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Introduction

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH READERS were anxious to learn and master the English that was being standardized throughout the century—so much so that they made grammar books bestsellers and, when they could not afford Samuel Johnson’s famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) in its entirety, bought it in serial form, week by week.¹ As deportment and manners, often most immediately discernable in one’s language practices, played an increasing role in establishing class status, knowing, speaking, and writing a standard English mattered more.² Yet eighteenth-century men and women also exhibited a fascination with words and phrases that fell well outside of polite, improving texts. They thumbed through Francis Grose’s popular *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, where they found words such as “IDIOT POT, the knowledge box, the head” and “RANTIPOLE, a rude, romping boy or girl, also a gadabout dissipated woman.”³ They collected provincial terms, as Joseph Banks’s sister did in her neatly written list that includes the entry “Coggle, pebble,” and read dialect dialogues in which provincials shouted insults such as “ya blow-monger baarge!”⁴ They scooped up William Falconer’s dictionary of nautical language and eagerly struggled through his poem *The Shipwreck*, with its many technical terms, such as “topping-lift” and “nittles.”⁵ If the naughty words excluded from proper print seem far afield from harmless regionalisms and technological jargon, what they share in eighteenth-century print collections and representations is a tantalizing obscurity and an association with the “common people,” an intersection *Strange Vernaculars* explores.

Scholars have long discussed the printed texts that helped standardize English, and the relation of these texts to the formation of a British national identity.⁶ Less studied have been print representations of languages attributed to the “common people,” variously defined—of the street, of dialect-speaking regions, of the workplace—representations that traded in opacity and puzzlement, yet also developed the notion of a national vernacular, adjacent to the

developing standard.⁷ *Strange Vernaculars* examines the glossaries, novels, poems, plays, and songs that represent often-baffling terms shunned by representations of a standard English—terms that complicate the story we have come to tell about the rise of English and the British nation it helped underwrite.⁸ These works, which I call print institutions of the vernacular, reveal how strange and estranged languages, even or especially in their obscurity, came to be claimed as British, making for complex notions of the nation and the strangers who composed it.

That the vernacular is in many ways strange is a less-surprising notion when we remind ourselves that, as Michael Warner has observed, nations are a way of “organizing strangers.”⁹ The strangers of modernity are not foreign outsiders but, necessarily, those within one’s national midst, compatriots. Britain, as James Vernon writes, was “the first to experience the new social condition of modernity, namely living in a society of strangers.”¹⁰ While much of the material discussed here falls before what has been called the “great transformation,” the free market’s erosion of social ties and conversion of society into an assemblage of strangers, and it often takes forms different from those of the Romantic “stranger syndrome” David Simpson has analyzed, it attests to an awareness—and sometimes creation—of strangeness within Britain throughout the eighteenth century.¹¹ In the Preface to his *Dictionary*, for instance, Samuel Johnson’s characterization of the “strangers” responsible for the “transformations”—and estranging—“of a language” shifts, in a few sentences, from foreign merchants to anyone who invades the seclusion of an uncivilized, illiterate tribe: any member, that is, of a modern nation. The reckoning with—and sometimes construction of—diversity in eighteenth-century representations of language allow us to observe the “sense of otherness far more profound and more unsettling than has been previously allowed” within Britain itself, upon which Saree Makdisi has remarked.¹² That sense of otherness, in the form of linguistic obscurity, permeates the printed works instituting a national vernacular in the eighteenth century.

That linguistic otherness can be disquieting, literally so in the printing of strange languages that attempt to reproduce the audible difference of odd words through phonetic intonation, as in the cant phrase “rumbo ken” (a pawn shop) or the provincial scolding expression “’chell baste tha’.”¹³ Such representations of “noise” make apparent the extent to which language is not a two-way system; there is a third element, the interference or static that must be cancelled out.¹⁴ Indeed, the establishment and exclusion of such noise is the dynamic underwriting one model of communication. The representations of language under study here, however, suggest a model that moves between exclusions and inclusions, with the excluded “noise,” sometimes defining community by way of contrast, but those same strange sounds also sometimes seen as making up separate languages and communities that must in turn themselves be incorporated within the nation.

The audible and visual otherness in these texts, then, is also disquieting in the sense of being disturbing, as it represents strange languages increasingly not those of the “outsider” but those of the “common people.” While Britons were strangers to each other in many senses—including as immigrants, practitioners of different faiths, followers of divisive political parties, gendered beings—the strangeness I pursue in this book is the strangeness troublingly pressed by the very concept of the “common people.” Strange languages, whether those that simply varied from an emerging standard English or those of particular occupations or even those of criminals, came to be ascribed to the “common people” in a kind of vernacularization of these languages. To put this differently, print institutions of the vernacular made room for the “common people” within national culture, but only after representing their language as strange. Criminal cant, a coded language imputed to scheming thieves that slowly transmuted into something akin to our idea of slang in the course of the eighteenth century, is perhaps the best example of this process of vernacularization, making strange terms stranger—and British. The 1725 *New Canting Dictionary* heaps scorn on cant terms such as “BUGHER, a dog,” or “FLEECE, to rob,” castigating them as particularly pernicious because they are the words of dangerous foreigners, “Gypsies from Bohemia.”¹⁵ By 1785, however, Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* reveled in the strangeness of these terms, yet lauded them as national, a sign of “British freedom of thought and speech, arriving from and privileged by our constitution.”¹⁶ Tying languages that defy the norms of standard English—strange languages—to a rhetoric of English liberty, Grose and others make curious, sometimes even inscrutable, words into signs not of underworlds or amusing outliers but of Britishness itself. Today’s sense of slang—a lingo trafficked in by inventive, streetwise strangers, but also, intriguingly, part of “our” free, living language—emerges in this period and is in part shaped by this refiguring of criminal cant.

Provincial languages, too (perhaps surprisingly, given their seeming connection to the places of Britain), were presented as strange, outsider tongues, yet on those terms also reclaimed as British. A sixteenth-century commentator described the languages of different regions as those of the “stranger . . . worthie to be derided, and scorned.” In the early eighteenth century an instructor in English language was typical in his description of provincial language as “jargon . . . almost unintelligible.”¹⁷ Yet by the end of the century Samuel Pegge would esteem provincial words as “free-born,” and critics writing on dialect poetry endowed its strangeness with a purity now lost to standard English and with a deep connection to place.¹⁸ The very strangeness of provincial languages also came to seem a guarantor of their historical value, a sign of connection to national ancestors, forebears who had established British liberty. This historicizing basis of revaluation was to make depictions of provincial languages especially important to later national tales and historical fictions as

they worked the terrain between the familiar—a wooden spoon, a cup—and the strange provincial terms that named them.

Even the technical speech of mariners, such as “tackle yards” and “bowsprits” (described in one early account as “Greek to a cobbler”) shifts in valence over the eighteenth century to become the oddly sentimental language of “our tars” fighting for British freedoms.¹⁹ The texts instituting the vernacular continuously turn strangers into familiars, even as they charge familiars with an enticing strangeness. In his study of lyric obscurity, Daniel Tiffany has pursued “the pleasure of cruising the unknown in a text” that is inherent not simply in elite literary but also in vernacular poetry, in “slang, jargon, or dialect.”²⁰ For Tiffany, the communities such obscurity helps form are “subcultures,” some version of “canting crews” (underground bands of criminals), their “canting songs” appearing from the sixteenth century through the present like a “verbal spring . . . passing through literary history” (156). *Strange Vernaculars*, alternatively, traces the structures by which eighteenth-century print representations of odd, enigmatic languages tie them not only to “infidels” but to emerging conceptions of the “common people.” While this book considers curatorial representations of strange languages—Daniel Defoe representing criminal catchphrases or antiquaries collating provincial terms—it also takes up the writings of provincials who were themselves deploying what they called “dialect,” and of mariners salting their poetry and novels with dense sea jargon. Yet it raises skepticism at claims that this writing was that of active subcultures. Instead, it traces how such writers responded to a dominant, vernacularizing discourse that had already positioned them as strange and placed them nationally.

In making them British, many print representations of the obscure languages that came to be associated with various sectors of the “common people” could not be said to be simply moments of clandestine resistance, Tiffany’s “infidel” languages. Nor, however, are these print representations only part of a process of homogenizing the strange, what Makdisi calls a “domestic Occidentalism”: an ordered, British uniformity that works in tandem with the production (and disciplining) of the strange in colonial Orientalism (10). The print dialogues of provincial languages, published depictions of sailors’ jargon, and dictionaries of cant and slang that appeared, as Makdisi notes, alongside dictionaries of Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit did not merely translate these languages into English but imbued them with a compelling sense of foreignness, even while claiming them as British.

To be sure, readers brought their own proficiency and ignorance regarding diverse languages to the texts representing them, but these texts, especially imaginative works that put these languages in the mouths of narrators and characters, also gave readers cues for how to think about those languages, inviting puzzle-solving pleasure, comic amusement, aesthetic delight, and sen-

timental affect. Makdisi explores how, in the nineteenth century, “the weaving of more and more people and ultimately the national population into a putatively homogeneous ‘we’” took place through translating social difference into universal, recognizable terms (ix). The “we” of eighteenth-century Britain, however, is predicated in part on vernacular languages that are made strange and often remain so, oscillating in their print representations between British and quasi-foreign.²¹ The legacy of these representations might be found in the criminal language in *Oliver Twist*, spoken in domestic settings but also starkly dangerous—for the domestic settings are those of criminal gangs. We find it, too, in the sentimental and vaguely sinister quality of provincial language as depicted in such works as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, in which the provincial is part of the British landscape, but a troubled part: “‘Wuthering,’” Brontë’s narrator explains, “being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather.”²²

Such representations are as much about estranging the domestic as they are about representing the strange. They bestow upon the familiar and the low enchanting and sometimes frightening qualities. Crucially, eighteenth-century writing initiated and developed a vision of a porous relationship between the merely “common” and what we might designate as “deviant.” Ned Ward’s tellingly titled *The London Spy* (1698), for instance, casts familiar London scenes, including coffee houses and taverns and their languages, as secretive sites, available only through furtive peering into strange worlds. Its descriptions of the least-glamorous pockets of London make them shimmer with quasi-gothic mystery, even if only for a moment in an otherwise ribald and humorous text. The “spy” fascinates readers with an illumination of the threshold to Billingsgate—“a gloomy cavern; where, at a distance we saw Lights burning like candles in a Haunted Cave, where Ghosts and Goblins keep their Midnight revels.”²³

This surveillance fiction, observing unfamiliar or defamiliarized worlds, is, as Srinivas Aravamudan has shown, a mode of Enlightenment Orientalism. It is a mode that modulates not only representations of the foreign but also of the domestic, but when directed toward the domestic, it does not always, as Aravamudan argues “collaps[e] into innocuous voyeurism.”²⁴ Instead, British writing about the domestic at times adopts modes that, like Enlightenment Orientalism’s treatment of the foreign other, strategically preserve a sense of “contrasting and essential cultural attributes” in their depictions of the common people (64). Captain Bland’s *York Spy* offers another compelling image of this startling sense of the strange difference of the otherwise common: “[P]eeping in at a Key-hole, we saw Book-keepers, Journey-men, and Apprentices, and their Taudry Margaretts kicking up their Heels to a Scotch Trump, and looking as . . . Wild, as so many Tarpaulins just Landed from Barbadoes or China.”²⁵ Tinged with the foreign, these “common people” take on other-

worldly qualities, a pattern continued throughout the century, perhaps most famously when Robert Burns in “Tam o’ Shanter” conferred upon Scots farm-women the supernatural qualities of witches at an unholy Sabbath.

Strange Vernaculars demonstrates that much of the work of estranging and translating the “common” happens at the level of language. Ward’s Spy’s encounters with common yet odd figures, such as tarpaulins (sailors) and fish-wives, are marked by obscure, riddlelike language—various low groups, it seems, are knowable, but also known as different, by the very strangeness of their language. The spy explains how street “Tatterdemalions” he encounters offer to “say the Lords-Prayer backwards, Swear the Compass round, give a new curse to every step in the Monument” (37). A “Drunken Tar” calls out to an inn owner, “you horse tardly spawn of a fresh-water lubber, why don’t you . . . induct me to my cabbिन that I may belay myself. . . the devil damn the ratlins” (43). Watermen on the Thames cry out what sounds to the spy like a bemusing question—“Scholars, Scholars, will you have any Whores?”—when they are only asking about “scullers” and “oars” (49). Sometimes the very sounds of the vernacular—the languages of fishmongers, sailors, street musicians, night watchmen—are reduced to mere noise, no longer recognizable as English or even human language but “croaking” (32), “squalling” (33), “bawling” (40) racket in an association of the obscurity of the vernacular with the sounding body that I track across this book.

The Spy, like glossary compilers and dialect poets, authors of criminal fiction and maritime writers, indulges in the pleasure of odd language. He slings his words and phrases like pay-for-view freakish displays—slanglike, then, as the origin of the word “slang” was, at least as George Parker claims, “to exhibit any thing in a fair or market, such as a tall man, or a cow with two heads.”²⁶ In making a novelty of language in order to sell it, commercial print representations of “common language” alienate it in ways not so far removed, perhaps, from the hawkers Ward describes, peddlers who isolate and sing strings of language—as in “Hot Bak’d Wardens” (pears)—to move their wares.²⁷ On the pages of his book Ward himself represents with italics the sound of the cries: “My ears were so serenaded on every side with . . . the melancholy Ditties of *Hot Bak’d Wardens* and *Pippins*, that had I had as many . . . Ears as Fame, they would have been all confounded, for . . . nothing could I hear but noise.”²⁸ Ward enlists classical allusions to position jocularly those recurring fragments of everyday life embodied in the sounds of hawkers, but that is only one of a series of estrangements. Print mediates voice, which the Spy then recasts as “noise.” Crucially, in Ward’s description these snippets of peddlers’ cries oscillate between “melancholy” and mere “noise,” between sentiment and non-meaning, inclusion and exclusion, in a dynamic that informs institutions of the vernacular throughout the eighteenth century.

The images that comprise the London Cries, of course, singled out sounded language as the distinguishing trait of the hawkers whose images they sold.

Interestingly, it is at the turn of the seventeenth century that particular series of “Cries of London” that featured individual hawkers and their cries began to appear. These “underscored but also promoted . . . the new visibility of commoners,” as Sean Shesgreen has shown, and, we might add, audibility, as their cries become their metonyms.²⁹ In a complex vernacularization of the languages of the street, the prints made “commoners” and their sounded language visible, alluring, and claimable as British in a graphic, reified version of their “cries” available for purchase, and they remain ubiquitous to this day in guest-houses hoping to convey a sense of Britishness. Throughout the century the “Cries” became “increasingly identified as an indigenous genre about a British city and its British inhabitants” (90), in a process that both estranged and familiarized British “commoners” and their languages—and that might serve as a template for the vernacularization of various languages I am describing.

This dual estrangement and familiarization takes place at the level of represented sound: the Cries emphasize the auditory in the captions that reproduce the calls of the peddlers announcing their wares, such as “Ripe Strawberries” or “Golden Pippins.” Some Cries were even printed with musical notes.³⁰ In his adaptation of Jacob Amigoni’s print *Golden Pippins*, G. Child amplifies the distinct sound of the apple seller in captioning the image “M’st ye ha some Golden Pippins” in a font as outsized as the shouted call.

Markers of speech—phonetic representations of sound, contractions, apostrophes—take on an unusually formal character here, as both title and caption of the engraving, in an expensive graphic image that also, nonetheless, gestures toward the lowly print ballad form. While, as Sean Shesgreen has noted, Amigone’s image suggested a sentimental relationship between viewer and the “commoner,” Child’s more linguistically based image elicits an erotic one, particularly a low erotic of the street. “She’d Education in the Mint, / When Whores and Thieves did most live in’t,” the verse lines beneath the image explain, and tell us that Nell “hopes to have . . . her Lilly Breast . . . prest.” Significantly, her voice is the charged site of these erotics: “Her trill Voice, we’ll think we hear, / Tells you the soundness of her ware”—less pippins in this account than her sexualized body. The voice reveals what the straw cap, barrow of fresh apples, and simple nose-gay belie—that the seeming innocent rustic is not what she appears, but is rather shot through with criminal history and illicit sexuality. Like the familiar empty Southwark field on which she stands, which routinely transformed into the site of riotous festivals and a lively September market, the common Nell has a charged other side.

That strange and estranging sense of the language of the “common people” informed the period’s generic experimentations, such as its mock pastorals, ballad operas, and early fiction, in ways that we have not yet fully estimated. Consider John Gay’s mock-georgic *Trivia*, with its surveying vision of London that nonetheless dramatically defamiliarizes language that is unmistakably English. Both insider and outsider himself, commentator and the object of his



FIGURE 1: Jacob Amigoni, "Golden Pippins," 1739.
Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

commentary, the speaker claims that his wide-ranging depiction of a free “Britannia” is inspired by a nationalist impulse: “My country’s love demands the lays” (2). *Trivia*’s peripatetic speaker walks a cityscape that reveals strange scenes, yet promises “not to wander from my native Home” and to avoid the “tempting perils of foreign cities,” such as “Paris . . . Where slavery treads the streets in wooden shoes.”³¹ The speaker is on national turf, yet the cries in particular that make up the poem’s vernacular soundscape are alien and alienating, sometimes menacingly so, in part because of a slippage between their singers’ shifting identities, sometimes merely common and sometimes criminal. The familiar if unpleasant “shrilling strain” of the ballad singer, for instance, turns out to be a diversion “to aid the labours of the diving Hand,” or pickpocket (58); daylight “begging tones” (62), the counterfeit cries of the nighttime thief. In other cases, the cry is infused with the uncanny. A mock epic story within the poem describes an underworld goddess’s supernatural aid for an orphan, the gift of a shoeblick’s gear, which precipitates as it estranges familiar sound: “His treble voice resounds along the *Meuse* / And *White-hall* echoes, *Clean your Honour’s shoes.*”³² A sound naming a service or item for sale shifts from its status as direct object to become the subject, as when the coal-seller disappears in the line “*Small-coal* murmurs in the hoarser throat.”³³ The sounded fragment, “small-coal,” severed from and supplanting its speaker, takes on a life of its own.

The peculiar disembodiment of the decidedly embodied speech of the cry takes a horrifically literal form in the mock elegy for Doll the apple peddler. She falls through the ice of a frozen Thames, “her Head, chopt off, from her lost shoulders flies: / Pippins she cry’d, but Death her Voice confounds, / And Pip-Pip-Pip along the Ice resounds” (38). To institute the vernacular—established here as recognizable cries connected to the speaking bodies of the “common people”—is also to estrange it, to decouple it from those speaking bodies, to make it obscure or without meaning at all (“pip-pip-pip”), to reduce it to pure, repetitive, but also highly charged sound, even to confound the human and the inhuman, as indeed all dolls do. Such print evocations of haunting lifelike sound give the lie to the notion that enlightened modernity suffered “hearing loss” and an accompanying disenchantment.³⁴ Gay’s ocular—print—display of acoustic phenomena is characteristic of some institutions of the vernacular, beguiling in its entwinement of odd sight and sound but also unnerving in the brutality associated with their imbrication.

The gruesome violence of Doll’s decapitation is matched in its comparison in the next lines to Orpheus’s beheading—“So when the *Thracian* Furies *Orpheus* tore, / And left his bleeding Trunk deform’d with Gore / His sever’d head floats down the silver Tide” (38). The voices of the disarticulated Orpheus and Doll continue from beyond death, and yet are transformed and transforming in that crossing: “His yet warm Tongue for his lost consort cry’d; / Eurydice with quiv’ring Voice, he mourn’d / And Heber’s Banks Eurydice return’d” (38).

If from that liminal space between two worlds, life and death, Orpheus's voice, ambiguously, causes Heber's Banks to return Eurydice, recalling the former powers of his voice, Doll's voice, while comic in comparison, has its own mesmerizing powers.³⁵ The resounding "pip-pip-pip" breaks through the barriers between visual print and sound, between low and high or general, between death and life, moving readers as the cry moves between the familiar and the terrifically strange.³⁶

Gay was not the only poet to figure the poetic institution of the vernacular as Orphic in its challenge of transforming low, particular language into language that might travel between irreconcilable worlds. In *The Shipwreck*, Falconer describes his efforts to make poetry of the technical argot of the sailor:

Not more advent'rous was th'attempt to move
Th'infernal Pow'rs with strains of heavenly love,
When faithful Orpheus, on the Stygian coast,
In sacred notes implor'd his consort lost;
...
Than mine, in ornamental verse to dress
The harshest sounds mechanic Arts express.³⁷

By the time Falconer was writing, in 1762, the comic implications of the comparison had dropped away. There is no humor, only pathos and violence, in his claim that bringing sea language into the mix of British poetry—and into the national vernacular—was an effort as profound and with a result potentially as moving as Orpheus's imploring song.

Similarly, poet Josiah Relph, who also attempted to call up sound on the page through phonetic representation of Cumberland dialect, compares the effect of his provincial spinster's singing to that of Orpheus striking his lyre.³⁸ The motif of the voice that sounds from beyond the grave is especially apposite when provincial languages of the present were said to be the English of the departed—of long-dead national ancestors. Figuring as Orphic the transmutation of various languages—cries of street hawkers, mariners' shipboard talk, provincial "dialects"—into the vernacular grants those languages an otherworldly quality, their movement to a "general" print space nearly impossible, but the necessity and power of that movement inarguable.

Why necessity? In part because an inclusive model of the polity demands representation of the whole range of society, even the "low" and "mean." This reevaluation of the low was part of a long transition from an aristocratic, exclusive understanding of the body politic to a British national polity based on rhetorics of inclusion and liberty. Moreover, as contemporary political rhetoric heralded Britain as "the most tenacious of liberty among all the civilized nations," the English language itself was viewed as both sign and product of that liberty.³⁹ John Barrell writes that "continuously related to the idea of the characteristic freedom of the English people is a notion of the 'freedom' of the

English language,” a formulation John Locke helped usher in with his theory of both political society and language as contractually based.⁴⁰ Barrell and Olivia Smith document the ongoing hostility to vulgar languages—those of trades, of provincial speakers—despite notions of a contractually based English. Nonetheless, representations of such “vulgar” languages did make their way into the press, and occasionally writers linked such appearances to English liberty. Grose, as we have seen, tied the inventiveness of English slang to British freedom. And even before Locke, James Howell had invoked the rhetoric of liberty to describe proverbs as “the peeples [*sic*] voice / . . . Coin’d first, and current made by common choice . . . / . . . Free-Denisons . . . / They can Prescription plead ’gainst King and Crown.”⁴¹ The strangeness of the languages of the “common people,” foregrounded or even instituted in many texts, was re-contained in these claims regarding the inherent British liberty that these languages supposedly indexed. Sometimes this structure of recontainment was significantly supplemented by contrasting free Britons and their language to the unfree: not only continental Europeans, with their dictatorial language academies, but, notably, increasingly racialized Africans, with their even lower pidgin languages, who appeared as slaves owned by those liberty-loving Britons. At other times speakers of the vernacular were themselves figured as beggars and slaves, posing a distinct model of liberty altogether.

The paradoxical representations of outsider languages that are also English might be related to the double duty of the words “common” or “vulgar,” which in the eighteenth century shared an overlap in meanings, shuttling between the sense of general and of low, even as both were being defined and codified.⁴² Thus, in his *Dictionarium Britannicum* Nathan Bailey defines the term “vulgar” as “common, ordinary, general; also low, base, mean, vile.”⁴³ It is precisely that movement between general and low language that *Strange Vernaculars* investigates, specifically the ways in which readers were invited to think of various strange and low languages as “vernacular,” meaning as Bailey defined it “peculiar to the country one lives in or was born in” even as the term could also mean “proper” to that country.⁴⁴ Institutions of the vernacular position speakers of “low, base” language among the strangers of the nation, but the notion of the vernacular also makes them familiars, so much so that their low language is the property of the whole country.

The vernacular, then, was the language one possessed by dint of living in a particular place, even if it was at times low. That low element could be alienating—“base” and “vile”—and tantalizingly obscure, making the vernacular at times strange even if it was also one’s own. To put this slightly differently, estrangement is inevitable when, as John Guillory puts it, “‘common’ language seems to efface social stratification by making language itself the vehicle of a common national identity.”⁴⁵ While Guillory traces the “literary” language that reinstalls difference at one end of the social spectrum, this book tracks representations of “common” and “low” language that make it a site of common national identity but also differentiate the other end of the social spectrum.

The status of the “low” and its relation to the “general” took various forms in eighteenth-century Britain. During the Civil War, Cavaliers had rallied around traditional, if lowly, popular rites, songs, and other cultural practices as part of their campaign against Puritanism in a political association that lasted into the eighteenth century.⁴⁶ Yet by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Joseph Addison’s *Mr. Spectator* repositioned the low as worthy of general appreciation outside of such party political terms. He remarks on his “Delight in hearing the Songs and Fables . . . most in Vogue among the common People” and justifies his pleasure in this demotic fare through an aesthetic capacity shared by all, high and low alike:

[I]t is impossible that any thing should be universally tasted and approved by a Multitude, tho’ they are only the Rabble of a Nation, which hath not in it some peculiar Aptness to please and gratify the Mind of Man. Human Nature is the same in all reasonable Creatures; and whatever falls in with it, will meet with Admirers amongst Readers of all Qualities and Conditions.⁴⁷

Mr. Spectator views approval by the common people as a yardstick for what would—and should—“please and gratify” everyone; only the affected would miss the enjoyment of songs beloved by the “rabble.” Addison’s is a democratizing vision—it is because “human nature is the same in all reasonable creatures” that the rabble can serve as a gauge.

That the low are close to “nature” is a commonplace of the period, a commonplace not always accompanied by Addison’s democratic turn of linking nature to a common “human nature.” Instead, the low could also be viewed as rough-natured, deprived of interaction in polite society in which, as Lord Shaftesbury had written, “We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of *amicable Collision*.”⁴⁸ For Horace Walpole, their unrefined proximity to nature was what distinguished low domestics from “princes and heroes.”⁴⁹ For Walpole and others, the low, as “nature,” might not have shared a sensibility with the high, yet they were worth representing as part of a social whole. In the second preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, he legitimates his inclusion of the low language of his servant characters: “My rule was nature. However grave, important, or even melancholy, the sensations of the princes and heroes may be, they do not stamp the same affections on their domestics: at least the latter do not, or should not be made to, express their passions in the same dignified tone” (10). Shakespeare, himself undergoing canonization in the period as national “bard,” provided one important basis for Walpole’s and other British writers’ inclusion of low language. Walpole wrote, “The great master of nature, SHAKESPEARE, was the model I copied. Let me ask, if his tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* would not lose a considerable share of their spirit and wonderful beauties, if the humour of the gravediggers, the fooleries of Polonius, and the clumsy jests of the Roman citizens, were

omitted, or vested in heroics? Is not the eloquence of Antony . . . artificially exalted by the rude bursts of nature from the mouths of their auditors?" (11).

As we see with the turn to Shakespeare, the value of representing the low was increasingly couched in nationalist rhetoric. For Walpole, the British willingness to represent such "nature" distinguished Britons, pitting them against the French and the neoclassical principles they espoused, most notably in Voltaire's attack on Shakespeare. And Addison's more general "human nature" was actually, it turns out, something closer to English nature. One of the "darling songs of the common People," the ballad "Two Children in the Wood," he wrote, is "the delight of most Englishmen."⁵⁰ As Bailey's definition of "vernacular," with its sense of a proprietary relation, suggests, it was not so much all of human nature as the "peculiar" character of one's own country that low and general populations might share. Addison's own use of the term (the one Johnson cites in his *Dictionary*) appears in a plea that war reportage draw its military terms not from a foreign, primarily French, lexicon, but from an "English vernacular," making salient the national stakes of the concept.⁵¹

Oliver Goldsmith went so far as to declare the low the true representative of the particular "genius" of a nation, writing that "in an estimate of the genius of the people, we must look among the sons of unpolished rusticity."⁵² This rethinking of the "unpolished" low was to some extent a function of contemporary political economy and its understandings of the "improvements" fostered by commerce, among them a cosmopolitan politeness that effaced national borders with a universal set of refined manners. The belief was that when the market "polished away the barbarism, rudeness, superstition, and enthusiasm of premodern societies," it polished away, too, the very particulars that constitute what writers were coming to understand as a national culture.⁵³ At that point, as Goldsmith writes, "the polite of every country pretty nearly resemble each other."⁵⁴ The impolite, the low, alternatively, retain the "genius of the people," enabling a perception of national culture. As Natalie Zemon Davis has argued, an emerging theory of "primitivism" characterized "the people's customs and speech [as] old, naïve," offering "an ordering principle, and thus a small step toward an anthropological concept of culture."⁵⁵

If all nations flourishing in an age of commerce were subject to polishing homogenization, attention to the low was particularly pressing in Britain because of a political discourse that identified its model of mixed government as distinct from that of other nations. The British polity, according to some, was unique, a model nation that produced a wide range of "manners." As David Hume wrote:

[T]he ENGLISH government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them. And the great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to dis-

play the manners peculiar to him. Hence the ENGLISH, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such.⁵⁶

English national character is to be found in the singularities its mixture produces. An English diversity in manners was understood in some circles to be a source of national strength, as Wolfram Schmidgen has illuminated, explaining that “mixture could explain how the many generated the one and how the one depended on the active and continuous involvement of the many.”⁵⁷ This revaluation of the many has implications for thinking about the low, for comprehending Britain would mean knowing its breadth of manners, including low languages. George Parker’s glossary of “low” terms, the one in which he introduced the word “slang,” invokes this model of a mixed nation to legitimate his attentions to the low. He insists that “general discoveries . . . with regard to English men go a very little way toward an explanation of a people so various in temper, manners, and behavior as the English,” and that studying “low” society and its language is necessary for a full “knowledge of his country.”⁵⁸

If, for Hume and others, the “liberty” of the English generated the diverse manners that compose their national character, eighteenth-century nationalist rhetoric increasingly saw liberty itself as the product of a constitution that foregrounded the role of the people.⁵⁹ For this reason, as Kathleen Wilson has argued, “populist beliefs and discourses were a crucial plank in the construction of national identities and consciousness,” even if most of “the people,” of course, did not yet have any real political voice.⁶⁰ Within certain political rhetorics, representing “the people” honored both the origins and consequences of British liberty. It is, perhaps, from both of these angles that Britain, as John Barrell writes, saw itself as “a form of polity which enable[d] and demand[ed] consideration of the whole of society,” and this led to “a progressive relaxation of the embarrassment at writing or reading about objects, occupations and people regarded at the start of the century as too ‘low,’ ‘minute’ or ‘mean’ to be worthy of literary attention.”⁶¹ This might help explain why eighteenth-century imaginative writing was, as Margaret Doody has noted, distinctive in “reproducing colloquial speech,” in “catch[ing] verbal manners, the tones and habits of speech appropriate to the character’s rank [and] background.”⁶²

Writing and reading about the “low” and “mean”—be they the “rabble of the nation” or “unpolished rusticity”—are, however, as we have noted, continuously accompanied by a sense of distance and obscurity, vernacular languages as much an alienation as a production of “knowledge of one’s country.”⁶³ There is a sense in which movement, travel to remote places to discover the low and common, is crucial to its production. Mr. Spectator, already distanced in the very position of “spectator,” arrives at his recognition of the value of the songs of the “common people” through a process of spatial estrangement. He begins

his passage on their delighting value by positioning himself as a stranger in a strange land—that it was, “When I travelled” that “I took a particular Delight in hearing the Songs and Fables . . . among the common People of the Countries through which I passed.”⁶⁴ The songs of the “common people” must be made strange, must be encountered from outside and as foreign, to be revalued and to revalue the “common people” themselves. Similarly, in a separate recounting, it is when Mr. Spectator leaves his urban haunts for “any house in the country” and “pr[ies] into all sorts of writing,” that he meets with the “song of the common people” that gives him so much pleasure.⁶⁵

It might be literal outward travels or figurative downward descent into the nefarious underworlds of London, but some form of alienating expanse divides the writer and reader from the vernacular in order to institute it. Parker, for instance, introduces and explains the term “crap-merchant” (meaning hangman) as he regales readers with tales of his daring sojourns to “night-houses” with “doctor Goldsmith,” where he heard the term.⁶⁶ Jacques Rancière gets at this sense that the “discovery” of the common people is always a function of establishing distance, of a definitive estrangement. It is a “traveler” who is able to “recognize, in its very foreignness . . . the proletariat in person.”⁶⁷ Think, too, of eighteenth-century writings’ use of the convention of the observing foreigner—Lien Chi Altangi, the Chinese philosopher of Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World*, or the Indian of Tom Brown’s *Amusements Serious and Comical Calculated for the Meridian of London*—to present back to a reading public some version of itself, including vernacular English.⁶⁸

Positioning the diverse, low, and common as “otherworldly” imparts a compelling draw. If language could be a means of attaching readers to the nation, the seeming transparency of an authoritative “official” English, in contrast, might fall short of such affective pull. Standard English might instead be counted among the technologies of abstraction—technologies needed to negotiate a nation of strangers—that might also dialectically produce and revalue the idea of “local” cultures and their concomitant languages.⁶⁹ While cultural nationalism is predicated on the idea and language of the (constructed) particulars of daily life, on the details of customs, on local things found within the horizons of the nation, that language must also possess an esoteric quality. As Viktor Shklovsky has suggestively argued, the alternative, clear prose, “eats away at things, at clothing, at furniture.”⁷⁰ One might say the very stuff of life, the very stuff offered up as signs of everyday culture, disappears in the supposedly neutral objectivity of any standard language. Alternatively, strange and estranged languages precipitate those particularities; they “make perception long and ‘laborious’” (5). Drawing attention to and reflecting on the strangeness of language and the particulars it names helps crystallize—or, more accurately, produces the sense of—details of life, evoking feelings, perhaps of affiliation, perhaps of desire for the thrillingly proximal but also provocatively obscure.

For Shklovsky, such estrangement is the condition of poetry, which he defines as “impeded, distorted speech.” He sees dialect language as a crucial device of that distortion.⁷¹ But the language of English poetry—which, as Guillory points out, did not develop a *Hochsprache*—had little distinction from that found in fiction. And fiction, of course, represents dialect, too: the “coom, coom” (come, come) of *Roderick Random*’s Northern coach driver, or a farmer’s use of “nerst” (next) in *Pamela* slow down the reading just as they articulate linguistic particulars of British life (a coach driver telling passengers to get in, a farmer too humble to stand near a fine lady).⁷² Eighteenth-century fiction also estranges language in other ways, including the display and explanation of words attributed to the vulgar. Defoe’s *Colonel Jack*, for instance, describes the punishment of Jacobite rebels, briefly interrupting the narrative to explain: “transported, as ’tis vulgarly Express’d, to the Plantations, that is to say, sent to Virginia.”⁷³ Later in the century, Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, while clearly warning readers off the ungrammatical English of characters such as the Braughtons, also introduces and explains vernacular terms and phrases. The title character writes, “we have been a *shopping*, as Mrs. Mirvan calls it . . . to buy silks, caps, gauzes” and notes that after the trip, “my hair is so much entangled, *frizzled* they call it.”⁷⁴ Such moments incorporate and mimic the logic of the period’s new vernacular dictionaries and glossaries, isolating and explaining English words, both difficult and common, in a kind of forensic display that draws attention to, slows down, and partly estranges language.

Often the strange languages incorporated into early realist fiction also manage to have an affecting tug. Richardson’s *Pamela* conveys the commonness of and readerly accessibility to that most British of heroines in her use of unusual provincialisms, such as “a mort of good things” or “their Clacks run for half an hour.”⁷⁵ Tobias Smollett’s Tom Bowling is “an utter stranger” to the “ways of men in general,” and his nautical jargon is utterly strange as well. He comments, unselfconsciously, of his nephew, Roderick Random, “He’s new-rigged, i’ faith; his cloth don’t shake in the wind so much as it wont to do.”⁷⁶ The peculiarity of these characters’ languages, however, is part of what ties readers to them and what registers them as common Britons, an invocation of Britishness via eccentric speech. Roman Jakobson describes the paradoxical sense of this vernacular language, at work, too, in those vernacular aphorisms, proverbs. What supposedly belongs to everyone in the nation, what is common, is also often opaque—considered “personal property,” they are, he writes, also “endow[ed] . . . with puzzling vocables, recondite motifs, and inscrutable, challenging allusions.”⁷⁷

Although the use of the term “novel” to name the works of fiction in which these words appear might be premature—few authors would embrace the term for their own writing in eighteenth-century Britain—its application in the sense of “novelization” is helpful. Sarah Kareem has discussed the novelization that took place as eighteenth-century fiction adopted techniques to “make the

familiar seem strange . . . observing common phenomena as if they were rare phenomena,” and I would add that such defamiliarization also occurs at the level of language.⁷⁸ Kareem sees this fiction as “employ[ing] defamiliarizing devices to produce hyper-attention to the ordinary for aesthetic . . . ends,” but this concentration on low languages—to common sayings, to argots, to colloquialisms, to provincial speech—can work to different ends, from empirical to erotic. And the aesthetic itself might not be an end so much as a means to in-stitute a vernacular and its attendant cultural politics.

The realist novel’s depiction of odd language that is nonetheless English reveals its complex work of imagining the nation not through establishing sameness but by displaying, producing, and consolidating diversity. Eighteenth-century realist fiction renders suggestively unusual an array of vernacular languages that also represent Britishness, assisting readers in their imagining of strangers as familiars, but also of familiars as strangers. Paying attention to representations of strange language that are part and parcel of these works’ “realism” might help us answer Srinivas Aravamudan’s question, “What if a theory of realism were founded on the pursuit of dissimilarities rather than the recognition of sameness?” (21). Aravamudan contends that “the *English* novel ideologically recuperates fiction for the nation, thereby becoming the monolingual opposite of what [Mikhail] Bakhtin means by novelistic heteroglossia” (68).⁷⁹ As I have been arguing, however, that is only part of the story. When it puts fiction to work to represent the nation, the realist novel must also activate a sense of linguistic difference that it by turns flaunts and assimilates. The novel might not so much “expel” foreignness as redefine and reposition it, highlighting and sometimes producing, if only briefly, a sense of what is strange within the domestic itself. James Buzard phrases this dynamic in particularly helpful terms, writing, “To make the novel’s one-making labors *visible*, we have to emphasize the domestic diversities with which it had to contend but also which it had to mobilize—the internal differences that . . . had to remain active in any convincing and culturally ‘thick’ evocation of national unity.”⁸⁰

It is tempting to characterize the production and representation of the foreign within the nation as an internalization of colonial otherness, but such a move threatens to diminish the real otherness that also characterizes fellow “nationals.” To designate domestic difference as a mere internalization of some truly foreign difference “out there” leaves intact the idea that all Britons, prior to such internalization of the foreign, share a common culture, including a linguistic one. This, of course, is exactly how the myth of nationalism works. Instead, what are internalized, or, more likely, move back and forth between colonial and national locations, are the strategies for representing (and emphasizing) otherness.⁸¹ Taking to heart Aravamudan’s caution that there has been too much focus on “the novel’s novelty,” we might consider the implications of the fact that the English realist novel’s representations of domestic

otherness are not new but instead borrow from pseudoethnography, that key device of the Oriental Tale.

One result is the complex form of self-representation of diversity that Buzard names “metropolitan autoethnography” (7). He sees this writing as emerging in fiction only in the nineteenth century, yet its “determinedly self-interrupting form” (7) is in evidence in the narrative structure of the presentation of strange language in some eighteenth-century works. These at least anticipate that self-interrupting “pattern of narrative + digression + narrative + digression” (40). This can take the form of narrative asides that pause to offer an odd word and then explain it, dictionary-like. They may be more lengthy digressions, as in the perplexing phonetically spelled epistles meant to convey the dialects of Win Jenkins or Tabitha Bramble in *Humphry Clinker*, passages that slow down the reading as they turn the common language of these letter-writers into riddles. While the other letter writers of *Humphry Clinker’s* epistolary fiction offer straightforward description of the places and manners of Britain, these pose a troubling digression. In one missive Win writes of how “a mischievous mob of colliers, and such promiscuous ribble rabble, that could bare no smut but their own, attacked us . . . and called me *hoar* and *painted Issabel*.”⁸² Buzard argues that in nineteenth-century narrative, “self-interruption” is a means of “safeguarding, salvaging, and recovering cultural territories” (40), the origins of the notion of culture itself. That notion might be emergent in the eighteenth century, however, with the interruptions and slowing down around language in some English novels suggesting an incipient formal strategy of national cultural writing. In its oddness, its wandering in meaning, this style affirms Ian Duncan’s identification of “the linguistic homelessness that lies at culture’s origins,” perhaps especially at those moments attempting to establish “cultural territories.”⁸³

We might consider, too, the narrator’s lexical digressions in *Tom Jones*, as when he interrupts the narrative to explain the phrase “Preservers of the Game”:

This Species of Men, from the great Severity with which they revenge the Death of a Hare . . . might be thought to cultivate the same Superstition with the Bannians in India; many of whom, we are told, dedicate their whole Lives to the Preservation and Protection of certain Animals, was it not that our *English* Bannian, while they preserve them from other Enemies, will most unmercifully slaughter whole Horse-loads themselves.”⁸⁴

Fielding’s quintessentially English novels pause frequently to explain such common English terms. His satirical humor, however, already exposes the linguistic homelessness of the culture. Explaining an English phrase through comparison to “Bannians of India” not only turns to the foreign and imperial but returns to English distinctiveness, the domestic preservers of game far worse than the “Bannians” in their indiscriminate and selfish slaughter of ani-

mals. In characteristic fashion, Fielding overloads and complicates any straightforward definition, already suspicious of the claim that the strange—or the nation—might be made fully knowable to all on the same terms. He is one of several writers skeptical, as we shall see, of institutions of the vernacular.

In these and other works of fiction of the period, italics suggest both that the term or phrase is somehow odd, not general, and also often invoke the sense of a spoken voice, the narrator or character quoting another's speech. Such representations, I want to emphasize, are not Bakhtin's heteroglossia, suggesting "a struggle among socio-linguistic points of view."⁸⁵ Rather, they are instances of novels' tendency to "organiz[e] heteroglossia", to place, in the sense both of locating and hierarchizing, diverse languages (315). Thus, while eighteenth-century fiction, as Bakhtin notes, "is an encyclopedia of all strata and forms of literary language," more important is its "highly specific treatment of 'common language' . . . the verbal approach to people and things normal for a given sphere of society, as the *going point of view* and the *going value*" (301, italics in original). Bakhtin argues that the fiction writer "objectifies" this common language, and that this objectification is also an instituting of common language, fitting "social diversity of speech types" into specific relations to the "going point of view." We might refer to this process as the institutionalizing of the vernacular. Crucially, this institutionalization does not allow diverse language to remain diverse—they are continuously positioned as they are brought into the fold of a national "common" language through a variety of means that *Strange Vernaculars* analyzes.

As he describes how readers are invited to a sense of distance from or proximity to the languages represented on the page, Bakhtin characterizes this relation not as static but as "to and fro . . . sometimes distant . . . sometimes not" (302). This movement was less a liability and more a part of the mystique and allure of institutions of the vernacular. Even when words underwent intra-linguistic translation, either with narrative asides or footnotes or even dictionary definitions, the charm of difference did not always dissipate. As Margaret Doody observes of this period, "the notion of words so unfamiliar as to need explanation had its own appeal. Words were allowed their alien presence, and were not to be simplified back into familiar language."⁸⁶ Although Ward's *Spy* positions himself as illuminating the multiple strange worlds that make up Britain's capital, for instance, he explains those worlds in a language that is itself loaded with distracting, obfuscating language, as when he describes people drinking "sott colored niny broth" (15). Later in the century, provincial print "dialogues," although they offered glossaries, left some words, such as "whau," undefined.⁸⁷ At such moments, many readers were left in the dark, a darkness that continued to inform eighteenth-century representations of vernacular languages, whether in the multimeaning criminal jargon of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Thomas Chatterton's antiquated parlance, or Burns's synthetic thicket of dialect.

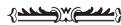
Allowing words their alien presence sometimes generates sublime effects. Edmund Burke argued that words, unlike painting, do not raise clear images in the mind, which is what makes them a fitting medium for the sublime, for “In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions.”⁸⁸ If this is true of language in general, it takes an exaggerated form in obscure language, whether in the crowded figures of Milton’s poetry or the opacity of the unfamiliar “low” languages imputed to the vulgar that were becoming part of the vernacular.

Indeed, Burke positions the vulgar as sublime object in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, a text in which, on occasion, as Karen Swann notes, “the vulgar have charisma.”⁸⁹ For Burke, even those “songs of the common people” that Addison had revalued are a testament to the sublime powers of language and obscurity: “Among the common sort of people . . . their passions are very strongly roused by a fanatic preacher, or by the ballads of Chevy-chase, or the Children in the Wood, and by other little popular poems and tales that are current in that rank of life. . . . poetry, with all its obscurity, has a more general, as well as a more powerful, dominion over the passions, than the other art” (56–57). Such moments of vulgar obscurity make the languages of the vernacular not objects of mastery, to be clarified and familiarized, but sites of seduction. For Burke, however, this is a seduction to be avoided. In his discussion of the songs in which the “common sort of people” take pleasure, their response serves not as Addison’s indicator of universal (or national) appreciation but as an elucidating but distancing analogy: as Chevy-chase is to the common people, so elevated poetry is to the elite. In tracing how Burke attempts to ward off the threat of the “vulgar sublime” by insisting on associating the sublime with elevated experience, Swann writes, “if all men are as the vulgar in preferring obscurity to clarity—the implied advice is attach yourself upward” (19).

Institutions of the vernacular, however, invite readers to attach themselves downward, and one of the ways they do so is through generating sublime effects from moments of incomprehension. As Tiffany writes, the sublime might just as plausibly be grounded in “the social misunderstanding of demotic speech” (8), at which point, “instead of reinforcing the traditional association of sublimity and elevation, lyric obscurity may trigger a variation of the sublime associated with the abject: a vernacular sublime” (45). Such an aesthetic experience is another means of negotiating the low-as-strange within national imagining. Burke recognized that obscurity lent itself to certain suspect forms of power, a means of duping the credulous, usually the lower classes who were taken in by, for instance, figures such as the “fanatical preachers” in the quotation above. And these dangers worked in both directions. He had also argued that “all men are as the vulgar in what they do not understand” (57)—that some readers’ incomprehension of certain low languages put them into the position of the unknowing vulgar. That relation of unknowing, as I have been arguing, was part of the draw.

Strange Vernaculars also considers how some writers deploy obscurity strategically to exploit those relations of knowingness and credulity at work in the vernacular sublime. Authors from John Collier to Robert Burns use provincial languages in this way. They resist a vernacularization of languages that would locate them in stable geographies of place and class. At their most radical, these writers stage-manage obscurity as a mark of authenticity in order to undermine the very connections between specific place or class and the idea of a language of the “common people” altogether. They expose the idea of a “common people” who make up the nation by detonating the strange, making it multiply meaning, and sometimes just making it up.⁹⁰ Their heirs are figures such as John Clare and James Hogg.

The writers under study, whether instituting or questioning the idea of a national vernacular, engage what Ann Wierda Rowland refers to as “strategies of dislocation to locate a culture.”⁹¹ Some of this was literal in the dislocations of oceanic maritime empire that brought new ways of valuing and imagining the local. The most dramatic contemplation of the dynamics at the heart of the idea of the vernacular might be William Falconer’s *The Shipwreck*. Falconer packs his georgic/epic poem with the technical terms of naval workers, explaining them comprehensively in diagrams and footnotes. The mariners and their material technical world, however, are violently destroyed in a storm at sea, becoming literally subliminal. Just as it seems a specific argot might become the property of all readers, the particulars it calls up disappear in un-navigable depths, reiterating the impossibility of knowing the whole, the enticing promise of the idea of a national vernacular culture. The raging ocean into which they disappear is an apt image for the violent erasure of actual language practices and particular relations involved in instituting the vernacular.⁹² It reminds us that if there is anything like vernacular language, its obscurity belies the notion of the common. And it remains unknowable in its sheer multiplicity.



Although not a linguistic study, but rather a study of the cultural work of print representations of “vernacular” language, *Strange Vernaculars* has benefited immensely from a range of historical linguistic studies of the period.⁹³ From Martyn Wakelin’s enumeration of the three main categories of what he calls English “dialect production”—social, regional, and occupational—I take the structural organization of the book.⁹⁴ Part One explores the wide body of print representations of language supposedly produced by what Wakelin would call the “social” category—not only subcultures and underground criminal societies, but also merely “low” and “vulgar” social groups. In the eighteenth century, languages once attributed to organized illicit subgroups—“cant”—began to appear in unprecedented collections of vulgar and slang terms, and

were even celebrated as a sign of British liberty. I ask how cant, long a symbol of a fallen post-Babel linguistic diversity, its speakers a deep-seated threat to the nation, came to symbolize, in some circles, British freedom. What change in thinking allowed cant and merely vulgar languages to be grouped together? What role did that shift play in the institutionalization of vernacular English? I examine how myths of cant's origins—as the double-tongued language of canny migratory slaves, as a language wandering not only in space but also in meaning—came to figure the mobility and shape-shifting associated with a new modern British subject, for better or worse. Early realist fiction featuring cant-speaking, polyglot protagonists who continuously encounter and explain strange language helped to institute the vernacular through a repeated initiation of its readers into the strange. The shifting narrative point of view in relation to those who speak these languages models fluid readerly attachments. The one site of disattachment, however, is the racialized slave, a disassociation that makes cant-speakers, increasingly conflated with merely vulgar speakers, fully British, free speakers of a national vernacular safely distanced from its imputed origins in slavery and criminality.

There were, of course, skeptics of the idea of a vernacular language that might consolidate the nation through a revaluation of the low and common. I track some of those responses, particularly in the writing of John Gay and Henry Fielding, which burlesques claims of language's ability to organize meaning, structure class, or consolidate the nation. For them, cant undermines British liberty by violating the ancient (linguistic) contract on which liberty is based. And if part of the allure of the new print representations of vernacular was its sometimes riddlelike locutions—both cant and colloquialisms, sometimes represented together, could, after all, be opaque in meaning—these writers seized on that opacity and its tendency to divide rather than consolidate readers and speakers. Cant's proliferative figurative qualities, its innovativeness, might more accurately represent the world than does the contractual standard language—and that is a problem, a point Gay and Fielding emphasize through their texts' linguistic and stylistic layers, which mix folk ballads and high opera, criminal biographies and classical allusions to generate endless and centrifugal meanings. Late-century compilations of slangy vernacular drew from the humor of these burlesque writings but defused the complexity of their language, facetiously tying the inventive wit of the “common people” to the gendered liberties of the freeborn Englishman. In these works, a place is made for vulgar language in the vernacular but only after being firmly located as the language of the low taken up by their well-heeled male counterparts.

Part Two of this book considers shifting representations of “regional” languages, from the foreign-sounding patois of hostile neighbors to the homey terms of sentimentalized compatriots. In this move to characterize provincial

languages as quintessentially British, they, unlike ceaselessly adaptable and wandering cant, seem fixed to particular places and past times. Poems, songs, and a new genre, the print dialogue, represent provincial languages as the peculiar tongues of remote rural regions, yet also as part of a composite Britain and its verbal lore. At once designating intimate and mundane particulars of rural life, but also appearing as strange ciphers, provincial languages in these works are filled with outré terms naming humble particulars, technicalities of labor, and crude aspects of the body. The grotesque bodies and oral (mis)pronunciations inhabiting these texts counter a developing understanding of English as a rational, disembodied medium. Naming local particulars, the obscurity of these languages is the guarantee of their authenticity, which also makes for uncanny and gothic effects. As I show, provincial writers themselves, from John Gay to Josiah Relph, Andrew Brice, John Collier, and Ann Wheeler, playfully engaged this poetics of opacity in their representations of supposedly sentimental and familiar, yet also strange, tongues. They assert provincial political virtue but use a concocted, synthetic language to do so, undoing the reassuring ties of place and language even as they seem to reinforce them.

The strangeness of provincial languages derived not only from their distance in space but their remoteness in time. They were also prized—and made part of the vernacular—as the remaining fragments of the language of national forefathers, connected to the liberties they established, and living connections to the now-strange language of such national writers as Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare. Provincial languages thus sometimes became available for sentimental attachment through what I call the anachronization of the vernacular. In this reckoning with estrangement over time, images of spectrality emerge. Provincial writers responded to this anachronization, Burns by offering parodic responses to gothic figurations and Chatterton by producing the effects of anachronism through artificially antiqued language.

Part Three turns to representations of “occupational” language through a consideration of mariners’ jargon, tracing how it became part of the British vernacular. I argue throughout the book that mobility, across Britain and further, helped produce and shape notions of the local and the vernacular. In the maritime language of poems, accounts of voyages, seafaring novels, nautical glossaries, and popular naval songs, the locale that oceanic itinerancy generates is that of the ship and its seamen. Works such as William Falconer’s hugely popular poem *The Shipwreck* or Tobias Smollett’s *Roderick Random* invite sentimental relations between readers and liberty-loving (and liberty-defending) sailors through their technical language. The things they name, however, are often absent or disposed of. Just as low and cant terms become vernacular when their speakers are figured as orphic, and provincialisms become vernacular in their association with the nation’s dead, maritime language

becomes vernacular when its objects and its speakers are consigned to oblivion. Strange not only in their captivating opacity, the vernaculars instituted in eighteenth-century print were perhaps most strange in the elegiac dynamics upon which they depended, the real and imagined loss they seemed to document.

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