

The Demonstration of Accent

Media, Manif, Monstrosity

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On July 5, 2020, Assa Traoré posted a short IGTV video to her Instagram feed in which she and other members of the Comité Adama announced they were continuing their struggle and called on followers to join a second event—*Marche et Festival Adama*—on Saturday, July 18, after an earlier call to action for truth and justice on June 13. Adama Traoré was a young Malian-French man who died in police custody after the violence of the ID check to which Black and Arab men are excessively subjected was laid bare, demonstrated in all its monstrosity, on his twenty-fourth birthday, July 19, 2016. With experts initially unable to agree on the cause of death, an autopsy commissioned by the family found that it resulted from asphyxiation from excessive pressure applied by the police, contradicting the picture painted by magistrate-commissioned reports. His older sister, Assa, has been the driving force behind and spokeswoman for a tireless campaign for

What difference does an accent make? I frame this question quite deliberately to bring out two different accentuations. What are the stakes—social, political, economic, juridical, life-and-death—of speaking with this or that accent? And in what sense does accent produce or constitute difference? In the epilogue to *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Derrida ponders precisely this question. The accent referred to, however, is not immediately a phonological index of race, class, or other lingual difference held to be the property of a speaking subject. Rather, the accent he has in mind is the orthography or transcription of a distinguishing feature of pronunciation not otherwise representable. More precisely, Derrida is pointing to a diacritic, *l'accent aigu* to be specific. The broader context of the passage, though, situated as it is within a book that reflects on the philosopher's own Franco-Maghrebi accent, makes it clear that *accent* here should be understood in all its polysemy—

justice for her brother, but it had received comparatively little attention outside sections of the French left.

The events of May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, broadcast around the world and decried on social media, changed that. Only in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd did the ongoing struggle for justice for Adama Traoré in Paris register in the consciousness of international—that is to say, Anglophone—media. George Floyd lost his life at the hands of racist police brutality in circumstances similar to Adama's just four days before the three officers responsible for that earlier killing were formally cleared of wrongdoing. The juxtaposition of the two scenes, each exemplifying the other, the two cries of "I can't breathe" echoing one another, sparked renewed protests in Paris, with tens of thousands taking to the streets on July 18. The echoes reverberated across the Atlantic. Assa Traoré seized the opportunity to popularize the antibrutality campaign of the *quartiers populaires* in an interview with *The New Yorker*, highlighting the "echoes" between the two struggles, declaring "We are Black Lives Matter. Justice pour Adama, Justice pour George Floyd, Justice pour Tous!"¹ The article depicts a striking scene of Assa aboard a truck, clenched fist held up high in front a row of police vans in the Place de la République, declaring that in showing their faces all over the world the protestors manifested their power.

At stake was this making manifest by standing in—George for Adama, the women's voices of the campaign for

vowel quality, tone, pitch, metrical accentuation, the disciplinary technology of elocution, and so forth. But it also should be understood, I shall argue, to refer to a generalized *corps-à-corps* combat (hand-to-hand in the sense of a duel, but literally a body-to-body struggle, both individual and corporate or political bodies, as well as the sexual connotation of physical contact) with language that invades all writing (*écriture*) in Derrida's generalized sense of that term.

Let us then look more closely at this *accent aigu*, which in French does not indicate stress, as it does in a number of other Romance languages, but solely a change in the quality of the vowel. Originally, the acute accent was used in the polytonic orthography of ancient Greek to show an *oxia*, a higher or "sharpened" pitch, and *aigu* comes from the same word calqued into Latin as *acutus*. In French, as in a number of other European languages, *l'accent aigu* indicates increased vowel height, which is defined by a certain constriction of the mouth whereby the tongue comes up closer to the palate to produce a more closed quality to the sound. Derrida, though, is interested in more than this strictly *lingual* difference and observes that the presence or absence of the accent is, moreover, the index of an *interlingual* difference between English and French. And the accent therefore makes, furthermore, a difference in sense.

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mais je ne sais plus dans quelle

the Black and Arab men more likely to be singled out for police brutality. Among the crowd gathering on July 18, the final words of the two men were held up in English and French on side-by-side placards, “Je n’arrive plus à respirer” translated into “I can’t breathe.” And the list of names of mainly young Black and brown men who have died as a result of French police violence was bound together with the litany in the United States as a series of singularities, each standing in for and manifesting one another, each giving voice to an other, striking a chord with one another—but *each with a different accent*.

Two scenes, then, two parallel demonstrations, yet spoken in two accents, one of activism, the other of philosophy, one specific and local, the other abstract and general. And yet these distinctions are immediately complicated. It is the philosopher who is in the streets. The scene collapses before your eyes, like the gap separating the two columns on these pages. Accent perhaps just is that entangled betrayal, the folding and twisting around one another of singular and universal, each falling short of the other.

What, then, does it mean to pronounce BLM, for there to be a demonstration of Black Lives Matter, *with an accent*? Notwithstanding the universalist character of her public pronouncements (in the past she has also declared “nous sommes des ‘Gilets Jaunes’ depuis notre naissance” [we’ve been *gilets jaunes* since our birth]), the book she coauthored with sociologist and philosopher Geoffroy de

langue entendre ce mot. Sans accent, la démonstration n’est pas une argumentation logique imposant une conclusion, c’est d’abord un événement politique, une manifestation dans la rue (j’ai dit, tout à l’heure, comment je descends dans la rue tous les matins, jamais sur la route mais dans la rue), une marche, un acte, un appel, une exigence. Une scène encore. Je viens de faire une scène. En français aussi, avec un accent, la démonstration peut être avant tout un geste, un mouvement du corps, l’acte d’une “manifestation.” Oui, une scène. Sans théâtre mais une scène, une scène de rue. À supposer qu’elle ait quelque intérêt pour qui que ce soit, ce dont je doute, ce serait dans la mesure où elle me trahit, cette scène, dans la mesure où tu y entendas, depuis une écoute dont je n’ai pas idée, ce que je n’ai pas voulu dire ni enseigner ni faire savoir, en bon français.² (MA 134–34/72–73)

(Perhaps I have just made a “demonstration”; it is not certain, but I no longer know in what language to understand that word. Without an accent, a demonstration is not a logical argumentation that imposes a conclusion; it is, first of all, a political event, a demonstration in the street (a short while ago, I mentioned how I take to the streets every morning; never to the highway, but to the streets), a march, an act, an appeal, a demand. That is, one more scene. I have just made a scene. In French, too, the demonstration, with an accent, can be, first and foremost, a gesture, a movement of the body, the act of a “manifestation.” Yes, a scene. A street scene without a theater, yet a scene all the same.

Lagasnerie gives a much more nuanced account of the singularity of political struggles.³ A portion of the book is devoted to explicating a model of politics starting from the local whose force derives from being anchored in local conditions and organizing even as the struggle assumes a national or international significance. Lagasnerie argues that if every movement carries within it something transposable to other struggles, Le Combat Adama aspires to transform not only society but also the forms and discourses that politics adopts (CA 207). At the heart of this lies a reconfiguration of the relation between singularity and universality. This struggle does not present itself as a general struggle against police violence or racism but starts from the specific set of events of July 19, 2016, and what has transpired since then, building an analysis of the present and of the systems of power to overthrow from that site. This approach is contrasted with a somewhat caricatured depiction of the French left as overly attached to grand abstractions (economic class reduction) whose generality excludes the specific experiences of oppression of the inhabitants of the *quartiers populaires* and is thus nothing but “du racism en col blanc” (white-collar racism) (CA 209).

It is for these reasons that Assa Traoré and the Adama Committee reject the classic call for a “convergence des lutes” (convergence of struggles) that wagers its power on their generalization against a common enemy in favor of an “alliance” that would not dilute their specificity in the name of

What I am entertaining doubts about, supposing it is of interest to anyone at all, would be the extent to which that scene betrays me, the extent to which, from one listening about which I have no idea, you will hear from it what I meant neither to say, nor to teach, nor to make known, in good French.)

Everything in this rich passage turns on the term *demonstration* and on the presence or absence of the *accent aigu* that inflects not only the sound of the word but also its meaning. Without an accent, the word *demonstration* in English names a political event in the streets designed to make public a collective demand or make a show of collective will or solidarity—a *manifestation*, or *manif* for short, as it is typically called in France. With the *accent aigu* in French, a *démonstration* is a proof or logical argument, but it is also a bodily gesture, the act of making public, and thus a manifestation of sorts. The demonstration with or without accent *makes a scene*.

And this is precisely what Derrida is doing in this stagey passage. He is making a scene, directing himself in the very act of demonstrating the theme of his text. More than simply telling us as readers about the monolingualism of the other, he is *showing* us that monolingualism and its effects. A number of issues complicate this scene, two of which have to do with the way in which demonstrating turns on itself. In the first instance, what Derrida seeks to demonstrate is demonstration, the very demonstrability of language, the fact of its showing aside from its potential to signify.

an abstract totality but would offer strength and impetus though mutual solidarity and respect for that specificity, each standing on an equal footing (CA 216–17). But she is uncompromising when it comes to backing the fight to obtain justice for her brother. At a recent event with environmental, labor, and Indigenous activists, she insisted, “On ne peut pas parler d’écologie sans parler des violences policières” (One cannot talk about ecology without talking about police violence).⁴ Her model of an *alli-ance* (in Old French *allier* means to bind or tie together) suggests an interlacing of threads more or less tightly knotted together without the series of singularities being absorbed into an abstract totality.

To this extent it has something in common with the vast networks of subterranean telecommunications cables whose differential rhythms and vibrations are the perfect metaphor for the more or less loose entanglement of singular and universal.⁵ Such networks were a principal technology of European expansionism, and in today’s digital age they function as conduits of U.S. empire facilitating a renewed domination of the Global South. If entangled wires of interlaced singularities are the highways of mediatized globalization, Traoré seeks to tell the story of a colonial violence interiorized within the metropole from the specific locality of the *quartiers populaires*. In this way, Le Combat Adama resists the indifference of speedier-than-speed telegraphic transfers and transferences. It were as if the *trans* resisted itself in the process of translation across borders

As I shall argue, accent just is this demonstration of language—understood as a double genitive in the sense both of what shows language, what makes it manifest, and also of a concept of demonstration as it is produced by language, how language conceptualizes demonstration, conjures it up like a fable or phantasm. In the second instance, this demonstration is inherently at risk of failure, the scene threatening to betray the manifestation of what it seeks to make manifest. If demonstration is the showing of language, in a logic that the later Derrida characterizes as autoimmune, it thus becomes a de-monstration that undoes the showing of language in the act of showing. It is precisely this undoing that allows lingual difference to splinter into *interlingual* difference.

Before returning to this demonstration of demonstration in the next section, I want to point to two further complications. First, there is the oblique reference to media and mediatization. Derrida recounts that he takes to the streets daily but “jamais sur la route” (never to the highways), recalling the previous paragraph in which he describes the highways of globalization and mediatization on which translation takes place and confronts its limits. Earlier in the text, in a passage that sums up the argument of the book and to which I shall return later, he figures translation as an “autoroute de je ne sais quelle information” (superhighway of goodness knows what information) (MA 81/61). In addition to the specificities of contemporary globalization, one should also hear in

and oceans. The solidarity with the Black and Arab men that Assa Traoré calls “our brothers” perhaps partakes of what Hélène Cixous, in a playful riff on the Freudian resistance of transference, calls “résistances de transfères” (*frères* meaning brothers in French).⁶ Accent is both the mark of translation’s passage and the obstacle on which it founders. Its de-monst(er)ization cannot be thought apart from the global media networks on which it is carried around the world and from the complicity of such tele-technology in European expansionism and the coloniality of language.

Lagasnerie points out the political stakes of resisting such fraternal universality in order to hold onto the specificity of the postcolonial demand:

Il ne s’agit pas de monter en généralité mais au contraire en singularité. . . . Si l’on part de ce qui est arrivé à Adama, qu’on en déploie la singularité, on peut poser des questions puissantes. À l’inverse, si on noie cette lutte dans un combat très général contre la “le répression” ou contre “a police,” on risque de tout perdre, de passer à côté de ce qui se joue concrètement, et de ne plus savoir quoi revendiquer. (CA 212–13)

(It’s not a question of assembling in generality but, on the contrary, in singularity. . . . If we start from what has happened to Adama, we deploy singularity. Conversely, if we drown this struggle in a very general fight against “repression” or “the police,” we risk losing everything, missing what takes places concretely, and not knowing any more what to demand.)

this metaphor a reference to how telecommunications technologies have served and continue to serve as conduits and instruments of Western imperialism.

Second, to grasp the significance of accent here, it is necessary to understand exactly what the object is of Derrida’s more or less successful demonstration. To do so one needs to reckon with how Derrida arrives at this meditation on “demonstration.” Just beforehand he has been speaking of “le miracle de la traduction” (the miracle of translation) and how the crossing between languages comes up against the limits of unreadability even as it makes itself readable. This impossibility stems from the singularity of the linguistic idiom. Think of those turns of phrase so specific to a particular source language that a translator cannot render them in the target language without a certain displacement or violence. This often happens when a text relies upon sonorous effects, such as homonymy, as Peggy Kamuf observes of her experience translating the highly poetic and amphibological writing of Hélène Cixous.⁷ And yet these instances, far from retreating into the world of a private language, demand to be taken up and carried over into other languages if their singularity is to be felt. Derrida’s preoccupation with the idiom is generalized beyond these specific instances and points to the condition of (un)translatability that belongs to language in general. It is in this sense, too, that accent is singular. It is not something inscrutable but calls

He moreover observes that the universalization of convergence excludes from the space of politics all those who are not readily seen as universal and thus reduces politics to that of the white middle classes (CA 211).

The Comité Adama, though, has notably made much of showing or demonstrating its support for other struggles from students, railway workers, cleaners, postmen, and McStrikers to migrants and antifascists, and more controversially has marched alongside fractions of the *gilets jaunes*. More recently, there has been a promising alliance with the working-class environmental movement Alternatiba. Lagasnerie characterizes this work of composition as a transversal or lateral movement (CA 219). Every movement inevitably spills over into other movements without being contained within a movement of movements and enters into entanglements with other struggles to which it more or less tightly binds itself in a joint bid for liberation. This yields a disseminatory, uncontainable spatiality of accent that is sutured to the temporal singularity or eventality of the *manif*. Accent likewise is indexed to the textuality that Rebecca Walkowitz describes as born translated in that it speaks in multiple tongues and for multiple ears at once.⁸ Accent is never reducible to a point in space for it only shows up as accent by virtue of a certain migration. It accents itself as it spaces itself. Likewise, it is always fractured by the minimal temporal displacement of listening in the ear of the other that gives

out to be heard and understood, and then relayed in other accents.

Derrida's anxiety about this demonstration, then, is whether everything that he will have said about translatability and the untranslatability of the idiom in this book will be intelligible given precisely this irreducible untranslatability. What he performs with the undecidability of the *accent aigu* is, of course, a passage or translation of sorts that shows the possibility of crossing over between French and English in such a way that meaning is lost but also enriched through the porosity of the encounter between two senses that cannot be held apart. The accent is what marks this translatability. It shows translation taking place. At a higher level, however, Derrida's doubts concern the intelligibility of that demonstration. He wonders whether his own discourse might, on the contrary, offer a demonstration of unreadability and whether his words might therefore be betrayed in the very act of demonstration. In other words, is the making manifest of translation betrayed by the very accent that makes it manifest?

If it is, furthermore, that *accent aigu* that marks the possibility and impossibility of translation, that makes a *démonstration* of demonstration and at the same time turns it into the demonstration of its self-betrayal, then this shows how linguistic demonstration is in advance compromised by an accent that has always already contaminated language from the outset. Another way to say this is that there is no pure manifestation

rise to a *Nachträglichkeit* or after-the-eventness. Media fantasize about outspeeding speed across these distances even as every phantasm of liveliness and immediation is shot through by the traces of reportage such that accent is always heard as reported speech. At the same time, if such a thing were possible, each incident arrives over digital networks as if it came up as a surprise from behind, unanticipated, but also incidental to the flow of the information highway and accidental in that it appears when the app is opened and can at any moment shoot down the feed out of sight.

This spatial and temporal dispersal and flight reflect how *manifs* tend to overspill and scatter into the *déborderements* of a *manif sauvage* (the unauthorized or apparently spontaneous actions of small groups of protestors splintering off to engage in distracting the police with cat-and-mouse games, in acts of property damage, or in other black-bloc tactics at the spatial, temporal, and legal margins of demonstration). Such scenes are seized upon as justifications for the demonization of the *banlieue* youth. This translation of demands into inarticulate rage is perpetuated by the media spectacles of *manifs* on our screens that offer us a demonstration of supposedly uncivilized and hence incomprehensible monstrosity untranslatable into any legible demand.

The political demands from the internal colony are recast as the murmurs, cries, onomatopoeia, and rustling of (non-)animal life that inhabit the dark margins of language, teetering between raw noise and meaningful

or de-monstration of language that is not always already monstrous in the sense of being absolutely untranslatable and unreadable. To the extent that the monstrous singularity of accent is radically indecipherable and thus breaks with all the rules of readability, it inaugurates its own rules of readability by which it then becomes intelligible, and can thus be domesticated, mocked, or expelled. To rephrase Thomas Clément Mercier's elegant gloss on Derrida's argument in "Some Statements and Truisms," every de-monstration of accent's monstrosity *de-monsterizes* it.⁹ This is another sense in which demonstration has an autoimmune quality by which it loses what it manifests in the very manifesting of it. This is how we should understand accent—as that which, to the extent that it manifests itself as irreducibly other, allows itself more readily to be incorporated as exoticism or rejected as an object of ridicule or contempt.

Translation belongs to that domain of speech that does not signify or, more precisely, does not immediately signify without supplement or detour. One can say or mean the same thing in the same language but with a different accent. To that extent, accent has something in common with those other vocalizations suspended between pure sound and sense. It diverts speech into the realm of sensation. At first blush, accent, like other sonorous traces in speech, might appear to be inessential or incidental, as Steven Connor has argued, but the import of the Derridean analysis I want to develop is that accent is, on

speech. They are also spoken—or yelled—in an unrecognizable accent. Their apparent monstrosity stems not only from the militant tactics of protest adopted but also from the way in which the content of the struggle from the standpoint of the ruling class can only be heard in an undecipherable accent, poised for misconstrual and (mis) appropriation.

Insofar as an accent is never mine but always the accent of the other (for I don't hear "my" accent as an accent), accent is always monstrous. It has the character of something exotic or even barbaric, marked for colonization. The quintessential demand of liberal identity politics for recognition and inclusion presupposes that disenfranchisement consists simply in excluding the inarticulate cry of the indigene, in silencing or turning a deaf ear to the voice of the subaltern, when, in fact, in censuring it as noisy brouhaha it aims to reincorporate this irrationality as an interiorized foreignness to contain its disruptive force—which is merely another form of silencing. In short, monstrosity, by virtue of its demonstration, is rendered capable of assimilation, domestication, and correction.

In his study of language's imbrication in French colonialism, Laurent Dubreuil analyzes the different overlapping strategies by which the language of the other might be colonized: it was not simply a matter of denying the subaltern the faculty of language but, moreover, that elements of indigenous speech—Maghrebi-Arabic loanwords or phonemes, nonconforming usages

the contrary, necessary and even that accent just is this necessity of accident, provided that accident is not an afterthought but "there" from the very outset.¹⁰ Accent, in short, demonstrates the trace-structure that Derrida exposes at work in language, deconstructing any opposition between origin and supplement to show that what is originary is nothing but this supplementarity. Similarly, one cannot speak *without* an accent, but more than this, one does not speak *with* an accent either, as if it were an accessory, for speech simply is this singular swerve and corruption that is accent.

Besides Derrida's autobiographical reflections—and I shall return to why accent impels this autobiographical drift—accent has received far less philosophical attention than categories such as shifters or glossolalia, which have fascinated theorists of language. Accent perhaps bears closest resemblance to the latter, which refers to speaking in glosses—that is, in a foreign or "barbaric" tongue which remains mysterious to the listener. Unlike raw noise, glossolalia shows that it intends to signify regardless of whether that meaning is understood. This leads Giorgio Agamben to conclude that it exemplifies the event of language, the very taking place of language.¹¹ It is to this extent that glossolalia and accent resemble shifters—those elements of language, such as pronouns and other deictic parts of speech (here, now), that remain undetermined without referring to the act of speaking as such. In those instances, a very generic meaning—any "I" or any

of French—would be incorporated into the language of the metropole as exotic savageries and barbarisms. Dubreuil's use of the distinctive—even exotic—term “encysted” suggests that these two forms of colonization are to be understood by analogy with the distinction between introjection and incorporation that Derrida tracks in the thought of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok.¹² He first develops the notion of a “crypt” or “cyst” in “*Fors*,” the foreword he wrote to their *Cryptonymie: Le verbier de l'Homme aux loups*, but the significance of the concepts is reflected in its encysting as it were in a variety of later texts, including most notably “*Cartouches*.” Whereas introjection describes the complete assimilation of the lost object into the self via healthy mourning, to introject the other into the interior pocket of a cyst is a bid to keep the other safe yet isolated. A Eurocentric perspective might suppose that Traoré's aspirations for alliances emanate from the French republican fantasy of assimilation into universal humanism and equality of legal rights, and yet *laïcité* (secularism) readily twists into a “monster” of identitarian Islamophobia that renders (post)colonial citizens “foreign bodies” within the nation.¹³

As the widespread police brutality inflicted upon Black and brown populations in the *quartiers populaires* shows, this internalized colonialism keeps them anything but safe and sound and instead treats them as what Derrida in *Glas* describes as “le vomit du système” (the system's vomit),

“now”—is filled in only once the particular speaker or the moment of speaking is taken into account.

Something similar is at work in accent, which likewise diverts speech away from the domain of signification, but with two crucial differences. First, unlike glossolalia, accent is not an unknown language that can signify for speakers and listeners familiar with the language but is inherently at one remove from the sphere of signification even in the guise of the mere intention to signify that Agamben isolates. It does not *want* to say anything. But accent can be made to signify indirectly insofar as its qualities are taken, for example, as indications of ethnic, geographical, or class origin. In this indexical operation, though, accent does not so much mean anything as it *shows* or makes manifest. Second, unlike shifters, with which it shares this deictic character, accent does not proceed from the universal but negotiates the tension between general and particular by starting from the specificity of an individual's accent whose composite features, while reflecting a series of more commonly held characteristics, are in their totality unique to the individual. In this way, accent *makes difference* and makes a difference among differences. It demonstrates and makes audible the self-differentiating character of language and the voice.

Medieval grammarians argued that empty pronouns, in order to be made determinate so that they can signify something, require a supplement that they called *demonstratio* (or *relatio*

absorbed into the metropole as (r)jects expelled only to the extent that they may be better re-incorporated into the system of carceral capitalism.¹⁴ Again, however, like accent, this liminal status is not an accident. This position of being “one *and* the other,” “speaker and outsider,” is part of colonialism without being unique to it, Dubreuil argues, while also noting how colonization accommodates itself to physical anthropology’s preoccupation with monsters and teratology.¹⁶ On the contrary, “so-called Western thought was *never* confined to an exclusively rational logic,” so that the cry and the scream, as much as they are “powerful signs of refusal,”¹⁷ in themselves do not disrupt logocentrism: “Its supposed irrationality is not productive in and of itself.”¹⁹ This is because the voice, far from being sovereign, is always already in deconstruction. The monstrous, irrational cry posited or thrown outside the *logos* does not precede the colonial metaphysics of the voice but is its effect.

This monstro/asity moreover announces a loss of tongue. It *mourns*. A little sharper than the diacritic accent in *démonstration*, it nonetheless still turns on a subtle shift in pronunciation and a small yet decisive difference between French and English. The absence of the *u* in French mimics the English spelling, but this passage from one language to the other already precipitates a vowel change in English with which the French catches up. The French with its multiple vowel sounds exhibits a dissemination unintelligible in English, while

in the case of relative pronouns). Agamben’s gloss on this body of thought notes that while almost every demonstration was understood to refer to either the senses or the intellect, a further category, later explored extensively by linguists such as Émile Benveniste, referred only to the instance of discourse.¹⁵ Demonstration (without an accent) is thus not a logical process of deduction, moving from general to particular, but simply a singular event. Agamben, moreover, observes that in the metaphysical tradition this kind of demonstration is characterized as a kind of negation in which the specificity of the sounding voice has always already fled the scene.¹⁸ In this sense, the demonstration of accent is necessarily a betrayal. What links accent to glossolalia is the combination of something barbarian with this “showing” dimension of language—the coarticulation of monstration and (its) monstrosity—its monstro/asity. When Assa Traoré refuses to know or accept her place and fills the public spaces of Paris with accented voices speaking, as David Palumbo-Liu puts it, “out of place,” her crime is this monostro/asity.²⁰

This helps to pinpoint the demonstrosity of accent more precisely. On the one hand, in the exergue to *De la grammaire*, Derrida characterizes monstrosity as the future anterior “pour ce monde à venir et pour ce qui en lui aura fait trembler les valeurs de signe, de parole et d’écriture” (for that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word,

the translation from German into French shows that very intelligibility as the *monstre* announces a loss of (mother) tongue in a foreign land. This de-monstroasity²² describes the originary experience of bereavement that characterizes monolingualism—of having no tongue besides the one that is not my own and hence of mourning what one ever had (*MA* 60–61/33). Besides this originary alienation and impropriety according to which every language is the language of the other, it might also explain Derrida's ambivalent relation to his "own" accent and a certain staging of its loss.

Starting from the claim that one enters French literature only by losing one's accent, Derrida goes on to confess his shame at his "French Algerian" accent which, even if its intonations sound in private anger or exclamation, he finds incompatible with the dignity of public speech or publication.²³ Surprisingly for a thinker who has done more than any other to call into question every phantasm of purity, the irreducible *corps-à-corps* struggle with which accent invades language strikes him as painfully unjust. The irony is not lost on Derrida, who seems to experience an added shame in being tempted by a certain censoriousness, confessing to a purity that turns out not to be very pure in that it is hyperbolic. If he surrenders himself to (the French) language, it is not to anything given but only to what remains to come in language and hence to every violation of grammatical, syntactical, and lexical norms—in short, to what we might call monstrosity. The

and writing).²¹ Derrida later returns to the question of monstrosity in the course of a discussion of Saussure's defense of natural living—which is to say sounding or phonological—language from the "tyrannie de la lettre" (tyranny of writing), the perversion of whose artifice "engendre des monstres" (engenders monsters) (*G* 57/38). Saussure laments that introducing the exactitude of rationality into ordinary phonetic writing, far from protecting the spontaneity of natural language, would bring "de mort, de désolation et de monstrosité" (death, desolation, and monstrosity). And, fortuitously for the analysis at hand, he continues: "C'est pourquoi il faut tenir l'orthographe commune à l'abri des procédés de notation du linguiste et éviter de multiplier les signes diacritiques" (That is why common orthography must be kept away from the notations of the linguist and the multiplying of diacritical signs must be avoided) (*G* 57/26; italics in original). If "L'écriture comme toutes les langues artificielles . . . participe de la monstrosité" (writing, like all artificial language . . . participates in the monstrosity), Derrida's gloss on Saussure clarifies that that monstrosity is not something beyond orthographical capture but is the effect of its intensification in phonological writing—the effect of a proliferation of diacritics. Could the same be said of the monstrosity at stake in the passage from *Le monolinguisme* on demonstration? To assess that, it is instructive to continue to track Derrida's reading of Saussure.

corps-à-corps (hand-to-hand combat) of accent is surrendered—translated—into a *tête-à-tête* (head-to-head) with the idiom in the demand “pour ‘écouter’ le murmure impérieux d’un ordre dont quelqu’un en moi se flatte de comprendre, même dans des situations où il serait tout seul à le faire, en tête-à-tête avec l’idiome, la visée dernière: la dernière volonté de la langue” (to “listen” to the domineering murmur of an order which someone in me flatters himself to understand, even in situations where he would be the only one to do so, in a *tête-a-tête* with the idiom, the final target: a last will of the language) (MA 79/46–47).

This imperative gives him a pronounced taste for a certain soft pronunciation which poses a challenge for a “pied noir” and which nonetheless reveals what is held in reserve, held back by a floodgate. At this point, the floodgates give way to a lyrical meditation on timbre and tone.

Je dis “écluse”, éclose du verbe et de la voix, j’en ai beaucoup parlé ailleurs, comme si un manœuvrier savant, un cybernéticien du timbre gardait encore l’illusion de gouverner un dispositif et de veiller sur un niveau le temps d’un passage. J’aurais dû parler de barrage pour des eaux peu navigables. Ce barrage menace toujours de céder. J’ai été le premier à avoir peur de ma voix, comme si elle n’était pas la mienne, et à la contester, voire à la détester.

Si j’ai toujours tremblé devant ce que je pourrais dire, ce fut à cause du ton, au fond, et non du fond. Et ce que, obscurément, comme mal-

Derrida quotes Saussure’s reflections on the possibilities of a universal phonetic writing only to conclude that a page encumbered with diacritics would obscure what it sought to elucidate.

Y a-t-il lieu de substituer un alphabet phonologique à l’orthographe usuelle ? Cette question intéressante ne peut être qu’effleurée ici ; selon nous l’écriture phonologique doit rester au service des seuls linguistes. D’abord, comment faire adopter un système uniforme aux Anglais, aux Allemands, aux Français, etc. ? En outre un alphabet applicable à toutes les langues risquerait d’être encombré de signes diacritiques; et sans parler de l’aspect désolant que présenterait une page d’un texte pareil, il est évident qu’à force de préciser, cette écriture obscurcirait ce qu’elle veut éclaircir, et embrouillerait le lecteur. Ces inconvénients ne seraient pas compensés par des avantages suffisants. En dehors de la science, l’exactitude phonologique n’est pas très désirable.²⁴

(Are there grounds for substituting a phonologic alphabet for a system already in use? Here I can only broach this interesting subject. I think that phonological writing should be for the use of linguists only. First, how would it be possible to make the English, Germans, French, etc. adopt a uniform system! Next, an alphabet applicable to all languages would probably be weighed down by diacritical marks; and—to say nothing of the distressing appearance of a page of technical writing—it is evident that by dint of its precision that writing would obscure what it seeks to clarify, and would confuse the

gré moi, je cherche à imprimer, le donnant ou le prêtant aux autres comme à moi-même, à moi comme à l'autre, c'est peut-être un ton. Tout se met en demeure d'une intonation.

Et plus tôt encore, dans ce qui donne son ton au ton, un rythme. Je crois qu'en tout c'est avec ce rythme que je joue le tout pour le tout.

Cela commence donc avant de commencer. Voilà l'origine incalculable d'un rythme. Le tout pour le tout mais aussi à qui perd gagne. (MA 80–81/48; translation modified)

(I say “floodgate,” floodgate of the verb and of the voice. I have spoken a great deal about this elsewhere, as if a clever boatswain, a cybernetician of timbre still had the illusion of governing an apparatus and of watching over a gauge for the time of a turn. I should have spoken of a boom for waters difficult to navigate. This boom is always threatening to give way. I was the first to be afraid of my voice, as if it were not mine, and to contest it, even to detest it.

If I have always trembled before what I could say, it was at bottom because of the tone, and not the substance. And what, obscurely, I seek to impart as if in spite of myself, to give or lend to others as to myself, to myself as to the other, is perhaps a tone. Everything is put on stay-at-home notice with an intonation.

And even earlier still, in what gives its tone to the tone, a rhythm. I think that altogether it is with this rhythm that I gamble everything.)

The singularity of language, the idiom, thus turns out to be timbre or tone, the

reader. The advantages would not be sufficient to compensate for the inconveniences. Phonological exactitude is not very desirable outside science.)

Derrida does not contest Saussure's reasoning on its own terms but instead points out that he excludes a monstrosity more radical and a priori necessary on account of which there could never be any faithful phonetic writing. To this monstrosity that is of a different order from diacritical demonstration Derrida gives the name *écriture* (writing). Far from being a supplementary, secondary, or accidental aberration, the “usurpation” that Saussure associates with writing is already at work within speech. My contention is that *accent* is another non-synonymous substitution for *écriture*, which, without coinciding with it, de-monstrates it.

We must, then, interrogate this sense of (de-)monstration further. At the beginning of *Le monolinguisme*, Derrida sets up his scene of demonstration: “Il est possible d'être monolingue (je le suis bien, non ?), et de parler une langue qui n'est pas la sienne” (It is possible to be monolingual [I thoroughly am, aren't I?] and speak a language that is not one's own) (MA 19/5). Cunningly, Derrida demonstrates in the very form of this scene—with the apostrophe that seeks recognition from the other—the very paradox of demonstration he goes on to elucidate. It is necessary that one first understands what one seeks to demonstrate. One is meant to know what one means or wants to mean precisely where what demonstrates has no

rhythm of a vibration beating against itself and against the discipline of coloniality and its interdict of monolingualism. Accent, too, as something heard is like the syncopated beats of piano strings as they are tuned. It is in this way that we should “listen” to the subtle change in tone marked by the diacritic—the accent—in Derrida’s later scene of demonstration.

Assa Traoré’s strategy of alliance consists not in situating a singularity in the whole series but in understanding the singularity in its vibrational totality and from there being able to discern practical syntheses and resonances with other places (CA 224). Underlying this approach is a sympathetic critique and measured defense of identity politics related to that advanced by Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi from an autonomist perspective.²⁷ For Lagasnerie and Traoré, identity politics risks succumbing to the same errors of abstract generalization—and thus exclusion—inherent in any politics of representation.

Contrairement à ce que l’on dit parfois, l’intersectionnalité n’incite pas à remédier à cet écueil en invitant à croiser les variables abstraites et les dimensions (race + genre). Elle incite à changer nos formes de problématisation. L’intersectionnalité est in préoccupation qui invite à rompre avec les catégories abstraites et à substituer à une pensée par généralité une pensée par synthèses concrètes. (CA 221)

(Contrary to what is often said, intersectionality does not urge one to remedy this pitfall by inviting us to

meaning or means something else. This aporia is, in fact, a feature of all monstration. The monster, as an aberrant exception exceeding every rule and norm, manifests *itself* as exception. It inaugurates its own principle of intelligibility. Whence Derrida’s doubts later in *Le monolinguisme* as to whether his demonstration will have been intelligible. The monster cannot manifest *itself* because *as* monster it is absolutely unreadable. And yet, once it is read and understood according to the principle of intelligibility it founds, this monstrosity—which Derrida dubs “une monstrosité normale” (a normal monstrosity)—is to a degree normalized and hence no longer monstrous.²⁵ By contrast, “les monstrosités monstrueuses . . . ne se montrent jamais, comme telles” (monstrous monstrosities never show themselves as such).²⁶ Since a monster cannot be addressed or faced *as* monster, Derrida’s apostrophe is an invitation to betray the scene of demonstration or, rather, it marks and *shows up* the very necessity of betrayal of any such demonstration. This is no accidental accent in the sense of a mark or a tonal inflection. What cannot be demonstrated is the monster as self-manifestation, the manifesting, the demonstrating of the monster. Demonstration just is this de-monst(e)ration.

This sense of de-monstration is advanced by Derrida in *Geschlecht II*, where he examines the (de-)monstrating function of the hand apropos of a translation of a Hölderlin poem discussed by Heidegger in *Was heißt Denken?* The key point is that the reference to

link abstract variables and dimensions (race + gender). It urges us to change our forms of problematization. Intersectionality is a preoccupation that urges us to break with abstract categories and to *substitute thought through generality with thought through concrete syntheses.*)

Identity politics, as it appears in its liberal guise, is therefore not too specific but *too general, too abstract*. It creates fixed essentialized categories where there is in fact a complex intermingling. But with this “mêlée” one must still be careful to avoid a pluralization susceptible to universalization or to atomization. The risk would be that, far from allowing the voice of women of color to remake urban space, it assimilates their dis/misplaced tones to a white, bourgeois feminism. For this reason, French feminist and decolonial theorist Françoise Vergès, coincidentally echoing Derrida’s metaphors of seriatage, argues that the word *enchevêtrement* (entanglement, with *enchevêtré* literally meaning “enbridled”) is more useful than intersection.

J’ai trouvé importante l’idée d’enchevêtrement, que je préfère à celle d’ “intersection.” Car, parfois, c’est assez difficile de trouver la racine d’un élément tant les choses sont enchevêtrées : c’est un mot qui conserve une certaine plasticité. “Intersection” semble supposer que des catégories existent déjà, et que l’on peut savoir ce qu’il adviendra de telle ou telle chose.²⁹

(I’ve found important the idea of entanglement, which I prefer to

monstrosity is introduced in the act of translation—that is, in the very demonstration of intelligibility at stake in Derrida’s scene in *Le monolinguisme*. The translator renders *Zeichen* (sign) with *monstre* so that the poem now asserts, “Nous sommes un monstre prive de sens . . . Et nous avons perdu/Presque la langue à l’étranger” (We are a monster void of sense . . . And have nearly lost/Our tongue in foreign lands). What emerges from this overly gallicizing or latinizing translation is a direct reference to an indexicality without referent, to showing without saying. It is a demonstration of pure demonstrating without anything to be shown or understood. This monster “montrer rien” (shows nothing) and as such shows a gap that inheres in the sign’s relation to itself—that is, to “une monstruosité de la monstruosité, une monstruosité de la monstration” (a monstrosity of monstration, a monstrosity of monstration).²⁸

What is interesting is that Derrida’s account of his shameful accent is not simply describing the monstrosity of *métissage* or linguistic hybridity that has been wielded in a tradition of hostility to colonial racism as a measure of resistance against the politics of purity. *Métissage*, though, stands in a highly ambivalent relationship to colonialism. Especially as it has been mobilized by contemporary consumerism, *métissage* proposes to dilute, even erase, race via a universalizing gesture. Given that *métis* is a term to describe people born of racial mixing, of European expansionism and its rape, metaphoric

that of “intersection.” For sometimes, the things are so entangled it is quite difficult to find the root of an element: it’s a word that retains a certain plasticity. “Intersection” appears to suppose that the categories already exist, and that one can know what will become of this or that thing.)

The new form of politics to which this demonstration of singularity aspires is also crucially a matter of forging a new *language* of struggle—one, I might suggest, that speaks with a different *accent* or different accents in that it places the accent on specific experiences of hope and oppression and “faire circuler des signifiants transversaux, latéraux, qui captent des situations concrètes où toutes les dimensions de l’existence sont mêlées” (puts in circulation transversal, lateral signifiers which capture concrete situations where all the dimensions of existence are mingled together)” (CA 224). With this demonstration of accent, we thus return to the question of circulation and of capitalist exchange and globalized highways of translation that stand in stark contrast to the *quartier* where Black and Arab youth might find refuge from overcrowded apartments. The specter of colonialism appears again, as Traoré recognizes.

Tout a été fait avec les jeunes de quartier. Quand on dit que les jeunes de quartier ne savent pas s’organiser, bah on sait s’organiser, mais la parole ne nous est jamais donnée. Leur voix n’est même pas entendue ou écoutée. Construire avec eux un mouvement où ils prennent la parole et où ils

and literal, of Indigenous people and lands, the violence of colonialist appropriation lurks within its universalizing gesture. All idioms, to the extent that they make use of loan words, exhibit an irreducible hybridity. It is this generalization of monstrous miscegenation that threatens to render that monstrous singularity equal to any other and thus to engender the other monstrosity of indifference and capitalist equivalence.

It would therefore not be enough to advocate for a mere multiplication of accents, for in this gesture colonialism already partakes of a certain opening to the other. If Derrida’s philosophy is a thought of irreducible mixture, of contamination, of *métissage*, it is not a celebration of that plurality (as a common misreading has it) but the insistence that this gesture is inextricably *mixed up* with the colonial violence it claims to oppose. The other is still rendered just monstrous enough for ventriloquizing domination insofar as it is made into an example or demonstration of the other. To this extent, demonstration as exemplarity—as the necessary passage of translation and substitution by which singularity shows itself—is always necessarily a betrayal. If each and every accent is exemplary of a more universal structure of alienation in language, it is still important not to misrecognize differential expropriations that can be fought on multiple fronts as a homogeneous violence. A similar risk of theoretical colonization exists with the denunciation of police violence or even “violences policières” in the plural in French.

jouent un rôle, c'est ce qui fait la force du Combat Adama. (CA 224)

(Everything was done with the youth of the neighborhood. When they say the youths of the hood don't know how to organize, they know how to organize, but the floor is never given to us. Their voice isn't even understood or heard. Constructing with them a movement where they speak and play a role, that's what makes of the force of the Adama Fight.)

This problem of going unheard either by silencing or by the stigma of the outraged cry—which is simply another form of silencing—is one of accent. Only what is said in the proper accent—which is to say, without an accent marked as such—is audible. The global mediatization of demonstrations whereby one can stand on the edges of one protest and be watching another streaming live on one's phone—as I did on July 18, 2020, unable to travel to my field-work site in Paris and nervous about the extent of far-right violence taking place before me in Trafalgar Square—exacerbates this problem of underaccentuating voices with an accent. The mainstream media, whose interests align with those of the ruling class, prefer to reduce the manifestation of discontent to a homogeneous global spectacle of violence, deaccentuating the demonstration of locality and singularity. The result is to level the differential forces and rhythms of protest, dissolving, for example, the specific complicity of *métissage* (mix, but also miscegenation) in the erasure of race in French republicanism in a way that

The first danger is to count only those explosions of physical brutality that shock without recognizing that these are incandescent manifestations of that systemic violence that structures the socio-economic as much as the juridico-penal spheres. The second theoretical one is to reduce each of these blows to mere manifestations of a single structural violence and in so doing to do violence to the multiple and differential accents in which violence is modulated in each instance.

Derrida's insistence on the impurity of his surrender to the French idiom guards precisely against confusing the language of the colonizer with the more radical coloniality of having no language to speak that is not one's own. This coloniality is *demonstrated* tonally by accent and is therefore experienced each time in its irreducible singularity.

Comment cette fois décrire alors, comment désigner cette unique fois ? Comment déterminer ceci, un ceci singulier dont l'unicité justement tient au seul témoignage, au fait que certains individus, dans certaines situations, attestent les traits d'une structure néanmoins universelle, la révèlent, l'indiquent, la donnent à lire "plus à vif," plus à vif comme on le dit et parce qu'on le dit surtout d'une blessure, plus à vif et *mieux que d'autres*, et parfois seuls dans leur genre ? Seuls dans un genre qui, ce qui ajoute encore à l'incroyable, devient à son tour exemple universel. (MA 40/20; translation modified)

(How then this time are we to describe, how to designate, this

is not echoed in American constructions of hybridity.³⁰

One should be careful to distinguish a critique of global mediatisation's indifference from a metaphysical fetishization of live presence and contact. It is not solely a question of solidarity among accents but also of the self-differentiation of accent. Its demonstration or *manifestation* would thus need to move away from the scene of touching bodies not onto the "auto-route de je ne sais quelle information" (superhighway of goodness knows what information) but to the contingency that touches each of these struggles, the contingency that is just simply what happens to Adama or George, the contingency of accent as that part of speech that is only ever arriving. These contingencies tap out a certain rhythm that ties together these demonstrations pronounced in multiple accents without reducing them to an abstract homogeneity or to an entirely disjunct series of occurrences.³² Accent, which sharpens or strikes more searingly, would be a name for that demonstration of demonstrations.

unique time? How to determine this, a singular this whose uniqueness depends on witnessing alone, on the fact that certain individuals, in certain situations, attest to the features of a structure that is nonetheless universal, reveal it, indicate, give it to be read more "à vif," as we say and because we say it especially of a wound, more *à vif* and *better than others*, and sometimes alone of their sort? Alone in a sort which (and thus makes it more incredible) becomes in turn a universal example.)

It is no coincidence that this demonstration is an aural scene (il suffit de m'entendre/it's enough to hear me) and that this *à vif* that takes the chance of cutting through the Gordian knot of differential intonations, rhythms, and vibrations that binds singularities into a series should therefore be *heard*.³¹ This searing *à vif* is, in short, the sharpening of accent to which the diacritic in the later scene attests. It is also this sharpening that makes the murder of a Black Malian in Paris carry and resonate across the Atlantic with the murder of a Black African American in Minneapolis without dissolving the difference that accent makes.

NOTES

1. Collins, "Assa Traoré."
2. Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, 134–35/72–73; hereafter cited as *MA*.
3. Traoré and Lagasnerie, *Le Combat Adama*; hereafter cited as *CA*. Translations are mine.
4. "Social, climat, reprendre nos vies en main," panel in Bagnolet (Saint-Denis), November 12, 2021, organized by Verdragon, Maison d'écologie populaire and *Reporterre*, at which Assa Traoré spoke alongside Gabriel Mazzolini (Amis de la terre), Kamel Guemari (L'Après-M), Goudo Diawara (Front de mères), Salah Amokrane (Tactikollectif), and Adrien Cornet (CGT Total Grandpuits).
5. Derrida, *Negotiations*, 30–31.
6. Cixous, *Anankè*, 131.
7. Kamuf, "Hélène Cixous."
8. Walkowitz, *Born Translated*.

9. Mercier, "Resisting the Present," 111.
10. Connor, "Accidence."
11. Agamben, *Categorie Italiane*, 65–70/66–71.
12. Dubreuil, *Empire of Language*, 104.
13. Wahnich and Ajari, "L'universalisme nuit-il à la lutte contre le racisme?"; Balibar, "Laïcité ou identité?"
14. Derrida, *Glas*, 183a (the pagination is the same in the English translation). On this notion of (r)ect highlighted by Jean-Luc Nancy in a back-cover endorsement that foregrounds a ject without junction, see Goh, *The Reject*.
15. Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 39/28.
16. Dubreuil, *Empire of Language*, 109–10, 149.
17. Dubreuil, "Notes Towards a Poetics of *Banlieue*," 102.
18. Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 50–51/36–37.
19. Dubreuil, *Empire of Language*, 110.
20. Palumbo-Liu, *Speaking Out of Place*.
21. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 14/5; hereafter cited as *G*.
22. Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, 60–61/33. I attempt to capture here in English the effect of Derrida's neologism *monstrosité*, which, as Laurent Milesi observes, attempts to capture the aporia of trying to name the monster without assimilating it ("De-monstrating Monsters," 276).
23. On Derrida's "self-flagellating candor" in this passage, see Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," 218–20.
24. Saussure, *Les mots sous les mots*, 57; cited in *G* 57–58/38–39 (translation modified).
25. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms," 237–38/79–80.
26. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms," 237/79 (translation slightly modified).
27. Haider, *Mistaken Identity*; Mohandesi, "Identity Crisis."
28. Derrida, "Le main de Heidegger (*Geschlecht II*)," 422/34.
29. Vergès, "La question du métissage m'a toujours interrogé."
30. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
31. Derrida, *Negotiations*, 30–31.
32. On this thinking of rethinking in Derrida's thought, see Bennington, "The Democracy to Come," 116–34, and "In Rhythm," 18–19, where he argues that "part of the logic of rhythm is that this can and must be said in so many other ways too, and that possibility must, as part of its rhythm, also syncopate and disrupt rhythm to the point of arrhythmia and perhaps just noise."

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