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INTRODUCTION

# Vernacular English

READING THE ANGLOPHONE

## *Elsewhere, or The Problem of English*

In the early 2000s, after almost a hundred years of stuffy great books fare, the Department of English at the University of Delhi in India revamped its curriculum. It hoped to undo the damage of colonial education practices and make English literary studies more relevant—less alienating—to the postcolonial Indian student. Accordingly, my peers and I began the degree program in English literature with one course on Victorian literature and another on Indian literature written or translated in English. The two literary traditions charted English between the colonial formations of the English canon at the height of imperialism and its postcolonial rebuttals. The inclusion of literatures from Indian languages in English revealed English in and through other languages, and radically redefined what English literature could mean in India.

This hard-won curriculum was a step worth celebrating, and I am fortunate to have benefited from it. But it also laid bare a problem.<sup>1</sup> In class, we talked about the subversion of colonial paradigms, about how Indian writers negotiated English, and whether it was adequate to India's political and linguistic complexity. But even as we read upper-caste writers, rarely did we discuss how caste and ethnic politics predating colonialism shaped different receptions of English in India. I wondered if the department felt that English literary study in a former British colony could only be a colonial compulsion. By anxiously returning to the colonial origin story, by naming the breach Indian writers and readers were condemned to stitch over, did the new curriculum distance English from India?<sup>2</sup> Did it parse

the relevance of English literature to the postcolonial student as her continued resistance to it?

The worlds inside and outside the classroom also felt different. Inside, the tenets of postcolonial studies held sway. We knew to read English suspiciously, against the grain. It was the language of British colonialism, fit only for critiquing the erstwhile empire. Outside, English was the language of Indian bureaucracy, political solidarity, global media, and the most contentious debates around class, caste, and access to education. India had just conducted nuclear tests, its economic growth had been steady, and call centers were mushrooming all over urban centers. English was everywhere, whether one knew it as English or not. What felt jarring—what made an impression on me—was that we read English only as a colonial language when it was also a language that all of us in the classroom lived daily. I often thought of the well-known Derridean aporia—the colonial language that is not mine but not foreign. But I wondered if English was also *our* language, made so with as many compulsory and aspirational encounters as there were speakers. This familiar ordinariness of English loomed menacingly outside the classroom but never made its way inside.

What became intelligible as English, and how? Could the use and presence of English be understood only as the continued operation and success of a former colonial power? English has existed for three hundred years in India. And yet, it continues to be studied only as a problem to be solved. It remains the language of imperial hegemonies from elsewhere. Scales, spaces, and sources located elsewhere are used to explain its everyday affects and politics.

Years later in an art show in New Delhi, I found a visual reference for this problem of English. For one of her works in the show, *Disparately Yours*, Anita Dube, an Indian contemporary artist, covered cheap steel wire with velvet and twisted and tied it to write out one of Franz Kafka's parables in English. Placing one full grate-like parable on top of itself several times, she created thick metal armatures. Looking at these pieces, it was hard to tell if the artist had written something or made a mesh of steely squiggles. Dube's laborious repetitive overlaying of text on top of itself transmuted Kafka's German into something primarily visual and tangible. As a German-language writer of the Jewish diaspora in Prague, Kafka's minority ethnic and religious identity was always at odds with his German. Dube's art practice gave that tension as well as the ambiguity and confusion of the parable a concrete form. The audience could hardly see the individual words to make sense of it; what remained was the uncanny density and materiality of language. Dube's work modeled how profusion

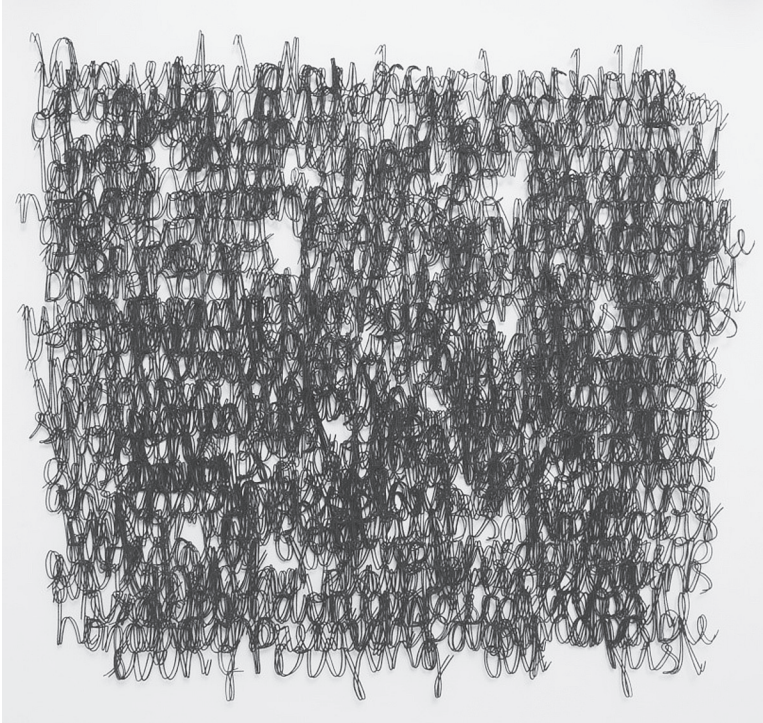


FIGURE 1. *Short Stories by Kafka—An Everyday Occurrence*. Steel wire covered with black velvet. Anita Dube. 2014. (Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.)

could make something at once self-evident and unrecognizable. Looking at these artworks, I wondered if perhaps something similar had happened with English in India. The English language itself had become so obvious and ubiquitous to us—in disciplinary debates in literary studies and everyday encounters—that we as scholars were unable to read it.

As I sat in her studio one January morning, Dube variously referred to this opacity of linguistic and textual excess as text becoming “noise,” “a thick curtain,” and “a jungle.” No matter what she wrote in her artwork, the audience noticed only the materials and the techniques: cheap wire, enamel eyes from temple statuary, raw meat, ink-saturated flat color fields, and velvet-clad found objects. These materials and processes were the artist’s way of “giving body to language” by asserting its location in the developing world and staging solidarity with its people. In another work, *Strike*, for instance, the titular word was painted in a bloody red and shaped by arranging ceramic eyes from Hindu religious sculptures.

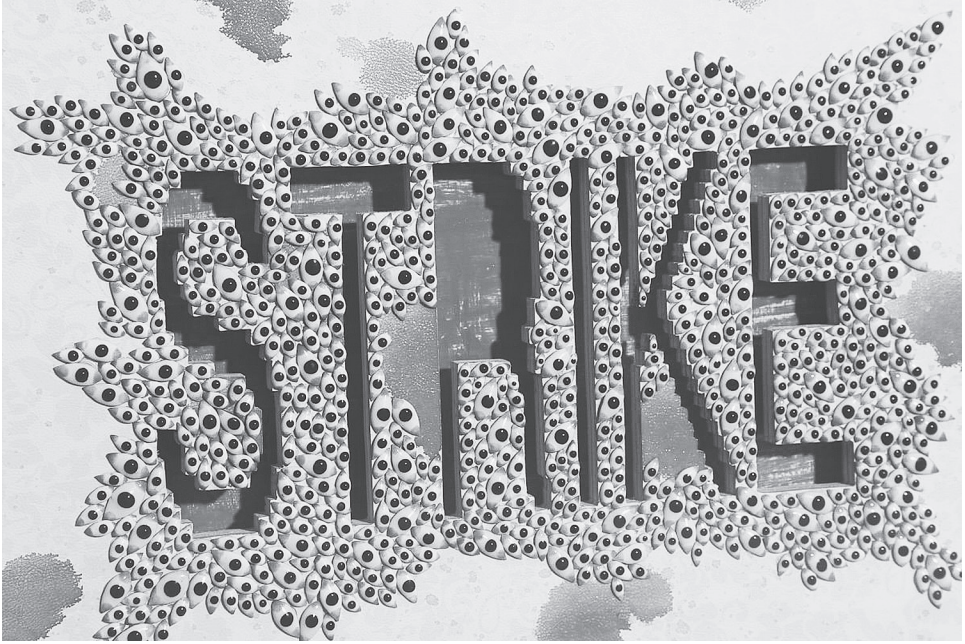


FIGURE 2. *Strike*. Enamelled votive eyes on painted board. Anita Dube. 2014.  
(Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.)

The eyes conjured the amoebic masses exhorted to strike and ascribed them divinity. The wrought body of language drew its meanings both from the laboring bodies who traditionally worked with those inexpensive materials and the beady-eyed deities. What was written and how it was written were both political choices that mutually transformed the other. To read the language, one also had to read the many bodies that made it legible.

Today, the English language has achieved a similar excess and opacity. English is the undisputed global language whose reach, visibility, normativizing power, and capacity to assimilate foreign words rival every other language in the world. Ironically, this spread of English has made it a comparative cipher in contemporary scholarship, which is rarely considered a language with history and culture that isn't already global or colonial. As literary scholars, we have mapped newer and newer trajectories to expand our archive. Still, we have seldom probed English, the medium of our study, as it facilitates comparative scholarship. This oversight has contributed as much to the perpetuation of a linguistic

exceptionalism as has the institutional neglect of other—especially non-Western European—languages.

This is not to say that scholars have not produced work that refutes the exceptionalism of English. Simon Gikandi, Srinivas Aravamudan, Jonathan Arac, Gaurav Desai, and Rey Chow have repeatedly urged scholars to account for the multiplicity of the very organizing principle of English literary studies.<sup>3</sup> In an ethnography of English literature in India, Rashmi Sadana has persuasively shown how English is no longer a language of the erstwhile British colonizer and has taken on a very different life in postcolonial India, which must be viewed in relation to other Indian languages.<sup>4</sup> Outside India, Moradewun Adejunmobi has shown that English does not spell a negative burden in Nigeria but appears desirably foreign and unintelligible in cultural forms like “World Music” and Nigerian video film.<sup>5</sup>

However, dominant strains in postcolonial studies and comparative literary studies—their forms, methods, archives, and conclusions—remain remarkably unperturbed by such scholarship. In fact, since the 2010s, with the decline of language programs in the United States, we have witnessed vigorous debates on the imperious and Orientalist role of English and what the title of Minae Mizumura’s 2015 book has called the “fall” of other languages.<sup>6</sup> Across the Anglophone world, discussions of the relevance, representational possibilities, and authenticity of English have such a long history that they have become, to quote Tobias Warner, “zombie” debates.<sup>7</sup> The verdict is insistent in these discussions: to read or write in English is to always be in the shadow of its colonial pasts and global presents. Both the unmarked neutrality of English as a scholarly medium and its much-remarked-upon expropriations as a global imperialist language perpetuate the absorptive logic of English.

Where India is concerned, numerous scholarly accounts of global literary successes, modernist internationalism, and call centers suggest that English is a language both from and directed elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The prized neutrality of English in the call-center economy further exaggerates English as a language of nonstop time, no place, and no people. It should come as no surprise that studies of global texts, movements, and industries suggest that English provides a foundation for exploitative global economies and disadvantages local languages.<sup>9</sup> In South Asian studies, English has mostly been written about in opposition to other Indian languages—as a scavenging discourse that manages and metabolizes other languages. Enduring is the dictum that the English language in India—and, possibly, everywhere else—has always done the same work. It advances the same

modern imperial and neoimperial logics. English is hegemonic and violent, insufficient and oppressive, elite and exclusive.

Depending on how you read them, the numbers also tell a revealing story about access, education, and what the novelist Aatish Taseer has called “the linguistic color line.”<sup>10</sup> At the time of writing, surveys conducted by the 2011 Census of India and the Lok Foundation-Oxford University show that of the approximately 1.3 billion people in India, only about 125 million consider themselves native speakers of English.<sup>11</sup> Of these, most people report English as their second language, often learned through formal institutions of education contingent upon one’s caste, class, and gender privilege. This relatively small figure, in a country of about twenty thousand different languages, reinforces English as the language of power, whose exclusivity could only hamper literary and political representational possibilities.

But if over 90 percent of Indians do not speak or understand English, how do they experience its ubiquitous presence? *Vernacular English* shows that numerous stories remain untold: stories that show how and why English in India is never simply an elite language of colonial and global power. Every day the English language accrues and exerts meanings beyond conditions of formal literacy. It courts emotions, feeds obsessions, shores up histories, and conveys ideas even among those who do not know the language. Now more than ever in India, English is seen on bureaucratic documents, billboards, clothing, and storefronts—and heard in political slogans, classes in spoken English, and Bollywood films. It circulates and commands authority not only in literary networks but also in visual and sonic discourses. The variety of (mis)recognitions, accents, and inflections that mark English chart desire and (un)belonging across class, ethnic, gender, and caste differences. This economy of literary, sonic, and visual English across languages and media—its use by people outside of traditional privileges of class, urbanism, and education—diminishes the authority of English as a language of global and colonial power. With such profound ubiquity, English demands newer ways of reading and conceptualizing language and power.

*Vernacular English* retells the story of English in India as the story of a people’s vernacular in a postcolonial democracy. It identifies two broad categories within this “people’s vernacular”—a political vernacular, used by the postcolonial state, and a popular vernacular that emerges amid varying degrees of literacy. It returns to disciplinary conversations with the argument that a language imposed from above is always remade in reception. The book highlights the adoption of English as one of India’s official



languages after independence, its role in public and private political protests against the state, as well as its wide circulation in popular media. Spanning the course of three centuries, this book looks for the English language in local, corporeal, and liberatory experiences. The meanings of a colonial and global English have always been shaped in relations—of alliance or opposition—to other languages, publics, media, and politics in India.<sup>12</sup> *Vernacular English*, literally, stages the proximity between what is considered vernacular and what is considered English—through the traces of one on the other. It follows how English lives in other Indian languages and media, such as Hindi literature, bureaucratic documents, language legislation, Bollywood and international films, and public protests. This book is especially interested in what happens when in its journey around the world, the English language faces those who see or hear it but can neither read nor speak it. By centering such embodied experiences of listening, watching, remembering, and speaking English, *Vernacular English* reimagines what is readable—and thus, knowable—about a language.

### *Vernacular Resolutions*

Both the term “vernacular” and the English language have been the subject of countless monographs, essays, and conferences in postcolonial and comparative literary studies. There is a good chance that seeing the two together in the title led you to reasonable conclusions about my object or arguments. Perhaps you thought of nonstandard uses of the English language. Perhaps the title seemed counterintuitive or even paradoxical given the popularity of “global English” and “global Anglophone.” In scholarship on India, English is considered an elite and global language, and vernacular brings to mind a quotidian and local register associated with modern Indian languages or *bhashas*. If there is a contradiction in the book’s title, it is intentional. It highlights a tension that makes vernacular a useful framework for the study of the English language.

The global spread of English brings the recognition, the fantasy, and the dread that all across the globe, people may share one language. Vernacular anticipates the coercive and liberatory potential of a shared commonality imagined in and through the English language. It clarifies the profound ways in which English circulates with the potential to make common; it also reveals the different kinds of literacies that encounters with English usher. In my use, the term “vernacular” is not a substantive name for a language. It describes intellectual and affective relations *between* languages, where the vernacular is at least, as Fiona Somerset and Nicholas

Watson write, “notionally in the more embattled position.”<sup>13</sup> The critical power of vernacular languages draws from the emotional weight of these relations.<sup>14</sup> No language is always and only a vernacular. To call English a vernacular is a way of historicizing its presence in the Anglophone world as well as a way of reading it. It names the affectively laden representative power of English, its imagined and desired capacity to speak for a people.

Having told you what vernacular English is, let me also clarify what it is not. Vernacular English does not name a special hybrid or dialect or local lower-case english that logs departures from a standard upper-case English in the mode of Enlightenment Orientalism.<sup>15</sup> The moral or physiological assessment of bad or rotten English is questionable, to say the least, and I do not wish to use it. Vernacular English is also not a strategy to provincialize English. It does not exemplify English in the colonies to pluralize (and unwittingly maintain) the standard English of the colonial metropole. Vernacular English is also not simply the suggestion that we consider English another Indian language. Instead, vernacular English is my effort to imagine language from different kinds and levels of literacies. It is a way of gathering the bodies that read, write, speak, and hear English, whether they are supposed to or not, whether they can or not, whether or not we as scholars recognize them as literate in English. Vernacular English is a way of recognizing that what seem nonstandard and hybrid englishes are the English language.

While the English language has had a rich vocabulary to characterize vernacular experiences and politics, literature scholars do not describe English as a vernacular today. Since the fourteenth century, the term “vernacular” has named a common experience of language. Writers and scholars alike have claimed languages and aesthetic forms as vernacular to create shared, demotic, vulgar, and natural experiences. But with the standardization of English as a racialized national language in early modern England, it spread across the colonized world as a language of national, colonial, and global power.<sup>16</sup> Imagining global literary history as a progression of six distinct literary ecologies—epichoric, panchoric, cosmopolitan, vernacular, national, and global—Alexander Beecroft shows that English has been a vernacular and has vernacular doubles. According to him, English was a vernacular language against Latin. But African American English or Haitian Creole, which are often considered vernacular languages, confirm English as a global language.<sup>17</sup> Even though these languages stand testament to the writers and users’ creativity, they only confirm the dominance of English. In literary studies and the world alike, English in its “standard” literary form seems to have outgrown the epithet of vernacular.

Particularly in comparative literary studies and postcolonial studies, vernacular has emerged as a veritable antonym of the English language. Common parlance associates the vernacular with a set of discourses of the local, folk, oral, bodily, unstandardized, common, and indigenous—all of which, Shaden Tageldin rightly notes, are “non-synonymous.”<sup>18</sup> As a result of these attributes, whether the vernacular describes a language, a sensibility, an aesthetic, or knowledges, it operates as a negative fallacy that is nondominant, adversarial, and oppositional. Postcolonial and comparative scholars often enlist a vernacular language to challenge the racist, colonial, and Eurocentric frameworks produced in English.<sup>19</sup> To borrow a phrase from Susan Koshy, “an unexamined logic of small and large” minoritizes and localizes the vernacular against global and transnational scales of power.<sup>20</sup> As a result, English is associated with colonial modernity, radical mobility, and communicability, while the vernacular is imagined as a language or textuality preceding modernity, local and untranslatable.

In the eighteenth century, the adaptability and copiousness of English—its covetous incorporation of different languages—was a symbol for the British Empire’s reach. In his study of eighteenth-century Anglophone culture and the rise of monolingual Standard English, Daniel DeWispelare writes that “both Englishness and the English language [were] singular because plural, multiply formed, and adaptable.”<sup>21</sup> The preeminence of English language and culture both lay in encompassing heterogeneity and consolidating wide imperial publics. Scholars of global Anglophone literatures and global English like Aamir Mufti, Rita Raley, Subramanian Shankar, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Ben Tran have noted this constitutive copiousness of English by describing it as a radically translatable and normativizing language.<sup>22</sup> Mufti and Shankar have specifically challenged the entitlement of this translatable and mobile English through vernacular languages that are imagined as more culturally and politically rooted.

Most clearly, in *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* (2012), Shankar has advanced vernacular as a broader category that stands in difference to the transnational, the global, the cosmopolitan, and the national. The vernacular, Shankar writes, resists systematization and abstraction; it remains “untranslatable” as an instance of “extreme cultural difference.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in *History in the Vernacular* (2008), Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee conceptualize vernacular history in terms of its difference “to critique and disturb” authorized forms of colonial and postcolonial modernity. They locate the vernacular as the opposite of colonial modernity when they frame their project as a search for history writing in India before the British intervention. To them

and the Subaltern Studies collective at large, vernacular has offered a way to access histories outside institutional frameworks of the colonial and postcolonial state.

However, scholars of vernacular history, aesthetics, and literatures do not only value the vernacular as local, intimate, indigenous, authentic, before modernity. They also use it as shorthand for other Indian languages. It is only by uniting these two unrelated registers that the vernacular—as a language and a position—can contest the dominance of Anglophone postcolonial studies. To name only the most recent publications, several dossiers, like “Literary Sentiments in the Vernacular: Gender and Genre in Modern South Asia” (2020), edited by Charu Gupta et al., “Translating Porn Studies: Lessons from the Vernacular” (2020), edited by Anirban Baishya and Darshana Mini, and “The Vernacular” (2020), edited by Subramanian Shankar, use “vernacular” to mean Indian languages against English.<sup>24</sup> In the introduction to “Literary Sentiments in the Vernacular,” the editors use the word “vernacular” to describe many things, like literary spaces and connections. Phrases like “vernacular literary spaces” and “vernacular interconnections,” while not explained, imply Indian languages besides English as well as an intimate register of action. The guiding impulse for all of these works is to bring attention to lesser-known and actively marginalized languages, cultures, and narratives.

The English-vernacular divide, at least in recent literary history, has consolidated over numerous debates about the place of English in the postcolonial world. The most famous is the debate between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe over the place of English in the postcolonial African literary imagination. Since the fateful Makerere Conference in Uganda in 1962, Ngũgĩ has maintained that English is always implicated in colonial histories and politics. According to him, it is impossible to imagine a decolonial politics in English. He switched to first writing in Gikuyu and translating himself into English. Achebe, on the other hand, held it was possible, nay necessary, to fashion an English which was at once universal and able to carry the peculiar experience of the African writer. He had been given the English language, Achebe wrote, and he intended to use it. In 1997, Salman Rushdie controversially claimed that the most important and strong body of literary work in India was produced in English and not vernacular languages. Rushdie’s statements led Amit Chaudhuri to argue that “English is not an Indian language in the way it is an American language; nor is it an Indian language in the way that Bengali or Urdu, for instance, is one.”<sup>25</sup> In the year 2000, author Vikram Chandra called out the “cult of authenticity” that made writing about India in English

“at best a brave failure, and at worst a betrayal of Indian “realities.”<sup>26</sup> In 2001, Amitav Ghosh withdrew his novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) from the Commonwealth Award because the category of “commonwealth literature” only recognized English-language works and not those from other languages. These dispersed moments shaped scholarly debates for years to come. These debates are charged—surfacing questions about choice, visibility, politics—and have led postcolonial comparatists to fix the vernacular as a political and affective locus of, if not authenticity, then immediacy, and pursue English as “global.”

The political rationale for distinguishing English from other Indian languages seems clear enough. Still, this accepted and principled opposition between English as modern/colonial and the vernacular as not modern/anticolonial is hard to sustain and counterproductive. The definition of a vernacular as regional, immediate, or native or even anticolonial, writes Tageldin, is “adumbrated by shadows of colonialism and slavery” and is a product of “imperial genesis.”<sup>27</sup> As scholars, we associate vernacular with regionalism and lack of power because colonial modernity constructed it as such to hierarchize languages and the people who used them. African American language practices, often described as vernacular, derived from British dialects and West African languages in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>28</sup> As a linguistic mode, vernacular encompasses the oral and nontextual because it is the product of colonial modernity, not because it is exempt from it.

In India, “the command of language,” as Bernard Cohn showed, was key to the consolidation of colonial power.<sup>29</sup> The imperial quest for efficient governance led Orientalist philologists to standardize native languages that would allow British administrators to speak to the people directly. These languages were standardized in script and grammar so that British civil servants could learn them for administrative purposes. Treatises, textbooks, and dictionaries were produced with the explicit purpose of making these languages knowable by the British Empire. Scholars of vernacular languages and practice who position these against Anglophone forms also show how vernacular language and literature developed by emulating styles and forms made familiar by colonial modernity.<sup>30</sup> Vernacular languages like Hindi or Urdu are an example of the conversion of Indian forms of knowledge into European objects. These languages do not necessarily stand against colonial languages but were often brought into existence by colonial effort.

In fact, this well-established history of vernacularization has also led, in some quarters, to suspicions about the usefulness of the term “vernacular.”

It carries the stigma of colonial intervention and the etymological meaning of the “language of the slave.” The casteist nature of public language practices predating colonialism has further deepened these derogatory meanings. When I presented early iterations of my argument, I received one consistent feedback: drop the “vernacular”! Indeed, Shankar pointedly notes “vernac” as a classist slur in his youth in India: “To be vernac was to be backward, gauche, naïve. It was the epithet with which, during my teen years in Bombay and Madras, you dismissed the kid from a distant village who, knowing no better, slicked his hair down with coconut oil, tucked in his T-shirt and spoke English with the wrong accent (all our postcolonial accents were wrong but some were wronger than others).”<sup>31</sup> The conception of vernacular as native or nondominant or oral is shaped by colonial and caste dominance, which blunts its power to launch effective anticolonial rebuttals. Vernacular is not a pure site of otherness that can be a seat of radical politics to repudiate and offer refuge from Eurocentric colonial, global, and national paradigms.

Yet, despite (or because of?) the compromised nature of any vernacular, writers’ use of vernacular language has also been a reclamation and assertion of power against a dominant tradition. To use vernacular languages is always a way to usher new literacies, readers, and writers in the literary establishment. Writing about colonial Punjab in South Asia, Farina Mir shows that despite the colonial state’s imposition of the vernacular of Urdu, the thriving public culture of the Punjabi language—enabled by print technology—contested the colonial vernacularization.<sup>32</sup>

Zooming out of India briefly, we see that manifestoes by figures as diverse as Dante Alighieri, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, Houston Baker, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. all share the common goal of calibrating new power relations between the dominant and the emergent sections of the society. Writers who used the vernacular democratized the potential of literature by creating new readers and writers. For instance, writing in a politically fragmented Italy of the Middle Ages, Dante sought an illustrious vernacular (*Latium vulgare*) both to rival Latin and to elevate Florentine above other Italian dialects. Chaucer and Gower wrote in a Middle English vernacular at a time when the dominant literary languages in England were French and Latin. Through their vernacular English, they transmitted Greco-Roman and European literature into English and shaped the English nation. Responding to the economic discontent of 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, these poets used their poetry to disseminate English, the language of the peasants, as cultural capital. At the same time, they also retained enough Latin glosses to give English a veneer of elitism and ensure that

not every person who knew English was admitted in the national polity. As a critical term, then, “vernacular” captures the twin dynamics of the assertion of a challenged people and their consolidation of power. Vernacular is not simply a nondominant discourse.

In the twentieth century, the Black vernacular tradition has reframed literary and cultural expression into an assertion of identity beyond geography and indigeneity. Here the etymology of *verna*, the domestic slave, takes on a literal meaning. Houston Baker used the vernacular to name the “living and laboring” conditions—the material conditions of slavery—in the United States. The new modes of creative expression, like the Blues, that resulted from these conditions were vernacular forms. Henry Louis Gates Jr. also drew on vernacular aesthetics “to confound a Eurocentric bias of literary theory” by reading African American literature through an American literary tradition and the Black vernacular tradition.<sup>33</sup> In each case, the claim to the vernacular was supposed to be, as Steve Botterill writes about Dante’s vernacular, “a declaration of independence”<sup>34</sup>—rooted in the legitimacy of human experience, its historical reality and geopolitical specificity. But while the Black vernacular tradition is very strong, it is marked by the question of whether, as Audre Lorde wrote, the master’s tools can ever dismantle the master’s house. One need only think of Frantz Fanon’s hostility toward the Blues as a “slave lament” that he said was “offered up for the admiration of the oppressors” to appreciate the political compromise of a vernacular.<sup>35</sup>

With such paradoxical historical entanglements and political overtures—its internalized shame and self-assertion, its weaker position and its bid for power—the vernacular makes it possible to assemble a thick description of language circulation, power struggles, and textuality. It presents a Möbius strip–like continuity from within the dominant system, rather than an objective vantage of neat opposition or unsullied indigeneity. As the common language that is standardized—by force or volition, in resistance or capitulation—the vernacular encompasses several contradictions. It refers both to oral cultures and to the written standards that name them. It refers to the particular experience as well as its abstractions, and can acknowledge aspirations within specific groups to commonality or a unified identity.

This messier modeling of the vernacular as a paradox can provide a greater purchase on English. It alerts us to a deeper history and more intersectional transmediations of English. Doing so illuminates how the meaning of a linguistic sign is socially produced. It pries open the space between *la langue* and *la parole*, between the individual utterance and

the signifying system. English often functions as an unmarked medium of literary scholarship, as if it itself is incomparable!<sup>36</sup> The discipline of comparative literature has turned to the vernacular to assuage its anxiety of Eurocentrism. Annette Damayanti Leinau writes that the vernacular has “accompanied Comparative Literature as an implicit conceptual frame,” where it guides determinations of Europe’s others. Vernacular is “an object of comparative promise.”<sup>37</sup> Its demotic energies—both common and everyday—have motivated philological comparatism, and its regionalism challenges the imperial expansion of comparative inquiry.<sup>38</sup> But, as a vernacular, English moves from being a comparative cipher to allowing for comparative plentitude.

The association of vernacular languages, aesthetics, and politics with lived experience can bring scholarship closer to a decolonial theory of the English language. By reading English as a vernacular—by noting its colonial and casteist formation as well as its promises of liberation—it is possible to reconstitute horizons of universality through local enunciations of a language. We can name the colonial and global power structures associated with English without re-inscribing them each time we discuss English. By casting globally present English as vernacular English, this book recognizes that the global does not exist in a realm distant and different from the local. *Vernacular English* questions the automatic assignment of values to the global regime associated with a dominant language like English. In doing so, it refuses—in a much-needed critical gesture—to cede power to dominant frames of analysis and study of Anglophone post-colonial literature and culture.

Simon Gikandi and Rey Chow, especially, have exhorted literary scholars to account for the range of English-language experiences. For instance, weighing in on the debate between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, Gikandi argued that “Achebe’s endorsement of English as the universal language and Ngũgĩ’s critique of it as an agent of linguistic imperialism endowed the language with a singularity and power that it didn’t have.”<sup>39</sup> English appeared powerful only “because of its association with the compulsory Englishness.”<sup>40</sup> Gikandi drew on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of provincializing as a way to renew European thought from the margins without repudiating it. To provincialize English, Gikandi wrote, was to represent English as one language among many. It was an “effective way of dealing with the anxieties that English generates.”<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in her 1995 essay “In the Name of Comparative Literature,” Rey Chow invited scholars to examine the multiple languages and cultural enclaves that already exist within English. The discipline of comparative



literature, argued Chow, could no longer conduct “Eurocentrism in the name of the other, the local, and the culturally exceptional.”<sup>42</sup> The discipline’s embrace of multilingualism and non-Western languages must be accompanied by an implosion of English itself as a singular language. English literary study should not be limited to British and American literature but also include Black English, Indian Anglophone literature, and ethnic American literature. Chow exhorted colleagues in the 1993 Charles Bernheimer Report to grasp the premise of language as power in the spirit of decolonization, not of diversity.

To borrow from Chow, it is in this spirit of “decolonization, not diversity,” that I approach English through the lens of the vernacular, as a vernacular. My use of vernacular to emphasize people and places retheorizes English away from its long-standing meanings and towards what Gikandi, drawing on Fanon, called the spaces where “the people dwell.” Such spaces stand apart from the metropolitan circulation of postcolonial literature, in “the marketplace where English encounters forms of popular writing that are not imprisoned in its rules, that the former language of empire is creolized.”<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, Ulka Anjaria has made a spirited case for defetishizing the distance between “vernacular” and “English,” and reading English as provincial in India.<sup>44</sup> To build on Gikandi’s and Anjaria’s proposals, English cannot be provincialized until we acknowledge—in scholarly paradigms—that English is already provincial. To read English as a vernacular is to deprive it of its singularity.

### *The Promise of the Common: Historical Routes of English in India*

Despite its overdeterminations as a colonial and global language, English came to India with vernacular ambitions. This is to say that English was a vernacular—not classical—language in Britain at the time, where writers like Samuel Johnson and Daniel Defoe sought to elevate it by strengthening it through borrowings from other languages around the world. Universal grammar was a key feature of eighteenth-century linguistic philosophy that imagined global linguistic diversity as translatable and traceable to one language. British Orientalist philologists translated from different world languages into English to elevate English as this common linguistic source. As a language of administrative control in the colonies, English had numerous encounters with local languages, and it realized these ambitions in consort with Indian vernaculars through their translation into English.

In this quest for universal grammar, one nineteenth-century Orientalist philologist, John Borthwick Gilchrist, upheld Hindustani, a popular north Indian vernacular outside courts, as the most useful language of study. The confluence of industrial, scientific, and imperial expansion in the eighteenth century had led to interest in language itself as something to be standardized and used. Gilchrist's interest in linguistic value in practical terms of trade and governance led him away from classical scholarship of courtly languages like Sanskrit and Persian, and toward Hindustani as a useful site of imperial expansion. As a corollary, this move extended legitimacy to all vernaculars, a category that was distinct from classical literary languages and that now included English. Rita Raley writes that Gilchrist insisted that the phonetic Roman alphabet of the English language could encode "all the sounds of all known languages."<sup>45</sup> By focusing on the Roman alphabet, Gilchrist stripped the English language of racial, geographical, or cultural value, and reimagined its value as utilitarian. Despite the absence (or rather, because of its repackaging) of British cultural values, English still remained useful as a translational and transnational medium that could translate other languages and which could thus travel beyond national borders.

Gilchrist's comparative philology was guided by a rationale similar to that of the famous Orientalist philologist William Jones and Anglicists Thomas Babington Macaulay, Charles Trevelyan, and Charles Wood, all of whom supported the introduction of English education in India to streamline administration and to morally improve the natives. He considered it necessary to transliterate foreign languages into the Roman script of English because their ostensible difficulty impeded rationality and civilization. His approach was also motivated by the quest for the "common" of the common source and universal grammar and to elevate English at home in England. But, through his plan of "Practical Orientalism" Gilchrist showed that only as a vernacular itself could the English language vernacularize Indian languages. His language philosophy valued vernacular as profitable and literary, and exploited the potential of the phonetic Roman alphabet to encode different languages.

As my discussion of the derogatory connotations of vernacular indicated, much has been written by postcolonial scholars about the vernacular as what Geeta Patel called an "etiology of turpitude," or the logic that "the base nature of the vernacular was the reason for the backwardness of the colonized people."<sup>46</sup> But, this simultaneous history of English is also significant not because English is, in fact, a language of universal communicability. Rather, its promise as such a language makes it an affectively

and politically charged site. The history of English in India is the history of vernacular English.

From the year 1608, when the British East India Company first arrived on Indian shores with English as the language of trade and governance, the English language swelled with the sounds of the languages with which it came into contact. Missionaries of all denominations followed shortly, making English the language of Christianity across British colonies in Asia. Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2012), for instance, dwells beautifully on the promise of linguistic contact, or what B. Venkat Mani, drawing on Jahan Ramazani, calls “code-stitching.”<sup>47</sup> In the year 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay, a British politician, successfully convinced the British Parliament that it should spend money on public education in English in colonial India. His now-infamous “Minute on Indian Education” led to the creation of an elite minority of English-educated Indians who brokered as clerks in the British colonial government and cemented their position within local hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. The “Minute” singularly unleashed English as the language of colonial *and* caste power for centuries to come.

After India won its independence from British rule in 1947, in a historic speech, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, announced the nation's birth in English. Nehru asserted India's sovereignty, reflecting triumphantly on India's resilient past and future. Was it ironic or fitting that what Nehru called the “the soul of a nation, long suppressed” found its “utterance” in the language brought by the former colonizer?<sup>48</sup> Soon after, the Indian Constituent Assembly adopted a bilingual Hindi-English Constitution, naming English its associate official language and Hindi as India's official language. The drafting committee of the Constitution was headed by Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the radical Dalit leader, who had used English to name the violence of casteism at the heart of Indian society and politics. Decades later, in 2010, Chandrabhan Prasad, a Dalit writer and activist, built a temple for the English language. Holding on to the promise of Ambedkar's Constitution, Macaulay, the Internet, and global capitalism, he called English a Dalit Goddess.

Indeed, an oft-overlooked legacy of English as a translational and transnational vernacular is its legislation as one of postcolonial India's official languages. In an echo of Gilchrist's vocabulary, the postcolonial Indian state made the English language its administrative vernacular. In 1949, the Indian state declared Hindi in *devanagari* script as its official language and English as its associate official language, because, as for Gilchrist, it was the “least-inflected dialect of the lettered world.”<sup>49</sup> As a translational and transnational vernacular, English belonged to the world, yet remained uninflected by it, neutral, as if all materiality were stripped from it.

India's struggle for independence and postcolonial statehood came with a push to dub its multilingualism into a monolingual national identity. But Hindi—the language favored by the Hindu nationalist elite as a possible “national” language—was spoken only in the northern part of the country. Given the diversity of languages, religions, and ethnicities, the idea of India as an independent and democratic republic could not be anchored in any one Indian language. In a multilingual country that could not agree upon one language to represent itself, English promised a neutral territory. Ambedkar, for instance, held that Hindi—were English not enlisted to secure it—would risk consolidating a hegemony of the northern Hindi-speaking states over the southern states that did not speak it. Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, saw in all regional languages a threat of secessionism from the Indian state. English was deemed necessary for the consolidation of India as an idea and a political unit. It was almost as if, as a language of the erstwhile colonizer, English was similarly foreign to everyone in the colonized land, and thus well positioned to address the nation equidistant from all competing linguistic cultures. English could link the people because all linguistic constituencies were willing to converse in it without having to recognize the authority of any regional language. The alleged foreignness of English, its untranslatability into native categories, was its greatest advantage. Enshrined in the Constitution, English gave language to the postcolonial state's values of secularism, democracy, modernity, and sovereignty.

The promise of the common stemmed from the promise of the foreign. While the nonnative character of English has been key to its political meanings as national and democratic, the advocates of English and the Constituent Assembly at once suppressed and invoked, forgot and celebrated the foreignness of English. As English was recruited to uphold the democratic state, advocates like Nehru and Ambedkar elided its foreignness so that they could use the language in postcolonial nation-building. But that foreignness was also invoked and celebrated to suggest the suitability of English for this role. Without its colonial history, English could be expedient in a variety of situations. It could communicate across wide swaths of people and allow the state to speak in the name of the many who had historically been disadvantaged both by Hindi and English.

But this promise of English was also underwritten by the communalization of Hindus and Muslims, and the politically motivated argument that Urdu was the language of Islam and Muslims in India. As a glorified vernacular, English enjoyed, as Rashmi Sadana has also noted, a translational relationship with Hindi, and never replaced it as India's official language. However, this relation between English and Hindi was one of

mutual reliance; English bolstered and supplemented Hindi's religionational aspirations. As the articles of language legislation show, English was chosen as an associate official language to prepare Hindi for its new role as the sole official language in the near future.

In this endeavor, as in every liberal imperial justification, it was hoped that time would be an ally. Hindi, while insufficient now, would become fit with its association with English. With patience, a more nationalist future could be realized. English promised to both buttress and disrupt the Hindu nationalist aspirations founded in the claims of the Hindi language. The government launched numerous lexicographical and translational efforts to modernize Hindi by association with English. The idea was that English would compensate for the insufficiency of Hindi as a language of national and international communication.<sup>50</sup> Its advocates considered English the conduit to ideas of political modernity, democracy, and science and technology. In its supplemental role, English was deemed the most democratic, the most secular, and itself an instrument that could make things happen. Hindi had already assumed the space of the vernacular. Its association with English endorsed the same status for English as well.

In the postcolonial phase of India's history, the political value and cultural power of English has remained specifically functional—at once profoundly objectified and fetishized. English is valued for its potential to foster modernity and to educate citizens in a democratic society. It becomes meaningful as a machinic object, a technology, that can be attached or removed, remembered or forgotten as needed. For advocates of English in India, the association of the language with science made it seem encouragingly pliable. English, as a language that could be taken apart piecemeal and harnessed at will, built on the utilitarian idea of language developed in the eighteenth century. For instance, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, independent India's first education minister, remained wary of English. However, in 1947 he floated the idea of teaching Hindi to non-Hindi- or Urdu-speaking Indians through the Roman script. There were millions of Indians who understood Hindi but did not know the script, he reasoned, and suggested using the Roman script as a supplementary script, in addition to the *devanagari* of Hindi and *nastaliq* of Urdu, in educational publications of the Indian government.<sup>51</sup> Azad's proposal did not find supporters at the time but has come to be realized today as the Roman script transcribes Indian languages on social media.

As I began by saying, scholars in comparative or postcolonial literary studies rarely approach English as a vernacular. Instead, vernacular—encoded as other Indian languages—makes it possible to trace national

or subnational knowledges. And yet, the conscription of English as a vernacular in India made the postcolonial nation possible, in the first place! The adoption of English bolstered the place of English in India's cultural and political imagination for time to come. No doubt the turn to English was the logical culmination of British rule, and parts of the Constitution of India quoted verbatim from the colonial Government of India Act of 1935. Yet both the Constitution of India and English—its “alien language”—were transformed into what Rohit De calls “talismans” to notionally and literally activate democratic citizenship and equality for millions across caste, class, and language differences.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Anglophone, or To Read What Is Not Written*

As the history of the legislative adoption of English shows above, the meanings of English are produced in an interplay of translatability and untranslatability into other Indian languages, especially Hindi.<sup>53</sup> The practice and metaphor of translation highlights both the original and the translation as *produced* in the act of making meaning. Scholars have been attentive to the translational role of English, primarily in its role in Anglophone literature. In *Forget English!*, Aamir Mufti rightly posits, “in world literature the (South Asian) Anglophone novel as a form marks a sort of *translation* of non-Anglophone and vernacular social and cultural spheres and life-worlds into the novelistic discourse of English and its cultural system more broadly. As such it is subject to a *politics* of translation.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the global circulation of English as a translational vernacular—as a language of translation from and to languages—requires greater attention to the practice of translation. Similarly, Rebecca Walkowitz has also theorized Anglophone novels as born as and from translations, *born translated*, “pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have.”<sup>55</sup> In this sense, Anglophone literatures, while written in English, are read as if they were produced in another language and then rendered into English by the author. Walkowitz attributes this quality of “being born translated” to global publishing pressures; if the author did not have to consider the global publishing economy's capitalist pressures, the work would be published in another language.

In this view, translation is always unidirectional (from other languages into English). English, as a translational and transnational language of elsewhere, obfuscates the original language. Because we are convinced that English is not itself—that it must be a different language in which the characters must have spoken—this formulation also obfuscates the moments

when English is supposed to be English. Using Dube's artwork as a reference, it seems that, as scholars, we are so drawn by what the twisted wires write that we forget to notice the wires themselves. We are so focused on what English stands for that we do not quite see how, where, with what it stands, and how these details shape its meanings right before us.

The Anglophone world looks very different if we theorize it from the Anglophone. Two overlapping institutional configurations have recently raised suspicions about the English language: world literature and global Anglophone literature. As disciplinary signs for "Literatures Other than British and American," these categories rely on the English language to access this other. But the suspicion has extended not simply to the representative-ness of English or English literature, prompting questions like "Is there a world literature?" and "What is global Anglophone literature?"<sup>56</sup> It has also led to questions about the veracity of the Anglophone world.<sup>57</sup> While arguments about the tyranny of nomenclature, the vagaries of academic job markets, and institutional politics are well taken, such debates should not eclipse that there very much is an Anglophone world. For instance, recently, Madhumita Lahiri has paid attention to new collectivities and alternate geographies that are created through the coinage of new words within the worldwide hegemony of the English language signaled in the phrase "the global Anglophone."<sup>58</sup> That the idea of global Anglophone literatures coheres the ethnonationalist logic of the Anglo-Saxon or the Anglosphere is indeed a warning to heed. But, it is also a missed opportunity that furthers said racialized logic if we are not careful.

English lives in the impossibility and desire for commonality in India. It manifests in ideas like democracy, in brands and bureaucratic documents, as sight and sound. To read English and the Anglophone after the vernacular is also an invitation to think language again—not at its limits but in its proliferation with bodies, media, and languages. The vernacular, as subaltern historiography has shown, is always a question of reading—it is not that the subaltern does not speak but that she demands newer ways of hearing.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. When the first call centers arrived in India in the early 2000s, they taught English as a spoken language, often sundered from rules of writing. English was thus unstandardized in this process. In her book, *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World* (2018), journalist Snigdha Poonam shows how the English language itself has transformed under the imperatives to learn it. Poonam attends one of the many English-language-speaking schools that appeared across India to train call-center employees. Known as "The

American,” this particular chain of schools prides itself on teaching *anyone* to speak English in a matter of days, no matter their background. Poonam describes the pedagogical method that breaks English down into a formula made of clichés, proverbs, and social pleasantries. This English is known as Spoken English or “Spoken.” The strategic elision of script unstandardizes English by writing out the very phonetic script that made it the oxymoronic “international vernacular” since British imperial expansion, up to the contemporary growth of digital media. English, once again, comes apart as the script, while its sound develops an affective charge in a localized regime of power. With immeasurable promises of “life improvement” and “personality development,” English becomes the sound of success, aspiration, and confidence in India today.

At “The American” Poonam meets Moin Khan, “The English Man.” Born a milkman in a small village in the state of Bihar, Khan became obsessed with learning English when he encountered his first English speaker. Over two months, he raised money for his lessons by milking every cow in his village. Khan’s obsessively rehearsed English sentences are cut loose from any grammatical compulsions and perfected over calls to strangers. Poonam writes with tenderness: “Every night when [Moin Khan] came back from the market, he sat in a corner of his house with his notebook and repeated aloud every single word the English teacher had uttered in the day’s class. Not only did he try to copy his teacher’s pronunciation of words, but also the manner in which they were delivered—whether it was with a pause or a drawl or a chuckle. The teacher used to make his English sound effortless by dropping in words from the local dialect. That’s the effect Khan strived for in his private practice sessions.”<sup>59</sup> As English promises social mobility outside formal education and paths to freedom hitherto unavailable, its experience in contemporary India is charged with thrill, hope, promise, and shame. After learning English, Khan may well speak with customers outside India. Still, his primary motivation is to achieve social mobility in his own country, in a landscape riven with caste and class barriers. English affords Khan with just such a vector that can bring him closer to the authority and respect that he would not otherwise have. What is more, unlike the dominant languages of the past, English is also within reach for a “cut-price,” a fee of five hundred and fifty rupees for six months of classes.<sup>60</sup>

New English speakers in India like Moin Khan do not see English as a language that comes from a particular country. As Poonam told me over the phone from New Delhi, they understand English as vaguely “Western” rather than British or colonial. All that the English aspirants know about the language is that it can create paths for those who are disadvantaged by their



social and economic marginality. The attitude is of survival: it doesn't matter where English comes from but it is here now. The imperative to learn and use English is mapped onto changing relations of class, caste, and regional power.

Most readers or writers or listeners of English—across its global life—may not even literally understand the language. This unintelligibility neither blocks access to English nor makes it foreign. It certainly does not make English less English. Walkowitz has argued that English-language literary texts are never only written or read in English, and has made a case for non-comprehension as a way to read global Anglophone literature to account for the fact that the globally circulating novel may or may not be written for the reader. Similarly, we must account for noncomprehension—our own and of others—when considering a globally circulating language; recognizing that not everyone in the world experiences English like we do. In this dialectic of translatability and untranslatability, English appears multiplex. The unintelligibility presents an inventive understanding of English that playfully and persuasively refigures expressive geographies in the Anglophone world in search of aspiration, class ascension, and global affiliation. Across vocal training at call centers and schools that promise instant English-speaking skills, English becomes vernacular through and in translation. Unhinged from its language, the Roman script—as metonymy for English—becomes something figural and hieroglyphic to be apprehended visually. It is no longer the written word but of the order of the image. The accent of English, its sounds and phonemes, become sound objects that gain new meanings by repetition and do not necessarily invoke where they are coming from. As the signified and the signifier split, the symbolic affordance of English multiplies. English becomes both iconic and banal.

These new expressive geographies of English put into crisis both textuality and what is readable. Vernacular English is not a category of texts but a mode of reading that attends to the interplay of sound and script to interrogate the textuality of the work. In a way, this is a process of flipping the gaze and audit, to read English through other eyes and ears.<sup>61</sup> Instead of estranging postcolonial writers of English of all ilk, this reading practice estranges the critics' own process. It demands that we read English like a brand or a bureaucratic document or a filmic image or a formula, paying attention to its lived experience. This also means that, as readers, we notice the indexicality of the English language.<sup>62</sup> In doing so, we attend to what is being made visible and audible. Reading English as a vernacular is not to reduce language, as François Noudelmann has suggested, to a "simple expressive function" but to go on to notice the interplay of sound and silence, orality and writing, whereby written and literary language is

estranged. To those not bound by the assumptions of coloniality or globality, the sounds of English speak of new possibilities. We need to be asking different questions: What does it mean to read the Anglophone, the English-speaking world? Who is reading it? Who is listening to it?<sup>63</sup> We need a more, not less, Anglocentric approach.

These questions can bring greater awareness of the different kinds of speakers and different modes of speaking and counter what Noudelmann has called the “voluntary deafness of the users of abstract language.”<sup>64</sup> In keeping with the conception of global Anglophone literatures as translations into English, for instance, in studies of world literature, global English has become a metaphor to describe the literary work’s presumptive encoding of the heterogeneity and multilingualism of its points of home. In the software and technology industry global English is understood to be “simplified or controlled English” that is universally accessible and comprehensible. It is almost a different language that encodes language and linguistic standard.<sup>65</sup> David Damrosch has called it “nothing more than a minimum competence, a bland, watered-down commercial and touristic language whose use could dampen down the linguistic richness of English even in its original home locales.”<sup>66</sup> This definition, bemoaning growing literacy in the absence of an accompanying literariness, is ironic. The cosmopolitanism of globally recognizable writers, of scholarly interest in itself, is not sufficiently reckoning with the far-reaching scope of “English in the world,” which circulates in media and markets and is available to many outside of privileges of class, education, and urbanism.

Certainly, the privilege and limits of one language, English, cannot establish the privilege and limits of fields like postcolonial studies and global Anglophone literary studies. But equally importantly, our conception of the English language itself can no longer be limited and a privilege. Global English is not simply the language of technology and software. It is also a language that a man like Moin Khan memorizes and practices to bridge cavernous class disparities. It is also the experience of a language of power as graspable and maneuverable. The sounds of this global English do not just make audible the hegemony of the outsourcing industry but also a man’s modest hope-filled attempt to navigate social hierarchies.

Today, the English language continues to animate debates about its legitimacy in the wide fields of African, South Asian, and Eastern European literatures.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, more than three decades after the debate between Achebe and Ngũgĩ, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has added a different perspective to the debate by claiming “simply that English is mine.”<sup>68</sup> Adichie continues, “Sometimes we talk about English in Africa

as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English.”<sup>69</sup> Adichie’s statement signposts a shifting landscape of English that scholarship must reckon with. It invites us as scholars to read global Anglophone literatures as not simply subverting the hegemony of English but as written in a *native* language. This tension between English as a global and a native language is the tension that vernacular allows us to name.

### *Chapter Descriptions, or Anglophone in Five Speech Acts*

The debates over the global dominance of English have largely been shaped by the realities English obfuscates and the people it does not represent. By contrast, this book reconsiders *how* to read English to capture all that becomes visible and audible in English when it reaches its willing or unwilling users. On the usefulness of the term “Anglophone,” Daniel Elam writes that English literature has always been a project of interpellation—one in which English literary studies was used to make colonial subjects. Elam adds that salvaging the Anglophone is akin to salvaging figures like Macaulay. Quite the contrary, right now what should worry us is that we are not able to see beyond the divisive and oppressive colonial education policy.<sup>70</sup> We are not able to pay attention to the different political and symbolic affordances of the English language, beyond its colonial life.

*Vernacular English* is an attempt to find critical purchase on the allure of English, the affective negotiations, and the political impasses of the English language in India. The following chapters pursue English as a vernacular language of people’s democracy through its hope and frustrations. Read through the translational vernacular, the Anglophone illuminates the shared but uneven experience of English. *Vernacular English* convenes wider publics and histories of English in the Anglophone world. It calls attention to the many mediations, translations, and embodiments of a language before or after it is codified textually. English as a vernacular heightens the shared life of a language, whether in the colonialist attempts to introduce English education, or in postindependence attempts to legislate the language, or in global capitalism and media diffusion.

I answer my opening question “what becomes intelligible as English, and how” by examining English through the different modalities of

linguistic experience and imagining different strategies of reading. The five chapters consider English as a law, a touch, a sight, and a sound. English is tied to people and their claims to power. In each case, English assumes meaning between its material formations and the body that writes, reads, speaks, and hears. Language, as we know it, appears at its visceral, material, affective limits. Every now and then, I have also drawn on personal experiences of growing up in India with the English language. My experience of English is marked by my gender, class, and caste: it does not represent the experience of everyone in India or in the Anglophone world. Indeed, I invoke these experiences to pose questions and articulate problematics.

The first chapter examines the English language in India as an object of democratic promise shaped by the bilingual English-Hindi Indian Constitution and as part of the bureaucratic scriptural economy. With its opening proclamation of “We, the people of India,” the Constitution offers an exemplary case of a people speaking English. Of all the ironies that characterize postcolonial India, perhaps the biggest irony is that the language of the erstwhile colonizer came to be indispensably tied to postcolonial assertion. The Constitution carries a voice that belongs both to the sovereign people and the colonial and postcolonial state. The relation of English with Hindi and other Indian languages, I argue, is a key way in which these competing voices are maintained. This chapter examines the life of English as just such a democratic object—goal, instrument—through *India Demands English Language* (1960), a little-known collection of pro-English essays by influential Indian political leaders, and contrasts the statist vision of English found there with the bureaucratic technics on the ground in Srilal Sukla’s satirical Hindi novel *Raag Darbari* (1968) and Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English novels, *English, August* (1988) and *Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2004).

Chapter 2 shows that English, unlike any other Indian language, promises a shared space where caste-based injunctions against touch are flouted. It explores English as an experience of touch, shaped in the bodily injunctions of caste and the promise of democracy. Since the nineteenth century, Dalit leaders and writers have cautiously used English to claim the promise of equality associated with the language. Chapter 2 brings together a corpus of Dalit Anglophone literature and Hindi Dalit literature. It shows that key Dalit leaders such as Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, and Kancha Ilaiah have used English as a principled rejection of the Sanskritized modern registers of many Indian languages, associating Sanskrit with upper-caste dominance. A new generation of Dalit writers insists on English as their own language to reveal the truth of urban caste experience

and to further an oppositional politics that seeks a shared discourse in English.

Chapter 3 reads Indian Anglophone novels about caste in the shadow of the caste politics of English noted in chapter 2. Over three hundred years of Indian English literature, there have been only a few low-caste or Dalit protagonists even as almost all of the novels are written by upper-caste and upper-class writers. The narrative logic of these novels rests on the characters' inability to speak English. But despite the literal and literary impossibility of English of those characters, they are also shown desiring English and performing Englishness to manipulate the performativity of caste. This chapter identifies two well-known caste-marked character types in Indian Anglophone literature, Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and Balram Halwai in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). It shines a light on an enduring hermeneutic knot in Indian Anglophone literature and imagines a mode of reading beyond suspicion that rehabilitates, rather than dismisses, these characters.

Chapter 4 turns to the English language as a sound object. It considers English as part of global protest vocabulary where it is used to speak back to the Indian state. In a 2004 landmark protest against years of army presence in the state of Manipur in Northeast India, twelve women stood naked in front of the army base to protest the rape and murder of a young woman named Manorama by members of the armed forces. Raising the English-language slogan of "Indian Army Rape Us / We Are All Manorama's Mothers," they used the language of the democratic state to challenge its authority. Northeast India as a geopolitical category and Northeast Indian literature as a body of work both become legible in the postcolonial state's use of English. The chapter argues that the women's political and phonological—figurative and literal—voice offers a decolonial lineage of a mother tongue in English. With a discussion of contemporary literature by northeastern writers like Tamsula Ao and Yumlembam Ibomcha, the chapter also reveals the emergence of the English language as specifically aural—an instance of speaking English, of Anglophony—as it represents the nonvocal (guns, bombs) and vocal (human cries, protests) soundscapes of military violence and human suffering.

In the context of traumatic silence that bears witness in English, chapter 5 examines the visual life of English in India. Two recent films—Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and Zoya Akhtar's commercially successful *Gully Boy* (2019)—stage English as a thing to be seen rather than read. English appears in Mumbai slums—on public signages and in social media—as the films cinematically produce its

pervasiveness. The logic of cinematic signification helps imagine a mode of *not* reading English as it circulates among those who do not know it. The figural character of English—such that its script becomes an image—fractures the authority of the ubiquitous global English.

A coda highlights in the term “Anglophone” a productive emphasis on the *speakers* and *speaking* of English. “Speaker”—as technology, people—reminds us that the speakers of English across the world may have varying levels of competence. It also draws attention to the fundamental role of *tekhne* in the inflection of the phonic (what is spoken) and the sonic (what is heard). The coda proposes that we draw on these mediated and embodied phonic meanings of the word “Anglophone” to consolidate a reading practice that is attuned to the mundane world and that hears marginalized voices in Anglophone studies and India alike.

Together, the texts considered in this book make visible a long history of the English language in India that is not only imbricated in global or colonial logics. This other history of the English language in the colonies by no means disavows the hegemony and violence of English in colonial and neoliberal global processes. Instead, the paradox of the vernacular locates English and its speakers in the world, looking squarely at their democratic aspirations. It offers an opportunity to trace their relations with precisely the multilingual literary and media cultures that the hegemony of metropolitan literary English threatens to subsume. Summoning the many lives and registers of English that make the Anglophone cracks open what has ossified in the name of a colonial or global or literary English.

This book urges greater attention to English, not with or against Indian languages but through them. Vernacular shines new light on both India and English, two topics that have commanded a formidable library of scholarship. While I argue that Hindi is the one language that most centrally shaped the meanings of English in postcolonial India, numerous other languages in the world shape the meanings of English. India was the laboratory for the development of English literary studies as a discipline and has been the paradigmatic site in postcolonial studies. Indeed, it seems to me that there is some wisdom in turning to the new readers and writers of English in erstwhile colonies to imagine disciplinary futures.<sup>71</sup> As we imagine progressively more diffuse teleologies of English—against a monolithic global future for “English studies”—vernacular, a practice of reading modeled in the book, can reposition English via some of these languages.

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