

From “Handicap” to Crip Curb Cut

Thinking Accent with Disability

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While reading Rosina Lippi-Green’s classic book *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* in its most recent edition, from 2012, I began to take stock of every occurrence of the word “handicap.” The word seemed to be designed to stand out; indeed, for Lippi-Green, “handicap” serves a rhetorical function, of emphasizing, highlighting, or calling out aspects of the experience of speaking with an accent.¹ I soon realized this was a common trend: accent scholars persistently rely on disability as a metaphor for impairment but they rarely think about why. While “speaking with an accent” is not universally understood as a linguistic “handicap,” it is in much of the Anglophone world, and that is how it is framed in much contemporary U.S. ethnic studies and postcolonial accent scholarship. I also realized that the metalinguistic exercise of indexing where and in what form disability appears in a few field-shaping examples of accent studies could teach us something about disability’s role in navigating the experience of accent.

Accent and disability share important epistemological ground. Both serve as sites of dis/identification for collectivities whose defining feature is heterogeneity. Scholars of accent and disability share an investment in theorizing the survival strategies employed by stigmatized people caught between compromised sites of identification. They make a case, respectively, for accentedness and disability as ordinary rather than exceptional, and they reveal the phantasmatic and discriminatory logics of compulsory language standards (or what linguists call “standard language ideologies”) and compulsory able-bodiedness.² The ableist use of disability metaphors in accent studies misses the opportunity to understand the complexly entangled, mutually constituted, and sometimes simultaneous experiences of becoming accented and becoming disabled in a manner that is more affirming and capacious of difference.

Thinking accent alongside disability scholars and activists, I trace a spectrum of conservative and radical apprehensions, *melancholic*, *accommodational*, and *coalitional*, not only of accent but also of the social world. I do not view these modes of thinking accent through disability as mutually exclusive or as evolutionary stages in a progress narrative so much as tendencies preoccupied with distinct psychical, infrastructural, and political economies. The exercise of mapping their differences moves us toward an understanding of disability as framed by feminist-of-color disability scholars: as a social system and relationship to power that intersects with and is mutually constituted by other social identities (like accent) in ways that can be capacitating or debilitating. Accent, like disability, represents minoritarian noncompliance and expertise from this vantage, and a demand for a world in which embodied difference is valuable—a world that minoritized and multiply minoritized people can only build in coalition.

ACCENT AS "HANDICAP," OR, THINKING MELANCHOLICALLY

First published in 1997 between two other pioneering interventions (Mari Matsuda's 1991 study of accent and antidiscrimination law and John Baugh's 2003 work on Black English and linguistic profiling), Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* was the first monograph to theorize accent as a site of discrimination in U.S. courtrooms, workplaces, classrooms, and the housing market.³ It is worth spending some time with this book not only because Lippi-Green's definition of accent is one of the most-cited reference points in sociological studies of language practices, but also because it lays the foundation for a prevailing *melancholic* mode of understanding of accent as an individual impairment to which a number of accent scholars across the humanities and social sciences still subscribe.

Accents, for Lippi-Green, are "loose bundles" of phonological features, whether prosodic (intonation, pitch contours, stress patterns, tempo, upswings and downswings, etc.) or segmental (how vowels and consonants are pronounced), that convey meaning about the speaker's geographic and social status.⁴ Lippi-Green argues that every English speaker has an accent. "Native" English speakers have what linguists call an L1 accent that is typically "marked" by clusters of features associated with the speaker's region as well as with other elements of social identity such as "gender, race, ethnicity, income, religion" (disability is not mentioned in this list). What is commonly called a "foreign" accent is an L2 accent, that is, the audible trace of native language phonology when a native speaker of one language or language variety (dialect) acquires another.⁵ Lippi-Green's phonological definition of accent has so thoroughly infiltrated contemporary scholarship on accent across a range of fields and media forms that it is now regarded as axiomatic that accent is

phonological, as opposed to visual, textual, gestural, or otherwise multimodal, as several contributors to this volume argue.

Lippi-Green employs disability as a metaphor for the ontological and ideological violence of standard language ideologies (or what she calls the myth of “non-accent”) that give rise to discrimination against nonstandard and nonnative accents, even as disability as an actual sociopolitical experience is not discussed in her book. Following are three symptomatic examples of how she uses “handicap” as a metaphor for nonstandard or nonnative English accents:

- 1) First, a speculative scenario: On the very first page of her book Lippi-Green asks us to imagine a fictional United States in which all adults of a given gender are physically identical in height and weight. A law is proposed to prosecute deviations from this norm such that anyone who is taller or heavier than the dictated standards “must be labeled handicapped” or else face charges for violating the law.⁶ Standards for spoken or written language, Lippi-Green argues, are equally absurd and equally discriminatory.
- 2) Second, a piece of testimonial evidence: Lippi-Green quotes a speech pathologist who testified on behalf of a radio station that denied a promotion to a bilingual speaker of English and Hawai’ian Creole English who sued his employer and lost: “I urgently recommend [Mr. Kahakua] seek professional help in striving to lessen this handicap . . . *Pidgin can be controlled*. And if an individual is totally committed to improving, professional help on a long-term basis can produce results.”⁷ The notion that everyone can, if they try hard enough, acquire a clean, pure, and variation-free language, Lippi-Green argues, is both scientifically untrue and ideologically pernicious.
- 3) Third, an analogy: “Think of all the sounds which can be produced and perceived by the human vocal apparatus as a set of building materials,” writes Lippi-Green.⁸ “There is a finite set of potentially meaning-bearing sounds (vowels, consonants, tones) which can be produced by [the] human vocal apparatus. The set in its entirety is universal, available to all human beings without physical handicap.”⁹ She continues, “Now think of the language acquisition process as a newborn child begins to build a *Sound House*. The Sound House is the “home” of the language, or what we have been calling *accent*—the phonology of the child’s native tongue. At birth, the child is in the Sound House warehouse, where a full inventory of possible materials is available to her.”¹⁰ Over time, however, the inventory—blueprints, tools, bricks, wood, and so on—begins to dwindle. A twenty-year-old English speaker may struggle to build a second Spanish Sound House while her little sister does so perfectly with no apparent effort. “Adult language learners,” Lippi-Green explains, “all have the same handicap in learning a second language: the blueprints have faded to near illegibility, and the tools are rusted.”¹¹ The author concludes that there is a *physiological* reason why some people cannot speak mainstream English.

In each of these instances "handicap," understood as an individual embodied deficit or impairment, functions as a rhetorical device (speculation, evidence, or analogy) in support of the book's central claim. That claim is that we have a limited degree of control over language, so demanding that someone lose their native phonology—their accent—or acquire a new one, is akin to an order that they "grow four inches, or, and more controversially, change the color of their skin."¹² Lippi-Green repeatedly employs such rhetorical moves to dramatize the obstacles and disadvantages faced by accented English speakers in a variety of institutional contexts.¹³ Her argument, in its simplest form, is that nonnative or nonstandard accents are a "handicap."

What is important to note here is that Lippi-Green confines the meaning of accent to the utterances of the speaker rather than the perception and judgment of the listener (an oversight she acknowledges later in the text).¹⁴ The same impulse of individualizing and anatomizing a phenomenon that is experientially relational and comparative informs her understanding of disability as a "handicap." For decades now, people with disabilities have preferred the terms "disability," "disabled people," and "people with disabilities" (which frame disability as a political category and experience shaped not just by bodies but by social structures and attitudes) to "handicapped" (which frames disability as a physical, physiological, or mental disadvantage, deficiency, or impediment that hinders normal achievement).¹⁵ The earliest uses of the word "handicap" date to sixteenth-century England, when disabled veterans unable to find jobs resorted to begging for alms "cap in hand," a practice legalized by Henry VII. In his foundational book *Stigma: On the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman writes that "handicap" is synonymous with "stigma," which he defines as a discrediting attribute that marks its bearer as bad, dangerous, or weak.¹⁶ *Stigma*, in Greek, means "to prick or to puncture"; the word originally referred to a sharp instrument used to brand or mark enslaved and incarcerated people to signify their fallen status. Disability studies has largely retired stigma as an analytical framework in part because the individualizing and bleak terms in which Goffman defines its contemporary categories ("abominations of the body," "blemishes of individual character," and "tribal stigmas of race, nation, and religion") reinforce the exclusion of the stigmatized person.¹⁷ Nevertheless, these are the categories invoked by Lippi-Green when she frames denigrated accents not as a *disability*—that is, as a collective political category—but as a "handicap" that sets an individual speaker apart from other members of a social group. If an accent is an accent because it stands apart from the norm, then disability—understood as stigma, or an individual discrediting difference, especially an apparent one—*supplies an accent* to her theory of accent.

Disability experience is infrequently mentioned and rarely elaborated in recent books engaging with issues of accent in the fields of sociolinguistics,¹⁸ raciolinguistics,¹⁹ musicology,²⁰ postcolonial theory,²¹ anthropology,²² and sound studies.²³

But reliance on the stigma of disability as a metaphor for discrediting accents is common in accent studies. In their landmark study of disability metaphors in literary narratives, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe this maneuver as a “discursive dependency on disability.”²⁴ Disabled bodies lend flesh to fact, a tangibility to abstract ideas or experiences.²⁵ Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability satisfies a basic preoccupation of narrative, supplying an aberrancy that narrative sets out to resolve, correct, or prostheticize.²⁶ Take, for instance, Hans Christian Andersen’s well-loved children’s story *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, in which a little boy, upon receiving a box of tin soldiers as a birthday gift, realizes that one of the soldiers is missing a leg. The perceived abnormality of the missing leg stands apart from and seemingly signifies the very collapse of the normal order. It supplies a lack that calls the story of the one-legged tin soldier’s inspiring adventures into being; one might say it is the crutch upon which the narrative relies for its symbolic and analytical inventions.²⁷

Disability inaugurates theory—certainly accent theory—as much as it inaugurates narrative.²⁸ Consider, for instance, recent monographs by Jonathan Rosa (a sociologist) and Rey Chow (a literary scholar). Like Lippi-Green (a linguist), Rosa and Chow demonstrate how the *visibly* disabled body enables theory by spectacularly materializing the need for interpretation, explanation, and analysis that the stigmatized, “marked,” or accented voice demands. Rosa, in his study of the racialization of language in a Chicago public high school, contrasts the variation of Spanish spoken by Puerto Rican students, which students saw as incorrect but “ghetto” or “cool,” with the variation of Spanish spoken by Mexican students, which students saw as correct yet “lame” or “uncool.”²⁹ Rosa argues that the school principal’s administrative project of transforming students from “gangbangers and hoes” into “Young Latino Professionals” racially segregated students based on how they were perceived to sound (“ghetto” or “lame”).³⁰ Invoking Goffman’s tactics of passing (rendering a stigmatized identity invisible) and covering (reducing tension so as to divert attention from the stigma toward the content of the interaction), Rosa argues that the students were in a double bind, caught between colonial and “authentic” sites of identification.³¹ He does not comment, however, on the force lent by the figure of the disabled body (“lame”) both to the students’ dismissive perception of a defanged mode of languaging, and to his own argument about the impairing logic of raciolinguistic enregisterment, or the process whereby “race and language are rendered mutually perceivable” in ways that disqualify or stigmatize some speakers.³²

Chow’s book *Not Like a Native Speaker* opens with an excerpt from Barack Obama’s autobiography about his visceral reaction to an image of a Black man who had received a chemical treatment to lighten his complexion in order to try to pass as white.³³ Chow likens the redoubled psychic trauma of the botched chemical treatment (“a double disfigurement”; “a defective correction of something already

deemed defective") to the predicament of brown and yellow offshore call center agents who are obliged to undergo accent neutralization training in order to sound like their North American and other English-speaking customers.³⁴ Chow is making a point similar to Rosa's: playing on the twinned aural and visual resonances of the word "tones," she observes that the connotations that attach to visual perceptions (for example, to skin tones) can permeate and become inextricable from those that attach to auditory perceptions (for example, to the tone of a voice).³⁵ Thus, she argues, people with (nonstandard or nonnative) accents are, like people of color, "obliged to give themselves a bodily makeover" to cover up the stigma of difference.³⁶

Handicapped. Lame. Disfigured.

Deformity, Helen Deutsch notes, "encapsulates the paradox of a visible sign of unintelligibility, a fall from form written by God or nature on the body."³⁷ It is also linked conceptually to stigma. To this day, writes Heather Love, visual deformities like leprosy, needle tracks, missing limbs, or obesity invoke this history and remain associated with moral disgrace.³⁸ Rosa and Chow both rely on the coded associations of the deformed body to explain how immigrant and diasporic accents are branded with negative racial, geographic, and class associations. Neither "native" nor "neutral," these accented speakers are suspended in a phonological no-man's-land and condemned to perpetually mourn the lingual belonging that eludes them. Their "negative accents" are deemed lacking or excessive; they operate as the locus of negative affects such as disgust, shame, worthlessness, embarrassment, and hurt whose internalization by the accented speaker festers a psychic wound.

A signal trait of melancholic theories of accent-as-handicap is that their diagnostic and prognostic criteria revolve around the psychically injured individual. This is a logical outcome of the medical model of disability that they employ (without naming it) as an analogy for the malady of accent. A reflection of enduring perceptions of disability as an underlying physical or mental condition, fact, or state that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities, the medical model locates disability "exclusively in an individual body, requiring treatment, correction, or cure."³⁹ When disability is understood medically, the pathological individual's options are cast in terms of external interventions (remedial treatment, surgery) or, failing that, self-improvement ("overcoming their challenges" with the help of friends and family). This may explain the focus of so much of contemporary accent discourse on injured identity, and the psychic implications of the tactics employed by people with stigmatized accents, such as disguising, covering up, reducing, or "eliminating" their accents. There are, however, other ways conceiving of disability, and therefore also of accent, that offer collective and social alternatives to the double bind of stigma.

ACCENT AS MISFIT, OR, THINKING ACCOMMODATIONALLY

Disability justice activist and artist Carolyn Lazard defines disability not as a “handicap” but as “an economic, cultural and/or social exclusion based on a physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive difference.”⁴⁰ Lazard’s definition, offered in the context of a practical guidebook on how to make small arts venues more accessible, is an example of what is commonly called the social model of disability.

Emphasizing meanings of disability that are “external to the body, encompassing systems of social organization, institutional practices, and environmental structures,” the social model often distinguishes between impairment and disability, arguing that disability results not from impairment but from structural and attitudinal barriers.⁴¹ Devva Kasnitz, who experiences both mobility and speech impairments, writes that the medicalization of her disability (recall the speech pathologist who recommended that Mr. Kahakua seek professional help to “lessen his handicap”) impacts how she advocates for change or looks for assistance even when she is accessing the medical care she requires. She explains, “That is why I am so careful to describe ‘my’ disability as an experience of a certain kind of exclusion, as opposed to describing it as dystonia, which is the diagnosis, or as speech and mobility impairment, which is the realm of functional limitations.”⁴² Kasnitz embraces her role as an “infrastructure activist,” but others have criticized the social model for overemphasizing design and architecture solutions.⁴³ They note, for instance, that the social model doesn’t always adequately address the mutual shaping of bodies and environments; the very real desire for medical treatment that can come from living with illness, pain, or fatigue; the relationship between disability and state-sanctioned forms of debilitation; and how disability experience and knowledge can become a site of collective reimagining.⁴⁴

These interventions open a path to two other modes of thinking accent alongside disability that we can think of as the *accommodational* mode and the *coalitional* mode. But first, let me update Lippi-Green’s account of accent in light not just of the social model of disability but also of critiques of this model that stress the complex and evolving relationship among disabled bodies and their social and environmental location. Accent is not a handicap. Perceived differences of accent—as H. Samy Alim, Geneva Smitherman, and April Baker-Bell have asserted regarding speakers of Black English, who are perceived by monolingual listeners who use Standard American English to be “speaking with an accent”—can be a source of intragroup identity, community, knowledge, and pride while simultaneously resulting in economic, cultural, and/or social exclusion.⁴⁵ Some accented speakers, like the bilingual Latinx texters discussed by Sara Veronica Hinojos in this volume, may choose to embrace their accentual differences as a site of resistance, and others may choose to assimilate, like the migrant professionals described in Vijay A. Ramjattan’s contribution, who opt for remedial “accent reduction.”

Particular accents can, in the interface with particular systems of social organization, institutional practices, and environmental structures, become disabling. And while this isn't my central concern in this chapter, we could use that same logic to examine how disability-affected voices like Kasnitz's that manifest expressive or receptive impairments (such as strange, mechanical, proxy, confused, signing, slow, or Deaf voices) can, in the interface with their linguistic environment, become accented.⁴⁶ Deafness is often perceived as audible or visible evidence of cultural otherness. In an ethnographic study on crip humor, Thomas, a hearing-impaired college professor who reads lips and uses a hearing aid, reports that he responds “Deafmark” when hearing people who inquire about the origin of his accent but are unsatisfied with his answer (Wisconsin) ask again, “I mean what country are you originally from?”⁴⁷ In Lynn Hou and Rezenet Moges's chapter in this volume, Joseph Hill, a Deaf signer of color, similarly describes being perceived by other Black scholars as culturally white because his ASL interpreters at academic events are usually white women.

Once we articulate the relationships among accent and disability in this way, we can pose a different question: *when does becoming accented become disabling?* After all, accents can sometimes be enabling, although an accent that enables the speaker in one situation may disable them in another. An accent associated with elite British public schools like Eton or Harrow might benefit a candidate interviewing for a job at a prestigious law firm but disadvantage an actor auditioning for a role as an illiterate farmer. An “Indian accent” regarded as unremarkable in New Delhi might disable an immigrant graduate teaching assistant being evaluated by a predominantly American or Canadian student body. Like disability, accent emerges from embodiment as a result of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the “dynamic material relation between body and world.”⁴⁸ Garland-Thomson writes that the encounters among dynamic but relatively stable bodies and environments produce “fits” or “misfits.” In her words:

The built and arranged space through which we navigate our lives tends to offer fits to majority bodies and create misfits with minority forms of embodiment, such as people with disabilities. The point of civil rights legislation and the resulting material practices such as universally-designed built spaces and implements is to enlarge the range of fits by accommodating the widest possible range of human variation. . . . We become disabled when what seemed to be the unremarkable and familiar bodies that we inhabit encounter an unsustaining environment.⁴⁹

Accented speakers routinely encounter unsustaining environments that frame them as misfits. The value of the accommodational line of thinking—evident in a range of literature that investigates legal avenues for redressing accent discrimination in housing and job applications, classrooms, or workplaces—is that it shifts the onus of creating a fit from the individual to the institutional spaces that deny them access or disqualify their participation.⁵⁰ The Americans with Disabilities

Act (ADA) of 1990, which has become a touchstone in the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well as the disability laws of many other nations, mandates “reasonable accommodations” to make “existing facilities . . . readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities” and “job restructuring” such as “modified work schedules” or “acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, appropriate adjustment or modifications of examinations, training materials or policies, the provision of qualified readers or interpreters, and other similar accommodations.”⁵¹

In their most dynamic interpretation, accommodations like extended times for test taking, ramps, captions, or working from home take disability as an occasion to recalibrate the baseline for everyone. Their most radical horizon is a fully accessible world in which individual differences are not deviations from some arbitrary norm but simply variations that warrant inclusion. In practice, however, accommodations are often interpreted in a static manner, as “favors” or “exceptions.” To borrow a term from Jay Dolmage, institutional accommodations are “retrofits”: small tweaks that temporarily make disability go away for individuals who demand inclusion without fear of recrimination.⁵² They operate according to the logic of what André Gorz calls “reformist reforms,” or modifications to existing structures that “subordinat[e their] objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy.”⁵³ Recalibrating the baseline requires coalitional leverage (e.g., the massive cross-movement agitation that spurred Congress to enforce Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the first significant disability rights legislation, and subsequently the ADA, which was itself modeled on civil rights law) and/or extraordinary circumstances (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the historic decision by state and private institutions all over the world to permit employees to work from home, even though that accommodation was not previously extended to disabled or chronically ill workers with any consistency).

Under ordinary circumstances, demanding accommodations requires self-identification, self-disclosure, self-advocacy, and extraordinary persistence by people living with the experience of disability. Garland-Thomson writes that demanding accommodations based on the rights to equal opportunities (as opposed to favors or exceptions) guaranteed by disability law is “the most definitive way we become disabled.”⁵⁴ The reverse is also true: disability identity is often an unavoidable corridor to reasonable accommodations. But the difficulty, as Kasnitz puts it, is that it takes repetition, reflection, and *work* for the apprehension of disability status to become a politicized disability identity.⁵⁵ The same is true of accent.

What would it mean for accented “misfits” to self-identify as politically disabled? This is, to be sure, a fraught prospect in a world where modes of existence thought of as disabled remain profoundly abjected and discredited, and where who gets to decide who counts as disabled is a vexed question. It is hard enough for many to acknowledge that they are perceived as accented. One of my students,

a Nigerian immigrant to Western Massachusetts, notes that her mother "refuses to refer to herself as accented even though her thick Nigerian accent stands out here in Massachusetts." As a counterexample, this student pointed to the Austrian actor and politician Arnold Schwarzenegger, noting that "he identifies as accented but his identity as an accented actor has helped him in his acting career and has been wildly embraced by fans." These observations about the unfairly distributed advantages and perils of self-identifying as accented offer a restatement of what disability justice activist Mia Mingus has observed in a different context: "It can be very dangerous to identify as disabled when your survival depends on you denying it."⁵⁶ As Mingus notes, it is often easier for white disabled people to identify as "(politically) disabled" than it is for disabled women of color who have the lived reality of being disabled but whose capacity to identify as disabled might be precluded by a range of complicated factors having to do with race, ability, gender, and access.⁵⁷ Perhaps this is why my student's mother sees no advantage to identifying with a Nigerian accent that brings social denigration rather than social acceptance or capital.

Accommodations are made every day for accented speakers that preserve the rationality and practicability of standard language ideologies, even if they are not named and understood as such. When a call center trainee from small-town India undergoes voice training to "lose" his regional accent, he is accommodating North American and other English-speaking customers. These customers benefit daily from the logic of disability accommodations without ever identifying as disabled, even as the call center trainee is made to feel defective, inadequate, and impaired—in short, in need of reform. Imagine a world in which the call center worker is accommodated as well as his customer. You might respond that text-based rather than telephonic exchanges have been widely adopted as a workflow modification that increases access for both accented call center workers and their customers. But the limitation of accommodational thinking is that it imagines access in terms of navigating built infrastructure rather than political leverage, and disability as legal identity rather than lived experience. A news story from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic reported that Filipino workers contracted by the Australian telecommunications company Telstra were "sleeping in the office in potentially unsafe conditions to help Australian customers, despite the risk of the coronavirus."⁵⁸ It took pressure from a union for Filipino call center workers and the threat of negative publicity for Telstra to relocate the agents.

Becoming disabled is not the same as being *debilitated*, Jasbir Puar's expansive and nonidentitarian category for populations rendered available by neoliberal racial capitalism for labor exploitation, occupation, incarceration, and other forms of "statistically likely injury"—populations that we now term, in the era of COVID-19, "essential."⁵⁹ The accommodational mode of thinking accent cannot, without coalitional leverage, remedy either 1) the debilitating working conditions (union suppression, low wages, unhealthy working conditions, job insecurity) that

are constitutive of the built infrastructure of the call center and other industries that rely on accented labor but fall outside the domain of workers' compensation law, or 2) the bodily experiences of accented speakers whose debilitation is a function of their racial, ethnic, gender, class, and/or locational underprivilege but does not fit within the rubric of disability identity protected by disability laws.⁶⁰

Debilitation, Puar reminds, works hand in hand with capacitation. Accommodational technologies like wheelchairs, cochlear implants, and rights-based discourse recognize, capacitate, and leverage some bodies—they “script and rescript what a body can, could, or should do”—even as they debilitate and incapacitate other bodies.⁶¹ Recalibrating the baseline for everyone necessitates what Gorz calls “nonreformist reform” or “what *should be made possible* in terms of human needs and demands.”⁶² The liberal interpretation of accommodation-as-inclusion hears the radical demand for a society that meets these needs as a reformist demand for greater assimilation into the very biopolitical circuits that cause debilitation in the first place. Garland-Thomson describes such a radical demand as a call for a “habitable world”: an accessible world in which the social participation and thriving of disabled people is deemed valuable and desirable for its own sake. A habitable world is made hospitable to disability not only by accessible structures but by an inclusive value system in which disability signifies the possibility for things to be otherwise.⁶³

ACCENT AS CRIP CURB CUT, OR, THINKING COALITIONALLY

Implicit in the transformative call for a habitable world is a call for a *coalitional* mode of thinking accent with disability. To think coalitionally across the experiences of becoming disabled and becoming accented is to address the intersectionality of struggles and issues pertaining to accent and disability as vectors of stigma, debility, and capacity. Coalitional thinking, as articulated by queer/crip and feminist of color disability scholars, asks how shared interests as well as competing needs and demands emerging from common conditions of debilitation can be leveraged in the service of shared inclusion in a habitable world.⁶⁴ The coalitional model trains its sights not on individuals (the melancholic model) or infrastructures (the accommodational model) but on the very social relations, conditions, values, and logics that trigger accent and disability oppression.

Many design-focused interventions emerging from disability activism and innovation, like the movement toward resonant design, emphasize interest convergence as a coalitional horizon. Resonant design, as defined by Graham Pullin, is “a design intended to address the needs of some people with a particular disability and other people without that disability but perhaps finding themselves in particular circumstances.”⁶⁵ Pullin describes resonant design as an aspirational goal rather than a compromise, specifying that it is “neither design just for able-bodied

people nor design for the whole population; nor even does it assume that everyone with a particular disability will have the same needs.”⁶⁶ The idea is that the needs of particular disabled and nondisabled people—or differently disabled people—can, under particular circumstances, come into resonance. Take, for example, the designers of the palmtop computer (commonly known as the personal digital assistant or PDA), who recruited two visually impaired people into the design team, realizing that they shared a need with busy professionals who would benefit from a voice-operated portable device. Video-conferencing platforms are another example of resonant design that serves people in lockdown and people in wheelchairs. Masks with a clear screen that provide Deaf or Hard of Hearing users with visual cues to help understand what a speaker is saying may also help to reduce confusion for accented speakers and listeners; in the context of a protest or a rally such a design modification might prove lifesaving.

How can the coalitional aspirations of resonant design be mobilized to build social capacities and solidarities *not only* when the interests of different groups are convergent *but also and especially* when their desires and aims are distinct or dissonant? What is the difference between these two approaches to thinking across differences, and why does it matter? I began this chapter by examining the affordances and limitations of “handicap” as a metaphor for accented speech. Let me answer these final questions by turning to another metaphor that offers a more capacious vision of the “cross-impairment synergies” among disability and accent, or what Kasnitz calls “a recognition that we share a unique and heightened energy across specific impairment labels that we cannot access separately”: the crip curb cut.⁶⁷

The curb cut, writes critical design and disability scholar Aimi Hamraie, has been mobilized as a storytelling device in two distinct historical narratives of disability rights and U.S. citizenship. These stories offer distinct interpretations of access, expertise, and the social world. In the first, liberal, narrative, the curb cut is a metaphor for unimpeded, barrier-free design. In the postwar era, progressive lawyers and rehabilitation experts extolled curb cuts and ramps as technologies of inclusive design from which “everyone” could benefit: “disabled veterans, disabled non-veterans, aged and infirm persons and mothers with baby carriages.”⁶⁸ The liberal curb cut has become a go-to metaphor for the accessible or barrier-free design movement, promoting a vision of bureaucratic expertise and the compliant assimilation of “misfits” into public space and productive circuits.

The second, radical, narrative offers a coalitional model for thinking accent alongside disability. Rumor has it that in the late 1960s, the Rolling Quads—a group Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha describes as “white, polio-surviving, physically disabled men who got radicalized while attending UC Berkeley by both witnessing Black and brown power and free speech movements and being sequestered in each other’s company because they were only allowed to live in the campus infirmary”—rode around Berkeley with nondisabled allies under cover of night,

smashing sidewalks with sledgehammers and recementing them with asphalt to produce curb cuts.⁶⁹ For Hamraie, this narrative situates disabled people not as passive recipients of rehabilitation experts but as “crip technoscientists” asserting disability as a source of scientific expertise, activist leadership, and engaged practice: members of the Rolling Quads went on to become pioneers of the Independent Living movement.⁷⁰

In this narrative, the curb cut functions as a metaphor not for compliant assimilation but for crip refusal and resistance. The crip curb cut enables the frictional production of *force*, not smooth movement, across material and ideological impediments. In Hamraie’s words, “As a frictioned, leverage-generating device, the curb cut represents noncompliant labor within an existing system, discourse, or built arrangement.”⁷¹ Perhaps as crucially, both Hamraie and Piepzna-Samarasinha insist, it represents how social movements need the leverage of other social movements to multiply their own force. When disability activists began a nearly month-long occupation in April 1977 to protest the federal government’s failure to guarantee the barrier-free programs and services enshrined in Section 504, the Black Panthers and a Chicago group, the Mission Rebels, not only sustained the occupiers with food; disabled party members Bradley Lomax and his caregiver Chuck Johnson also became thought leaders in an emerging intersectional consciousness among the racial justice and disability justice movements despite the ableism and whiteness internal to each group.⁷²

The curb cut generates so much more leverage than “handicap” as a metaphor for nonnative and nonstandard accents. Accents that interrupt, delay, or complicate smooth communication are not handicaps to be overcome, nor are they inconveniences to be accommodated. They are *crip curb cuts*. Their rough inclines represent minoritarian expertise, noncompliant labor under conditions of forced compliance, and a demand for a habitable world in which embodied difference is valuable and desirable.⁷³ At stake in this reframing of the discursive connections among becoming accented and becoming disabled is an acknowledgment that metaphors are not neutral in their politics or in the knowledge production they enable. If we approach accents as crip curb cuts, we evoke not the medical or liberal social history of disability but a radical one that centers coalitional, anti-assimilationist, nonreformist, minoritarian, and disabled ways of being, feeling, making, knowing, and movement building.

Where “handicap” individualizes and stigmatizes struggles for equity, the crip curb cut emphasizes the multiplication of force. It frames accent discrimination as a disability justice issue and disability rights as an accent justice issue. As a metaphor, the crip curb cut foregrounds the solidarity politics that were instrumental in getting disability rights legislation passed, and which are increasingly invoked, as a colleague at Stanford recently remarked to me, in how they are applied. Describing the overwhelming number of requests for academic accommodation from students of color in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by racist police as a coalitional tactic,

she reflected, "It is striking that in the very moment when academics are eagerly rejecting 'accommodation' as inadequately political, our students have keyed into the power of this category to create coalition with students who identify as disabled and force the university to recognize their experience of racialization as an administratively actionable category of psychic distress."⁷⁴ Injured identity, in this instance, is not an individual attribute to be "managed," qua Goffman, but a means of friction-multiplying leverage. Kasnitz adds that marking accommodation needs as relational and interactive can be a radical group advocacy tactic. She writes, "Everyone should fill in the 'Accommodation Request' box with notes such as 'I don't sign. I'll need an interpreter for any presentations by deaf participants,' or 'I'll need a revoicer for Devva at these times when I hope to meet with her.'"⁷⁵

The implications of such a shift in consciousness when it comes to the methods, histories, and horizons of accent studies is a topic for another study. Having spent most of this chapter considering how disability has been leveraged in accent studies, let me conclude with one final example of how accented speakers can leverage the project of disability justice, this time from my perspective as a documentary scholar.

To this day it is common for documentarians to enlist speakers whose accents are regarded as "neutral" or "accentless" to provide voice-over commentary for their films. This practice of masking or neutralizing the particularity of standardized accents is seldom considered in tandem with another common practice in documentary as well as fiction film: using burned-in subtitles to transcribe non-standard accents. This selective use of subtitles to transcribe nonstandard accented speech indicates that a particular accented listening ear is being accommodated as if it were a neutral or default setting. There is, to my knowledge, no industry-wide terminology for describing the routinized practice of employing nonoptional or "open" subtitles to provide sensory access as opposed to linguistic access. Anecdotally, when I have encountered documentaries that employ such "open subtitles" I have found that they tend to segregate to an optional track sensory access features like captions and audio description that make the film accessible to audiences with visual and auditory disabilities.⁷⁶

A growing movement among artists and filmmakers with disability and accent exposure is working to change these access practices, which reinforce both the unmarked norm of a sighted and hearing audience *and* unspoken raciolinguistic norms. In *Shared Resources* (2021), a meditation on their white, southern father's self-reliant attitude toward war debilitation, illness, debt, and bankruptcy, Jordan Lord uses open captions and burned-in audio description as the building blocks of a new documentary language in which access features guide both the film's aesthetic and its narratological movement. I experience the film's integrated sensory access as a crip curb cut with varying inclines. As someone who speaks English with an "L2" accent, I appreciate that the "thick" southern accents in the film are not the only ones to be visually transcribed—a reminder that accents happen

in the eye and ear and not just the tongue. Lord's inventive approach to audio description (in describing what they see, Lord's mother and sister also reveal the invisible and inaudible care work that literally and metaphorically props up the story of Lord's father and his recovery) also invites me to reflect on how my habituated preferences as a hearing and seeing spectator have reinforced a narrative economy in which sensory access is treated as an afterthought rather than a practice of collective care that swells documentary meanings and horizons.⁷⁷ *Shared Resources* demonstrates why accented speakers and listeners, especially those of us who are as-yet-nondisabled, should add our voices to the call for sensory access as a matter both of disability and accent justice.

This is just one instance of how accented and disabled people can become partners in cocreating a more habitable world. The history and future of our coalition remains to be written.

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NOTES

1. All citations of Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* refer to the 2nd edition (2012), unless otherwise noted.

2. Lippi-Green defines standard language ideology, a term first coined by James and Lesley Milroy, as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class." See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 67. "Compulsory able-bodiedness" is a term coined by Robert McRuer to refer to the ways in which ability, as a standard of body and mind, has been naturalized as a universal rather than culturally and historically specific aspect of being a human being. See McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness," 369–70.

3. Matsuda, "Voices of America"; Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling."

4. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44–45. Phonology has to do with the system of relationships among the speech sounds that constitute the fundamental components of a language.

5. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 45–46; Moyer, *Foreign Accent*, 1.

6. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 2.

7. Matsuda, "Voices of America," 1366, quoted in Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 47; 157.

8. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 1st edition, 46.

9. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 47.

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

11. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 50.

12. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 157.

13. Also see Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 1st edition, 162, for a citation from the court transcript, in which it is noted that a native of China and a professor of mathematics who was refused promotion "is at a decided disadvantage in the classroom because of his natural accent" and "has a difficult time overcoming this handicap"; and Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 84, where the

author summarizes a Massachusetts teacher's bias against their Puerto Rican students' perceived deficiencies in spoken English as a "cultural handicap."

14. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 45.
15. See Linton, *Claiming Disability*, 10.
16. Goffman, *Stigma*, 11.
17. Goffman, *Stigma*, 13; also see Love, "Stigma," 174.
18. See Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*; Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee, *Feeling It*.
19. See Alim, Rickford, and Ball, *Raciolinguistics*.
20. See Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.
21. See Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*.
22. See Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*.
23. See Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*.
24. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 51.
25. Mitchell and Snyder call this the "materiality of metaphor" (*Narrative Prosthesis*, 52).
26. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 53.
27. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 49, 54.
28. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 57.
29. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 18, 152.
30. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 63. Rosa likens the language ideologies used to separate and stigmatize these Spanish-speaking students to the racialized segregation of Black and Mestiza subjects discussed by W. E. B. Du Bois and Gloria Anzaldúa, respectively.
31. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 64–66.
32. Rosa, *Looking Like a Language*, 7.
33. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 1–2.
34. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 8.
35. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 8.
36. Chow, *Not Like an English Speaker*, 9. Notably, Chow sounds a rejoinder to Lippi-Green's argument that accents are as obdurate as skin color. Seemingly material facts are, Chow argues, ideological through and through.
37. Deutsch, "Deformity," 52.
38. Love, "Stigma," 173.
39. Adams, Reiss, and Serlin, "Disability," 8.
40. Lazard, *Accessibility in the Arts*, 6. Lazard situates her work as part of the Disability Justice (DJ) movement, or the second wave of the disability rights movement as articulated by queer and trans activists of color in the San Francisco Bay Area, who have advocated moving away from a single-issue approach to an intersectional, multisystemic way of understanding the uneven distribution of disability.
41. See Adams, Reiss, and Serlin, "Disability," 8.
42. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S21.
43. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S24.
44. See for instance, Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 7–11; Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 22–27; Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 74.
45. See Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*; Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice*; also see Lynn Hou and Rezenet Moges's contribution to this volume.
46. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S20.
47. Milbrodt, "Crip Humor, Storytelling, and Narrative Positioning of the Disabled Self."
48. Garland-Thomson, "How I Became Disabled."
49. Garland-Thomson, "How I Became Disabled."
50. See for instance, Baugh, *Linguistics in Pursuit of Justice*.
51. See Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 192; Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, As Amended.
52. See Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 70.

53. Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, 7.
54. Garland-Thomson, "How I Became Disabled."
55. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S19.
56. Mingus, "Moving Toward the Ugly," quoted in Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 15.
57. Mingus, "Moving Toward the Ugly," quoted in Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 15.
58. See Atkin and Kewley, "Call centre staff in the Philippines have been sleeping at work."
59. Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xviii.
60. See Puar's critique of the social model of disability in *The Right to Maim*, 74.
61. See Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xv. Also see 22, 74.
62. Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, 7 (italics added).
63. Garland-Thomson, "A Habitable World," 303.
64. See the chapter "Accessible Futures, Future Coalitions" in Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip."
65. Pullin, *Design Meets Disability*, 93.
66. Pullin, *Design Meets Disability*, 93.
67. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S19.
68. Letter from attorney Jack H. Fisher (1946) to mayor of Kalamazoo, Michigan, quoted in Hamraie, *Building Access*, 95.
69. Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 39.
70. Over the past four decades, people with not only physical but also sensory and mental impairments have reappropriated "crip" (from cripple, an insult for people with visible physical disabilities) as a defiant expression of disabled pride that embraces the valuable forms of creativity, interdependence, pleasure, and noncompliance that disability experience can yield. Queer theorists Robert McRuer and Carrie Sandahl have emphasized the simultaneously confrontational and invitational quality of crip provocation, understood as a political and conceptual intervention in productive reciprocity with queer activism and queer theory that is founded on the tenets of nonidentitarian solidarities and unlikely dis/identifications across identities. See Sandahl, "Queering the Crip, Crippling the Queer"; McRuer, *Crip Theory*.
71. Hamraie, *Building Access*, 102.
72. Hamraie, *Building Access*, 125–30.
73. I hear Nina Sun Eidsheim's articulation of "just recognition" in her contribution to this volume as an attempt to articulate a listening practice that responds to such a demand.
74. Email from Roanne Kantor, April 27, 2021.
75. Kasnitz, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," S18.
76. Closed captions (which exist on a separate file and are usually identified by a [CC] symbol in the corner of the screen that allows the viewer to switch them on or off) are the most common type of captions used by major broadcasters and video streaming services. An umbrella term for techniques meant to make visual media accessible to blind and partially sighted audiences, audio description refers in the cinematic context to the verbalization of images and text that appear on screen, usually on an optional prerecorded audio track.
77. For a more detailed comparative discussion of these issues of linguistic and sensory access as they pertain to documentary, see the chapters "Listening with an Accent" and "Listening in Crip Time" in my forthcoming book, *The Documentary Audit*.

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