



LYNELL GEORGE

Not as I Say/As I Do

Parsing the California accent

A handful of days before Thanksgiving, some two thousand miles from home, I somehow find myself at The Holy Ground, a congenial pub in mid-city New Orleans, a brisk, long walk from the tourist turns in the French Quarter. I needed a bracing splash of something—the neighborhood talk—or the “cant”—as my New Orleans relatives used to say.

I’ve met up with an old friend from my early reporting days, a pause before a quick swing of interviews I’m in town to conduct. My hope: to not just capture words, but atmosphere. Since my arrival, though, I’ve been feeling many shades of sentimental. So much so that allegiances and memories are tangling.

I was born in California, a native Angeleno, but the last few hours wandering these streets have made me deeply aware of how much of New Orleans—my mother’s birthplace, the place I spent my “Southern summers” with my grandfather—has imprinted itself. Even decades after his passing, I still hear the street names, superstitions, and rituals solely in my grandfather’s voice. His accent. That accent: a dialect so singularly of this place.

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Sitting among the locals, I listen to tonight's brisk volley of conversation. I know just enough of the landmarks, the colloquialisms, to shadow their stories. In them I hear echoes of my grandfather's cadences: faint waves of what was deeply familiar. Finally one of the men, Henry, the voice whose cadences most call up my grandfather's ghost, states more than asks: "So, where you sprung from? Not here. I can hear it."

"Los Angeles," I say, sensing precisely what will follow, something that is not fully meant as correction but has always sounded like one.

"Ah." He pauses, then lets the next word unfold like a fan: "Cal-i-for-nia."

This part of the exchange, I haven't had in twenty years, and in twenty years it hasn't changed. Not one note of it: the long length of the state trumping the specifics. But in the past, what often followed was a sense of curiosity, if not a polite esteem. This time it's just the word—no elaboration. California. Full stop. He lets it hang, twisting. The chain of questions, the admiring asides aren't in play. That vein seems dried up, perhaps another casualty of California's ongoing drought.

Henry returns to his ale, his colorful discourse on local politics. It's a mannerly way, I know, to not underscore or raise a sense of "unpleasantness"—like someone who doesn't want to linger on the subject of someone's bad times.

What he was communicating in that dodge, those four syllables, opened up an old door. The root of my elusive accent—or "accent-less-ness"—was never precisely what New Orleanians were mining for. It had nothing to do with your precise city designation. All that seemed superfluous once you stepped out of the context of the state. My "accent," I sensed, wasn't what he was after. Knowing precisely where I was from wasn't the goal of the interaction—it never had been. What the questioner wanted to know was something about me beyond physical place.

Growing up, I coveted that New Orleans accent, its syn-copation, its undiagrammable idiosyncrasies that mirrored the city itself. It had a distinct presence, a way of "being." I've watched strangers who hail from other cities connect

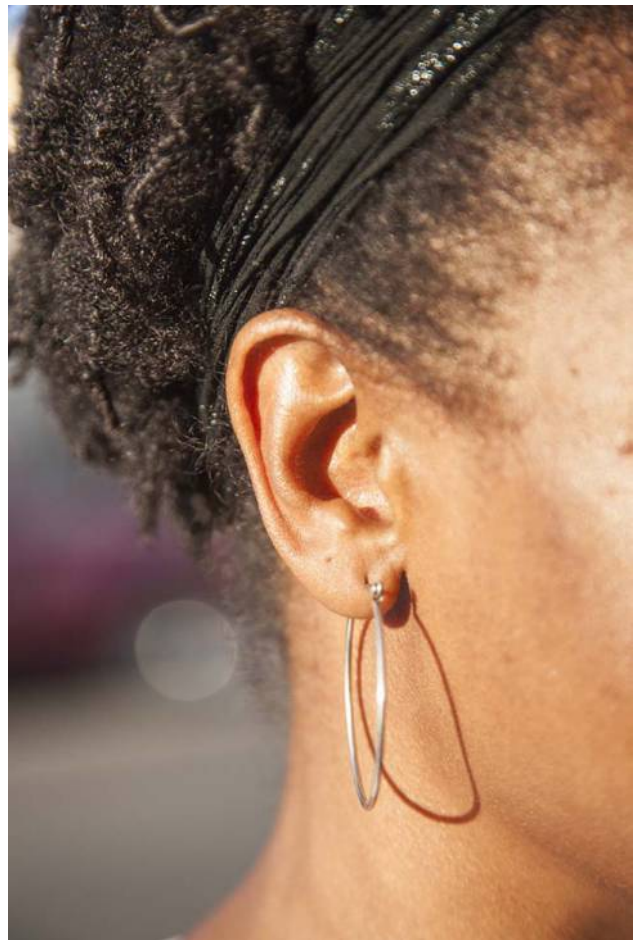


PHOTO BY NOÉ MONTES.

after just a few words pass between them, deliberately playing up the more exaggerated features of their accents for a quick dose of home. Compared to what I experienced in New Orleans, California always felt like a place both slick and ungraspable—albeit one with a beautiful backdrop. As odd as it might sound, I have always felt more Californian in New Orleans than I ever feel in Los Angeles—or anywhere else outside of California for that matter—but even as I write this, I'm not quite sure that I can precisely define just what that might be. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I don't think of myself as a "typical" Californian, or rather, that I live outside of the borders of oversimplified definitions placed on us (or that some decide to

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embrace)—blond, beachgoer, brainless. But away from home, like here in New Orleans, I feel my difference in a different way—as something that will be questioned, or needs to be explained. Perhaps it is that “California” is simply a catchall, a shorthand; it easily explains my difference to them.

Being Californian always seemed to hold some sort of different value when viewed from without. It was coded with something more than coordinates. Because its sheer size creates pockets and outposts, and because it is a cosmopolis, a tangled mix of tongues and deeply held outside allegiances (which make it very different from New Orleans), it casts a unique shadow. But I’ve come to realize that perhaps what it is to be Californian is as elusive as its accent.

Repeat after me

For some regions, the way one communicates connotes a vivid image or tangible sense of place, but in California’s

case, when I hear outsiders reference the state, it registers less as a place than as a generalized abstraction—vague, mythic, without limits. Trying to convey California, and its nuanced and complex sense-of-place, was one of the very reasons I wanted to become a journalist. But even when communicated via the written word, the fantasy often still trumps the reality—yet another form of language that fell on deaf ears.

When I was very young, I wondered what it was my New Orleans relatives were hearing when I spoke. This was many years before Moon Zappa’s Top-40 burlesque, “Valley Girl,” and eons before the latest staccato-cadenced, on-tiptoe speech that I hear so many younger native Californians trade in. (You’ve heard it: Where vowels slide and each statement lifts at the end so it sounds like a question: “Because I could relate to them?”) By and large, the language we natives spoke felt (comparatively) scrubbed free of place, and maybe that meant free of the burden of it.

Code shifting

Some years ago, a number of hand-lettered signs popped up around Greater Los Angeles. Tacked to telephone and light poles around East Hollywood, Midtown, and South LA—vividly ethnic neighborhoods—these signs, in their uncertain handwriting, announced: “Accent Elimination.” Some were simple marker-on-heavy-cardboard affairs. Others were photocopied flyers framed with staples. With the latter, at the bottom, you could pull off the contact phone number that had been cut conveniently into a tab ready to slip into your pocket. I took a tab one day and called, overtaken by personal curiosity above even the journalistic. I got a machine and a brief, forgettable message. I left my information after the tone but never heard back. Perhaps the operator of this “business” didn’t feel I was the target audience, or that I didn’t have the sort of accent that needed to be “eliminated.” However, I never stopped thinking about

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what circumstances—desperation, shame or hope—might motivate someone to call; but also the idea behind such a service struck me as a sort of oral eugenics, a verbal plastic surgery.

What was it that was being sheared away? In a larger sense, it wasn't simply the mechanics with which words hit air. Whatever notion lived within outsiders' heads had little to do with how we Californians composed our lives—the everydayness of our routines; rather, it was our “un-placeable-ness” that was key. It was essential. Perhaps, to the listener, an accentless English represented another promise or “cure” from “The Coast,” where people are allowed to prune away the past, rework their story. Back when California meant opportunity, the desirable accent wasn't an accent at all. It was part of some larger wish—a passport. It was a way of inhabiting the world.

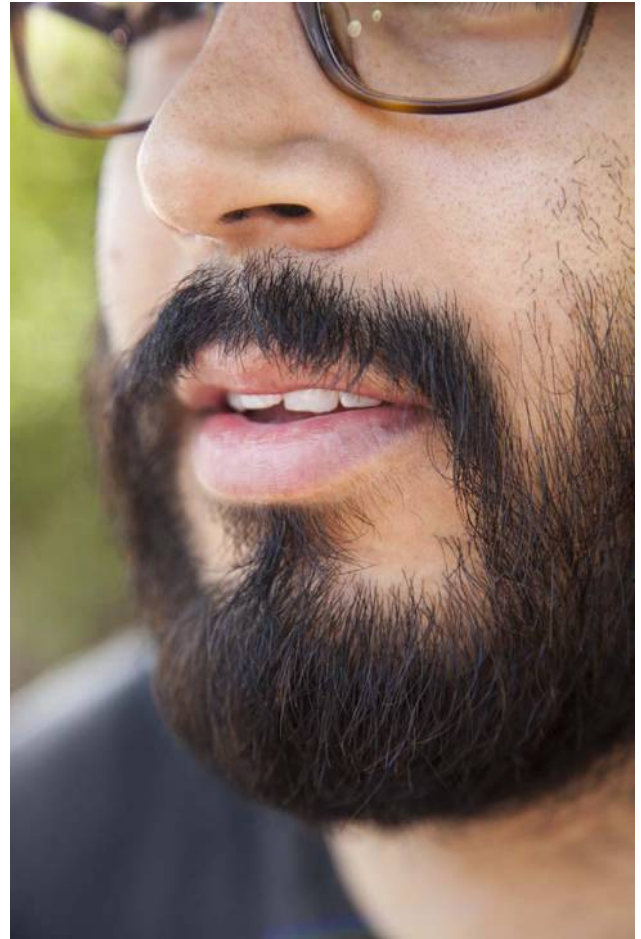


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Native tongues

Among ourselves, Californians are very specific about origins. We wear our regional affiliations—Southern/Northern/Central—on our sleeves. And though they might be subtle to outsiders' ears, I hear accents every day. Distinct ones. Language here is shaped by all manner of influences—family, neighborhood, class, ethnicity, theatrics. In Los Angeles in particular, where more than eighty languages are spoken, very often speech is an amalgamation of the influences that we have serendipitously encountered and consequently absorbed, or perhaps adopted, by way of day-in/day-out proximity. In other words, you could say that the California dialect is elusive because it is so diffuse, a dialect that is a pick-and-choose mashup. People shape and tailor their speech, mimicking those around them, unconsciously at times—deliberately at others. What Henry might be



PHOTO BY NOÉ MONTES.

hearing in my voice isn't a lack of accent at all, but an amalgamation of experience.

All too often, outside our borders, Californians tend to be lumped into the same crate—Generic Product of the Sunshine State. Yet, while California is tremendously populous and vividly diverse, the overall perception of the accent (often, paradoxically, within the state itself) is a dialect that is “featureless,” “homogenous,” a “standard TV accent.”

Listen closely: California still holds echoes of the legions that passed through it. A team of researchers in an ongoing study, “The Voices of California,” led by Penelope Eckhart, a professor of linguistics and anthropology at Stanford University, are examining the long tail of influence of generations of immigrants and migrants on California speech patterns—Deep South, Dust Bowl, Midwest, Mexico, and El Salvador among them. They are also finding, as I have long suspected, that the way in which people speak is

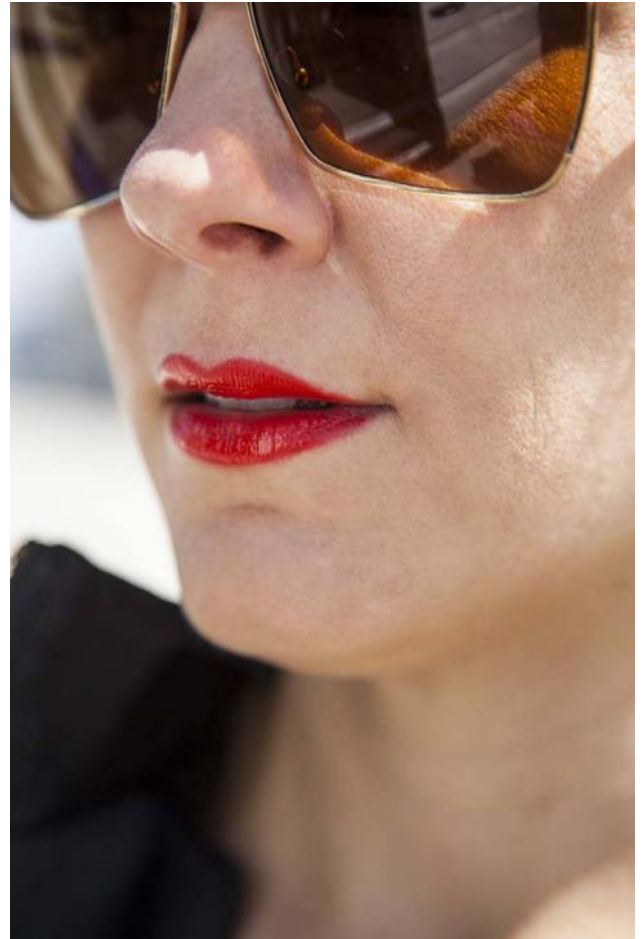


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shaped not only by where their ancestors came from but by their personal attitudes, the way they want to present themselves to—or remake themselves for—the world. Language, and how you use it, becomes the first story you tell about yourself.

Lost in translation

For my relatives, and the tens of thousands like them, the thin line of the Interstate 10 West wasn't just a highway on a map but a lifeline. California meant “space” in many shades of that word's implications. Yes, physical space, but also personal. For African Americans during the Great Migration, to move West was to create not just a new self, but a different meaning for you yourself.

Unlike my grandfather, who chose never to move away from New Orleans, my Uncle Harvey set out for Oakland. In the 1940s, he signed on with the railroad as a Pullman



PHOTO BY NOÉ MONTES.

Porter and never returned. Not once. Not for weddings or funerals or family reunions. There was, he felt, no need. I'd see him on my visits North, between his runs up and down the length of the California coast. He'd sometimes make journeys East, but very seldom into the South. He was a new man. Yet no one talked about it in the family. The absence of information around his decision made me curious. What event had spurred his exile? Violence or the threat of it? I sensed that such a thread of conversation was as off-limits as the South itself.

For years, he lived peaceably in a "rough" part of Oakland, but in later years his house was ransacked, burglarized, and most of his Porter memorabilia stolen—his cap, his watch, his uniform—and anyone who knew him, even casually, saw that this violation knocked the wind out of him. Afterward, when I asked him why he didn't want to take a quick trip back to Louisiana—just while they worked

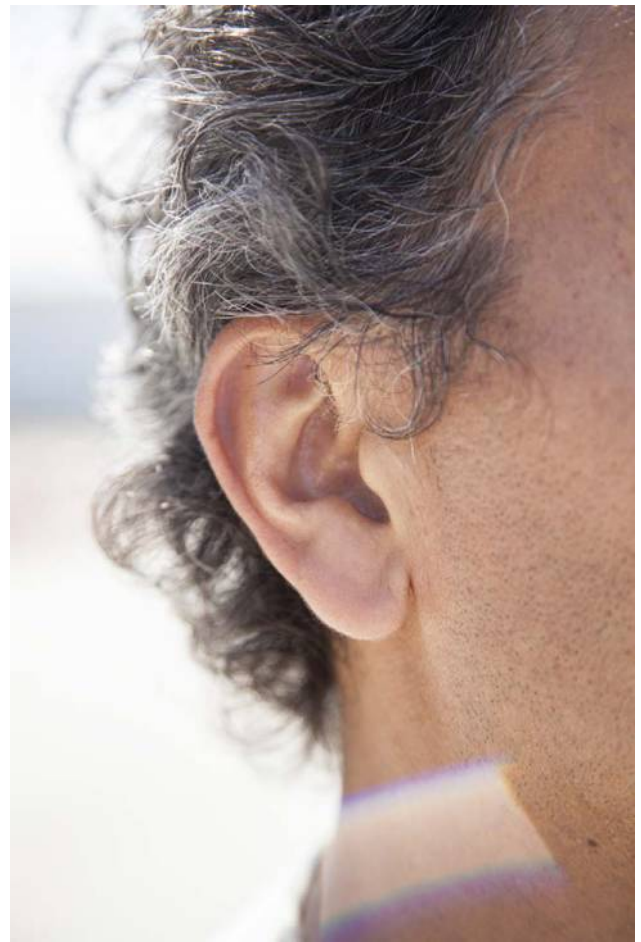


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on his house—he dignified the question thusly: "I ain't studyin' New Orleans." Even the discussion wasn't worth his time. He'd announce, with his pronounced New Orleans modulations still-in-play: "Dah'lin, I'm from Calee-for-nee-ya now."

My Uncle Harvey's declaration crystalized something for me. Beyond the casual aside, seldom (if ever) had I proclaimed that to the world in such prideful tones. So much had transformed this state. By the eighties and nineties, that booster-spin of an "idyllic" California as a place to escape to had been completely rewritten. The state lived in the headlines—a bleak, broken-down, gang-infested, drug-addled, eternally bankrupt region. That "accent" was no longer something glamorous but something cautionary. Sometimes, I avoided having to talk about where I'd "sprung from" because everyone had an opinion, a sense, or so they thought, of what it must be like to live here ("a series of



PHOTO BY NOÉ MONTES.

disasters waiting to happen”) and often they began not only to wonder why I was continuing to think and write about such a place, but why I was so bent on staying.

Lingua franca

While the conversation circling the bar at The Holy Ground this cold New Orleans evening isn't like the ones I'd once engaged in during the last two decades of the twentieth century, as California burned, shook and shattered, nor is the state seen as the revered Promised Land—Holy

Ground—of previous decades; it's someplace in the middle, mid-float.

Although it is still not always an easy place to be, our emerging California might be just beyond the ability of language to describe it, but already, I see the first blooms. Of late, the subjects I've been writing about are people working at the edges, around the rubble of old power structures and hierarchies of success: redefining work, redefining home. They might be people who feel a shade more comfortable with the gamble of the unknown, within the space of uncertainty, because they know they have to: They are taking the broken pieces of jobs and foreclosed homes and emptied-out bank accounts and repurposing them. They are webmasters, scientists, chefs, teachers, architects, musicians—they are even journalists. They are all Californians who see opportunity in the wreckage, possibility in a new start. So the sprit of California as a place of new beginnings might be tattered, but it remains intact.

It's an internal dexterity that is perhaps the psychological equivalent of being multilingual. For example, just a few months back, I encountered a profile subject—a competitive snowboarder-turned-commercial photographer-turned-self-styled “alchemist.” Ian Ruhter, a South Lake Tahoe native, had rerouted his focus by building his own large-format view camera, cooking up his own “film,” then had taken to the road to tell “American Dream stories.” He saw the new terrain this way: “This is where great ideas are born. When we're backed into a corner we are going to have to take things into our own hands.” California still gave him the space not just to dream, but to do, to put a plan in motion—again and again and again—without his own second-guessing and without an outsider's critique. “That's what people are doing,” he says. “There is not a choice. If we're lucky, we can come to the point where we're controlled by fear or [are] motivated by it.” For him then, the California way would not be to cut one's losses and turn away, but to confront them head-on—refashion the plan. In other words, there are no dead-ends, just circle-backs. In California, there's always another try.

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The view from inside

Sometimes you can better understand yourself in relief, set against stark contrast. In retrospect, I realized that my oddly timed visit to New Orleans—Thanksgiving, when I journeyed away from family for work, wandered a “strange” city by foot, and traveled across town “off the printed map,” as the hotel concierge put it—marked me with some sort of far-outside-the-realm-of-sensible aura. I registered as different, even in this laissez-faire city.

My California “accent,” then, isn’t the rests and stops, the cadence or speed at which I speak: it’s an attitude. It’s not just the way I talk or walk, but how I see and negotiate the world. I may not declare it as Uncle Harvey might have, but it’s with me in every decision, every step, every risk or gaffe or double-back. When Henry at the bar surmised, “You’re not from here,” he wasn’t casting silent aspersions; he was stating what was obvious. It wasn’t that he could hear it. He could *feel* it. There was no need to announce it. It did and will always, I suppose, announce me. **B**