collective social identities of class, of race, of nation, of gender, and of the West.⁸⁰

Van Harskamp’s work troubles this imperative to geo-locate the speaker, as

⁷⁹ Mishra, “The Diasporic Imaginary,” 432.

⁸⁰ Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in *Culture, Globalisation and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 63.

each speaker (actor) embodies multiple locations through performing a multiplicity of accents. These performed Englishes cannot become one homogenous, monolithic whole as they continually remind the viewer/listener that the performance is highlighting difference: the dispersed Englishes of the “multitudes”, rather than a single English as a signifier of a “people”.⁸¹ In *English Forecast*, Van Harskamp is representing the multitudes through her focus on different (and sometimes opposing) utterances, accents and speakers. Nation, as the home of English, is troubled. Language’s ownership is shifted to that of the speaker, and away from its former position as owned by a nation. English in *English Forecast* is unveiled as a large, unwieldy, changeable and in-process language that is visibly and audibly being deterritorialised. The actors speak with the accents of others through their ability to read and speak the sounds of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). They translate these sounds literally through the IPA and in so doing speak with the intonation of someone who speaks another native language. These multiple and mutable accents shifts English away from its racial, ethnic and nation-state boundaries and repositions it as a cross-border language that is owned by whoever chooses to speak it.

⁸¹ See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, “The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relation, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends towards identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it...Every nation must make the multitude into a people.” See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Sovereignty of the Nation-State,” in *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 103.

Conclusion

If you say who you are you could say where you come from; broadly speaking, what race you belong to, a nation state of which you are a citizen or subject; you have a class position, an established and relatively secure gender position. You know where you fitted in the world... [W]hereas most of us now live with a sense of much greater plurality, a sense of the unfinished character of each of those. It is not that they have disappeared but they do not stitch us in place, locate us, in the way they did in the past.
-Stuart Hall ⁸²

Brendan Fernandes's *Foe* (2008), Katarina Zdjelar's *The Perfect Sound* (2009) and Nicoline van Harskamp's *English Forecast* (2013) all explore what is at stake when one speaks with an English accent(s). In my analysis of these works, I demonstrated how these artists unmask accent as a marker of difference (race, ethnicity and class) through their focus on both the aural and embodied nature of language and accent. By exploring how race, class and "origins" are evoked through the sound of a voice, and through investigating the intersections between accent and identity, these works share an affinity with Stuart Hall's notion of an identity that is not "stitch[ed] in place." This dislocation of accent from an identity that is fixed to a particular place or a nation, allows the postcolonial speaking subject a flexibility that "makes us aware that identities are never completed, never finished; that they are always as subjectivity itself is, in process."⁸³

In this respect, it is notable that all three of my chosen artists originate from the

⁸² Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," 63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 47.

peripheries of English (if the centres are considered as the places where English is spoken as a first language). They all speak/spoke with non-standard accents and are in possession of multiple “tongues.” Brendan Fernandes’s multiple tongues include the various English accents of his diasporic genealogy; Katarina Zdjelar is Serbian, but due to her living in the Netherlands she also speaks Dutch and English; Nicoline van Harskamp is Dutch and speaks English. I propose that these artists, due to their position on the peripheries of English, are able to consider accent in new ways by applying a “double critique”/“border thinking” in their consideration of what it means to speak English in a globalised world.⁸⁴ The notion of a “double critique” refers to a thinking/critique that is situated simultaneously inside and outside of a dominant culture; it, “think[s] from both traditions and, at the same time, from neither of them.”⁸⁵ This makes possible a new thinking (“an other thinking”/“border thinking”) and new knowledges are released.⁸⁶ It is my contention that these artists are able to consider accent and language in critical new ways precisely because they are employing a form of “border thinking.”⁸⁷

Through an investigation of these works, I have singled out accent and language as an integral part of subject identification and postcolonial identity in process.

Fernandes, Zdjelar and Van Harskamp’s critical views of accent “delinks” accent from

⁸⁴ Walter Mignolo theorises this notion of the “double critique” by drawing on writers and theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Abdelhebir Khatibi and Edouard Glissant. See Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). 49-88.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Walter Mignolo theorises the notion of “border thinking.” He describes it as, “a disruption of dichotomies through being [itself] a dichotomy...[it is] a dichotomous locus of enunciation and, historically, is located at the borders (interiors or exteriors) of the modern/colonial world system...” See *Ibid.*, 85.

race and nation. Walter Mignolo speaks of the decolonial gesture as a mechanism that enables a critical “delinking” from “coloniality” and, I would add, from concomitant frozen representations of identity:

If we understand the definition of “gesture” as a “movement of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasises an idea, sentiment, or attitude,” we narrow down the meaning of “decolonial gesture”: it is a body movement which carries a decolonial sentiment or/and a decolonial intention; a movement that points toward something in relation to something already constituted that the addressed of the gesture or whomever sees the gesture, recognises in relation to “colonial gesture.” Universes of meaning are never constituted in themselves but always in relation to networks of differences...“The decolonial” option, turn or gesture is always at once analytic of and signs of delinking from coloniality.⁸⁸

The embodied voice, spoken by the “accented” speaking subject, confronts the viewer with both physical gestures and multiple iterations of decolonial gestures. These three artists and their respective art works are positioned in the centres of the West (Europe and North America), but they all enunciate positions that are other than purely Western in origin: they speak from the borderlands – a positionality that enables their decolonial gestures. By way of situating these works within contemporary discourse, I propose that they are applying a “border thinking” that enables the viewer to see and think differently: the periphery is gazing back at the centre. The English language (together with its colonial history and accompanying baggage) becomes the focus of this newly directed gaze as the respective artists and artworks interrogate accent, mother tongue and the relationship of accent and language to place and space. Every one of these videos shows a subject(s) in process as identity and place are “decolonised” and

⁸⁸ Walter Mignolo, “Looking for the Meaning of ‘Decolonial Gesture,’” *E-Misférica* 11, no. 1 (2014), <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/emisferica-111-decolonial-gesture/mignolo>.

deterritorialised.

The videos by Fernandes, Zdjelar and Van Harskamp, each explore how accent aids in the construction (or deconstruction) of identity through its connection with place and ethnicity. My discussion started with the individual subject, as Brendan Fernandes explored his own ethnic genealogy with its connected notions of identity; and developed towards the more general and universal, as Katarina Zdjelar's speaking subject could stand in for any subject that is attempting to lose (or gain) an accent and thereby negotiate a new identity in process; Nicoline van Harskamp's four actors embody multiple different individual/ethnic accents as they point towards the global spread of English and the implication of this spread on how we view English as a language. Fernandes points to a precarious sense of belonging to a place, Zdjelar's speaking subject explores belonging through accent and in so doing arouses questions about this new precarious belonging, and Van Harskamp explodes notions of race, place and space as language (English in particular) is disconnected from its relationship to a particular place (England and North American) or race (Anglo Saxon) and explored as a way of communicating across borders through a process of linguistic deterritorialisation.

The insistence on emphasising the voice (specifically, the accented voice) as the content of visual art is not widely theorised. Despite Brendan Fernandes's prolific output and extensive exhibition history for an emerging, mid-career artist, not much has been published about his work - numerous newspaper articles, magazine articles and

interviews, but only one journal article that addresses itself to his work.⁸⁹ Similarly, Nicoline van Harskamp, despite an impressive exhibition history and overwhelmingly positive critical responses to her performances, has been neglected within academia. Katarina Zdjelar has self-published a collection of essays by a range of writers, she has been featured in catalogue essays (she represented Serbia during the 53rd Venice Biennale) and has received critical responses in art publications and online.⁹⁰ The philosopher and cultural critic, Mladen Dolar, has also written extensively on Zdjelar's work. What has not been made apparent in any of the critical and analytical responses to these artists, is the connection between them, or indeed with any other artists who deal with similar issues. This MRP begins the process of filling in this particular theoretical and critical lacuna through its focus on the joint theoretical and practical concerns investigated by these artists. In so doing, it highlights the importance of accent as an indicator of difference and identity in an ever more globalised and diasporic/postcolonial world.

⁸⁹ W. Ian Bourland, "Breaking the Codex: Brendan Fernandes's Recent Work," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2012, no. 31 (2012): 22–35, doi:10.1215/10757163-1586454.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Katarina Zdjelar, Mladen Dolar, and Alexandra Bowles, *Katarina Zdjelar: Parapoetics : Reader* (TENT.10, 2009).

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