Shakespeare and Accentism

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Afterword

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In 2017 Adele Lee and I co-led a seminar addressing the issue of accentism and the aural characterizations that indicate cultural status in Shakespearean performance at the European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA) meeting in Gdańsk, Poland. At one point in our discussion with the auditors, we realized that all of those of us at the table were ethnic and linguistic minorities within our countries of residence. The status of liminal insider/outsider is not a requirement for scholars of accentism, of course, but conscientious of how our speech marks us in our societies, it is unsurprising that we were drawn to this field of study, a field which, alongside Sound Studies, is developing through interdisciplinarity to form methods for understanding historical and presentist sounds. Literary Studies too has recently embraced aurality, as the 2020 section of *PMLA* devoted to aurality aimed "to call attention to the constancy of sound in the production and dissemination of texts now and over time."[1] Meanwhile, Theatre Studies has shifted its attention toward acoustemology, combining "acoustics" and "epistemology" to acknowledge how meanings of sound are derived relationally. As Ross Brown writes:

> If sound is elemental to theatre, as a building and a live event, then acoustemology is fundamental to dramaturgy, which deals with meaning and must therefore understand that audiences *know* sound only as they are culturally equipped to. The categories of aural dramaturgy—voice, speech, music, noise, silence—are not fixed but determined in the cultured ear of the listener. Here, then, we come to aurality, the subjective phenomenology.[2]

Accents can connote ethnicity, class, locale, nationality, generational qualities, and other modes of division or cohesion within the world of a production. They can also signal the role a character has—regal, comic, outsider, stereotype. In my research on Latinx Shakespeares, I attend to how Latinidad is constructed in a canon of plays written before the ethnic construct of Latinx culture. In order to create division onstage, or

what I have previously termed "The *West Side Story* Effect,"[3] linguistic markers such as accent, dialect, and language are employed. Frances R. Aparicio argues, "if Spanish obliquely functions to reaffirm ethnicity within the dominant sector, for U.S. Latino/as it serves to ethnify them."[4] Applying this statement to accents rather than language, the same Latinx accent incites different responses from non-Latinx versus Latinx audience members by playing into a perceived generalization of the aural Other to be legible to the former, and identifying the actor, and perhaps the character, as Latinx to the latter. Similarly, the same Latinx accent can have antithetical consequences for the actor or character onstage if a "standardized" Latinx accent[5] is used that does not denote a specific setting when non-Latinx-accented speech is particular to the production's locale.

But not all accents are created equally, as this collection attests. They are informed by the legibility of the actors' bodies (accents, I contend, form part of the "aural costuming"[6]); the languages spoken both onstage and in the region of the theatre; and a possible disjunction between acting methods, theatrical concept, and alterations to the script. In Luminarias' 1997 production of *The Winter's Tale* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, the first all-Latinx production of the play, audiences saw a vague Renaissance setting in the outdoor venue and heard a range of Spanish accents with inflections from various Spanish-speaking countries and regions as well as actors who spoke English without a Spanish accent.[7] In Latinx Shakespeares, or Latinx-themed Shakespearean productions, the Spanish language and oftentimes Spanish accents intermix with Shakespearean English, such as in Yale Rep's 2003 all-male *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by a non-Latino and performed by a cast of entirely Latino actors.[8] The setting was the present day, and actors spoke in their natural voices with a diversity of Spanish accents and some without, and they ad-libbed some Spanish phrases and relied heavily on Cuban and Puerto Rican music and costumes to connote a non-geographically specific Latinx atmosphere. Further, in the 2015 production of *Twelfth Night* at Cottage Theatre in Oregon, the setting was 1950s Cuba with a West coast, primarily non-Latinx cast performing as both Cubans and American Southerners, causing one reviewer to write, "beware of broad accents."[9] In all three instances, Spanish accents were used but to varying consequences: The "natural" voices of the actors in the Luminarias production to confirm Latinx ethnicity aurally, in case it was not clear visually at Yale Rep, and to perform Latinx culture through non-Latinx bodies at Cottage Theatre.

If theatre histories can often be told through physical spaces, funding and sponsorship, auteur directors, or watershed productions, the history of accentism owes a debt to celebrated Shakespearean actors and the development of vocal methods. Accentism functions as part of the

semiotic, linguistic, and power structures within the world of the production or play, but it can also produce or reflect a dramaturgical aesthetic. In the oft-cited 1989 Peter Hall production of *The Merchant of Venice*, American Dustin Hoffman performed the role of Shylock. Most of Christian Belmont—Portia, Bassanio, Nerissa, Antonio, and Lorenzo—was portrayed by British actors. But Shakespeare's notorious dirtbag, Gratiano, was played by an Australian, and the remaining "Othered" characters included a British-American Jessica, an Australian Tubal, a Scottish Prince of Aragon, and an American Morocco. Likewise, in the 1997 "photonegative" *Othello* with British actor Sir Patrick Stewart in the lead role, the remaining cast was played by African-American actors. In both cases, the Othered characters were designated aurally (and sometimes visually) by their accents, invoking the soundscape to define or accentuate outsider status.

Conversely, the positionality of White actors to employ accents as a dramaturgical signifier or part of the Othered character's costume varies from that of BIPOC actors and those from other marginalized groups. Douglas Lanier addresses Ghananian-born British actor Hugh Quarshie's strategy for *not* distinguishing a racially marked character such as Othello through accented differentiation in order to combat tropes of cultural Otherness. In so doing, Quarshie acknowledges what Jennifer Lynn Stoever calls "the sonic color line," which, she writes, "produces, codes, and polices racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear race as well as see it. It is a socially constructed boundary that racially codes sonic phenomena."[10] Puerto Rican actor Raúl Juliá employed an adjacent, though seemingly divergent, strategy to Quarshie's: Juliá's accent functioned as part of "color-deaf" casting in most of his roles as dominant male lead onstage at the New York Shakespeare Festival (now The Public Theatre),[11] but in Paul Mazurksy's film *Tempest* (1982), Juliá retained his Puerto Rican accent even though he was playing Caliban as a native of a Greek island. His accent served to differentiate him as an "Other" regardless of the anachronistic sound in conjunction with the setting. Similar to Quarshie, Juliá used his accent to combat pejorative expectations of the Othered character as well as perceptions based on his ethnic and racial identity.

Hierarchies of accents within a production or locale intersect with demographic attributes beyond race and ethnicity. Koel Chatterjee points to variations of accents by gender within the world of a production. Accents therefore function alongside colorism, bilingualism, gender expression, and ageism. Although some productions are constrained by vocal cohesion, such as productions in Received Pronunciation (RP), Original Pronunciation (OP), or the now antiquated American Standard, others that permit a diversity of accents are typically marked by accents made popular by White, male, and British celebrity actors

who have shaped ideas about an "authentic" sound. As Alec Patterson and Ronan Patterson demonstrate, in English-dominant countries, actors and directors can become famous for watershed productions but accents become famous based on how the actor speaks across multiple productions. David Garrick's regional inflections made him "the most important catalyst for acoustic change in the period,"[12] as Sonia Massai argues in her recent book on accents in British Shakespearean performance. In this collection, Alec Paterson illuminates how 100 years later, after years of speaking in a more standard accent, Sir Henry Irving came to embrace his Cornish accent and consequently shifted ideas about accents on the Shakespearean stage. In the United States, 100 years after Irving, bilingual actor Raúl Juliá advanced ideas about the sound of American Shakespeares through his work with the New York Shakespeare Festival (NYSA). In 1966 Papp's short-lived Spanish Mobile Theatre staged a Spanish-language production of *Macbeth* that included Juliá, who had recently moved to New York from Puerto Rico, as Macduff. After realizing he wouldn't have to perform Shakespeare in English in a British style and voice, Juliá said:

> I could bring myself to it. I could bring my own culture, my own Puerto Rican background, my own Spanish culture, my own rhythms, my own feelings to Shakespeare because Shakespeare is too big, Shakespeare is too big to be put into one little way of doing him.[13]

Part of the significance of Juliá's statement was that language, more so than looks, was considered an impediment to Shakespearean acting if it varied from the norm, at least for racially white Latinx actors. Aurality has also been an issue for Black actors, for even the forward-thinking Papp exposed his accent bias when he said that he "didn't want someone with a Deep South accent playing an Irishman" when he directed interracial casts in Sean O'Casey plays in 1952.[14] Few actors overcome essentialist and stereotyped accent bias, and even Juliá had less of a Spanish inflection onstage than he did offstage for that reason. Indeed, in the 1981 documentary *Kiss Me, Petruchio*, about the production of *The Taming of the Shrew* starring Meryl Streep, Juliá's backstage interviews illuminate how much the actor altered his accent for the stage, signaling both his virtuosity in vocal control as well as his understanding of an audience prepared to hear a Spanish accent in Shakespearean performance, just not too much of one.[15]

If theatre shapes the taste for accents, film can help to cement their popularity and influence due to widespread distribution; certainly, as Alec Patterson notes, that Laurence Olivier's successful Shakespeare films helped to spread RP as a dominant accent in the United Kingdom. But in the United States, progress and diversity was in the theatres,

largely through Papp's efforts at the NYSF in New York, the Inner City Cultural Center (ICCC) in Los Angeles, and in the growth of theatres of color from the 1960s to the present. The push to establish Shakespeare festivals and theaters in second-tier towns across the United States after World War II changed the locales, demographics, and sounds of American Shakespeares. Importantly, comparative theatre studies mandates specificity in the face of generalizations about Shakespeare; while Standard American English became popular in the 1930s via radio and later in television, film, and on national stages, the regional accents spoken by local actors, unofficially authorized by the practices at the NYSF and ICCC, became the norm for American Shakespeares.

In addition to famous male actors, producers, and directors, different legacies of colonization inform aesthetics and notions of authenticity too, as Chris Thurman points out in his chapter on South African Shakespeares. It is deeply ironic, however, that although the history of theatrical accents is associated largely with men, most voice coaches are female and "women tend to be maybe half a generation ahead of males on average" with sound and vocal changes.[16] In fact, I suggest that part of the reticence to focus on the voice is that vocal methods have traditionally been gendered: In Amy Mihyang Ginther's assessment of dysconscious racism in British voice pedagogy, she cites Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenberg, Christina Shewell, Kristin Linklater, and Barbara Houseman, the most revered vocal coaches, and all female. Ginther notes that their uses of "terms like 'open,' 'natural,' 'honestly reflects,' 'sincere,' and 'good' are experiential and subjective," another pejorative association that is not predicated on heteronormative standards of labor.[17]

In attempting to address the issue of accent bias one faces some methodological challenges, then, not least because auditory prejudice is less-attended to in theatre. While reviews are helpful to reception studies, and in Chatterjee's case, social media responses as well, it calls into question who and how listening constructs meaning. Matthew Davies draws on his experience as a director and actor, bringing a practitioner's lens to his scholarship as a point of authority and analysis. Accentism is a history of acting and voice methods, and stereotypes and assumptions that are part of them after all. Ema Vyroubalová, turning her attention to textual accentism and, like Adele Lee in the Introduction, calling for "voice-aware reading," notes that accented characters who speak minority languages are an aberration, and they consequently get ignored in historical research and theorizing. Several authors organized their analyses by characters that have dominated their local or national stages as aural others, predominantly Othello, Shylock, and Caliban, while others look at plays that do not draw cultural division but have become a blueprint for so doing.

Accentism is just one portion of the aural soundscape of a production and does not imply a desired negligence of the visual. Just as Taarini Mookherjee argues for attending to the possibilities of the complexity of looking one way (Indian) and sounding another (actors speaking British RP), George Home-Cook asserts "that listening is not a one-sense show but necessarily entails a 'double act' where looking always plays a part."[18] Visual tropes of blackface, brownface, prosthetics and makeup that contribute to stereotypes may align with an accent or increase its importance onstage. Due to less-overtly racist demands of the theatre (for the most part), today's actors of any color may be asked to be perform a role more "urban" or "sassy" as code for cultural or class markers. A number of the contributors detail how adapting Shakespeare's plays, whether through adding extratextual moments or cutting the scripts to shape the role of Othered characters, can affect representation of outsider characters and provide more opportunities or foci for their possible accents.

The contributors to this collection attempt to break with traditional criticism by not just focusing on the aural rather than the historically dominant visual mode for attending to race, but through the use of various methodological practices: Textually, Ema Vyroubalová contends that the canon should be broadened beyond Shakespeare to understand the relationship between languages and expand ideas about dramaturgies of foreigners on the early modern stage, and Ronan Paterson reminds us that Shakespeare's career span saw great changes in language, theatre-making, demographics, and ideas about foreigners. Alec Paterson associates RP with the private British school system, suggesting both a class and racial barrier to learning the pronunciation that became the standard bearer for British theatre. Douglas Lanier sheds light on the legacy of RP that is echoed in the "decorum" of audio productions when the image of the actor's body is not available, and Taarini Mookherjee demonstrates how bicultural actors can inform what we think we hear. Chris Thurman argues for Shakespeare to be performed in translation to move away from problematic accents while Chatterjee claims that accents can be used to positively alter the perception of racialized characters. Adele Lee's contention that accents can be untapped assets aligns with Davies' highlighting of the rhetorical virtuosity of the non-native speaker in Shakespeare's plays and how they illuminate thematic concerns.

Each essay and the collection as a whole repeatedly point to the constructedness of national boundaries and ethnoracial categories. While we depend on these categories to describe people, what we see and hear, there are no monolithic accents within each community. Chris Thurman situates the diversity within Black South African English (BSAE) spoken today just as Welsh OP scholar David Crystal confirms that "diversity

would have been the norm on the Elizabethan stage."[19] Consequently, Ema Vyroubalová notes that standardizing OP can flatten the diversity and wordplay within the text, and it can also signal a false "authentic" way of speaking. In Marcus Cheng Chye Tan's seminal book on *Acoustic Interculturalism*, he argues, "universals, in music or theatre, are a priori simulacra of an exterior harmony and can be achieved only as a fantastic performative."[20] Accented cohesion is a false premise that through repetition, substitutes for a non-existent original through which subsequent false historical narratives (and voices that eventually need to be freed from their grasp) emerge. RP, I believe, functions much like Aoife Monks' notion of an *aesthetic body*, one that is comprised by a history of codes, as well as the *historical body*, which may not be accurately based but becomes representative of a time period.

Prioritizing accentism and aurality is key to undoing the confines of ethnoracial categories, defined largely by politics and (visual) popular culture. In Douglas Lanier's assessment of the lack of range of accents in two productions of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the ethnicity of RADA-trained Latina actress Alejandra Escalante who played Desdemona and Miranda, respectively, is not conveyed through her accent. One of the possible consequences of OSF's diversity initiatives is that casting, representation, and works by playwrights of color have all become the norm, so accents designating ethnicity in their Shakespeare productions could result in more negative possibilities for stereotyping. Ronan Paterson contends that other languages and accents may bring out understanding and variation that we wouldn't otherwise hear, and Taarini Mookherjee exposes the range of accentism's consequences from cultural appropriation to the deconstruction of stereotypes. Ultimately, this edition presents the range of possibilities and concerns for accentism, as Adele Lee argues, the problem is cultural bias, so there is not one theatrical solution.

While this edition affords a comparative look at Shakespeare and accentism across genres, time periods, languages, vocal methods, and locales, it marks the beginning of a field of inquiry that offers theoretical advancements not just for the stage, but for our culture as a whole. Sound theorist Ross Brown makes explicit, "that theatre has an important role to play in exploring and making sense of the sounds and auditory culture of everyday life."[21] Likewise, Adele Lee suggests that expanding this work to other marginalized communities will include gender, sexuality, ability, and new accents and dialects that have developed more recently. For example, American Sign language (ASL) is a spatio-temporal language; the 2017 documentary, *Signing Black in America*, explores the evolution of an African American "accent" and dialect that developed from segregation forward; and in 2020 *The New York Times* writer Jesse Green noted that actor Scott Price "thinks of himself as someone

who, in addition to a thick Australian accent, has an 'autistic dialect'." This led Green to conclude, "if Price's autism is a dialect, surely my own neurological makeup is one, too?" Learning how accents develop over time in a range of linguistic communities, and how they foster characterization and reception on stage and on screen, we advance our understanding of Shakespeare's aural poetry for different media and how we through hearing, see one another.

Notes

1. Christopher Cannon and Matthew Rubery, "Introduction to 'Aurality and Literacy'," Theories and Methodologies, *PMLA* 135.2 (2020): 351.
2. Ross Brown, "Towards Theatre Noise," *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, eds. Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 3–4.
3. Carla Della Gatta, "From *West Side Story* to *Hamlet, Prince of Cuba*: Shakespeare and Latinidad in the United States," in *Shakespeare Studies* 44 (2016): 152.
4. Frances R. Aparicio, "Whose Spanish, Whose Language, Whose Power? An Ethnographic Inquiry into Differential Bilingualism," *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures* 12 (1998): 21.
5. Univision, the largest North American Spanish-language television network, has news commentators speak in a "neutral" Mexican accent despite the diversity of personnel and audiences. The central-Mexican accent in both English and Spanish has been established as standard/neutral throughout the Americas.
6. In Aoife Monks' study of actor costuming, she defines six constructs of actors' bodies that inform the actor and audience experience with bodies onstage. If we extend accents to be part of the aural costuming, several of these constructs play a significant role in shaping Shakespearean performance (See her *The Actor in Costume* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 19–25).
7. Many San Franciscans are accustomed to hearing Spanish accents, primarily from those of Mexican or Chicanx heritage.
8. Some Yale MFA acting students, none of whom were Latinx, were later added to the cast as non-speaking servants in Petruchio's house.
9. Bob Keefer, "Shakespeare in Cuba: 12th Night at Cottage Theatre," *Eugene Art Talk*, January 31, 2015. https://eugenearttalk.com/2015/01/shakespeare-in-cuba-12th-night-at-cottage-theatre/, accessed June 7, 2020.
10. Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race & the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 11.
11. Antonio Ocampo-Guzmán, "My Own Private Shakespeare; or, Am I Deluding Myself?" in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 132.
12. Sonia Massai, *Shakespeare's Accents: Voicing Identity in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 16.
13. *Kiss Me, Petruchio*. Dir. Christopher Dixon. Perf. Meryl Streep and Raul Julia. USA, 1981.
14. Kenneth Turan, *Free For All: Joe Papp, the Public, and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 51.

15. It is noteworthy that BBC critics were awed by the diversity of the audience that is evident in the documentary and, with much bias, amazed by Juliá's command of the language.
16. Douglas Quenqua, "They're Like, Way Ahead of the Linguistic Curve," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/science/young-women-often-trendsetters-in-vocal-patterns.html, accessed June 20, 2020.
17. Amy Mihyang Ginther, "Dysconscious Racism in Mainstream British Voice Pedagogy and Its Potential Effects on Students from Pluralistic Backgrounds in UK Drama Conservatoires," *Voice and Speech Review* 9.1 (2015): 43.
18. George Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.
19. David Crystal, *Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27.
20. Marcus Cheng Chye Tan, *Acoustic Interculturalism: Listening to Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 193.
21. Ross Brown, *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

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