Sounding Imperial

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“Poetry,” the French philosopher Denis Diderot argues, “must have something in it that is barbaric, vast, and wild.” His counterparts in Great Britain found such barbaric wildness in oral traditions near and far. Coming from seemingly primitive speakers whose passionate voices were thought to be natural and authentic, folk traditions felt enlivening and even slightly dangerous. Ancient bards and “noble savages” possessed the “spirit of poetry,” exclaimed the eighteenth-century Scottish scholar John Pinkerton, and they expressed it in their “dying sound among the wilds.”2 Sounding Imperial analyzes an almost century-long experiment in which British authors revived this unique, endangered spirit and its sound by designing poetic voices that imitated the techniques and attitudes of oral speakers.

This tradition of experimentation with poetic voice occurred in two simultaneous, interconnected literary and cultural transformations. First, an emergent poetics of “printed voice” explored how to present oral voices in literate forms. During the eighteenth century, authors organized new techniques—for example, quotation marks differentiated speakers and certain meters evoked chanting—to suggest that their poems channeled public performances. Second, this new poetics coincided with a reimagining of the author as an intermediary between traditional (often oral) cultures and English literature, seeking out original speakers and appropriating them for readers. As eighteenth-century poets worried that the power of language had declined because of the explosion of print, they sought inspiration in folk culture and foreign speakers to counteract this crisis in vitality. Imitations of Chinese performances, translations of
Persian songs, Indian “tales” in verse, eclogues of Africa or the West Indies, and reworkings of Scandinavian folk songs all are examples of non-European cultures that appeared as topics of eighteenth-century poetry. While the British expanded their dominion in North America, the Caribbean, and Asia, and while they explored the Pacific Islands and Africa, they were also idealizing the oral traditions they found there and impersonating overseas speakers. In this book, I examine the elements that authors developed to convince readers they could hear those distant voices or experience the exoticism of foreign speakers when they read a text. I link these forms of address with literary, social, cultural, and economic changes that motivated an eighteenth-century evolution in the concept of poetic voice and the techniques used to construct it.

Although no text is unmediated, the fantasy of unmediated voices has driven literary experimentation for centuries. As material relations change, so does a culture’s imagination of textuality, and it is a central claim of this book that the reexamination of media—oral and written—during the Enlightenment raised anew long-lived questions about the nature of print. Voice is thus a category that needs to be historicized. My study participates in this historicizing of voice. The positive revaluation of oral traditions that occurred in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, the continued culturewide consideration of what mass print and literacy meant to the modern world, and the growing importance of colonialism all contributed to a significant reassessment of poetic voice. Rapid growth in the print industry made texts more readily available. The availability of printed texts created a viable literary marketplace, which in turn supported new notions of professional authorship. At the same time, oral traditions previously thought to be “primitive” were reimagined as heroic and inspiring rather than degraded and uncivilized. Turning uncivilized orality into the type of inspiring barbarism that Diderot championed was one of the most important accomplishments of eighteenth-century poetry.

Oral voices were so appealing because they were seen as wild and passionate, instilling a spirit of communal relationship and promising the intimacy of face-to-face contact. This idealized sense of oral performance as collective belonging offered an antidote to the detachment associated with print circulation. The spread of literacy and the growth of the print marketplace during the eighteenth century only intensified these feelings. “The gradual detachment, through print, of the writer from the present and familiar audience is one of the most far-reaching influences of modern times,” Bertrand Bronson comments insightfully. Although an extended reading audience is always in some sense fictional, the conditions of proliferating print meant that the detachment of authors from
audiences advanced with “special insistence” during the eighteenth century. Many authors, like Samuel Johnson, embraced the distanced relationship of the professional author, who writes for money and who is beholden to, but also securely removed from, the reading public. However, the smaller group of authors whom I discuss in this book worried that the expressive powers of language had been reduced by the mechanization of print and the progress of civilization. For them, print lacked the affective charge of speech and severed the connection between author and audience. By constructing their poems as wild prophecies, dying speeches, and heroic political addresses, they sought to persuade readers to imagine themselves as auditors and thereby counteract the potential to feel solitary and isolated when reading.

Of course, printed poetry cannot duplicate the auditory dimensions of vocalized sound. It must simulate presence, which requires techniques alert to the representation of different voices. Poetic voice therefore rests at the center—the pivot point—of the relationship between the materiality of print and its metaphorical representation in the cultural imaginary as spoken performance. Most scholars have suggested that these appeals to oral performance were backward-looking attempts to reject modernity or were examples of Britain’s “aesthetic imperialism” across the globe. In this model, oral voices and foreign speakers become ways to protest the rationality associated with print by appropriating the authenticity of marginalized cultures. Rather than interpreting eighteenth-century authors as nostalgic for an oral world before print, I understand their poetic experiments to register a new kind of presence in texts and to craft a more intimate relationship with their readers. The dialogue between oral and literate forms was one venue for tinkering with new prototypes of poetic voice and for creating collaborations between what we have until recently considered antagonistic forms of media and modes of cultural belonging. Modern poetic voice, then, must be thought of as textual virtualization, as the disembodiment of a radically singular personal characteristic. Romanticism is often heralded as the era that ushered in the definition of poetic voice as an individualized, interiorized expression of personal identity that is associated with the lyric speaker. But, in the decades before British Romanticism, eighteenth-century authors engaged in similar explorations, which contributed to the arrival of the highly confessional voices of Romanticism’s well-known lyrics.

The experimental tradition I discuss was not, however, emblematic of eighteenth-century poetry. It was not understood as an artistic movement at the time, as Margaret Anne Doody claims Augustan poets sensed themselves to be. Moreover, these experiments with poetic voice were unlike many other literary
trends contemporary with it, such as the emergence of the novel. Yet it was not subterranean or localized either, in the way of many modern experimental literatures. The authors that I discuss in this project—English poets William Collins and Thomas Gray; Evan Evans, Felicia Hemans, and other Welsh bardic performers; James Macpherson and his Scottish allies; Anglo-Indian poets of colonialism; literary impersonators of Pacific islanders—were eclectic and would be hard-pressed to see themselves as members of the same group or literary collective. Nonetheless, they shared cultural representations and literary devices, and often revised and alluded to the same texts, revealing a common interest in resolving difficult questions about how to animate and reenergize printed poetry. The period’s intense awareness of the importance of Gray is especially illustrative, elaborating an extensive chain of adaptations and rewritings of his poem “The Bard” and his folkloric imitations (rather than his better-known “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard”). One goal of this book is to join authors and cultures that have as yet been seen as unrelated or even combative, and thus to redraw familiar literary genealogies.

Novelists had their own interest in using the representation of native and foreign voices to address problems of modernity, as the dialect in Tobias Smollet’s Expedition of Humphry Clinker (1771) and the idiosyncratic form of Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759–67) amply illustrate. Alexis Tadié argues that the emergence of the novel forced a paradigm shift for orality. He claims that Sterne’s work, for instance, exemplifies the novel’s use of conversation as a means of “addressing the changing modes of narrative” that amalgamated storytelling conventions with an emphasis on the literacy of the book. The new reading protocols of the novel pushed readers to “apprehend the text with the prerequisites of an oral culture,” that is, to “listen in” on characters, “to participate in conversational exchange,” which the novel presents as moments of dialogue. The chaotic grammar for reporting speech in prose narrative—the cacophonous italics of Daniel Defoe’s texts, the hyphens of Eliza Haywood’s novellas, the increasingly standardized use of quotations and speech markers such as “he said”—is mirrored by the poetic experiments I discuss here. But, while the novel promotes this sense of presence primarily in moments of virtualized conversation, poetry offers the immediacy associated with the spatial proximity of oral performance. And, while poetry was not alone in its engagement with orality—one could argue that the dramatic text always theorizes the collision of oral and literate—this type of eighteenth-century poetry was unique in its attempt to prefigure an aesthetic ideology that insisted on the immediacy of its oral voices and exotic speakers.
Srinivas Aravamudan has wondered whether literary study is “overinvested in the book as [a] cultural and aesthetic category.” In *Tropicopolitans*, he seeks to undo the idea of literacy and textual voice as equivalent to subjectivity and agency, calling this relation a “factish”—that is, an imperfect concept we employ because it works. Here, I seek to expand the range and register of Aravamudan’s question by wondering if we have overemphasized print—in particular, printed prose—in our literary study of colonialism. The result of this overemphasis is evident, I would suggest, in the conclusions we draw about culture and politics from our analysis of the prose techniques that we investigate. By focusing primarily on prose narrative—on characterization in novel discourse or on the first-person reminiscence of travel writing—we have ignored other modes of mediating and encountering foreign voices. Poetic voice channels foreign speakers in ways different from novels; it makes the inhabitation of another’s subject position a constitutive part of its form in a manner that eighteenth-century prose does not easily imitate. The alignment of author and speaker permits readers of English poetry to confront foreign perspectives as if they were immediately available, that is, to confront them as if they were actually speaking as their own person, ultimately voicing themselves without the intervention of a narrator, translator, or traveler. This fictive immediacy, when applied to alternate voices, makes them powerfully persuasive and often dangerous acts of appropriation.

Aspects of this experimentation with voice, performance, and subjectivity have been partially addressed over the past two decades by the disparate fields of postcolonial theory, archipelagic British history, book history, and multimedia and sound studies. I strive to synthesize these rarely overlapping fields and to extend their approaches by considering the various places and political climates in which this poetics of voice was forged and the ways in which it was framed. Because these authors were intent on reestablishing intimate connections between themselves and their readers, they searched widely among geographical locations, ethnic groups, and cultural situations to discover new and vigorous types of speakers and perspectives. For them, poetry was always elsewhere; it was in wild northern Scotland, in the hills of Wales, in the sublime vastness of India, in Scandinavia, or in the past, waiting to be salvaged by those with ears attuned to hear it. Likewise, oral traditions were portrayed as part of a past culture or a remote locale, sometimes preserved in documents but just as likely perceived to be in danger of disappearing forever. In seeking these voices from *over there* or *back then*, Britain’s authors cast out toward the edges of their empire and into the distant past for alternative models of the poetic speaker.
At its base, the project of this book is to rethink the relationship between the global and the local in eighteenth-century poetry, between Britain’s overseas colonies and the formation of the British national voice. Robert Crawford has offered the idea of devolution to consider the interaction among the parts of the British Isles. He writes that by devolving English literature—by looking to its edges, by decentralizing our study of it—we reveal the geographical and cultural margins that organize the emergence of a national British literature. But what if we also devolve English literature beyond the British Isles? What if we travel to Britain’s furthest colonies and back again to discover other interacting forces that influenced poetic voice as an evolving eighteenth-century concept? Following the transperipheral travels of poetic voice as it circulated along the edges of Britain and throughout its colonies offers a deeper sense of how oral traditions and foreign voices revived late-eighteenth-century English literature, shaping some of its most crucial literary experiments. Rooted in multiple locations, connecting various cultures, the experiments described in this book show that British poetic voice was always about the political relationship between different cultures flung across the vast expanse of the globe.

Layered Mediations

A poem from 1749 sets out such an experimental agenda in its very title: “An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, Considered as the Subject of Poetry.” Its author, William Collins, offers the folk traditions and oral tales of the then-remote Scottish Highlands as a new topic for English literature, seeing Scotland as a place of natural wildness. He departs from early-eighteenth-century neoclassicism in favor of different voices, unusual speakers, and alien places. To describe these new subjects, Collins constructs a printed poem that acts as a conduit for the voices of ancient Highland bards. His poem’s speaker is presented as a medium for these bards, whose voices the speaker hears, records in his text, and transmits to English readers, who will be “astonished” by the “choral dirge[s],” “strange lays,” and “hideous spells.” Collins searched for the correct representational form for these wild oral voices, as a means of reinvigorating an English poetry that he feared would never again achieve the greatness of the work of poets from preceding generations, like John Milton and Edmund Waller.

The Highlands Ode exemplifies a tendency found throughout the eighteenth century of locating poetic inspiration elsewhere. The Scotland of Collins’s poem is rich with songs, superstitions, and folk traditions that are still “fresh to that soil” (line 13). Unlike England, the Highlands are “Fancy’s Land . . . Where still,
‘tis said, the Fairy People meet . . . while Airy Minstrels warble jocund notes” (21–22, 25). In Scotland, “Old Runic Bards shall seem to rise around / With uncouth Lyres, in many-colour’d Vest, / Their Matted Hair with boughs fantastic crown’d” (41–43). Minstrels and bards rise from the ground like apparitions to sing old songs on their “uncouth Lyres.” The authenticity of these sounds is connected with their geography. Northern Scotland is “hallow’d Ground” littered with the tombs of supernatural “Pigmie-Folk” and the “Rifted Mounds” of ancient monarchs who arise at midnight from the dead to hold an “Aerial council” (151–54). The land offers tangible evidence of its antiquity. These supernatural voices are autochthonous, like the “Old Runic Bards” themselves.

Susan Stewart concludes that Collins’s Highlands Ode should be classified as a “distressed genre,” a genre intentionally made antique, in which nostalgia is not “for artifacts for their own sake” but is “a nostalgia for context, for the heroic past, for childhood and the collective experiences of preindustrial life.”19 Authors in the eighteenth century, she notes, appealed to those traditions that were not “literature” to mollify a “crisis in authenticity.”20 Such a crisis makes authenticity into a problem that “arises in situations where there is a self-conscious perception of mediation; a sense of distance between one era and another, one world view and another; a sense of historical periodization, transformation, even rupture.”21 The answer to this problem, she suggests, comes in writing “oral genres” that invest literature with a lost presence, a missing context that only orality can repair. British poets felt, she claims, that English poetry was weary or unenergetic, and they were motivated to look elsewhere for access to the “authority of the oral world” in order to “recoup . . . the voice of orality in all its presumed authenticity of its context.”22

As with other “distressed” genres that Stewart describes (like the forged ballads of Thomas Chatterton and the historical ballads of Walter Scott), I argue that Collins’s Highlands Ode is a “machine for recreating context,” meaning that it is a highly intricate literary tool for evoking the nostalgia and authenticity associated with the oral past.23 Collins mixes supernatural figures, ancient voices, and oral storytelling to depict a haunted Scotland that exemplifies this idealization of the preindustrial past. All of the poems I examine in this book are machines for recreating context in much the same way that the Highlands Ode is. In Collins’s poem, this machinery consists of multiple layers of mediation between its authors, speakers, and informants. One important layer is the ode’s address to John Home, a Scottish playwright who had attempted to stage his plays in London.24 Unsuccessful, Home returned to Scotland, an occasion that Collins celebrates in the poem as an opportunity to invent a new kind of
writing that channels Scottish oral voices. Collins advises Home: “Proceed, in forcefull sounds and Colours bold / The Native Legends of thy Land rehearse / To such adapt thy Lyre, and suit thy pow’rfull Verse” (185–87). He presents Home as an ideal informant on this alien land and portrays him as a more modern version of Scotland’s ancient bards, who continued a long chain of transmission that extended back into antiquity. Within the logic of the poem, Home can sing of his native Scotland in ways that Collins cannot. The imaginative renewal that the Highlands Ode hopes to secure originates in the superstitious songs, ancient customs, and oral traditions mediated by Home to Collins’s waiting ear—and then by Collins to England’s “astonished” readers.

The media transitions implied by this poem are numerous and extremely complex, moving from the orality of folk traditions to the metaphorical “singing” of Home’s verse, then to the speaker’s “waiting ear” and onward to the eyes of England’s readers. Maureen McLane, following Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, would call this layering “remediation” or “transmediation”—the transformation of oral material into literate features so that the oral is “remediated” into some other form. Readers of Collins’s poem do not experience the oral but, rather, a “variety of orality effects” that results from what Friedrich Kittler calls the “transposition of media.” Transposing media across genres entails finding some imperfect equivalent for orality in writing. And while a “medium . . . cannot be translated,” as Kittler argues, it can be evoked. Thus, in the Highlands Ode it is not the oral that is represented so much as the layers of mediation required to access an idealized oral past. Collins imagines the process of accessing this past—that is, shifting from oral to literate—to be like translating between languages or listening to a beautiful song being sung and making a musical instrument. At the end of the Highlands Ode, the speaker describes his reaction to reading a sixteenth-century translation by Edward Fairfax of the Renaissance Italian poet Tasso:

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How have I sat, where pip’d the pensive Wind
   To hear his harp, by British Fairfax strung
Prevailing Poet, whose undoubting Mind
   Believ’d the Magic Wonders which He sung!
Hence at Each Sound Imagination glows
Hence his warm lay with softest Sweetness flows
   Melting it flows, pure num’rous strong and clear
And fills th’ impassioned heart, and lulls th’ Harmonious Ear
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(196–203)
Printed poetry morphs into an aural experience. The text supplies a voice that the speaker animates and makes aural, filling his “impassioned heart” and lulling his ear with harmony.

But the relation between the speaker and the text’s voice is mediated by Fairfax’s translation of Tasso. Collins portrays Fairfax as an instrument maker and his translation as an Aeolian harp by “British Fairfax strung,” where the image of weaving and fixing the strings into the frame of a harp depicts the process of translation. Fairfax captured Tasso’s voice, which was carried across temporal and spatial boundaries through the translated text. Reading Fairfax’s translation, the speaker hears Tasso’s song and experiences the romance of his “undoubting mind” (199). Similarly, one can hear Home’s song, and thus the collective voices of ancient Scottish bards, through Collins’s Highlands Ode. The literary revitalization promised by superstitions and “Native Legends” is achieved through the paradoxical presence and mediation of oral traditional voices as printed poetry. This is the experience Collins hopes to give his readers when they encounter his poem.

In the Highlands Ode, therefore, media transmission crosses the boundaries of nation, language, and of oral and literate modes. The relationship between the speaker and Home exemplifies the broader relationship between English authors and the imaginative power of the Highlands that rejuvenated them. Collins’s text translates non-English oral traditions (never accessed directly in the poem, except by the inclusion of Scots vocabulary) into a British poetic idiom: folk traditions become English odes; books become harps and lyres; words are like musical strings. Many of these images are quite conventional, but by combining them, Collins created a highly mediated printed poem that claims to originate in the oral performance of a circumscribed community of listeners. His ethnographical interest in northern Scotland and his address to Home fashion the English author as a translator of others’ oral voices. Collins rooted his poetic voice in an authentic context and his poem is the conduit through which oral voices can be heard. This was an extremely powerful and complicated position for English authors to occupy, because Britain was at the same time enlarging its overseas empire by quite literally absorbing new speakers into its domains.

Collins’s struggle to find forms that could represent oral voices was answered by the machinery of the poem, which seeks to recreate the context of an oral past in a printed text. While these struggles persisted throughout the late eighteenth century, Collins’s confident assertion that his poem enabled readers to listen in on ghostly bards and distant singers is characteristic of an enthusiasm
for experimenting with presence, as contingent and troublesome as that idea might be for twenty-first-century critics. Like Collins, the other authors analyzed in this book accepted the authenticity and passion of oral voices, while simultaneously understanding the sophisticated means by which that authenticity was constructed. They were self-conscious in their experiments about the technical and cultural effects of mediating oral voices, in ways that we have been prone to associate only with the media savviness of McLuhanite technological modernity. Yet, in the last age before sound recording made possible the mechanical reproduction of speech, eighteenth-century authors tested out print as a way to convey orality’s ephemeral voices. Therefore, issues of authenticity, place, literary and cultural translation, speaking and listening, and cross-media intelligibility are all under examination in this book. Collins’s poem is akin to a manifesto for this experimental poetics as it would be taken up over the next half-century. These authors searched for their own equivalent to Scotland’s “Old Runic Bards” and wondered how best to present those voices in English verse.

NEW VOICE STUDIES

Questions about how to represent voice and how to theorize about it still preoccupy us today in ways that Collins and his contemporaries would have understood. Voice remains a slippery concept, yet it is pervasive in academic study whenever we mention the “speaker” of a poem, ask students to find their voices, describe a political election as citizens making their voices heard, or lament that the disenfranchised are voiceless. In fact, the first decade of the twenty-first century has brought renewed attention to literary voice as a historically contingent concept, inaugurating what could be called the New Voice Studies. Working at the convergence of numerous fields, the New Voice Studies draws liberally from anthropology and folklore; oral, manuscript, and print culture; media theory; and sound studies. It attempts to create culturally and historically informed understandings about the nature of sound, practices of listening, and technologies of vocal reproduction. Among recent examples, Charles Bernstein on “close listening,” Gina Bloom on the “motions” of early modern theatrical voice, Steven Connor on ventriloquism as it reflects on the “auditory self,” Ivan Kreilkamp on “voice-in-writing” and Victorian literature, Maureen McLane on “balladeering,” John Picker on “Victorian soundscapes,” Yopie Prins on “voice inverse,” Bruce Smith on early modern “acoustic worlds,” Garrett Stewart on the “phonotext,” and Lesley Wheeler on modern poetry’s public performances use voice as an analytic with which to understand the creation of literary texts.
and the process of reading in a sensate, aural world. These studies mark a radical break from those that came before by taking an abiding interest in the material forms of voice, which collect new metaphors and offer new vantages for these studies.

The New Voice Studies seeks to describe these possibilities by inhabiting overlapping meanings. In this sense, it thinks of voice as a literary form responsive to numerous cultural, social, and political contexts at once. As a field, it approaches these forms as the concretion of those media transpositions that theorists call “remediation,” thinking through the ways printed and written texts evoke a human voice. Connor names this process “sound hermeneutics,” in which “giving voice . . . is the process which simultaneously produces articulate sound, and produces myself, as a self-producing being.” For him, voice is not “something I have” but rather “something I do.” The emphasis in his “sound hermeneutics” on the action involved in making voice present is only a slightly different version of what Susan Stewart describes as a new “formalism” that is meant to analyze the aural and oral characteristics embedded within those printed texts that strive to imitate presence and immediacy. Voice is thus a contract between authors and audiences, one negotiated by the text but not generated solely within it. It is also the literary principle that is able to understand and interpret that contract.

By expanding the range of media under critical investigation, while retaining attention to the text as a fabricated object embedded in social and historical contingencies, the New Voice Studies aims to integrate many disciplines and technologies without rejecting the methods of literary criticism from the past half-century. In fact, New Voice Studies responds to many of the upheavals of twentieth-century criticism. There have been three major stages in the modern study of literary voice. The first began in the early twentieth century with scholars like T. S. Eliot and (later) Francis Berry, who asserted that poetic voice was related to the physical attributes of an author. In reproducing an author’s voice, the best one can hope, Berry claims, is for a voice that “approaches [the author’s] as nearly as possible” when “the poem is said aloud.” These scholars associate voice with the physiology of the writer.

The second stage was dominated by the methods of New Criticism, which was a direct response to the physiological notion of voice. New Criticism detaches voice from the author and instead focuses on the rhetoric of speech to describe the action of a poem. William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, for example, insist that when we read “we ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic speaker.” Likewise, Ruben Brower
argues that every poem is “dramatic” in the sense that “someone is speaking to someone else,” and therefore every poem should be understood as a relationship between “the fictional speaker and auditor.” “We hear the drama,” Brower writes, in the voice of the poem. For New Criticism it is the structure of this drama that is of paramount importance to literary critics; “the character of the speaker, his thoughts and responses, are reflected in style, structure, metaphor.” All of these elements are grouped under what Brower calls the “voice” and what Wimsatt calls the “verbal style” of a text. Therefore, New Criticism and the notion of the intentional fallacy are essential to the modern study of poetic voice. In the process of establishing the importance of the text, New Critics separated it from authorial biography and thus solidified the vocabulary of “poetic speaker” and voice, which remains integral to the protocols of close reading. Establishing the self-sufficient text is prerequisite to understanding the speaker as something related to but still exceeding the authorial persona claimed by New Criticism. It turns “speakers” and “voices” into a textual effect.

The third stage of voice studies responded directly to New Criticism’s attention to dramatic speaker and poetic voice. Generally, literary theory after New Criticism contextualized speakers and voices within the wider world and its history. Structuralism, like New Criticism, emphasized the importance of form; but rather than focusing on the self-sufficiency of the literary object, it made voice reflective of cultural situations. In structuralism’s accounts of orality and oral culture, voice was a sign of presence. For critics like Walter Ong, the spoken word is the primary instrument for sustaining oral cultures. Orality, he argues, is an attempt to establish the presence of the words; “voice is not peopled with presences. It is itself the manifestation of presence.” Writing, in contrast, is technical, permanent, an object and a commodity. Poststructuralism’s arguments for the constructed nature of the self and subjectivity motivated a reassessment of this transcultural account of voice and of the authenticity of speech. Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction undermined the notion of speech and voice as physical presence. Simultaneously, Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogism and polyphony sensitized literary criticism to the multifarious voices that make up literature’s constitutive intertextuality. The speaker is historically contingent, the product of a variety of forces within an enormous cultural matrix. Feminism, postcolonialism, and ethnopoetics emphasized the politics of voice. Hélène Cixous’s notion of écriture féminine is predicated on the idea that a woman “must write her self... must put herself into the text”—a task accomplished when women seize “the occasion to speak” and make their bodies
“heard.”46 This position has been refined by other feminist scholars, like Julia Kristeva, who draws attention to the “signifying practices” in an artistic work that make us believe there is a self that articulates. Ethnopoetics has developed ideas of voice in relation to experiences of colonialism and postcolonialism, such as Kamau Brathwaite’s assertion that “nation language” makes suppressed voices heard and Edouard Glissant’s insistence upon “creolization” as voices countering established literary norms imposed by outside powers.47 These attitudes are paralleled in fields like composition studies, writing pedagogy, and narratology, which have focused on the social and grammatical mechanics of voice. Current methods of teaching writing and composition (at least in American higher education), which emphasize authors and the fictional projections they create (still called “speakers” or “narrators”), reaffirm voice as expressions of selfhood structured by discourses and learned techniques.48 Since the 1960s, narratology has approached voice as a discursive problem and, together with linguistics, has tended to emphasize that voice and the speaking subjects are a product of grammar; cognitive scientists have linked voice to human consciousness and the function of the mind.49

By legitimizing their authoritative voice and by exploring the troubles of the authentic self, the burden of representation, and subjectivity, all of these theoretical camps assess the relationship among voice, self, and authority in their own characteristic manner. And all of these recent approaches stress that voice is inherently artificial; print does not speak, ink cannot make noise. Instead, we imagine that they can, in order to describe the emotional experience of reading. The effect of voice, Roland Barthes notes provocatively, is to create an audio-textual “hallucination.”50 One must always be aware of these ideas as metaphors, while remaining sensitive to how poems formalize this hallucination. My approach to poetic voice is therefore formal and historical: I unpack the relationship between a text’s form and its metaphors of voicing. In this, I follow the methods of Eric Griffiths, who describes the relationship between author and reader as a “printed voice.” The “voice of the poet,” Griffiths argues, “is not the voice of the person who is the poet,” but rather something decided “in reading a text.” “All writing is dramatic” in the limited sense that all “writing is an act of supplication to an imagined voice.” Likewise, reading is an act of “imaginative voicing” that turns readers into an audience. In print, the writer and reader do not face each other, causing an ever present loss of community that Griffiths believes manifests itself again in the “further community,” the “new life” of a reader who interprets and resuscitates the text.51 And, like the theory of French scholar Paul Zumthor, which calls for a “poetics of the voice,” my approach to
the “printed voice” is anchored in the oral and its manifestations as textuality. Zumthor felt that the orality of a text could only be captured as a “performance, not an origin,” so we must modify our perspective and examine how to “perform the text in action.” But, rather than emphasize the relationship between the printed text and its more proper oral enunciation, as Zumthor and others have, I examine the performance on the printed page as the place to ascertain poetic voice. Metaphor implies and carries with it a formalization and a structure; changing textual strategies are the evidence of voice. Poetic voice is how it operates on the page. In this sense, poetic voice becomes a means of thinking through the printed text as the linchpin in the relationship between authors and readers, a relationship mediated by cultural genres that themselves must be historicized.

Ephemeral Air, Material Texts

Formal analysis of the type found in the New Voice Studies (and in this book) depends upon a historically informed concept of voice. This history shows that the Enlightenment was a pivotal point in the study of voice, because it was that period which developed scientific explanations of hearing and sound. By 1750, as Jonathan Sterne notes, sound had become firmly established as an “object and a domain of thought and practice.” Since the mechanical preservation and reproduction of sound did not exist until the nineteenth century, printed texts are among the few access points we have to oral cultures and to histories of hearing. By attuning ourselves to this sensory history that Sterne describes, we may be able to hear the past of voice in new ways. Exploring the history of voice, including its roots in early modern and Enlightenment scientific, social, political, and literary discourses, can elucidate the peculiarities of these eighteenth-century poetic experiments.

Early modern theories of voice start with breath; Francis Bacon wrote that breath “maketh the Voice . . . for all Speech, (which is one of the gentlest Motions of Aire,) is with Expulsion of a little Breath.” “Invisible yet substantial, ephemeral yet transferable,” voice was thought to be a “vapor,” the effusion of a “leaky body,” as Gina Bloom puts it. This attitude made voice seem material yet unstable: it was “alienable from the speaking subject . . . temporarily attached, released, and exchanged by bodies,” making Renaissance vocality a site of contention over subjectivity and agency. This versatility and exchangeability of voices helped license early modern technological experiments with human speech. The Italian scholar Giambattista della Porta imagined an early version of tele-
phony in 1584 when he suggested that a series of metal pipes could transmit voices over great distances. He also hypothesized an instrument “now upon trial” in which spoken words could be “shut up as in a prison” until the machine was opened again and the words were heard (a premonition of the answering machine). Of course, della Porta was never close to developing the technology needed to realize these objects, but his preoccupation with different means of producing, transmitting, and preserving oral voices is characteristic of this scientific moment.

Nearly one hundred years later in London, the amateur scientist Samuel Morland invented the “tuba stentoro-phonica,” a “speaking trumpet” to amplify the voice. Morland’s goal was to “magnifie (or rather multiply) the voice,” and after testing his trumpet in St. James’s Park, he boasted that he could be heard “word for word” from 850 yards away. In his theory of voice, magnification is multiplication, as the voice propagates itself through space by reproducing like an echo. Morland depicts this reproduction as a series of concentric circles that travel like “ripples on a pond,” as diagramed in a pamphlet on his experiments (Fig. 1).

French anatomists in the early eighteenth century followed a track similar to that of Morland when they debated whether the voice was a “blown string” extending out into space, a tightening of the air, or perhaps a “lasso or a noose,” an idea that anticipated the notion that voice can recall words and make them less ephemeral. The idea that voice can be corralled or hung demonstrates that early experimenters attempted to find metaphorical equivalents for the physical effects of speech. In the late eighteenth century, the German scientist Wolfgang von Kempelen further explored these effects when he produced the first mechanical voice. He fastened a bellows to a box into which he had bored holes to which he attached thin reeds made from ivory. Operating the bellows by hand and covering some of the holes with his fingers, von Kempelen reproduced the sounds of human speech (in German) by forcing air through what he called his “speaking machine.”

In the early modern period, hearing was under investigation as well. Theories of sound developed over the period, as anatomists tested the physiology of the ear and philosophers speculated about the nature of waves caused by vibration, similar to the watery ripples represented in Morland’s diagram. This ongoing exploration of sound led to attempts at creating hearing aids, such as Robert Hooke’s glass ear trumpets, which he crafted in 1668. Hooke imagined the ear as a film that was vibrating like an extremely complex drum skin. His ear trumpets invert Morland’s principles, using the speaking tube to capture voice rather than magnify it. Ear trumpets winnowed their way into general life, even
Figure 1. An illustration from Samuel Morland’s *Tuba Stentoro-Phonica* (1672) showing something akin to sound waves emanating from his megaphone-like voice. Courtesy of the British Library Board (C.115.t.15).
appearing as important personal objects, as in the portrait of the Scottish geologist James Hutton. Hutton, a forerunner of Charles Darwin, was hard of hearing for most of his adult life, and his ear trumpet became a constant companion. His deafness was such an identifiable personal characteristic that he had himself painted with his ear trumpet (Fig. 2). 64

These ideas, gadgets, and experiments show that, long before the phonograph or the telegraph, voice and sound were topics of scientific inquiry and
technological innovation. Along with these inventions came new attention to the philosophical relationship between writing and speech. If metal pipes, copper megaphones, and glass trumpets might collect and project the voice, what about the written word? Having inherited ideas that dated back to Plato’s Phaedrus, Renaissance authors felt that speech was more immediate than writing; Elizabeth I’s tutor Roger Ascham taught that “no man can wryte a thing so earnestlye, as whan it is spoken.” Erasmus, who had more faith in handwriting than Ascham did, argued in 1528 that handwriting preserves the writer’s voice: “when we get letters in their own hand from friends and fellow-scholars, how we welcome them and seem to be listening to their very voices and to be looking at them face to face.” For Erasmus, voice conveyed personality, and handwriting converted a person’s physical voice into a transportable form, acting upon the reader in the same way as a face-to-face conversation. The early modern connection between letters and voices was so strong that pedagogical techniques arose in which students simultaneously spoke out loud and wrote what they had heard, in an attempt to “imbue [the] hand with the sound of [their] own voice.” This inherently metaphysical approach assumes that writing makes human voices present. It was accepted by many that the voice, the handwritten text, and the body were equivalent—even exchangeable—entities.

This strong link between voice and writing differs from the perceived relationship between voice and print. While Renaissance scholars believed that handwriting conveyed someone’s personality, making the pen an extension of the human body, print was thought to be the opposite: impersonal and anonymous. The printing press separated the text from the body, creating an alternate persona that, while metaphorically related to the body of its creator, was also understood as being detached from it. This feeling about print had intensified by the eighteenth century, leading many poets to experiment with ways of recreating an intimate connection between author, text, and reader, while still maintaining the benefits of print’s alternate personae.

Eighteenth-century poets looked to oral traditions as a way to reestablish this intimate connection. The uninterrupted integration of print into British society brought a “sharper awareness” of oral cultures and orality’s special characteristics. During the Enlightenment, the number of media classified as oral was vast and included elements from the many dialect communities throughout the British Isles; songs used during manual labor, recreation, and social rituals; the preservation of regional knowledge through storytelling; and public debates. All of these contributed to what Jay Fliegelman has described as the eighteenth-century’s vibrant “culture of performance.” This variety was magnified by the
fact that in early modern England songs and stories would “migrate promiscuously” between media as they circulated through society, making the “boundaries between speech and text, hearing and reading . . . thoroughly permeable.” Early modern reading itself was a “different and much more variegated species” than it is today, because it “centered on hearing the page as much as seeing it.” All of this indicates that the relationship between orality and writing in early modern England was “reciprocal,” Adam Fox argues, and a hybrid product of “generations of cross-fertilization between oral, scribal, and printed sources.” The “cross-fertilization” intensified as print became a more prevalent part of everyday life. Print, rather than undermining or destroying orality, as most scholars claimed until recently, seems in fact to have expanded orality’s reach. At the same time, the growth of the literary marketplace led authors to believe that they were in a moment of media shift that concretized orality and literacy as discrete ideas. As Nicholas Hudson contends, “orality is fundamentally a literate concept” that can only originate in the specific conditions that a successful print culture arranged.

A pivotal point in this media shift was the revaluation of oral culture that occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. Paula McDowell reveals that an “increasingly positive idea of oral tradition” emerged from the “originally negative” notions that associated orality with living forms of vulgar speech, often uttered by women like London fishwives or female religious prophets. While gendered notions of orality persisted throughout the period—for example, in the perception that polite women’s singing could civilize an otherwise coarse commercial society—differences between “elite” and “non-elite” types of oral tradition continually eroded. As McDowell demonstrates, vulgar orality was “sanitized” in a “close dialectical relationship with ideas about print.” The sanitized concept of oral tradition combined with a reconsideration of traditional oral performers, like minstrels and bards, to remake orality into something heroic and often masculine, rather than vulgar and feminine. Institutions that supported minstrels and bards, such as aristocratic patronage and national gatherings, dissolved gradually for three centuries. And, while traditional bards remained active during the eighteenth century, especially in more remote parts of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, the meaning of their bardic performances changed radically. Whereas many observers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw bards as itinerant vagrants, not unlike the largely female ballad singers who wandered the streets of London singing for pennies, during the mid-eighteenth century bards were reimagined as an element of Britain’s noble heroic past, in part because by then they were so rare. The Welsh author Iolo Morganwg seems
characteristic of this shift in the perceived value of oral traditions. Morganwg refused to think of oral traditions as “confused” stories or as “Old wives tales.” The Welsh bardic traditions that his work invokes (which were almost entirely fabricated) were imagined to be heroic and trustworthy precisely because they were “recited annually” and thus were “guarded” from “deviat[ing] materially from the Truth.” The truth is safer, he suggests, in the custody of these oral performances than it is in “letters”—printed type and written script—that “skulk in dens and dark corners; we know not whence they come to light, we often know not how they came into existence.” For Morganwg, the public nature of orality, reclaimed from women (“Old Wives”), made its traditions more reliable than an unknown manuscript discovered in a dark room. This is a highly ironic position for him to have taken, considering the archival methods he used to create his own performances and his textual representations of ancient Welsh oral traditions (discussed in Chapter 2).

Like the heroic bardic traditions of Britain, other types of oral media (such as ballads, which had been dismissed as low) were, by the end of the eighteenth century, being seen as repositories of national values. While Thomas Percy had relied on manuscripts to compose his Reliques of Ancient Poetry (1765), later ballad scholars (for instance, Walter Scott) increasingly turned to oral reciters, whom they believed to be trustworthy sources of knowledge about the past. Oral sources came to be regarded as the most reputable ethnographic authorities. Ballad collectors became ethnographers engaged in fieldwork, collecting evidence and preserving samples of an alien or earlier way of life practiced by what seemed to be a shrinking number of people. This ethnographic approach developed in classical scholarship as well. Thomas Blackwell in 1735 portrayed Homer as a “wandering indigent Bard” whose poems reflected the state of his society, and thirty years later Robert Wood extended Blackwell’s conclusion by suggesting that Homer sang rather than wrote his poems. These unorthodox opinions about Homer merged with the fad for medievalism and Celticism to create nostalgia for alternate versions of Britain’s past. While the culture of Greece and Rome remained undeniably important to antiquarians throughout the eighteenth century, they also searched for historical British manuscripts, and these revived interest in long-lived British traditions.

The elocution movement also contributed to the positive revaluation of orality. Thomas Sheridan, the most influential eighteenth-century elocutionist, championed the “living tongue,” associating speech with passion, with “life, blood, and soul.” For Sheridan, even a “man wholly illiterate,” with “no
other ideas of language, but what he has obtained thro’ the ear,” can convey his emotions with all the force of “nature.” His contemporary Daniel Fenning likewise argued that “each passion” was “expressed by a tone peculiar to itself” and Hugh Blair, a well-known eighteenth-century Scottish academic and writer (discussed in Chapter 3), agreed that “all the great and high efforts of eloquence must be made, by means of spoken, not of written, Language,” even as each of them published treatises on oratory. Parliamentary debates were transcribed by hand and circulated throughout England; some political figures, Harold Love notes, would give speeches with this eventual “scribal publication” already in mind. The tenets of the elocution movement “carried over . . . into the realm of silent reading,” Jacqueline George claims, creating the expectation that readers might “perform privately, in the theater of their own imaginations.” The close relationship between oratory, public performance, and silent reading offered fertile ground for authors seeking to use text as a means of mediating oral voices. In short, oral performance claimed a special prominence in mid- and late-eighteenth-century Britain, and eloquence was associated with the natural power of speech, with the heroic past, and with the changing capacities of readers to imagine reading texts as audible performances.

Not everyone agreed, of course. Samuel Johnson was strong in his denunciation of oral tradition, believing that “speech becomes embodied and permanent” through writing, and without writing, nothing that is not “very short” can be “transmitted from one generation to another.” Since, historically, language was spoken before it was written, Johnson intuited that speech was “unfixed by any visible signs, [and] must have been spoken with great diversity” before the invention of writing and print. He believed that this “wild and barbarous jargon” could only be organized and refined by writing; and oral traditions introduced inconsistencies that Johnson, creator of the Dictionary, expressly tried to sort out and rationalize using print. Johnson worried, in fact, that the imperial expansion of Britain around the globe further imperiled the purity of the English language by introducing dangerously foreign speech. He remained uncertain whether his incredibly ambitious project to catalog and “fix” the English language could reverse this trend. Such worry demonstrates what many intuited: that the mid-eighteenth century was a transitional moment for those diverse elements that we would now classify as orality—spoken performance, ballad collecting, Homeric scholarship, the elocution movement, medievalism and Celticism, and the heroizing of the bard.
The feeling that orality was alien yet original and passionate proved to be a crucial aesthetic for eighteenth-century poetry. From the mid-eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, authors refined the relationship between orality and ethnographic authority, aligning oral traditions with the exploration of unusual, remote, primitive, often non-European cultures. Whether celebrated as “noble savages” or dismissed simply as uncivilized, the inhabitants of the Americas, the Scottish Highlands, Ireland, central and southern Africa, and various parts of India and the Pacific were described as either preliterate, and thus exclusively oral, or as not yet having progressed beyond a dependence on the oral past. The popularity of stadial theories of history, which perceived societies as moving through ever more sophisticated stages, only confirmed the marginalization and exoticization of the oral, by describing these foreign cultures as mired in earlier periods of civilization.91

“Orality” thus identified not just a mode or a set of techniques but a precise cultural situation, one which conformed with epistemologies that recognized oral cultures and performance as symbolic of an earlier, more primitive, and at times nobler way of life. By portraying Britain as aware of its heroic oral past, and yet literate, commercial, modern, and imperialistic, unlike many other parts of the world, authors redefined orality as a sign of foreignness and exoticism.

Stadial and climatological theories of human differentiation were attractive to eighteenth-century poets experimenting with voice because they focused on locales and cultures that maintained a more passionate relationship to their surroundings and thus a more natural artistic expression. To adopt these cultures’ oral voices and adapt them to printed texts was to access this passion, which had been reduced, they thought, by writing and print. Alterity’s alluring suggestion of authenticity is primarily what is under examination in these early versions of what is now termed cross-cultural poetics. These models of ethnic, cultural, and technological difference allowed authors to cast themselves imaginatively out toward other cultures, returning with an understanding of others’ legitimacy, which these authors could mediate to their readers, as Collins does in his Highlands Ode. Such authority is predicated entirely on the energy and vibrancy associated with these unusual voices, oral performances, and exotic speakers. The period’s obsession with authenticity and voices “going native” was therefore both symptomatic of an eighteenth-century crisis in the legitimacy of print and the system by which to resolve that crisis.
Information about these nonliterate cultures was frequently drawn from travel narratives, from Grub Street’s world histories, and from outright literary fantasies. Eighteenth-century authors imagined oral traditions with characteristics, and invested alien cultures with values, that they desired for their poetry. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the sense that primitive societies possessed extraordinarily vigorous languages was widely accepted by English authors. For example, William Warburton argued that the Bible was the “primitive poetry of a primitive people” in his *Divine Legation of Moses* (1741). Continental European philosophers like Giambattista Vico, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau championed living speech over writing, nurturing the idea that primitive languages were part of the “state of nature.” The East proved a reservoir of story and fable, as numerous orientalist fictions were translated and then consumed avidly by readers. The Oxford University lecturer Joseph Trapp singled out “Eastern” arts as exemplifying the power of speech, believing that “eastern eloquence abounded . . . with metaphors and bold hyperboles.” Thomas Percy called for the reinvigoration of English poetry, arguing in his 1760s translation of the *Song of Solomon* that “cold European imaginations” could benefit from the warmth of Eastern metaphors. Morganwg argued that his native Welsh countrymen were “aborigines” and that their language was the first on earth with a continuous, unbroken tradition. Hugh Blair claimed that the Scots were once “addicted to poetry,” which made their compositions “forcible and picturesque.” The linguist and legal scholar William Jones (discussed in Chapter 4) suggested repeatedly that a Europe deadened by its obsession with classical Greece and Rome look further east, to Persia and India, for new inspiration. In his 1782 *Essay on Epic Poetry*, William Hayley, a well-published but now overlooked poet, patron (of William Blake, among others), and translator, celebrated the “dark and distant source of modern Verse,” which he located in the “Gothic Harp,” the “North’s wild specters,” and the “Runic rhymes of many a Scald.” These media, he claimed, offered a “vigorous source” from whose “savage strength” English poetry drew “new vigor.” While much of the study of exotic cultures was motivated by pseudo-anthropological impulses and by the hunger for more colonial commerce, it was also strengthened by an interest in new aesthetics that might benefit English arts. Authors in this period drew from a variety of cultural idioms, each of which seemed more invigorating, powerful, and natural than polite neoclassicism.

During the mid-eighteenth century, therefore, the idealization of oral culture presented a way to pursue poetic innovation while avoiding the troublesomeness of actually dealing with existing oral practices. This does not mean
that eighteenth-century authors were entirely ignorant of oral traditions or of other cultures. Whether oral traditions were brutish and savage or sophisticated and heroic was debated throughout the period. The Enlightenment exploration of the globe and the mechanics of colonialism made oral traditions a useful framework within which to draw cultural comparisons. This book does not seek to exhaust the locations where cultural and literary interactions between the oral and poetic voice were at work. Additional (albeit different) examples might be drawn from the Gaelic songs of Ireland, the syncretic folk practices of West Indian slaves, or the indigenous orators who so fascinated Americans like Benjamin Franklin. Nonetheless, one of the most important claims of this book is that poetry systematically assessed fictional oral speakers as a way to contemplate the affinities and differences among enormously diverse cultures and locations of the modern world.

These fictional speakers, a nascent form of comparative ethnology, served the national and imperial definitions of Britain and Britishness. Fuyuki Kurasawa calls this process the “ethnological imagination,” the Western creation of “mythical representations” for non-Western cultures, which he dates to the eighteenth century. This ethnological imagination, Kurasawa argues, “anthropologizes” Western societies “to defamiliarize, to denaturalize, and situate their customs . . . through juxtaposition to a series of non-Western alter egos.” At the same time that it created “problematic and flawed,” not to mention self-serving, understandings of non-European cultures, it also motivated a “powerful self-critique” of Europe’s colonizing nations.100 Constructing this ethnological imagination was part of a strategy to apprehend European culture by comparing it with those of foreign peoples.101 As the eighteenth-century author and member of Parliament Edmund Burke wrote with enormous satisfaction: “[W]e possess at this time very great advantages towards the knowledge of human nature. We need no longer go to history to trace in all its stages and periods. . . . now the great map of mankind is unroll’d at once; and there is no state or gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same instant under our view.”102 Burke suggests that there is no longer any need to look into history to find the earliest stages of human life; instead, because of European exploration, historians can just look around the globe at other societies. His comment rightly has been interpreted as reflecting Europe’s deeply held sense of superiority over other parts of the world. But it also bears noting that Burke’s assertion displays a fundamentally comparative approach to cultural difference. The superiority of English culture is demonstrated not so much by its sophistication or its economic dominance as by the
map itself, “unroll’d” so that the “gradation[s] of barbarism, and . . . mode[s] of refinement” are laid out for the English, making them the superlative witnesses to and consumers of the Earth’s diverse customs.

Cultural crazes and public mania for the foreign were important influences on the developing ethnological imagination and its unrolled “map.” These crazes included the expanding dominion in India and later the celebrity trial of impeached Governor-General Warren Hastings, the controversy over Macpherson’s Ossian (poems said to be in the style of an ancient Scottish epic told by the mythological hero Ossian), the Celtic revival from the 1750s onward, and interest in the Pacific between the 1770s and 1790s. Less important to this study, but still significant for the period, are the century-long fascinations with the “oriental” tale, with Native American culture, and with the commercial and scientific exploration of Africa. The simultaneity of these crazes and their geographical diversity show that the British poetic voices of earlier centuries, while no doubt international in orientation, were not as plural, proliferating, and intense as they were in the late-eighteenth-century global world. One small example from Horace Walpole may serve as a larger portrait: after the explorer James Bruce returned in 1774 from Africa, where he had for years been looking for the source of the Nile, Walpole wrote acidly, “Africa is, indeed, coming into fashion. There is just returned a Mr. Bruce, who has lived three years in the court of Abyssinia, and breakfasted every morning with the Maids of Honor on live oxen.” He continued, “Otahetie [Tahiti] and Mr. Banks are quite forgotten,” referring to Cook’s by-then famous expedition to Polynesia and to that voyage’s botanist, Joseph Banks, who brought back reports and specimens of its verdancy and descriptions of its inhabitants’ rituals. Walpole’s letter gives some insight into exactly how the Celtic revival, “Indomania,” or the “craze” for the Pacific influenced the global aesthetics of poetic voice. In his reaction, we see how these crazes and manias for the exotic are subject to the vagaries of fashion, coming into and dropping out of the public’s attention quickly and capriciously. Yet Walpole also suggests that these locales are ultimately replaceable, even homologous, depending only on the exoticism of their publicity and the timing of the public’s attention. Where once Tahiti was fashionable, now Africa is; tomorrow it may be reversed, or interest may move on to India instead.

Furthermore, in reading Walpole’s comment we might see that the crazes are also interconnected, informing one another and teaching readers how to have pleasure in each of them. In an expanding literary marketplace, eighteenth-century poets capitalized on these crazes, not so much by offering descriptive scenes of foreign life, as travel narratives often did, but by dramatizing the
voices and subjectivity of the speakers found there. The interest in translating cultural differences through literary forms produced what the eighteenth-century antiquarian William Shenstone described as an enormous “appetite” for “foreign poetry,” an appetite aided by secondary publications of scholarly tools, such as dictionaries, grammar books, and fantastical world histories that spurred new concern with and comprehension of non-English verse.

A cross-cultural and cross-media poetics based on appealing to oral traditions and foreign voices required the nascent ethnological imagination and the momentum of the cultural craze. Or, to put it differently, the poetics of printed voice adopted Europe’s developing ethnological imagination as a way to operationalize its cross-cultural aspects. The experimental tradition uncovered in this book was informed by this ethnological imagination and at the same time rethought its essential components. In particular, I interrogate late Enlightenment ideas of primitivism, the oral-literate binary, the “state of nature,” and climatological explanations of cultural difference. The poems in this book respond to broad cultural movements, while helping to represent these outsider cultures collected on the “great map of mankind.” In fact, it seems that as the century went on, it became increasingly difficult to tell what it meant to be outside versus inside these cultures; the poems of this study rarely fit easily into imperial models of Britain as possessing a center and a cultural or colonial periphery. There can be no doubt that British authors were keenly aware of the networks and relays of the eighteenth century. London remained the most significant node of them all, as every aspiring English-language author understood, whether they were in Calcutta, Aberystwyth, or Edinburgh. Still, their poetry, engaging with an imagined ethnology, blurs the distinction between cultural categories (oral/printed, primitive/civilized), spatial coordinates (center/edge), and collective identities (colonizer/colonized, British/other) in the effort to create new kinds of voice to circulate across and through the edges of the British empire, often resting in London or other commercial centers before being dispersed again.

Although sincerely interested in translating the differences of alien cultures to English readers, the authors described here were aware of their role in cultural appropriation and the creation of collective identity, acts which were consonant with British nationalism and the colonial project. As Katie Trumpener notes, English literature was a tool by which the aesthetic served imperial ends. While this process is discussed more in Chapter 2, suffice it to say here that Trumpener claims that English literature constituted itself by the “systematic imitation, appropriation, and political neutralization” of cultural movements in
the British Isles and the colonies. Bardic nationalism, by contrast, as found in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, “binds the nation together across time and across social divides; it reanimates a national landscape made desolate first by conquest and then by modernization, infusing it with historical memory.” Trumpener’s account remains a powerful explanatory system, but her schematization of authentic “bardic nationalists” and appropriative English authors has numbed us to the significance of other exchanges within eighteenth-century British culture. I argue that the local-imperial connections of the cultural nationalist movements that Trumpener brings to our attention demonstrate an evident, if sometimes fraught, collaboration with English literary traditions. These connections between English literature and cultures in Wales, Scotland, and India show that, while literary nationalism occurs under what Trumpener calls the “sign of the bard,” the authenticity of bardic voice is consistently made (and remade) in texts: all bardic voices, like all poetic voices, are impersonations. From this vantage, we can work out another set of answers to questions about the role of poetic voice and bardic cultures in the creation of (and resistance to) a British state made up of regional and national cultures. Like Janet Sorensen, I hope to “track the contradictions of the attempts to legitimate the idea of a British national culture” by noting the internal diversity and connections among nationalist and colonial traditions. The international orientation of this experiment with poetic voice provided English literature with new speakers, genres, and models of poetic voice. It also helps to explain why poetry proved to be such fertile ground for the assessment of nationhood. The intra- and international posture of these mediated voices was relational: the link between English literature and marginal cultural nationalism was not a one-way appropriation but the politicized exchange of traditions in uneven hierarchies of power. Understanding the imperial drive of poetic voice refreshes our ideas about eighteenth-century poetry’s political purposes and goals.

For the authors involved in this eighteenth-century experiment with poetic voice, the politicized exchange occurred in the printed poem and its renovation of earlier literary techniques and genres. Furthermore, these poems imagine the interactions of these spaces, identities, and cultures through metaphors of speaking and listening, remaking the distant onlookers of Burke’s “great map of mankind” into situated listeners and vocalizers. The English poem attuned to these oral voices and foreign speakers promises the impossible—an unmediated experience of other cultures and past voices—while reflecting self-consciously on the tactics and practices by which this supposedly unmediated experience is created in texts and in acts of reading.
those texts. The English-writing author sits significantly in the middle of this model as a mediating figure required to make these voices intelligible to readers. This is the unspoken obligation of the barbarism and wildness that Diderot championed: there must be an author to tell it to us. The constitutive contradiction of the experimental poetics described in this book is that the authority supplied by ostensibly authentic, immediate oral voices was nonetheless mediated and grounded in the form of the text and in cultural relations and exchanges among the participants of the British state and its growing colonial empire. The poems that I describe in this study aspire to be what they cannot be; they are poems that want to be spoken out loud, like prophecies and pronouncements. They want to channel those exotic speakers—whether ancient Welsh bards or Hindu prophets—that they impersonate. The texts they create, and the readers they attract, are like the Tasso that Collins describes in his Highlands Ode, who “believes the wonders of which he sung.” Eighteenth-century poets believed in the wonders of wild, unusual, passionate oral voices, yet they remained keenly aware that these voices were not pure authentic expressions.

This poetics of printed voice exists at the confluence of cultural forces, historical trends, and literary innovations, many of these international and transregional. And, while oral cultures were almost always thematized as historically distant and spatially remote, the texts that I have selected construct a fiction whereby their voices are made immediately available to the speaker via printed literature. The poems rarely engage with dialect or vernacular (though this is an important element of late-eighteenth-century poetry, particularly in Scotland). They also do not display those attitudes and techniques that would become crucial for nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropology, with its emphasis on recording and transcribing of oral performance and folklore in seemingly objective or accurate ways. Eighteenth-century authors and scholars were less concerned with representing the actual practices of oral performance and more interested in creating a satisfying facsimile of what they thought were the stylistic effects of oral performances or the sound of foreign voices rendered in English. These experiments with mediating the voices of oral performance led to consideration of impersonation and ventriloquism as tools with which to revive the past or understand British expansion overseas. Ultimately, then, these appeals to oral voices are insistently about literature: they are a way of maneuvering within the literary by turning to what (and to whom) is perceived as outside of it.

Each chapter of this book emphasizes a different (though related) context in this experiment with printed voice. I begin with Thomas Gray, whose imita-
tions from the late 1750s and 1760s of Welsh bardic voices and Scandinavian folklore serve as an alternate tradition for poetic experimentation with the oral and the alien during the eighteenth century. I show that Gray employed numerous strategies in his poetry to evoke a sense of oral performance. These strategies were not an indication that Gray abandoned the print marketplace, as some scholars have suggested, but rather an attempt to reform it. Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard” (1751), “The Bard. A Pindaric Ode” (1757), and his later imitations of folklore, such as “The Fatal Sisters. An Ode” (circa 1761) and “The Triumphs of Owen. A Fragment” (circa 1761–63) reveal, imitate, and evoke bardic voices in innovative ways. In “The Bard,” for example, Gray uses quotation marks to differentiate between kinds of voices, and he evokes the prosody of Welsh oral meters. In his imitations from the 1760s, he presents bardic voice without any framing—no quotations marks, no explanation about the speakers—in an effort to supply readers with an unmediated experience of these ostensibly wild, passionate oral voices. I compare Gray’s extensive use of quotation marks, point of view, and mode of address with the practices of orators like Thomas Sheridan, Gilbert Austin, and Joshua Steele. Austin and Steele produced fascinating guidelines about how to recite printed poetry like Gray’s. I include examples of their curious markings and an assessment of the impulse to “notate” poetry for public performance, and I link these notations with twentieth-century anthropological debates about how best to edit oral texts, for example, of Native American storytellers.

Gray’s later poetry, especially “The Bard,” was an important origin of the experimental tradition described here, and the voices and scenes of “The Bard” were taken up and adapted by an eclectic group of poets, including Welsh antiquarians who, like Gray, were fascinated by bardic voice. These antiquarians and authors pursued a related set of experimental techniques to imagine Welsh cultural identity as constructed out of the audible voices of the bardic past. Rather than rejecting Gray’s representation of Welsh voices, Welsh authors instead borrowed from it. They even cited Gray’s poetry as a way to legitimize their own printed voices, and they translated it into Welsh in public performances. These moments of allusion and citation show that collaboration existed between bardic nationalists and those English authors who appropriated from peripheral British cultures. Welsh authors saw the past as oral and audible, making voice, speaking, and hearing significant tropes in the construction of Welsh national identity. Examining the work of Iolo Morganwg shows how oral performance of ostensibly ancient epic poetry was an important part of Welsh cultural nationalism. Likewise, Felicia Hemans sought to create printed versions
of fictional public performances to present oral voices. All of these poems addressed in Chapter 2 demonstrate the complex politics involved in fostering Welsh cultural nationalism by collaborating with English literary traditions.

Chapter 3 extends this discussion of the oral past as a means of building national identity by looking at the controversy surrounding James Macpherson’s Ossian poems. Examining the Ossian poems as a printed object—as a fabricated thing—reveals that Macpherson’s work provided another crucial turning point in the eighteenth-century experiment with reconstructing and mediating oral voices to English readers. I detail how Macpherson’s writing creates a sense of oral performance in print by using personification, mode of address, archaic language, obsolete diction, and diacritical indicators like quotations marks. The narrative style of the *Fragments* (1760) and of Macpherson’s two-volume expansion of the Ossian myth *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763) imitates the characteristics of oral discourse. This is particularly apparent in his use of repetition and tense shifts to create what I call “restored voices,” those moments when the text approximates the experience of aural reception. Macpherson emulates bardic speech and the intimacy of its implied audiences as a means of creating a participatory mode of reading that aims to turn readers into auditors, a process that I term the “intimate hailing” of his texts. His poems were taken up especially by women writers, who revised and extended the intimate publics that accreted around his collections, demonstrating that women were important contributors to the redefinition of earlier gendered notions of oral performance during the eighteenth century.

The focus of Chapter 4 shifts to experiments with textualized oral performance in one of Britain’s colonies. Impersonation and persona take on a greater role as the experiment with voice in print moves overseas to India and as British orientalists adopt foreign voices as a means of comprehending the vast domains that were being organized under the British flag. Chapter 4 takes up Anglo-Indian poems written during the 1770s and 1780s that impersonate Indian speakers. Their authors, mostly white employees of the East India Company, composed Indian characters and speech by orientalizing British cultural traditions and amalgamating English literary forms with Indian voices to produce a peculiar colonial idiom. They rewrote English poetry, filling it with Indian women who sing in heroic couplets and Brahmans who speak like Celtic bards. These authors sought to devise printed equivalents for the acoustics of oral and foreign voices (much as Gray did in his representation of Welsh bards). However, they also attended closely to the politics of impersonation and personae, using foreign content as a way to renovate conservative English literary forms.
These Anglo-Indian poems therefore are an important culmination of eighteenth-century poetry’s impulse to listen outward from England for new inspiration and unusual speakers. This reading of Anglo-Indian poetry begins with the compositions of William Jones, a noted orientalist and legal scholar who took a position in 1784 on the Supreme Court in Calcutta. In his poetry, Jones portrays himself as an intermediary between Indian voices and English readers, and there is a strong similarity between his fictional Indian speakers and his function as a judge. The interrelationship of Jones’s highly advanced linguistic skills and his Anglo-Indian poetic forms reveals how his colonial administration related to his experiments with English literary form.

The politics of these innovative poetic forms affected the impersonation of women’s voices by male Anglo-Indian writers. I show that cross-gender impersonations of native Indian women created a complex sexual politics of imperial expansion, a structure that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The chapter concludes by linking these gender impersonations with two revisions of Gray’s “The Bard” which replace his Welsh speaker with Indian Brahmans. These rewritings of “The Bard” adapt the intricacies of Gray’s poem to the specifics of Indian geography and cultural traditions, while simultaneously commenting on British colonialism in Asia. The impersonation of Indian voices and the creation of bardic Brahmans are examples of a “dislocated orientalism” that disembeds voices, shifting them between Asia and Europe to create new speaking subjects who reflect on colonialism. The multiplicity of these cultural appropriations and literary revisions force us to reassess the practices of orientalism and develop new ways to think about literature’s role within it.

Voice and speaking personae thus become important in assessing what it meant to be British in the late eighteenth century. The complex jumble of racial and sexual politics at work in these impersonations shows that the addition of foreign voices motivated English poets to reconsider British cultural norms within the context of an expanding global worldview. Poetry, as Karen O’Brien argues, was not just an expression of a politics but an essential part of the “generation and elaboration” of thought about empire in the eighteenth century. She claims that when poetry ventriloquized native speakers and indigenous peoples it was an “uninformed ventriloquizing of an external point of view” that “never enabled genuine non-European participation in the debate about empire.”109 I disagree; I see the elaboration of foreign voices by British authors as the lucent backdrop upon which appropriations of colonial discourse were set to multiple ends that rarely can be classified as purely uninformed, repressive,
or unimpeachably anticolonialist. In this way, I add to Suvir Kaul’s idea that the eighteenth-century produced “poetry of contemporary globalization” that exhibits an “aggressive nationalism” which “desire[s] . . . a cultural power that would be more than literary.”¹¹⁰ Kaul has illustrated how poetic form can be both an instrument to manage the contradictions of an outward-looking and aggressively nationalistic poetry as well as a material record of the existence of those contradictions. All of the poems discussed here are examples of what he terms “anthems of empire,” in that they offer an “ambivalent response” to the mercantile and colonial expansion of Britain and subject Englishness to comparative examination.¹¹¹ In my analysis of eighteenth-century poetry, following Kaul’s international model, I discover a more dynamic sense of the colonizer that unflattens the operations of colonial power, showing that it included an uneven mixture of sympathy and collusion, evidence of which is fossilized in the period’s literary forms and printed voices. Analyzing foreign speakers and subaltern voices raises pressing questions: Can European impersonations limn a subaltern subject, or are they always moments that extended imperialism? How deleterious is an anticolonial representation if it is ventriloquized? In what instances can ventriloquism and impersonation be seen as concordant with anticolonial representations?

The Coda concludes this line of inquiry by articulating a mode of archival reading that moves beyond appropriation and cooptation and that redescribes the link between colonial subjects and colonizing authors. I examine William Lisle Bowles’s “Abba Thule’s Lament for his Son Prince Lee Boo” (1794), a first-person monologue in the voice of a Pacific Islander mourning the loss of his son, who had traveled with a British ship to England. Bowles’s poem raises difficult questions about the role of authenticity and impersonation within postcolonial reading. I theorize an archive of the inauthentic that seeks to expand the colonial archive to include all of the impersonations, virtualizations, and appropriations of foreign speakers that circulated in the eighteenth-century British world. If we can strategically disable our desire to categorize texts according to their ability to reflect authentic, coherent cultural positions—colonizers, resisters, and so on—we might find additional vantages from which to hear the post-colonial lessons of eighteenth-century experiments with poetic voice.