PERSONAL HISTORY

THE COMMON TONGUE OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LONDON

Schoolchildren in the British capital have developed a

For the project "Year 3," a collective portrait of London, Steve McQueen photographed students in the British equivalent of second grade. Photographs © Steve McQueen and Tate / Courtesy the artist / Thomas Dane Gallery / Marian Goodman Gallery

In the summer of 2018, my family moved to London, the city of my birth, from New York, my home for three decades. We wanted to be closer to my mother as she neared the age of ninety, and my husband and I were eager to expand the horizons of our son, who had just turned thirteen. My parents had moved to Weymouth, on the southern English coast, when I was just three years old, and so London was unfamiliar to me. Acquainting myself anew with the city, I walked its streets and visited its parks and museums with an exhilarating sense of novelty.

Not long after my family settled into a new home, near Hampstead Heath, I went south to the Tate Britain museum, on the bank of the Thames, to see an ambitious project undertaken by the British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen. He had made a collective portrait of London by photographing its Year Three students—second grade, in the British system. All the city's elementary schools—public, private, faith-based, special-needs—were invited to participate, and more than fifteen hundred of them agreed to have photographers deputized by McQueen take a class picture. The result, called "Year 3," is an assemblage of more than three thousand images, featuring seventy-six thousand children.

"Year 3" was overwhelming in scale. Individually framed, and mounted on white, the photographs were stacked wall to wall, a dozen high, in the museum's lofty Duveen Galleries. From a distance, the regular arrangement of brightly colored rectangles looked like the board of a children's game. Close up, each rectangle resolved into a traditional class portrait, with the tallest children standing in the back row, and the smallest sitting cross-legged in the front. Many students wore school uniforms—blue blazers and gray shorts, gingham dresses and red cardigans—the outfits barely changed from those my mother wore when she went off to grammar school, or those I wore when it was my turn to enter the British equivalent of kindergarten.

I wished that my mother, who still lives in Weymouth, could have accompanied me, as she would have found the children as irresistibly appealing as I did, with their broad grins showing teeth that are still jostling into position: a boy in a soccer uniform, with a soccer-player haircut, cropped on the sides and long on top; a girl in a green hijab next to a girl with a white satin hairband. Aged seven or eight, they are on the cusp of an understanding of the world, and of their place as individuals in it. Though the project must have been logistically difficult, with all the paperwork and the permissions and the persuasion, it offered a brilliantly simple conceit: displaying the heterogeneity—class, race, nationality, faith—of young Londoners at the age when they first develop an awareness of their own differences, and of the structures that bring them together or keep them apart.

The museum was full of lively children scampering from one side of the gallery to the other, pointing at the images and chattering about the faces on the walls. An essential element of "Year 3" was that all the classes who sat for McQueen's photographers had the opportunity to come in to see themselves represented. You are the future of London, museum staffers told the students when they arrived—hundreds of them every day. Some of the children had never been to a museum. One purpose of the project was to instill in them the sense that the institution belongs to them, and not just to people like me, a middle-aged ticket buyer overhearing their squealed reactions: Look at this boy, picking his nose! Look, here are children with disabilities, in wheelchairs. Look, these children have a dog with them, a mascot—lucky them.

An essential element of "Year 3" was that all the classes who sat for McQueen's photographers had the opportunity to come to the Tate Britain to see themselves represented. Photograph © Steve McQueen and Tate / Courtesy Steve McQueen / Thomas Dane Gallery / Marian Goodman Gallery

London itself belongs to these students, whose parents and grandparents have come from all over. More than three hundred different languages are spoken by the children who attend London's schools, but, as I listened to their voices at the Tate, I was struck by how similar to one another they sound. Sociolinguists who study the way that Londoners speak have identified the emergence, since the late nineteen-nineties, of a new variant of English among the younger generations: M.L.E., or Multicultural London English.

In recent decades, large-scale studies have been undertaken of language use in Hackney, in East London. Historically, Hackney was occupied by white working-class residents, or Cockneys, whose basic elements of speech are familiar not just to Londoners who grew up with them but to anyone who has watched Dick Van Dyke effortfully twist his tongue in "Mary Poppins"—saying *wiv* for "with" and *'ouse* for "house." The years after the Second World War brought an influx of immigration that resulted in Hackney becoming one of London's most decisively multiethnic neighborhoods. In one cohort of Hackney five-year-olds, who were studied between 2004 and

2010, there were Cockneys, but there were many more children with parents from Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Albania, Turkey, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and various African countries. Friendship groups were multiethnic, the researchers noted, and often included children who spoke a language other than English at home, or children whose first language was English of a postcolonial variety, such as Ghanaian or Indian English. In this diverse milieu, the children found their way to a new common language.

Speakers of M.L.E. use notably different pronunciations from speakers of Cockney: "face," which in Cockney sounds like *fay-eece*, for example, slides closer to *fess*. (In linguistic terms, the Cockney diphthong is replaced by a near-monophthong.) Some of M.L.E.'s features are lexical, with vocabulary especially influenced by the language spoken by people with Jamaican backgrounds—one of the first postwar immigrant groups to arrive in the East End. But the shifts in the language of London amount to more than the borrowing of vocabulary or changes in pronunciation: there are structural changes, too. David Hall, a linguist at Queen Mary University of London, has written of the organic emergence of a new pronoun, "man," which, depending on its context, can mean "I," or "me" or "him" or "them." As an example o days." To describe the second-person use, he ci d Hall to meet me in a café in Mile End, in E d uses many features of M.L.E. in his speech with the verbs "go" and "come" in certain co

"It has to be some sort o ld me. "It can't be 'I went art gallery.' "

This is a feature that M reign languages the novelties of M.L.E. are rooted, because it has emerged from such variegated and fertile ground. "It is difficult to say if there is a direct influence from Nigerian English, or Jamaican Creole, because they are all in the mix somewhere," Hall explained. Moreover, the London children whom Hall and other scholars have studied are influenced more strongly by the phonologies of their peers than by those of their caregivers. Starting at four or five years old, they pool a set of languages and linguistic features, and settle on some subset of that pool as their common language. They begin to speak like one another instead of like their parents. "Normally, kids, until they are eight or nine, will copy their caregivers, and then they will match the community afterwards," Hall told me. "But these kids are doing it very, very young. It is language change not from the outside but from the inside—they are building it themselves."

If McQueen's cameras had captured the chatter of the Year Three students as they shuffled into place and smiled, M.L.E. is one language that nearly all of them would have been familair with. Hall explained to me that, when groups who speak in different ways come into frequent contact, people often shift the way they speak, eventually sharing speech styles and modes of pronunciation. If you have an extremely mixed group—one whose members speak, say, ten different languages—speakers will settle on linguistic features that allow them to do what they most want to do, which is communicate. "Ultimately, people want to sound like one another," Hall told me. Linguists use the term "accommodation" to describe the way that individuals change how they speak to align with one another. "It's not cultural appropriation, it's not rude, it's just what we do," Hall said. We accommodate ourselves to others' speech because we want to get along; we want to understand, and to be understood.

Soon after my son enrolled at his new school, a few blocks from our house, he started bringing home words and phrases that his new peers, at the onset of adolescence, use to demarcate themselves from their parents, claiming their status as the future of London. The vocabulary was new to his Brooklyn-raised ears, and to me, who had been absent from London for so long. Whenever he brought such words home, I turned them over with him, like fossils found among stones on a pebbly beach. ("Bare," perplexingly, means "plenty," or "a lot of." "Allow it" means "leave it alone.") Among his classmates are students with English surnames that sound as if they date back to the Norman Conquest or earlier, but there are also children with parents from Somalia, Syria, Bangladesh, Turkey, Poland, France, and Germany. Some of the students arrived in Year Three from Romania, speaking not a word of English; just listen to them now.

For a while, my son was the new outsider, the one who talked funny. Say "aluminum," his classmates demanded. Say "candy." Say "elevator." His American accent was long enough established that it now seems likely to be indelible, though over the past few years he has adjusted to his new context, to fit in. He now says "sweets" instead of "candy," "maths" instead of "math." He speaks of his teachers as "Miss" and "Sir," just as I did—the latter honorific now striking me as peculiar, because I'm hearing it on his democratic American tongue. When my son calls me on his phone after school, to say he'll be home later than expected, he says, "We're going shop," just like his new friends say it—the ones I can hear larking in the background behind him. He used the expression at first with a slight self-consciousness, but in a spirit of openness. Gradually, it has become his default. He is accommodating himself to London, this new city to which he has been translated.

In moving my son between two English-speaking countries, I have not made available to him the opportunity to become fluent in another language. Unlike his classmates with Romanian or Somali or French parents, he cannot move easily and unconsciously between two tongues. But learning to speak like a Londoner is granting him a certain flexibility. I have watched his growing comfort with this new language and am gratified: this expansion of range is, after all, one of the reasons why my husband and I decided to up and move.

When I reflect on the upheaval of moving countries in midlife, I am shocked by what the months of displacement, the anxiety of resettlement, and the disconcerting unfamiliarity of daily life have taken out of me. On a merely practical level, the experience is draining. In so many ways, it would have been easier to stay put. We have voluntarily given up comforts and continuities in favor of choosing a more open-ended prospect. My husband and I told ourselves that we wanted to make a change of our choosing, before unsought change was visited upon us. We chose to get ahead of the instability that we felt was inevitable, by destabilizing ourselves. We hoped and trusted that we would be stimulated by placing ourselves in a new context, that there would be value for us in seeing the world from a new vantage point.

But we knew, too, that there would be costs to our choice, and that moving would demand of us a reckoning with loss. The closer I am to my mother, from whom I was distant for so long, the farther I am from my beloved American family: my sister-in-law, my brothers-in-law, my husband's three adult sons. Indeed, we learned of the impending birth of our first grandchild only after we had moved to London, when my husband's oldest son called and we put him on speakerphone, his voice sounding thrilled and proud as we looked out of the window toward a garden wall along which a red fox creeps at twilight.

But my midlife is my son's youth, and the move has already shown him that the world is wider than it would have appeared to him had we never strayed from our old neighborhood, in brownstone Brooklyn, with its scrappy basketball courts around the corner; its friendly, progressive middle school and its constantly inflating property prices; its coffee shop where, on the sidewalks outside, dogs slurp at aluminum bowls of water while their owners stand in line waiting for their own carefully crafted refreshments. I have seen teen-agers grow up in New York, and I know how the competitiveness of the city—the urgency and drive and self-importance of it, the characteristics that so thrilled me as an ambitious new arrival in my early twenties—can leave a young person feeling defeated before she has begun. I have seen, alternatively, how New York can make a young person believe that there is no other place in the world significant enough to matter. I want to inoculate my son against such provincialism. I want to nurture his native cosmopolitanism.

I go to a party at the home of a new acquaintance, in Central London. It's like being transported back to a party from the eighties, the decade in which I first left England behind. Everyone is drinking whatever gets put into their hands. Everyone is smoking cigarettes that will leave my hair reeking by night's end. There is urgent, shouted conversation about art and politics and history. I fall into conversation with a woman, a filmmaker with some recent success. Reflexively, I explain my relocation. I cannot bear to be taken for just another Londoner—someone who never left and made a life elsewhere, though my British accent remains intact, belying my thirty years away, my American passport, my American fidelities.

I tell the filmmaker that I want my son to grow up with the ability to move comfortably among countries, continents, worlds. You want to turn your son into an Englishman, she replies, with a note of apparent satisfaction at having found such a neat formulation. *God, no,* I reply, surprising myself with my vehemence. That's the very last thing I want to do. My son is a complete American, born a New Yorker as the summer dawn broke over the East River, its rising red disk visible from the hospital bed in which I first held him in amazement. My son, blessed in childhood with a cheerful temperament, has what I think of as an American's optimism and an American's openness, even though he has been raised and loved by an English mother with her English instincts for repression and regret.

Those instincts may account for the aspects of my decision to move that I find hardest to explain to a stranger, or to anyone: the sense that I wanted to dislocate my son so that he would know what it is to yearn for elsewhere. I did not bring him to England in the hope of bequeathing on him an alternative national identity as an Englishman. My ambivalence about this chilly, moated island nation does not accommodate that fantasy of homecoming. I have known many city dwellers whose affection for the structures of their own childhood is so great that, upon becoming parents, they wish to replicate them, and thus yearn to move to the country or to the suburbs. I do not share this longing. Though I am delighted by the pleasures of introducing my son to the landscape of my childhood—to have

him bounce on the same seafront trampolines as I did, and race along the same cliffside slopes—there is no sense in which I want to reduce his world to the narrowness of that from which I came.

What I do want to grant him from my own childhood experience is the corollary of that narrowness. I want to cultivate in him a sense of ambition and a quest to roam—attributes that, in my own adolescent experience, were nurtured by a sense of never quite feeling at home in my home.

By uprooting my son just as he was about to begin applying to high schools, I placed his childhood definitively within one retrospective landscape and offered him an unknown vista for his adolescence. I am excited for what this new territory will offer him. London is a good place to be a teen-ager, friends old and new have told me—there's a freedom offered by the city, with its sprawling streets and generous parks, its network of tubes and buses, its intersecting social circles. These days, I often walk past high-spirited gatherings of kids on Hampstead Hea g music on loudspeakers that they a adian; these hours whiled away in urban fie n that offered by the sophisticated constraints se of ownership. I want him to get to know 's something else that motivates me. A sense o make it my son's inheritance. I have given

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