

# Accent Elimination

2005

Although they have lived in the United States for over forty-five years, my foreign-born parents both have distinctive but hard-to-place accents that I have never been able to imitate correctly. (Childhood attempts merely resulted in cartoonish-sounding “Russian spy” voices.) Inspired by posters around New York advertising courses in “accent elimination,” I decided to hire a professional who could teach me to speak in each of my parents’ accents and teach them to speak with a so-called standard American accent. My parents and I took intensive lessons with accent coach Sam Chwat at his office every other day for several weeks and also practiced in my studio between lessons. We worked with two scripts: one written by my mother and the other by my father, both modeled on the typical conversation that each of them has when talking with a stranger who notices an accent and gets curious about its origins.

I played the part of the stranger. We first perform the dialogues in

our natural accents, and at the end of the piece, after much practice and struggle, we attempt to perform the same scripts—in the best version we can muster—of our new accents.

—NINA KATCHADOURIAN

Is this some kind of a joke?

*Actually, I also speak some Swedish, because Swedish is my wife’s mother tongue.*

And so your wife is Swedish?

*No, she is Finnish, but she belongs to the Swedish-speaking minority of Finland.*

And did you meet your wife in Finland?

*No, we met in Beirut.*

In Beirut! Amazing. So your accent is a mixture of all these languages.

*Sort of.*

And do people ever figure this out?

*No, they think I am Hungarian.*

“Hungarian”: it feels like the punch line; you should probably laugh, even if you don’t entirely get the joke, even if something must have been lost in translation. The questioner is Nina Katchadourian, and the informant is her father, Herant, who is listing his languages and how he got them. He has already taken this shaggy-dog catechism through Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, and French. His wife, Stina, has done the same. In the installation, she is on the rightmost of a bank of three television screens; Herant, on the left; Nina, in the middle.

These two language biographies are the starting point for an ingenious exercise, serving as the scripts for mother, father, and daughter to practice acquiring one another’s accents, exchanging old worlds for new and new for old. It is a family drama: Nina and Herant are comically impatient with one another. It is also political: they are all trading the linguistic traces of diaspora, intermarriage, and genocide; they do so against a neutral



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Six-channel video with sound, six televisions, three pedestals, dimensions variable

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin

Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, in honor of Director Simone Jamille Wicha’s ten-year anniversary at the museum

Installation view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2007

or perhaps Federal blue background, speaking straight into the camera. A domestic scene? A language school? An interrogation?

Walk to the other side of the installation, and you are behind all these scenes: another bank of three screens, showing sessions between the family and a professional accent coach. Sam Chwat’s office is decorated with diplomas and memorabilia, bona fides

of a professional American assimilationist. He sounds like Brooklyn, but only when he wants to; he joshes the Katchadourians through their lessons with a gentle, echt Uncle Sam disrespect for the dignity of age. The whole game is so funny and so affecting because it is an eddy of free play turning against the broad currents of generational and global assimilation. In the real world, accents are not

exchanged. They are eliminated. At the end of one scene Nina, Stina, and Sam work hard on a particular phrase: “What were you doing in Beirut?” “What were you doing in Beirut?” “What were you doing in Beirut?” “What were you doing in Beirut?” Maybe that one is the punch line.

—JEFF DOLVEN

Professor of English, Princeton University