Sounding Imperial
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Oral traditions and foreign voices from the edges of the British Empire revitalized eighteenth-century English literature as poets experimented with various ways to represent these traditions and voices on the printed page. The techniques they developed were a response to the period's shifting relationship to cultural media: the positive revaluation of folk traditions as heroic, not vulgar; the reconsideration of what mass readership meant for authors; the growing importance of colonial locales for poetic inspiration. By evoking the sense of immediacy associated with oral performance, the collective belonging of folk traditions, and the excitement of exotic places, these experiments attempted to mitigate the social isolation that authors worried had derived from the growing prevalence of silent, solitary reading. Thomas Gray's later poetry set an example, cultivating a relationship to reading texts that resembles listening to song and imagining that the intimacy of oral performance can be achieved by readers attuned to texts’ aural possibilities. His poetry served as a vital origin for a number of experimental offshoots: the elocutionists, who sought to use the printed text to revive what Thomas Sheridan called the “living voice,” and those poets in Wales, Scotland, and India who turned to Gray’s model when rewriting foreign voices to register the politics at work in the debate about British colonialism. By offering an alternate genealogy of eighteenth-century experimentalism, I seek to establish a heuristic for understanding the formation of poetic voice in relationship to colonialism, one that can be extended to other topics and locales, such as the highly sexualized imitations of Tahitian islanders that circulated during the 1770s and 1780s or the impersonation of African slaves
found in abolitionist poetry. I see this heuristic as both adding to and troubling our understanding of Britain’s national canon as being organized around the desire for a unifying culture that shifted from classical to vernacular literacies during this period of rapid expansion of colonial governance overseas.

This alternate literary genealogy necessarily returns us to questions about the relationship between our conceptions of voice and colonial subjectivity. Previously, scholars have emphasized the importance of discriminating between the authentic traditions of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland and their appropriation by English authors. While these readings have generated crucial new theories about the emergence of Britishness, they have also caused us to overlook the rise of transnational literary forms whose voices result from vital collaborations between these ostensibly antithetical authors and traditions. The impulse to seek cultural resources outside and away from literary England led to the formation of a global aesthetics of poetic voice. The competing national and international allegiances of the poetry explored here contain pioneering attitudes toward literary form and generic adaptation. Gray, Collins, Hemans, and others utilized the ode and blank verse, genres and techniques that we currently understand as innovative in the late eighteenth century; but others, such as Anglo-Indian authors from the 1770s and 1780s, also renovated neoclassical conventions rather than abandoning them. Therefore, the “invention” of voice referred to in Chapter 3 should also be understood as a reinvention of recognizable forms and genres. This renovation of well-known genres and this adaptation of conventional techniques were not simple exercises in emptying and refilling literary forms. These verbal structures carried with them the vestigial politics of their initial making and their subsequent transformations. These politics were conveyed through the genres, scenes, and techniques of earlier poems that were incorporated in and tailored to the circumstances of new localities and speakers. Multiple and at times discordant voices structured the contemporary disputes about the evolution of the British state and the consequences of its rapidly shifting empire. Poetic form is a quite specific record of these debates about nationalism on the British Isles and imperial expansion overseas.

If poetry was a valuable medium within which to debate nationalism and empire, then the ventriloquism of non-British speakers was an important (if flawed) way to imagine their part in this debate. Reflecting on what we might learn from reading these voices and figures, Lynn Festa warns that, “in composing accounts of eighteenth-century colonialism that seek to avoid making objects of others,” we should “be cautious about making the semblance of subjects as well.” Even as we recognize that colonial figures were not always oppressed...
objects at the mercy of imperial power, we must avoid anachronistically project-
ing our fantasies of meeting idealized colonial figures from the past. Festa
advocates for a “sentimental model of recognition” which “might be incorpo-
rated into a form of subject making that does not just involve puppetry or wish
fulfillment.”

Ventriloquism and impersonation, however, unsettle our current descrip-
tions of eighteenth-century forms of subject making. How should we read colo-
nial texts and understand the connection between the voices evoked within
them and those historical subjects they claim to represent? In reappraising our
methods of reading the colonial archive, we might turn to William Lisle Bowles’s
first-person poetic monologue “Abba Thule’s Lament for his Son Prince Lee Boo”
(1794), which engages many of the technologies of impersonation and meta-
phorics of voice discussed in previous chapters. As with the Anglo-Welsh col-
laborations and the works of the Brahman bards, Bowles’s poem presents a sub-
ject who is neither an oppressed figure of empire (“puppetry”) nor a dependably
resisting agent (“wish fulfillment”). The poem, based on real events, recounts a
mournful soliloquy by Abba Thule for his son Lee Boo, a prince who traveled
from Palau, a Pacific island group near the Philippines, to England on an East
India Company ship in 1784. After six months in England, Lee Boo died of
smallpox and was buried in a London cemetery. The tragic story of Lee Boo was
well known in Britain because of a popular travel narrative published in 1788. This
narrative refers to his father as “Abba Thulle” (neither name was correct)
and is illustrated with an engraving that depicts him shirtless and muscular,
with tattoos across his chest and shoulders. An earring dangles from his elon-
gated earlobe and a hatchet is propped on his shoulder (Fig. 16). This is a depic-
tion of an alluringly exotic Micronesian placed within the well understood con-
ventions of eighteenth-century portraiture, such as its three-quarters profile.
This collision of exotic and familiar appears in the narration as well: Captain
Wilson, a British explorer who traveled back to England with Lee Boo, reports
that when he first met Abba Thulle he was “perfectly naked,” had no “ornament
of distinction,” and disliked English tea. But Wilson also professes his respect
for Abba Thulle’s humanity. Another narrative repeated this description, claim-
ing that Abba Thulle was a “man of great humanity as well as extraordinary
natural understanding,” who felt deeply for the sailors and saw them as friends.
It is impossible to know definitively Abba Thulle’s perspective, but he did feed
the shipwrecked sailors, ask them to aid his military campaigns, help them to
build a new ship, and entrust his son to their care, showing some level of attach-
ment to them.
Bowles’s poem, likely inspired by these narratives, uses the immediacy of the monologue to dramatize Abba Thule’s sorrow at his son’s departure and the unsuccessful wait for his return. The sense of exoticism mixed with admiration that Captain Wilson felt comes through in the Bowles’s portrayal of Abba Thule’s pathos. Abba Thule stands at the water’s edge and casts his voice out over the ocean to his son, then waits for a reply that he never will receive. He weeps in disappointment as ships pass by without returning his son. Bowles’s poem presents Abba Thule’s voice in an attempt to connect Britain with distant locales by conducting its speaker into the global circulation of voices. He hears

Figure 16. An engraved drawing of “Abba Thulle,” by Henry Kingsbury (after one by Arthur William Devis), which appeared in George Keate’s *An Account of the Pellew Islands . . .* (1788). Courtesy of the National Library of Australia (an9024483).
the “sound of the encircling seas” (line 18). Its “falling surge” is “mournful” because it carried Lee Boo away, yet in its sound Abba Thule still thinks he can “listen to [Boo’s] echoing shell” (32). He hears warnings in the articulate ocean: “Methought the wild waves said, amidst their roar / At midnight, Thou shalt see thy son no more!” (48–49). He loses faith, exclaiming, “Oh! I shall never, never hear his voice” (61) and lingers “on the desert rock alone, / Heartless, and cry for thee, my son, my son” (71–72). He implores the sun “beneath whose eye / The worlds unknown, and out-stretched waters lie” (9–10) if it can see Lee Boo in some far-off land, standing on the

. . . rude shore
Around whose crags the cheerless billows roar,
Watching the unwearied surges doth he stand,
And think upon his father’s distant land!

(11–14)

The parallel positions of Abba Thule and his son on distant shores yet facing the same ever-circling ocean endow voice with the ability to traverse vast distances, much as Gray hoped his imitation of Welsh and Scandinavian bards would do. As Gray’s voices traveled widely, due to the efforts of his poetic adapters and imitators, the voice of Abba Thule traversed the globe in Bowles’s imaginative rewriting of it.

Lee Boo’s silence in comparison to Abba Thule’s extensive speech expresses some of the complexities of their extended aural intimacy that Bowles’s poem tries to capture. Abba Thule hopes to transcend the boundaries of space and time and hear his son’s voice again. However, while he believes he can almost discern his son’s voice in the ocean, Lee Boo’s reply never reaches him. Bowles did not create specific accents or metrical forms in which to present the cultural uniqueness of his speaker’s voice. Instead, like many of the authors discussed here, he utilized the idea of speech, the metaphorics of voice, and renovated generic forms to create an impersonation with which to understand the effects of colonial encounters on an increasingly interconnected planet. In this instance, Bowles adopted the dramatic monologue to devise a frustrated call-and-response, an incomplete, one-sided conversation that satisfied the persistent desire among eighteenth-century readers to be addressed by an exotic speaker. There is an explicitly political dimension to this choice of the dramatic monologue. A contemporary of Bowles, Joseph Cottle, a Bristol poet and the printer of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s and William Wordsworth’s 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, placed Abba Thule in dialogue with his son in his poetic version of this
Bowles chose the monologue to capture the deleterious impact on Pacific culture of European contact, which takes away Abba Thule’s son and removes his sound from him. Uncompleted calls thus become a trope for the sinuous currents and counterflows of global travel and colonialism that often are themselves intercepted or arrested midstream, to the detriment of indigenous populations.

Bowles’s poem reaches English-language readers, intending to excite their pity and sympathy with the father’s cries of “my son, my son” and with his exclamatory weeping. The circuit of speaking and hearing between Abba Thule and his son, interrupted by the vast distances, is completed instead by readers, who are recruited by the poem’s dramatic address to be the recipients—the audience—of what was intended for Lee Boo. What does it mean to “hear” the voice of Abba Thule that was intended for Lee Boo but is diverted to us? That eighteenth-century authors employed subaltern voices raises questions about how we are supposed to understand ventriloquism and impersonation in relation to forms of subject making. Postcolonial criticism has extensively theorized the dangers of scholars’ desire to recover subaltern voices and reconnect them with those texts that claim to represent them. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak even wonders what is at stake when we ask subalterns to speak in the first place. The attempt to discover subaltern speakers in the colonial archive, she asserts, demonstrates the desire for the “useful fiction” of a “self-consolidating other” who appears from the archives, like a ghost, just at the moment when it is needed.

I agree with Spivak’s cautions; in fact, as I have pointed out in preceding chapters, we will not find any actual voices within any of these texts. Yet, because the concept of voice underwrites our understandings of individuality, interiority, and personhood (especially political personhood), even in forms ostensibly resistant to European subjectivity, an analysis of how authors experiment with poetic voice, and how it evolves as a result, offers us fertile terrain for exploring the role of ventriloquism in colonial discourse. Additionally, it allows us to reassess how we read eighteenth-century British impersonations of foreign speakers for evidence of colonial agency. To what degree does it matter if these texts are not authentic (or authenticated) enunciations of subaltern figures or resistant nationalists? Can we recover subaltern subjects from European impersonations of their voices? Is it possible to advance an anticolonial agency through European imitations of colonial subjectivities? How compromised is the anticolonial representation if its speaker is not an actual colonized subject but a ventriloquized one? Is this fictive subject so compromised that we must declare it an extension of British imperialism?
One valid set of answers to these questions would insist that these evocations of oral voices and impersonations of foreign speakers are instances of outright appropriation that have been pointed to for years as the motor of colonial discourse and imperial policy making. In this reading, these evocations and impersonations are not translations of oral performances or the voices of actual subalterns like Abba Thule—whose name cannot even be agreed on by his English authors—and therefore should be separated from all the different kinds of enunciations we could study in the presence of better archival evidence. Appropriation is a misrepresentation of others, limiting the opportunities for them to represent themselves. This view of impersonation as solely disruptive asserts that imitation is always an asset to British colonialism at some fundamental substratum, even if authors critique or resist it. From this perspective, our time would be better spent attempting to rediscover the texts of native speakers and explaining those voices rather than comprehending texts that impersonate them.11

Conversely, the printed voices and literary impersonations analyzed here complicate our still rigid dichotomy of voice as either imperial projection or recognition of unalloyed oppositional figures. We need to acknowledge more readily that there is continuity between these two positions while considering some of the ways that colonial impersonations both construct and constrain the experiences of indigenous or subaltern subjects. I suggest that we see these impersonations of foreign speakers and imitations of oral voicing as elements of a reconceived colonial archive. To do so would further expand discursive boundaries and retool our interpretive techniques, permitting us to reexamine projection, virtualization, and voice as modes of colonial reading. This view does not regard the colonial impersonations described here as a reliable historical archive, if that term implies authenticity or verifiability. Instead, such an archive is designed from the inauthentic: it is a set of associated stories and characters, virtual projections and appropriations that circulated through British society, near and far, during the eighteenth century. To read this archive of the inauthentic not only expands our sense of the colonial archive but also relates historical beings with their numerous virtual and literary companions who are constructed and given voice in English-language poetry and travel narratives. From this vantage, these impersonations of non-English voices constitute colonized speakers and contribute to this archive in significant ways, especially when they usurp sovereign native subjects and replace them with their own representations.

Untangling the literary forms of impersonation provides an opportunity for further understanding the multiple exchanges enacted by the adoption of foreign voices. Striving to describe a middle range between colonial complicity and
anticolonial native resistance can be found in a host of British textual practices akin to resistant colonized subjects but clearly not produced by them. The conferral of voice and the personification of speakers introduce powerful if slippery hints at subjectivity. Fashioning the illusion of being addressed by alien subjects in their own voices was clearly an act of appropriation and of virtualization by European authors. Nevertheless, it established an unstable yet reciprocal intimacy among readers and fantasized colonial voices. This is why the literary text is aptly poised to register types of anticolonial thought that are complexly intermixed with imperial power. Reading such texts closely and situating them in global cultures unite intimate moments and relationships—especially evocations of bodily effects like the voice that occur through generic adaptation and formal innovation—with more virtual and imaginative considerations, such as ethnic and national belonging, shared reading, persona, and other techniques involved in the formation (and constraint) of subjectivity.

Representation, Srinivas Aravamudan counsels, “should not be read as politics tout court, but as vicariously so,” especially with colonized subjects who are both European projections and “beings leaving stubborn material traces even as they are discursively deconstructed.” Reading for certain tropes of representation opens “the discussion of a wide range of representational and rhetorical techniques used by metropolitan cultures (sometimes erratically, at other times systematically) to comprehend the colonized.” The archive of the inauthentic refocuses our attention on the vicariousness and virtuality of these impersonated colonial voices and the politics that comes with them. From these residues, which stand beside and in place of indigenous voices, we may be able to reconstruct the obfuscated picture of colonial agency as it is mutually constituted. Confining ourselves to repeating the impossibility of recovering “authentic” voices involves losing a level of richness that could expand our study of subalterns. Bowles’s depiction of “Abba Thule,” for example, is composed from elements that resemble those of Gray’s last Welsh bard, Macpherson’s Ossianic speakers, and the Brahman bards of late-eighteenth-century Anglo-Indian poetry. If we are unable to read these affiliations, we neglect the deep affinities among groups—Welsh nationalists, Brahman impersonators, Pacific islanders—that worked against disciplinary regimes of British imperialism, even though each of them functioned within it and was affected by it quite differently. We might note how these poems and their elaborate literary impersonations insinuate that their authors understood the invented nature of these voices. These writers’ innovative poetic practices correspond with an equally innovative cultural politics of borrowing, exchange, and collaboration.
Recuperating the archive of the inauthentic therefore requires that we continue to press upon the contours and function of the colonial archive. Recent debates about the colonial archive have theorized its positivistic history and have tried to comprehend its limitations. I suggest that we will find refreshed possibilities if we combine techniques like virtualization and retroactive reading with these new theories of the colonial archive, in the process discovering alternate routes backwards to subjectivity and agency. As Jenny Sharpe notes, resistance too often is equated solely with possessing an “oppositional consciousness,” which is difficult for scholars to determine because we cannot know the intentions of individual subjects and because agency is always a negotiation and is often compromised. Anjali Arondekar likewise calls for a theory of archival reading that moves away from the idea that discovering an object leads to formulation of a subject, that if we read a body or a text we can somehow recover the person who authored it. We must “work with the empirical status of materials even as that status is rendered fictive,” Arondekar explains. Reading the archive as providing us not with empirical truth but with narratives will necessitate that we engage with all the difficulties and advantages wrapped up in textual interpretation. Betty Joseph pursues such a strategy in her call for a “globalized reading of the transnational archive of British rule,” not to “excavate the past” but rather to reveal the “arenas, agendas, and subjects that are hidden when history is told one way or another.” She rejects the argument that we need in our research to portray the native speaker as a “sovereign subject or nothing” at all. Joseph’s method of reading proposes that literature can function as a supplement to the “official” archive. By focusing on the use of intertextuality, citation, and quotation in the official archive, she argues, scholars can imagine what is absent and who remains uncertainly reported in its pages.

Throughout this book, I have remained acutely aware of impersonation as a mode of virtualization along the lines that Aravamudan, Arondekar, and Joseph describe. I have sought these material traces and signs of resistance in literary form, in the allusive collaboration between Wales and English literature, the intimate publics of Scottish nationalism, and the impersonation of Indian voices in English poetry as an exponent of colonial politics. Preserved in poetic form and activated by it, we can hear the virtualized voices of native speakers shaped by metropolitan cultures and we can listen to the distortions of those voices. In reading these voices, I have sought to describe the transformations in genre and style that make the mediations culturally intelligible and politically vibrant to English audiences. In short, I read these impersonated voices as powerful instances of virtualization that can be submitted to the procedures of
retroactive reading. By thinking through how voices are made in a text and how alien speakers are impersonated, we might broaden an already existent avenue through which to comprehend the mechanisms of British colonialism and the effects it has on colonized subjects. I suggest that the production of virtual and colonial speakers in English-language texts is thus a form of resistance housed within the dynamics of affirmative colonial discourse and in the practices that created colonial space and systems of regimentation. These texts have been neglected for too long, either because we assume that they do not have anything to say to us or because what they say is perceived simply to reinforce notions of European cultural superiority. What appears to be a substantive problem is in fact a methodological one, causing us to discount evidence by classifying it as not actually evidence at all.

It is time to reexamine the sinewy and uncomfortable connections between appropriation and collaboration, authenticity and inauthenticity, as a way to describe the link between colonized subjects and the inhabitants and descendants of colonizing countries who appropriated their voices. In this type of reading, we might see that a material trace of subaltern resistance to colonialism exists within the ventriloquism of British authors. If we can tactically suspend our attempts to differentiate between the rightful possession of cultures and vernaculars and their theft by ostensibly inappropriate authors, we can investigate more closely the networks of formal and aesthetic experimentation that both supported colonialism and gave voice to the debate about its consequences. Ventriloquism, therefore, was not always an instrument of colonial co-optation, of anglicizing, of domination. Voice instead was transpersonal, in much the same way Adela Pinch has argued that sentimentality and feeling were seen as transpersonal in the eighteenth century, roving contagiously among individuals, with an agency that traverses texts. Transpersonal voices were associated with specific bodies and persons but were also detached from them, impersonated, and then satirized, celebrated, mourned; they were continually revised and distributed throughout the print marketplace and across oceans as virtual representations of themselves. Voices leapt from one person to another and connected disparate persons and locales while communicating between them. Of course, this was not a new technological or cultural condition in the late eighteenth century. To some extent, all textual voices are transpersonal because they are citable, able to be set in new contexts. But the portability of voice as a printed product increased during this period, due to the confluence of literary, economic, and social factors, all of which impelled the self-conscious experimentation with printed poetic voice discussed here.
This is not to suggest that we should suspend our attention to appropriation as a venue from which to theorize European colonization, or that the study of English-language literature is always best able to advance postcolonial thinking. The shift that this kind of reading requires is fragile, because the possible interpretations are highly fluid and open to misunderstanding. Nonetheless, one of the many consequences of reading the archive of the inauthentic is an awareness of the global aesthetics of printed voice developed throughout this book. While English literature was being constituted through the collaboration of traditions and speakers in Wales, Scotland, and Britain’s overseas colonies, it was also being harnessed as a means of theorizing practical resistance to colonialism. These movements were happening simultaneously and were dependent on one another. Uncovering eighteenth-century experiments with poetic voice provides not only an additional tool for illuminating the contradictions in British colonial texts from our present position in history, but it also further reveals the benefits of performing retroactive reading on new colonial archives. These archives, and the way we read them, can be tied to actual speakers who imagined resistant political possibilities and practices, “including those not yet realized or realizable in their own historical moment.”20 While these historical moments will always remain tantalizingly out of reach, I hope that by embracing the possibilities latent in the virtual, the vicarious, and the performative—indeed what we think of as inauthentic and forged—we might be able to conjure new critical practices for the future.