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Where Does This Accent Come From?

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Where Does This Accent Come From?

It's from late night radio and teenage anxiety nights of study and days of laughter
with fear of no future
it comes from a roofless country
of dark baby rivers and bottomless winters
a matter of deep geography and an exit-only history
It springs out of moving boxes in all too sudden small towns
fills my talk in pointless corner bars
Its broken edges hurt stranger faces
on the walls of houses that weren't – lingering
at night in empty, wet and well-lit streets
young "single shot" and uncanny
corners of not belonging and walls of grief – over, what, am, I, doing
here, staring into the future
reflecting from one frozen river after the other

standing over a bridge, chest burning
 filled with pirate thoughts and the holy spirit of newborn brandy
 here, something red, something new, something stolen
 squeeze my tongue and it drips
 this strange feeling
 hot pepper and fresh cumin
 curses and prayer
 to treacherous, endlessly cunning gods from afar
 crush my chest and catch the shape of my suspicious, alien breath
 study, in the name of the lover, the mother, and the holy clay from the big river
 feel my sound, red and swollen – of, not, being, one, of, us
 just say the words and I will disappear – at, once.

After/thought Within the Territories of a Poem

The non fiction narrative in “Where does this accent come from?” takes the form of free verse and weaves around the shared, witnessed, and unshared, unique, psychological, embodied complexities of life as a documented, undocumented, gendered, racialised migrant in the global north. Having an accent, an unidentifiable one in particular, is at the intersection of these radically different migrant experiences. Hence, the often sociable, ice-breaker “where does this accent come from?” sets the opening scene and the context in which the poem is built.

The narrative is multiply intertextual across people, places, and time. It recounts my lived experience and public/personal encounters with both mundane and radical instances of human mobility over the last fifteen years. Taking off from my own first-generation background and infused by my own experience of my assigned status of “highly skilled labour” in Canada, UK and Germany, the non-linear storytelling in the poem becomes a blind walk that has allowed me to both follow and lead the stories of people I met in higher education classrooms, integration classes, language classes, care centres, bridge tops, under bridges, tea houses, coffeeshops among others. These encounters and their verse reflect my witness and ally status in support of students, friends and others within the in/formal solidarity networks that I've been involved with, who experience open and covert discrimination and hostility in everyday, bureaucratic, academic environments.

The poem is a narrative event taking place within the territory of a second language (i.e., English). This unintentional emergence shows signs of independence by letting literal translations from Turkish and German find their way into the narrative. Having an accent as the driving element of its stories is a convincing argument why this narrative act takes place in English.

The intuitive process at work in the poem is responsive to the material at hand (i.e. recollections). In my experience, this meant a key difference between the vulnerability that

result from publicly revealing an expressive response to my private, personal, memory-based engagement with reality, and the tension around accountable, ethical, rigorous analytical research. Why this is so in this case, has to do with a fundamental difference in the way I, as author, appear through rhythm and voice in the poem. Such hyper-visibility is the only means for this work to enjoy a sovereign inter-dependent life. Yet, its presence leaves me at the mercy of conflicting impulses for safety and the desire to trespass internal and external (i.e. epistemic, disciplinary) boundaries. Here, what is at stake is beyond failure. Do I have the permission to trespass, do I need one?

Being part of an audible minority is an intersectional experience. Language, of course, is a perceived marker of race, class, status, belief etc. Having an accent in many cases is a well integrated indicator within the discriminatory systems of instant socio-sensory profiling. This is so not only between the native- and later-acquired speakers of a dominant language but also among the speakers of varied accents of the same language.

Growing up in a predominantly mono-linguistic part of pre-social media Istanbul, I learned English while still in Turkey. My own migration history ties in closely with my academic past which in turn is a product of the country's hyper-competitive education system imagined and practised as the only available and ethical route to upward social mobility for its low-middle-no income working class households. It wasn't until I moved abroad that I became fully aware of the social and geographical matrices of accent diversity beyond an average immersion into judging status, level of education etc in everyday life within the space of a single dominant language.

I first encountered "where does this accent come from?" in Canada as a socially acceptable, friendly question posed to me and others on various occasions. To this day there is nothing I find particularly ill-meaning or hurtful about this gesture itself. Nonetheless, I have always been intrigued, rather unknowingly, by its formulation and performance, that is, by the social settings and the bodily nuances that frame its emergence. Learning, speaking German in southern Germany and later moving to Berlin; as well as speaking Turkish with members of Germany's large and diverse Turkish-speaking diaspora may also have sensitised me towards perceiving myself and other migrant bodies as moving, sounding beings who are relatively self-aware by the burden of involuntary, incessant hyper-visibility through audible expression including word choice, phrasing, intonation and so on. The poem and this afterthought provided me with the space to inquire deeply these interests and the diverse, conflicting feelings and perceptions around being emplaced, embodied, and mobile.

Sounding different, having an unfamiliar accent enunciates a glitch, of being accented, of being unfamiliar in an unfamiliar way. I argue that a liminal source of anxiety is triggered by this unidentifiable vocal encounter in settings often built and experienced around predictability built-in (e.g. through spatial planning, policing, branding) and perceived in terms of uniformity such as the coffeeshop, the building, the campus, the neighbourhood. The accented voice could be a negligible crack, perhaps in the predictability (and perceived uniformity) of public space, but more importantly, it violates the preconscious beliefs (around location and position) and seizes the immediate environment in potentially unpredictable, uncalled for, undesirable directions.

"Where does this accent come from?" is an unexpectedly bitter answer to a polite question. It is a screen to watch the double/triple-exposed scenes of external and self-

induced harm and suffering. Yet it does not threaten the viewer. Neither a documentary, nor a thriller, it is an earnest demand to witnessing and recognition as well as an alert to danger or that something is wrong. Perhaps this is tactical and all it does is to remind us that neither the whimsical sociality of the question's setting nor its thin formulation would in fact be capable of counterbalancing the psychic, historical, social volatilities and the intensities that may be triggered by its utterance. It is this territory of conflict that the poem investigates.