

Reverb: American Literature and Sonic Media, 1876-1952

By

Sean Michael Keck

B.A., Boston College, 2007

M.A., Boston College, 2009

M.A., Brown University, 2011

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Date_____

Stuart Burrows, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date_____

Tamar Katz, Reader

Date_____

Daniel Kim, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date_____

Peter M. Weber, Dean of the Graduate School

Vita

Sean M. Keck was born in Ridgewood, New Jersey on June 4, 1985. He graduated *summa cum laude* from the Boston College honors program in 2007 with a B.A. in English and minors in Art History and Creative Writing. While an undergraduate, he received the Kelleher Prize for Poetry, the Mary A. & Katherine G. Finneran Commencement Award, and the J. Robert Barth, S.J. Arts Excellence Award. Keck remained at Boston College to pursue an M.A. in English, which he completed in 2009. As a master's student at BC, he received the Andrew Von Hendy Prize for Graduate Writing, served as Assistant Managing Editor of *Post Road* magazine, and taught in the First-Year Writing Seminar program. Keck received an M.A. in 2011 and a Ph.D. in 2015 from Brown University. While at Brown, he was awarded a Manning Graduate Fellowship III, Cogut Center for the Humanities Fellowship, and Dissertation Completion Fellowship. He presented his research in a number of venues, including the annual conferences of the American Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association, and he published an article in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. In Providence, he taught courses for Brown's Department of English and its Pre-College Programs and he co-led creative writing workshops for Rhode Island adults with developmental disabilities through the Brown Writers' Group volunteer organization.

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¹ Mark Twain, *The Complete Interviews*, ed. Gary Scharnhorst (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 256-57.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1883, Mark Twain and William Dean Howells debuted *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist*. Their play recounted the continuing exploits of its title character, a buffoonish speculator and inventor who had first appeared in Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novel *The Gilded Age* (1873) and had met with mixed theatrical reviews in *Colonel Sellers* (1875). *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* did not improve Twain's reputation as a dramatist, but the sequel did promise audiences a glimpse of one of the period's emerging stars. In the Colonel's laboratory, among instruments for re-materializing dead spirits and achieving other such fanciful objectives, is a phonograph, a machine Thomas Edison had introduced and begun exhibiting to the American public only five years prior to Twain and Howells's play. Colonel Sellers touts his version of Edison's machine—a “Ship's Phonograph for the application of stored Profanity”—as a cost-saving and more reliable substitute for the labor of a class of middle managers (i.e., first mates and factory foremen) whose chief value is imagined to lie in their ability to verbally abuse their workers.¹ Twain and Howells parody Edison's claim that the phonograph will replace human labor by allowing businessmen to “dispense with the clerk” when dictating correspondence.² Sellers also proudly describes how the device can be made to

¹ Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist [1883]: A Comedy by S.L. Clemens and W.D. Howells*, in *The Complete Plays of W.D. Howells*, ed. Walter J. Meserve (New York: New York University Press, 1960), 223, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqi:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:dr:Z000780321:0.

² Thomas Edison, “The Phonograph and Its Future,” *The North American Review* 126, no. 262 (May/June 1878): 533, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25110210>.

“eavesdrop” on anyone speaking in close proximity to it.³ Twain and Howells cross these two functions for comic effect, and at various points in the play the phonograph emits a mélange of hyperbolic curses and fragmented dialogue, racial dialect, song, and even the sounds of a cat fight. There will be much more to say about *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* in chapter 1. But for now I want to focus on what it would have meant for a phonograph to “speak” on stage in 1883.

While the phonograph, as a “real” invention, stands in stark contrast to the other devices that figure prominently in *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist*, its “realization” on the stage would have been no less artificial and imaginary than that of Sellers’s apparatus for re-materializing the dead. Not only is it highly unlikely that Twain and Howell’s could have secured one of Edison’s exhibition machines for their play, but, even had they managed this feat, the phonograph could not have done what their script asked of it.⁴ The machines Edison demonstrated before American audiences in the late 1870s and early 1880s recorded their messages on a thin sheet of tinfoil, and this “could only be played until it was removed (and thus, destroyed) from the rotary drum.”⁵ The repeated playback Sellers advertises for his “Ship’s Phonograph” had thus yet to become a technological possibility. Moreover, the speech to be recorded had to be very brief in duration; when Edison commercialized a wax cylinder version of the phonograph in 1888, even its more durable and replayable recordings could not exceed two minutes in

³ Twain and Howells, *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist*, 241.

⁴ Even when the “perfected” phonograph first became commercially available in 1888, Twain was unable to secure two of the machines for himself, despite attempting to jump the queue of eager consumers by sending multiple entreaties directly to Edison. Harriet Elinor Smith, “Introduction,” in *Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 1*, ed. Harriet Elinor Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 20, n48.

⁵ Kyle S. Barnett, “Furniture Music: The Phonograph as Furniture, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18, no. 3 (Dec. 2006): 320, doi: 10.1111/j.1533-1598.2006.00096.x.

length.⁶ Finally, the theatrical phonograph's ability to "eavesdrop" suggests a level of aural sensitivity that the real phonograph would never achieve. Given the technological limitations of the latter (e.g., the volume and closeness with which one must speak or sing into the recording horn), accidental recording, or "eavesdropping," could not have occurred. Rather than saving labor by replacing human voices, Twain and Howells's "phonograph" must therefore have required a significant investment of human effort in order to maintain the fantasy of its automatic recording and speaking abilities. In place of an actual (impossible) record containing all of the various sounds called for by the play, one imagines a carefully timed chorus of actors' voices and sound effects delivered from offstage, an ironic ventriloquizing of the object whose major claim to fame (in the play but also in Edison's rhetoric) was its ability to record "faithfully" and to reproduce real sounds with a level of precision and indexical authority beyond the capacity of human beings.⁷ The audience, listening to this staging of the phonograph, would have had to suspend their disbelief in order for its autographic claims to resonate.

Although this phonographic performance stands as an extreme case study, the assemblage of technology, human bodies, and imagination required to make Colonel Sellers's phonograph "work" on stage is nonetheless paradigmatic of the entanglement of emergent sonic media and American culture. Despite claims made for their independence from the partiality of human representation, the sounds recorded and reproduced *automatically* by phonograph and gramophone, or transmitted

⁶ When the Edison Phonograph Company abandoned the cylinder for the flat disc record used by Emile Berliner's Gramophone Company, cylinder recordings had only managed to double their runtime (to four minutes).

⁷ Although much of his introduction to the device speculates about the future uses of the phonograph, Edison writes that "the apparatus is practically perfected in so far as the faithful reproduction of sound is concerned." "The Phonograph and Its Future," 530-31.

instantaneously by telephone and radio nonetheless registered with their auditors by means of deeply engrained cultural assumptions. As Jonathan Sterne observes, “From its very beginnings, sound reproduction required a certain level of faith in the apparatus and a certain familiarity with what was to be reproduced.”⁸ All early sonic media needed assistance from the cultural imaginary in order to validate the authenticity of their communications. And literature reflected upon and helped (re)produce the discourses through which new sonic technologies were understood by America.

This project recovers the cultural resonance between American literature and sonic media from the invention of the telephone and phonograph (the 1870s) to the end of the golden age of radio (the 1950s). I read realist and modernist works for the insights they offer into the crucial role the auditory register plays in producing racial and national identity. Contributing to the burgeoning field of sound studies, I place texts by Twain, Stephen Crane, Gertrude Stein, and Ralph Ellison in conversation with forgotten audio artifacts and discourses. Reconnected with their sonic contexts, these works offer compelling evidence that identity travels through more sensorially expansive and socially complex channels than visual studies accounts acknowledge. *Reverb* attends to realist and modernist explorations of sonic media to disrupt conventional understandings of ideology by suggesting culture’s often invisible, dispersive influence.

The project takes a non-instrumental view of technological influence. Instead of understanding technology as *the* privileged determinant of historical and cultural change—as we do when we speak of inventions that “changed the world,” for example—*Reverb* explores how specific sonic technologies have been constituted by as well as have

⁸ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 247.

constructed the cultural contexts in which they were developed and received. Lisa Gitelman describes this kind of relationship as one of mutual, simultaneous influence: “Culture insinuates itself within technology at the same time that technology infiltrates culture.”⁹ In moving between the telephone, phonograph, gramophone, and radio, I therefore map not a neatly linear mechanical history of media evolution, but rather what Richard Menke has referred to as a “media ecology.” “This concept,” according to Menke, “emphasizes that a culture’s range of technologies and codes of communication dramatically shape and are shaped by human experiences, thoughts, and values.”¹⁰ In such an “ecology,” the imagined capabilities of a given technology matter at least as much as its actual functionality. This is true even when imagined capacities far outstrip actual ones (as with Twain and Howells’s portrayal of the phonograph as a highly sensitized listening device) or when popularly held scientific beliefs later prove to be mistaken (as was the case with the “ether” postulated by early radio scientists as the medium through which radio waves travelled). Along these same lines, temporary or transitional stages in a technology’s development (for example, the hand-powered gramophone) can nonetheless continue to resonate culturally well beyond the date of their mechanical obsolescence. The media ecology approach to understanding technology, because it shifts the critical focus beyond the functionality of given media to a consideration of their (often technically unsupported) cultural meanings, allows us to understand literature not as a medium at risk of becoming obsolete in the face of new

⁹ Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.

¹⁰ Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 12.

transmission and recording technologies, but as a continuing participant in the (re)definition and critique of the meanings accumulating around these technologies.

To read audio as part of a media ecology rather than exclusively as a motivating factor in cultural change is to work against the grain of a longstanding American narrative that equates technological and social progress. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have persuasively argued that all media “re-mediate” other media forms in pursuit of two contradictory impulses: “Our culture wants both to multiply its media [hypermediacy] and to erase all traces of mediation [immediacy]: it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying technologies of mediation.”¹¹ One of the assumptions of the cultural logic of “remediation” is that “one medium is seen ... as reforming or improving upon another.”¹² And, in the American context, this rhetoric of media reform bleeds into an assumption of broader social reform via technological enhancement. Bolter and Grusin explain,

That digital media can reform and even save society reminds us of the promise that has been made for technologies throughout much of the twentieth century: it is a peculiarly, if not exclusively, American promise. American culture seems to believe in technology in a way that European culture, for example, may not. Throughout the twentieth century, or really since the French Revolution, salvation in Europe has been defined in political terms—finding the appropriate (radical left or radical right) political formula. . . . In America, however, collective (and perhaps even personal) salvation has been thought to come through technology rather than through political or even religious action.¹³

While I intend to downplay the either/or logic of this comparative analysis of American technological and European political reform, the sonic media I consider—starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—are indeed frequently written about in ways that

¹¹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, “Remediation,” *Configurations* 4, no. 3 (1996): 313, <http://muse.jhu.edu.revproxy.brown.edu/journals/configurations/v004/4.3bolter.html>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 350.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 351-52.

suggest that technological advancement is one major channel through which American social change becomes imaginable. (Or perhaps the powerful mythos of technological advancement is how social change remains imaginary, perpetually deferred until a future groundbreaking technological discovery—a *deus ex machina* where the machine is itself the god—rather than a struggle in the present.) For example, the telephone, the phonograph, and the radio were all early on hailed as potential democratizers of education, capable of bringing cultural knowledge to those who previously wanted for it. Of course, what counted as worthwhile “knowledge” in such fantasies was narrowly defined along white, upper class lines. Even when the imagined audience for such knowledge was comprised of racial and cultural “outsiders,” it was clear that these groups were to be the recipients of, rather than the participants in, an education.

But the question of who controls the content and operation of sonic media, while still extremely important today, is not the central focus of this study. All of the technologies discussed in my account were primarily conceptualized and used as servants of “normative” (white, Western, middleclass) culture. This did not, however, prevent contemporary writers from imagining how sonic media might communicate alternative social resonances. Today access to the means and media of public expression has improved and, although a great deal remains to be done in this regard, the issue of more inclusive social representation has at least been articulated as a problem to be solved. What has not been adequately addressed, however, are the political assumptions embedded within mainstream American culture’s understanding of communications media themselves. These assumptions remain remarkably consistent over time, a

recursive soundtrack playing underneath a number of technological developments otherwise commonly hailed as socially revolutionary.

The cultural “faith” that supplemented audio technology’s ability to divorce sound from its source in space and time and to reproduce it, as we will see repeatedly in the chapters ahead, was frequently grounded in longstanding, “familiar” associations between black bodies and instrumentality. As Mark Goble, who also addresses these associations, aptly puts it,

Race pervades the machine aesthetic of modern culture, mediating, for white artists most of all, the sometimes precarious desire to embody and reflect technology’s ‘impersonality’ without becoming just another body plugged in to its objectifying rationality. Race is what happens when you become the medium of someone else’s instrumentality.¹⁴

Race served as a means by which a certain (white) subset of the American public tried to mark a distinction between themselves (as those who could master technology) and those who would merely be mastered by technology or rather *as* technology. Such distinctions served a palliative function in a period when anyone’s voice—if not in fact, at least in the fantasy of Edison’s (and Sellers’s) rhetoric—could be captured and transported against one’s will. In the American context, sonic media presented a threat to social hierarchies by disembodiment of speech from its human sources, thereby rendering the racial identity of the speaker visually unverifiable. A device like the phonograph could even possibly, as *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* imagines it doing, produce sonic miscegenation by mixing the voices of white and black speakers. In place of the missing speaker, the machines themselves were culturally coded as black through prevalent racial auditory “*stereo-*

¹⁴ Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 171-72.

types,” to adapt Christopher Hight’s sonically punning play on the familiar term.¹⁵ These stereo-types equated blackness with the (sub)human body’s receptivity to a range of auditory currents and its automatic reproduction of them. No figure better represented these associations to the late-nineteenth-century (white) American imagination than did “Blind Tom,” an immensely popular, mentally disabled musical medium later referred to as the “Human Phonograph.”¹⁶ (In chapter 1, I examine Blind Tom’s cultural impact at much greater length in the context of Twain’s encounter with him.) Even after sonic media achieved a greater level of technical audio fidelity, the stereo-types that had helped them earn the public’s faith and maintain social hierarchies, although now submerged into the background, remained (and still remain) powerfully in effect.

Attempts to shore up social relations through the racialization of sonic technology become necessary not only because of what can no longer be seen during telephone, phonograph, gramophone, or radio communications, but also because of what cannot *not* be heard when listening. The automatic sonic reception and reproduction associated with Blind Tom, and later with the phonograph, epitomize the perceived openness, and hence vulnerability, of the auditory sense in general. The linearity of vision allows for a

¹⁵ Christopher Hight, “Stereo Types: The Operation of Sound in the Production of Racial Identity,” *Leonardo* 36, no. 1 (2003): 13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1577272>. While Hight uses this term to refer to “the harmonic order of whiteness” produced by the Western musical-philosophical tradition—a tradition which he argues is disrupted via “[Ralph] Ellison’s syncopation” and “rap as ‘cyborg’ music *par excellence*”—I am interested in the racial “stereo-types” undergirding media rather than music, including the very media Ellison and rap artists draw upon, in Hight’s reading, to resist the “harmonic order.” Although the phonograph could not produce *stereophonic* sound—an advancement that didn’t really take off until the 1930s—I still find Hight’s pun apt here as it allows us to think of race as the (often unheard) second auditory channel that gives the illusion of realistic depth to the phonograph’s limited repertoire.

¹⁶ Willa Cather uses this phrase to refer to Tom in the *Nebraska State Journal* from May 18, 1895, quoted in Deirdre O’Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2009), 182. Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918) bases the character of “Blind d’Arnault”—who appears in Book II, Chapter VII—closely upon “Blind Tom.” For a reading of Cather’s handling of “Blind Tom,” consult Goble, *Beautiful Circuits*, 172-77. The “human phonograph” label would frequently be used to describe Tom for the remainder of his life, including, for example, in an obituary of the performer published in the *Detroit Free Press* on June 17, 1908.

cultural distinction to be drawn between viewer and viewed, seeing subject and seen object, and this distinction frequently polices social difference. This is the structural logic of the controlling spectatorial “gaze” as examined by Laura Mulvey, of the disciplinary layout of the “Panopticon” as postulated first by Jeremy Bentham and then reconsidered by Michel Foucault.¹⁷ From this perspective, visibility is the most important (if not the only) determinant of identity. Corporeal visibility—the surveillance and fetishization of the body—works against legal recognition, threatening to reduce persons to material objects. (In chapter 2, I explore a further theorization of such visually rooted power dynamics when reading Stephen Crane’s phonographic realism beyond the sightlines of Mark Seltzer’s “realist seeing machine.”) But sound, in contrast to the image, promises or threatens (depending on your perspective) to invalidate the tidy demarcations between viewer and viewed, subject and object, agent and instrument. While vision is unidirectional (I can see only what is in front of my eyes), listening is multidirectional. Sound can and frequently does penetrate the barriers that impede and police sight. Sound even disregards the distinction between the individual human body and the world. Jean-Luc Nancy observes, “[A]nimal bodies, in general, —the human body, in particular—are not constructed to interrupt at their leisure the sonorous arrival, as has often been noted. ‘The ears don’t have eyelids.’”¹⁸ We cannot, without a considerable effort, safeguard ourselves against hearing undesirable sounds. The

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminisms REDUX: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 432-42. Mulvey writes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (436). Foucault addresses the Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995). There he writes, “Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (200).

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 14.

boundary between inside and outside, between our selves and the world, becomes permeable when sound strikes us. “To be listening,” Nancy writes, “is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other.”¹⁹

Sound and sonic media do not in any simplistic way liberate where vision and visual media repress, nor are they wholly complicit in or resistant to prevailing ideologies. The politics of the senses are, like the politics of given technologies, works of cultural imagination and negotiation. And literary engagements with other media enable us to understand the various forms that such imaginings have taken. Prior critics have often foregrounded photography and film in their attempts to read American writing as part of a broader media ecology, employing visual concepts (like the “gaze” and the “Panopticon”) to theorize the relation of text to culture along political sightlines. Literary explorations of sound invoke a more automatic and dispersive model of cultural influence. The particular political valence that this model is given, however, depends largely upon how its effects are interpreted. For example, Crane and Ellison both invoke sonic media to imagine permeable human bodies, but they draw very different political conclusions from these imaginings. In chapter 2, I examine Crane’s noisy rendering of the Civil War battlefield in *The Red Badge of Courage*; there sound’s ability to penetrate the human body is violently depicted and speaks to the terrifying power of an “immense machine” that seems to operate beyond anything resembling rational human control. In chapter 4, I consider how 1920s radio discourse shaped Ellison’s concept of American culture. For Ellison, the possibility that individuals could be receiving cultural

¹⁹ Ibid.

“frequencies” across racial demarcations and perhaps even below conscious thought was at once a cause for concern (a la Crane) and for hope.

Realist and modernist literary engagements with sonic media critique (or allow us to critique) the American equation of technological innovation with cultural reform and the dangers and limitations of visually policed social relations. Equally importantly, they also provide cause for reconsidering how American literature responded to the rise of (supposedly) rival communications media. This response took the form not only of drawing upon a new body of cultural materials (gramophone records, radio broadcasts, etc.), but also of imagining how literature might itself function like a sonic medium. In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Friedrich Kittler argues that “[a]s a surrogate of unstorable data flows, books came to power and glory.” But the development of media capable of recording images and sounds without first transcribing them into print cost literature its fantasized “storage monopoly.”²⁰ Writing, Kittler observes, is limited to recording symbolic data. It cannot record the imaginary (as cinema can) or the real (as phonography can), and once autographic technologies emerge that can do this, according to Kittler, writing’s deficiency becomes apparent. However, the ability of the phonograph faithfully to record its respective sensory data frequently depended on an effort of cultural imagination on the part of both producers and audiences. And, as the authors considered here repeatedly demonstrate, such cultural imaginings often carried more weight than a given device’s “actual” technical capabilities. Against technologically deterministic accounts of media history like Kittler’s, *Reverb* understands the border between the written and the acoustic as far more porous. American authors did

²⁰ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 9-10.

not yield sound recording and transmission to aural media, but could, and did, imagine ways in which texts might also reverberate with their readers.

My opening chapter, “Ethical Interference: Mark Twain’s Communications Breakdown,” examines how Twain—an early devotee of Edison’s phonograph and the self-described “first person in the world that ever had a telephone in his house for practical purposes”²¹—invokes phonographic and telephonic miscommunications to criticize the racially-inflected rhetoric of control associated with these technologies and to destabilize his own texts’ similarly problematic realist claims. Twain’s work sheds light on both the early, provisional existence of these new technologies and the cultural logics in which they are, from their inception, embedded in order to be understood. *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* and *The American Claimant* (1891), the later novelization of Twain and Howells’s play, humorously parody Edison’s ambitions for the phonograph as a substitute laborer and a means of technologically extending social control over others, but these works also bring the racial violence subtending such ambitions to the surface. Sellers plans to re-materialize the dead and turn them into a new source of slave labor, and the most detailed technological explanation of how this would work (articulated through the imagined killing and rewiring of Sellers’s African American servants) essentially renders the “materializee” as a phonograph. However, Sellers’s inability to control his “Ship’s Phonograph” suggests that the new technology can subvert the very racial and class hierarchies it is intended to bolster as it breaks down the distinction between media operator (master) and object (slave). In the second half of the chapter, I argue that Twain invokes the telephone to criticize dialect writing’s sonic

²¹ Mark Twain, *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), 326.

representation of difference. The racial and rural dialects transcribed by American regionalist fiction offered mostly white, urban, middle class readers entertaining encounters with “other” voices at a safe remove. The rhetoric surrounding the telephone’s development promised that it would one day fulfill the same function in real time. But dialect writing, regardless of its claims to aural accuracy, reinforces homegrown stereotypes rather than conveying geographically or socially distant voices to its readers. Similarly, despite early fantasies of cross-cultural communication, the telephone facilitated socially insular conversation as it became systematized. Rather than accepting the telephone’s communicative fidelity at face value, Twain emphasizes the numerous delays and interferences of the medium’s infancy in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). He thereby destabilizes the claims to aural realism grounding what Gavin Jones describes as “the ideological power of dialect literature” by invoking the telephone’s historically contingent, limited existence to slow down the reception of racial and rural voices in his own works.²² In doing so, he suggests an ethics of delayed listening for both literature and the telephone.

In my second chapter, “Stephen Crane’s Phonographic Corpus: Recording, Race, Realism,” I argue that Crane invokes phonography to express the horrific automatism of the stereotyped subjects (re)produced by realism. The soundscapes of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and *The Monster* (1898) allude to the “descriptive specialty,” a prevalent genre of early commercial phonograph recording that employs sound effects to create the aural illusion of various realist scenes, among them sonic reenactments of Civil War

²² Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 45-46.

battles and domestic emergencies. An immensely popular recording called “The Night Alarm” (first recorded in 1888) bears a particularly striking resemblance to the fire alarm sequences of *The Monster*. While the importance of photography to realist literature has been amply demonstrated, no one has yet examined the influence of this other, *phonographic* brand of realism on literature. Crane not only draws upon sonic details gleaned from descriptive specialties, but also structures the actions (or reactions) of his characters in these novels according to phonographic form. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, the “immense machine” of the battle cannot be seen, but it can be heard; its sounds penetrate and reverberate through soldiers’ bodies, making the dead and the living grotesquely automatic sonic recorders and reproducers. Sound proves to far exceed the range of visually policed social relations, but *The Red Badge* makes clear that this only opens the subject up to further, in many ways more horrific means of control. In *The Monster*, the violent defacement of African American Henry Johnson reveals the repetitive, phonographic nature of not only his minstrelized speech, but of the soundscape of Crane’s fictional town as a whole. Working against realist literature’s pseudoscientific claims to accurate social representation, Crane’s thematic and formal phonographic allusions render the recursive logic of realism’s stereotypes audible and terrifying. In photographic realism, the machinery (the camera) responsible for producing the image disappears; in phonographic realism, the machine leaves traces of its violent production process. Crane amplifies these traces to destabilize the realist project by emphasizing its productions as just that, productions rather than realities.

While Crane engages phonography to convey the disturbing mechanization of the stereotyped (and “stereo-typed”) realist subject, Gertrude Stein imagines recovering the

individual subject within typology by pushing automatic sound recording and playback to extremes. Though Stein's comparisons between her writing and the cinema (especially in "Portraits and Repetition" [1935]) have been repeatedly examined, the rhetoric of "saying" and "hearing" that also permeates her meditations on time and composition suggests that film tells only part of the story. My third chapter, "Her 'Master-piece' Voice: Gertrude Stein's Continuous Gramophone," reads Stein's approach to portraiture in the "continuous present" as both gramphonic and anti-gramphonic. I demonstrate that Stein's early experiments in automatic writing with Leon Solomons postulate a human body with aural, oral, and graphic capabilities somewhat akin to those attributed to the early phonograph. I then connect these experiments to the contemporaneous discourse around conditioning the human body to properly operate the "hand gramophone," which I contend offers a popular culture analogy to the period's burgeoning scientific and artistic interest in automatism. Because media are not merely channels of social communication, but are themselves sites of cultural imagination and contestation, it is certainly possible for the same medium to evoke alternative, even competing cultural meanings. While the gramophone's early, hand-powered existence offers a fitting comparison and possible inspiration for Stein's desire to write "the motor going within" her portrait subjects, the technology's later cultural associations—with fidelity to the (dead) past—prove entirely antithetical to her project. Stein's "I am I because my little dog knows me" refrain—variants of which appear in many of her 1930s writings—carries a particularly anti-gramphonic resonance. I place her claims about the temporality of "master-pieces" in conversation with the Victor Talking Machine Company's famous trademark image "His Master's Voice," where a terrier sits

spellbound before the horn of a gramophone that plays a recording of his deceased owner. Stein's "master-pieces" push against the temporal assumptions of this image, which insists upon keeping faith to the past: to both the dog's dead master and the production of the original, *master* recording. By refusing to separate the processes of "saying" and "hearing," Stein's "master-pieces" strive to instead maintain the openness of the "continuous present," of a time "when you were not you as your little dog knows you" ("What Are Master-pieces" [1935]). However, despite Stein's desire to think beyond typology, her temporal innovations nonetheless depend on familiar racial stereotypes. I close the chapter by addressing the story Stein identifies as the starting point for her discovery of the "continuous present": the "Melanctha" section of 1906's *Three Lives*. There her later formal innovations begin to take shape through the racial dialect in which she renders the speech of her African American characters, who, although suggesting the mechanism for Stein's later anti-typological portraits, are themselves rendered stereo-typically.

In contrast to the critical silence around Twain, Crane, and Stein, several pivotal studies of Ralph Ellison focus on his engagement with sonic media. The narrator's phonographic descent into a Louis Armstrong record in the prologue to *Invisible Man* (1952) supports both Fred Moten's analysis of the temporality of "the black radical tradition" and Alexander Weheliye's theorization of "the subject of sonic Afro-modernity."²³ My final chapter, "'Lower Frequencies': American Culture and Ralph Ellison's Radio," builds upon these insights by examining the other half of the invisible man's "*radio-phonograph*." In the 1920s, Ellison cut his technological teeth building

²³ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

radio sets from instructions in magazines like *Popular Radio* and *Radio News*. Beyond providing diagrams of electrical circuits and operational tips, these publications described a world saturated with invisible frequencies and imagined how human bodies might be affected by such frequencies below the threshold of conscious perception. I argue that Ellison appropriates this radio discourse as a model for American cultural dispersion. In his many speeches throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist is frequently unable to identify the source of his words. This proves both problematic and potentially liberating, as he automatically tunes in both socially repressive and subversive broadcasts. Ellison closes the novel with a question that imagines narrative voice as a similarly ambivalent form of radio transmission: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Invoking the medium—both the radio figured by "lower frequencies" and his own text—beneath the message, Ellison challenges the distinctions between subject and object, transmitter and receiver, author and reader, "I" and "you." In his introduction, Ellison describes the genesis of *Invisible Man* as stemming from a state of "hyperreceptivity" in which he was unable to ignore the intrusive voice that kept interrupting him in his original attempt to write a novel, the voice that would eventually become that of the protagonist. At the end of the novel, he imagines that his text might have a similar effect on its reader "on the lower frequencies."

Reverb examines American literature's diverse connections with a rich but underexplored sonic media archive. By attending to the politics of how such media were not only used but also imagined, it offers a more fluid model of the production of racial and national identity, one better attuned to the multiple, dispersive cultural channels reverberating in the realist and modernist periods.

CHAPTER 1

ETHICAL INTERFERENCE: MARK TWAIN'S COMMUNICATIONS BREAKDOWN

This chapter traces the entanglement of a series of cultural and technological discourses in Mark Twain's literary explorations of the emergent phonograph and telephone. One of the most persistent discursive tropes regarding technology is that of its ability to generate radical cultural and epistemological (even ontological) breaks. This is the logic of the technological a priori, whereby technological innovation precipitates cultural change. Before twentieth-century theorists like Walter Benjamin, Leo Marx, and Friedrich Kittler assumed the primacy of technology to cultural change, popular responses to technology employed a similar rhetoric of unidirectional influence. For instance, a writer for the *Electrical World* from March 3, 1894 described the telephone as "the voice crying in the wilderness, announcing the speedy coming of electric illumination, power transmission, transit, and metal working."¹ In part fueling such popular responses, inventors made public statements celebrating the drastic changes their new devices would enable. Working in this vein, Thomas Edison's 1878 report on the phonograph's "*faits accomplis*" and its future uses promised no less than "to annihilate time and space."²

¹ "The Electrical Firmament," *Electrical World*, Mar. 3, 1894, 273, quoted in Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 209.

² Edison, "The Phonograph and Its Future," 536. This conceit is still very much at work for Stephen Kern in *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

No one would deny that the ability to transmit and to record sound has had a profound impact upon not only American but global cultural development over the last almost century and a half. However, to assume that technology operates exclusively as a force reshaping culture—without also being subject to the discourses already at work in that culture—is to hear only half of the story. The tendency to theorize technology at large, rather than focusing on specific technologies, assists us in forgetting the multidirectional flow of discursive influence. “Technology” is a cultural concept that partly dictates, partly obscures our understanding of individual technologies. Twain’s interest in the telephone and the phonograph in a less standardized, more contingent stage of their development short-circuits the unidirectional rhetoric of technological influence at work in standard progress narratives. In the delay, we hear some of the problematic cultural assumptions that have produced such narratives, as well as Twain’s call—routed through the telephone, the phonograph, and the novel—for a more fluid and ethical mediation of culture.

To suggest that technology invades non-technological spaces and times (the “wilderness” in the *Electrical World*’s description of the telephone, the pastoral in the case of Marx’s “machine in the garden”)³ locates it within the logic of domination. Technology is often figured as the motivating agent of such invasions, hence lending an air of mechanical inevitability to the process. But the cultural logic of invasion precedes the introduction of specific technologies like the telephone and the phonograph; before they achieve anything resembling standardization, the rhetoric of domination used to describe their (future) functions discursively limits their possible cultural resonances.

³ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1964]).

According to Niklas Luhmann, communication within social systems operates according to a paradigm of “double contingency.” The initial emergence of communication is not predetermined; its forms and modes, though responsive to environmental conditions, are socially fluid. Hans-Georg Moeller explains, “What is communicated and how it is communicated is totally contingent: there is no basic a priori condition for communication.”⁴ However, once patterns of communication are established, future communications follow those patterns.⁵ As Luhmann puts it, “Settled system differentiations stabilize the possibilities for reproduction by constraining conditions on the comprehensibility of communication and the suitability of behavioral modes.”⁶ This second, constraining form of contingency essentially inactivates the first, replacing the openness of communication’s initial emergence in a social system with the precedent of prior communication. In the case of the telephone and phonograph, the cultural significance of their emergence is constrained (contingent in the second sense theorized by Luhmann) by the logic of domination into which they are incorporated. New media can thereby come to perpetuate older discourses, not producing a radical cultural break, but *reproducing* the cultural logic that fuels the belief in technology’s power to effect such a break.

Though Bell and Watson’s invention of the telephone (1876) predates Edison’s announcement of the phonograph (1878), this chapter’s first section focuses on the latter technology. Twain’s (and the American public’s) engagement with “Blind Tom,” the African American performer later referred to as the “human phonograph,” began before

⁴ Hans-Georg Moeller, *Luhmann Explained: From Souls to Systems* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), 23.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. and Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 189.

either sonic invention was developed. Tom's celebrated ability to imitate any noise, speech, or musical composition placed him at the heart of the cultural imaginary regarding sonic reproduction, and the coding of this imitation in terms of his race and supposed mental impairment participated in and perhaps helped reinforce discursive assumptions of *domination* and *instrumentality* later at play in Edison's early descriptions of his phonograph. Martin Heidegger theorizes "the instrumental conception of technology" as a subordinate form of domination; in order to exert power through technology, one must first "master" technology.⁷ Twain's creative rendering of the phonograph in *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* (1883) and in his adaptation and novelization of the same as *The American Claimant* (1891) manipulates these discursive expectations to humorous and ethical effect by showing what happens when technology eludes human control. In these works, the phonograph *overhears*, reproducing sound in excess of that which its inventor intends to capture.

Section two explores Twain's response to the cultural contexts of the early telephone in works where he fictionalizes the technology. Introducing greater complexity into Twain's breakdown of discursive conventions of technological domination and instrumentality, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) celebrates technological openness by emphasizing a third trope that is present, but normally downplayed, in invention narratives: *infancy*. Twain's association of the telephone with infancy in *A Connecticut Yankee* renders audible the developmental stage of the medium

⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 5. Heidegger writes, "But this much remains correct: modern technology too is a means to an end. That is why the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will, as we say, 'get' technology 'spiritually in hand.' We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control."

and invests it with nostalgia, an emotion usually reserved in progress narratives, if at all, for the regions invaded by technology. Near the end of *A Connecticut Yankee*, two lamentable forms of instrumentalization are analogized in the protagonist's musings over the infant Hello-Central: standard telephone service and standard English. Yet Twain's technological nostalgia does not commemorate the bygone stability of the early telephone, but rather celebrates its linguistic potential energy, an energy ironically lost when the medium achieves standardization. By reversing the affective logic of the conventional progress narrative, Twain unsettles one of its major ideological assumptions: that cultural growth depends upon technological domination. In his rendering, by contrast, uniform instrumentalization is characterized as linguistic and cultural stagnation.

Section three examines how both early telephone discourse and dialect writing hold out the promise of connecting the user or reader to other voices, and why these connections so often fail. Twain's dialect writing has been the focus of numerous critical studies, and the author himself identifies the speech of his characters as a central concern in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), where he follows an opening "Notice" expressly forbidding conventional reading practices (for motive, moral, and plot) with an "Explanatory" that clarifies the precision with which he has rendered the book's multiple dialects. Without such an explanation, he fears, "many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding."⁸ While the book's unconventional form struggles against its readers' preconceptions of how to read a novel, its phonographic realism struggles against their audile preconditioning. In both cases, the

⁸ Mark Twain, *Mississippi Writings: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Life on the Mississippi, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 620. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

reader's experience of the text is *contingent* upon his or her prior cultural conditioning (what *A Connecticut Yankee*'s Hank Morgan repeatedly refers to as "training"), which channels the voices of others through ideologically-compromised receivers. Twain models a more flexible form of aural reception through Huck's attentiveness to how sound travels on the Mississippi River. Atop a literally fluid telephone, he observes that what one hears is hugely influenced by the channels through which one listens.

The chapter concludes by arguing that the reverberation between different media forms (the phonograph, the telephone, the novel) in Twain's work suggests that the discourse of domination underlying technologies of realist literary production might be subverted by paying greater attention to the breakdown of sonic instrumentality (the ability, pace Heidegger, of exerting "mastery" over these technologies). This final section asks how the (mal)functions of Twain's literary listening machines—the collapse of the distinction between operator and object, the inability to prevent the machine from *overhearing*, and the effect of the audible gap between source and receiver—might trouble the power relations assumed in realist discourse. Raising this question in the context of Twain's own uncertain status somewhere between controller and medium of his literary (re)productions, this section sets the stage for a more extensive examination, in chapter two, of Stephen Crane's phonographically informed rendering of the loss of individual agency.

I. Mark Twain & the "Human Phonograph"

On a winter's day in 1868, Samuel Clemens rode the train between lecture engagements in Illinois. There he encountered a figure behaving so strangely that he

later recalled his observations (under the pseudonym of Mark Twain) in a special correspondence to the San Francisco *Alta California* of August 1, 1869:

I went into the smoking car and sat down to meditate; but it was not a good meditating place, for pretty soon a burly negro man on the opposite side of the car began to sway his body violently forward and back, and mimic with his mouth the hiss and clatter of the train, in the most savagely excited way.... Clattering, hissing, whistling, blowing off gauge cocks, ringing his bell, thundering over bridges with a row and a racket like everything going to pieces, whooping through tunnels, running over cows -- Heavens! I thought, will this devil never run his viewless express off the track and give us a rest? No, sir. For three dreadful hours he kept it up -- and you may know by that what muscles and what wind he had. His wild eyes were sightless.... When he spoke he talked excitedly to himself, in an idiotic way and incoherently, but never slowed down on his imaginary express train to do it. He looked about thirty, was coarsely and slouchily dressed, and was as ungainly in build and uncomely of countenance as any half-civilized plantation slave. After I had endured his furious entertainment until I was becoming as crazy as he was and getting ready to start an opposition express on my own hook, I inquired who this barbarian was, and where he was bound for, and why he was not chained or throttled? They said it was Blind Tom, the celebrated pianist -- a harmless idiot to whom all sounds were music, and the imitation of them an unceasing delight. Even discord had a charm for his exquisite ear.⁹

Twain's initial impression of Blind Tom—whose legally-disputed name was Thomas

Wiggins or Thomas Bethune—offers readers a description of primitivism incarnate.

Tom's "idiocy" renders him "*savagely* excited" in his imitations, and his "*wild eyes*" and general physical appearance align him, for Twain, with a "*half-civilized* plantation slave."

In this scene, stereotypes of mental incapacity and racial inferiority become mutually reinforcing attributes that convey an overall picture of barbarism. Cognitive impairment and blackness implicitly read as synonyms; both characteristics account for the drive toward imitation that also, through circular logic, "proves" the identity of impairment and blackness in the first place. It is this link that "Blind Tom" would epitomize in an article

⁹ Mark Twain, "Letter from Mark Twain," *San Francisco Alta California*, August 1, 1869, <http://www.twainquotes.com/18690801.html>.

in *The North American Review* from November-December 1878: “[Phillis Wheatley] was a poet very much as ‘Blind Tom’ is a musician ... A fatal felicity of imitation stands in the way of this interesting race, and we cannot fairly deny that facts give support to the opinion of an inherent mental inferiority.”¹⁰ Among those “facts” was the cultural impact of Blind Tom, whose capacity for reproducing orally and on the piano any sound, speech, or composition he heard was at once deemed remarkable enough to warrant his long career in show business and yet also interpreted as completely emblematic of a general (though normally less-extremely embodied) racial trait.

In the May-June issue of *The North American Review* from the same year, Thomas Edison extolled the virtues of another sonic reproducer. There he assessed the phonograph he had recently invented—which “has commanded such profound and earnest attention throughout the civilized world”—as neither savage nor slave, but as technological captor. Among the phonograph’s “*faits accomplis*,” Edison enumerated

1. The captivity of all manner of sound-waves heretofore designated as ‘fugitive,’ and their permanent retention.
2. Their reproduction with all their original characteristics at will, without the presence or consent of the original source, and after the lapse of any period of time.
3. The transmission of such captive sounds through the ordinary channels of commercial intercourse and trade in material form, for purposes of communication or as merchantable goods.
4. Indefinite multiplication and preservation of such sounds, without regard to the existence or non-existence of the original source.
5. The captivation of sounds, with or without the knowledge or consent of the source of their origin.¹¹

Edison was by no means the first or the only person to characterize an invention’s accomplishment in terms of its domination over physical forces. But his description of

¹⁰ James Parton, “Antipathy to the Negro,” *The North American Review* 127, no. 265 (Nov.-Dec. 1878): 488, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25100697>.

¹¹ Edison, “The Phonograph and Its Future,” 530.

the phonograph's command of sound waves employs a rhetoric of mastery reminiscent of the then only recently ended period of African American enslavement: captivation and use (reproduction) "without consent," the transmission of "captives" as "merchantable goods," and the capture and retention of "fugitives" (a controversial issue at the forefront of national debate from the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to the beginning of the Civil War). This is not to suggest that Edison posits his phonograph as the means to a modernized, post-Reconstruction cultural re-enslavement of African Americans (though a large proportion of early Edison cylinder records would "capture" minstrel performances for the enjoyment of predominantly white audiences). The rest of Edison's initial essay on the phonograph focuses on the mechanics of recording and his predictions for the device's possible uses. What his "captivity" rhetoric does reflect, however, is the impingement of cultural-historical contexts upon the conceptual elaboration of even "new" technologies. Domination served as one framework for understanding the work of invention and, in the context of 1870s America, the most prominent cultural model for domination came from the antebellum South.¹² Blind Tom perhaps offered an even more specific cultural referent for the kind of domination promised by the introduction of the phonograph.

By 1878, when "a few exhibition machines ... were placed before the public" by Edison,¹³ Blind Tom's skill for sonic reproduction had already been on tour and

¹² The rhetoric applied to Native Americans in the same period did not share in the discourse of domination but that of race war and genocide. In "Antipathy to the Negro," for instance, Parton at one point reinforces his assessment of the African American by contrasting him with the Native American. Though the latter, unlike the former, "can control his countenance [and] his tongue," he cannot be instrumentalized to useful ends: "But the Indian of pure blood will not work; and if you make him work, he dies" (489-90). See Richard Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment* (New York: Atheneum, 1985) for an extensive critical account of this discourse surrounding Native Americans in the period.

¹³ Edison, "The Perfected Phonograph," *The North American Review* 146, no. 379 (June 1888): 643, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25101531>.

celebrated in newspaper articles for nearly two and a half decades: “[B]y 1874, Tom had traveled the length and breadth of the United States and Canada so many times that his managers could confidently claim that he had probably been ‘seen by more people than any one living being,’ having played almost every town of any size plus a whole lot smaller in between.”¹⁴ The phonograph became commercially available for the American public to own beginning in 1888, and thereafter an explicit analogy between Tom and the device would be made. In the *Nebraska State Journal* from May 18, 1895, Willa Cather wrote of Tom: “He is a human phonograph, a sort of animated memory, with sound producing power.”¹⁵ However, given that Tom captivated the country with his capacity for sonic reproduction long before the introduction of the phonograph, might we not reverse the terms of Cather’s analogy? In its early years, could the phonograph have registered culturally as a mechanical Blind Tom? Such a connection is imagined in “Blind Tom, The Human Phonograph,” a 1908 obituary for the performer: “Tom was at his best before Edison invented the phonograph, *but he might have served for its suggestion*. He had all its capacity for recording certain sounds, *and little more initiative*. Almost an infant in mental ability, he could reproduce the most intricate musical compositions with a faithfulness which was marvelous.”¹⁶ While Blind Tom does not factor directly into Edison’s account of his inspiration for developing the phonograph, he occupied a prominent position in the cultural imaginary.

Even before the development of the phonograph and explicit comparisons noting the similar lack of “initiative” in the performer and the device, descriptions of Tom

¹⁴ O’Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 182.

¹⁵ Quoted in O’Connell, 240. Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918) bases the character of “Blind d’Arnault”—who appears in Book II, Chapter VII—closely upon “Blind Tom.”

¹⁶ “Blind Tom, The Human Phonograph,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 17, 1908, (emphasis added).

emphasized a certain instrumentality underlying his sonic abilities. The rhetoric in the latter section of Twain's 1869 account of Blind Tom is typical of mainstream (white) responses to his performances:

Some archangel, cast out of upper Heaven like another Satan, inhabits this coarse casket; and he comforts himself and makes his prison beautiful with thoughts and dreams and memories of another time and another existence that fire this dull clod with impulses and inspirations it no more comprehends than does the stupid worm the stirring of the spirit within her of the gorgeous captive whose wings she fetters and whose flight she stays. It is not Blind Tom that does these wonderful things and plays this wonderful music -- it is the other party.¹⁷

Contextualized as entertainment, Tom's imitative capacity is transformed from the "savagery" Twain earlier observed into angelic genius. Rather than being "chained or throttled," as Twain initially thinks Tom ought to be, in performance he is controlled more subtly by being instrumentalized. He does not need to be restrained because, as a mere channel for other spirits to play through, he is himself little more than a form of corporeal restraint—a "casket," a "prison," a "fetter"—momentarily overcome. Tom's role as a medium had been explicitly advertised even while he was still a child: "[At the Spalding & Rogers Museum] Tom's concerts were touted as 'séances'—a small semantic shift that suggested that the great masters were channeling themselves into the body of the blind 'witless' child."¹⁸ Because of his race and his "mental inferiority," Tom was figured as a mere instrument.

But he was an instrument whose function exceeded the limited parameters set by his masters and later (after the end of the Civil War) by his various managers and guardians. "The will to mastery," Heidegger writes of the instrumental conception of technology, "becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from

¹⁷ Twain, "Letter from Mark Twain."

¹⁸ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 83-84.

human control.”¹⁹ Twain’s initial rhetoric had suggested the need for explicit physical mastery of Tom’s imitative tendencies when encountered outside the (somewhat) successfully controlled context of performance. And his turn toward such disturbing rhetoric followed a particularly strange moment in his response to the at first unknown imitative African American: “After I had endured his furious entertainment *until I was becoming as crazy as he was and getting ready to start an opposition express on my own hook*, I inquired who this barbarian was, and where he was bound for, and why he was not chained or throttled?” Before identifying the “barbarian,” Twain suggests that Tom’s sonic power has transformed his own mental state, creating in him an impulse to imitate the imitator. While this response is likely hyperbolic and hence unrealized in this text, in his later literary treatment of the phonograph in “Colonel Sellers as a Scientist” and *The American Claimant*, Twain would imitate Edison’s sonic reproducer.²⁰ There he emphasizes how the instrument exceeds its intended use and, in the process of *overhearing*, blurs racial demarcations. As his nearly imitative response to Blind Tom suggests, one such imperiled distinction may be that between the operator and the instrument.

Edison’s rhetoric of “capturing” sounds in his early account of the phonograph emphasized overhearing as one of the device’s functions: “captivation of sounds, *with or*

¹⁹ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 5.

²⁰ While Twain does not (re)produce his “opposition express” in his 1869 account of Blind Tom, perhaps he had this earlier moment of transportation imitation in mind while composing Ben Rogers’ extended impersonation of a steamboat in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), of which the following is only an excerpt: “‘Stop the stabboard! Ting-a-ling-ling! Stop the labbord! Come ahead on the stabboard! Stop her! Let your outside turn over slow! Ting-a-ling-ling! Chow-ow-ow! Get out that head-line! *Lively*, now! Come—out with your spring-line—what’re you about there! Take a turn round that stump with the bight of it! Stand by that stage, now—let her go! Done with the engines, sir! Ting-a-ling-ling! *Sh’t! s’sh’t! sh’t!*’” (*Mississippi Writings* 18). Here the drive toward imitation is explained by the youth of the speaker, but “childishness” was another way African American “mental inferiority” was frequently characterized. See, for example, the explicit correlation drawn between the mind of young Caucasian Jimmie Trescott and that of adult African American Henry Johnson in Stephen Crane’s *The Monster* (1898), which is discussed at greater length in my second chapter.

without the knowledge or consent of the source of their origin.” As previously noted, the language he uses evokes discursive notions of domination most readily understood within the American history of racial oppression. However, the racial distinction separating oppressor and oppressed is not guaranteed to neatly translate into the difference between the captor and captive of the phonograph. Contrary to Edison’s and Twain’s early imaginings of the device, it would actually have been mechanically nearly impossible for people to have been recorded without their knowledge by the then rather limited phonograph. But cultural imaginings of a given technology’s impact are not always—frequently are not—limited to the functional realities of that technology. Edison imagined the phonograph could overhear without consent; nothing, except perhaps discursive assumptions about what social demographic controlled technology (white males), suggested that this function would observe social hierarchies. Twain’s creative rendering of the phonograph pressures such assumptions by imagining its ability to record across race lines and against the will of its inventor.

Colonel Sellers as a Scientist (1883) and *The American Claimant* (1891) both take up the continuing adventures of Mulberry Sellers, a naïve and cash-strapped inventor first introduced, as Eschol Sellers, in Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s *The Gilded Age* (1873).²¹ Sellers believes himself to be descended from English nobility, and both of his later literary incarnations center on the arrival in Washington D.C. of the current heir to an earldom and the mistaken assumption that this individual has perished in a hotel fire. In both the dramatic and the narrative version of the sequel, two of Sellers’ entrepreneurial “inventions” are prominently featured: a “Ship’s Phonograph for the

²¹ Twain (and Howells) changed the inventor’s name to avoid legal complications from a real-life Eschol Sellers.

application of stored Profanity to the working of Vessels during storms” and a machine for materializing the dead so as to employ them as a cheap labor force.²² And, in both versions of the story, Sellers assumes that he has used the latter technology to resurrect the heir thought to have died in the fire. There are several smaller differences between the plotting of the play and that of the later novel, but the above provides enough of a context to allow us to examine the appearance of the phonograph within them.²³

The stated function of the phonograph in both “Colonel Sellers as a Scientist” and *The American Claimant* is to replace the limited swearing capacities of a ship’s mate with a multiplicity of cheaper, mechanical reproductions of such swearing. Swearing, according to Sellers’ logic, is the primary means of motivating sailors: “You know that sailors don’t fly around worth a cent unless you swear at them.”²⁴ The swearing phonograph is thus characterized as an instrument for controlling the maritime labor force. However, it can record and reproduce more than just the voice of the “expert” swearer: “If you want to load it up loud and strong, you stand right over it and shout. But if you leave it open, and all set, it’ll eavesdrop, so to speak---that is to say, it will load itself up with any sounds that are made within six feet of it” (*Colonel* 241). Though intentionally “loading” the phonograph cylinder and setting it for “eavesdrop[ping]” are described as two distinct functions that the user can choose from, within the text

²² Twain and Howells, *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist*, 223. Further references to this source will be cited parenthetically in text.

²³ In the play, Sellers knows the heir is in town and mistakes him for dead because yet another heir, cousin to the first, dies in the fire. In the novel, a series of unlikely circumstances leads the heir—traveling incognito—to wear the clothes of a man who dies in the hotel fire, and Sellers assumes that he has materialized that individual. In scene two of the play, Sellers’ daughter is reunited with the man whom she fell in love with while traveling but was separated from during the sinking of a boat; this man reveals himself to be “co-heir to the dream of being the Earl of Dover” with her father (225). In the novel, Sellers’ daughter falls in love with the disguised heir after her father has “materialized” him, and she only learns of his true identity toward the end of the book.

²⁴ Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age and Later Novels: The Gilded Age, The American Claimant, Tom Sawyer Abroad, Tom Sawyer, Detective, No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, ed. Hamlin L. Hill (New York: The Library of America, 2002), 576. Further references to this source will be cited parenthetically in text.

eavesdropping occurs accidentally and actually interrupts the successful playback of professional swearing by accumulating a variety of “irrelevant stuff” on the cylinder (*Colonel* 241). Among the “irrelevant stuff” unintentionally captured by phonograph in Twain and Howells’ play are snatches of the dialogue between Sellers’ daughter Mary and her black nurse Aunt Sally in the first scene:

THE PHONOGRAPH: Where’s that Portagee Joe? Go aloft, go aloft, you wow, wow, or I’ll heave your carcass overboard to the sharks.

...

THE PHONOGRAPH, *confusedly*:

You think he got drowned---poor creatures out of the train---git my hands on him---tar de lights out’n him---mop de floor wid him—fancy to a perfect stranger in the cars---American pork---Oh, he is my dear, dead only love---talking by the guard before the boat went down---pulled me up on that piece of wreck and told me there in the horror and darkness that he would rather be there with me in the presence of death--- (223-24)

Following the professional maritime swearing, the “confusion” in the phonograph crosses white and black speech, reproducing them as a montage of phrases emerging from a single, mechanical source. Twain’s novelization of the play replicates a later scene with the phonograph where the maritime swearing has been unintentionally recorded over by singing and the sounds of a catfight, but not this earlier crossing of racial voices. Perhaps a trace of the crossover remains, however, in Twain’s decision to change the name of Colonel Sellers’ daughter from Mary in the play to Sally (the name earlier given the black nurse) in the novel.

In addition to presenting the breakdown of clearly demarcated technological functions as a kind of racial sonic intermixture, *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* also suggests that even the playback of the phonograph’s intended content can serve unintended purposes. As noted, the swearing phonograph is designed to produce greater

efficiency among maritime laborers. However, Mary's instinctive response to hearing the phonograph reveals that this function has often been subverted by a laborer in her own home:

MARY, *within*:

Uncle Daniel, will you let that phonograph alone?

(*Entering.*)

Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. I thought it was our old servant. Whenever he gets provoked at anything, he comes in here and swears through the phonograph till we have no peace of our lives. (224)

In opposition to its inventor's stated intention, here the swearing phonograph does not enforce labor but rather enables an African American servant to express his frustrations and, in so doing, disrupt the household he serves.

Such phonographic racial transgressions are only briefly mentioned in *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist* before the focus shifts back to the major plotline. Though Twain's later novelization of the story omits these particular details entirely, *The American Claimant* does posit that the problem of African American servants deviating from their allotted tasks might be caused by their inadequate instrumentalization. In the novel, Sellers' former slaves Jinny and Dan'l only pretend to work so they can listen to or interject their noise ("gabble") into the conversations taking place in the house: "'Dan'l waits on the front door, and sometimes goes on an errand; and sometimes you'll see one or both of them letting on to dust around in here—but that's because there's something they want to hear about and mix their gabble into. And they're always around at meals, for the same reason'" (*Later Novels* 480). Sellers imagines that his other major invention, the device for materializing the dead into service, might bring his former slaves back under his more effective control, and the violent rhetoric of this thought expresses a desire to render them mechanical primarily so as to dictate their sonic output:

‘Yes,’ he said to himself, ‘when I’ve got the materializing down to a certainty, I will get Hawkins to kill them, and after that they will be under better control. Without doubt a materialized negro could easily be hypnotized into a state resembling silence. And this could be made permanent—yes, and also modifiable, at will—sometimes *very* silent, sometimes turn on more talk, more action, more emotion, according to what you want. It’s a prime good idea. Make it adjustable—with a screw or something.’ (*Later Novels* 510)

While the swearing phonograph promises to enforce labor by reproducing the verbal abuse of the ship’s mate, here Sellers believes materialization might (re)produce more adequate servants by turning them into phonographs whose “eavesdropping” and aural playback—unlike that of the ship’s phonograph and the living Jinny and Dan’l—can be strictly controlled: “sometimes *very* silent, sometimes turn on more talk.” The violence of such instrumentalization—which amounts to no less than murder—is explicit.²⁵

“Materialization” renders all of its objects (regardless of their race) instrumental and hence of subordinate social status. Even the descendant of English nobility, when thought to be reproduced via materialization, can generate a fear of miscegenation. Hawkins—Colonel Sellers companion rube in *The American Claimant*—expresses this fear when he believes his friend’s daughter has fallen in love with a materializee: “she’s gone and lost her heart to this mangy materialize! Why *didn’t* we see that that might happen? But how could we? Nobody could; nobody could ever have dreamed of such a thing. You couldn’t expect a person would fall in love with such a wax-work” (*Later Novels* 609). The ridiculousness of the situation—the impossibility of materialization—downplays the fear that a white man could be so objectified. Yet it was not beyond the pale to believe that one’s voice could be controlled in this way; Edison’s description of

²⁵ Alternatively, one could argue that Twain’s presentation of this idea in the voice of Colonel Sellers, an inventor whose crazy schemes characterize him as a complete buffoon, suggests that—even if, in 1869, he readily accepted Blind Tom’s mental nullity as a medium—he is here, by 1891, parodying rather than affirming the troubling association between race and instrumentality.

the phonograph promised conquest over space and time, reproducing sound “at will, without the presence or consent of the original source, and after the lapse of any period of time.” The possibility of having one’s voice recorded offered at once a certain power over death and powerlessness before the living who would control one’s sonic afterlife.

Twain’s “Colonel Sellers” portrays black and white voices being overheard and intermixed without the consent of their original sources, but this recording occurs by accident rather than by intention: the playback of this and other “irrelevant stuff” interrupts the control over labor which the swearing phonograph was intended to produce. Recording, in Twain’s rendering, cannot be controlled. To deny the perfect instrumentality of the phonograph ensures that one’s voice cannot be dominated “at will” by the user of the machine, but doing so abandons the claim to “mastery” over the technology. While unmastered sonic reproduction, in Twain’s early encounter with Blind Tom, is characterized as a form of savagery, in his approach to the emergent telephone he develops another discourse—deriving from but understated in the accounts of inventors like Edison, Bell, and Watson—to render such open sonic mediation in positive terms. This discourse is that of technological infancy.

II. Can you hear me *now*?—The Emergent Telephone in *A Connecticut Yankee*

The first telephone exchanges were geographically bounded, “local phenomen[a], [their] localness underlined by the ever-present ‘Central’ and her de facto position as the neighborhood message center.”²⁶ Though the Bell Telephone Company held exclusive

²⁶ John Brooks, “The First and Only Century of Telephone Literature,” in *The Social Impact of the Telephone*, ed. Ithiel de Sola Pool (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 216. In the very first exchanges, the operator was most commonly male, a fact perhaps suggested in Twain’s “A Telephonic Conversation” (1880) by the description of the “gruff” hello from the operator. Mark Twain, *Collected Tales, Sketches*,

patents on telephone technology in America from 1876 until 1893, their company model of “leas[ing] the instruments and licens[ing] local providers of telephone service” accommodated a certain degree of regional independence: “in the earliest years perhaps dozens of entrepreneurs in towns across America ... made individual licensing agreements ...”²⁷ As one might expect given the local aspect of the early exchanges, the range of potential calls was limited. The first long distance call wasn’t made until 1892 (between New York and Chicago), and the first coast-to-coast call wasn’t made until 1915 (between New York and San Francisco).²⁸ The Bell Telephone Company concentrated its early construction efforts in urban population centers outside the South. But after its patents expired in 1893, independent companies and mutuals became prominent in rural markets, so much so that “after the first decades, it was not the people in the metropolitan areas but those in the hinterland who most often had telephones.”²⁹ Twain did not merely reflect the current state of the emergent telephone system in his writing, but played upon the tension between its first public iteration—with which he was well familiar as the self-described “first person in the world that ever had a telephone in his house for practical purposes”³⁰—and the more comprehensive standardization he (correctly, in the long run) believed would characterize the system in its maturity.³¹

Speeches, & Essays, 1852-1890 (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 738. Male operators were soon replaced, however, because of their “egregious inefficiency.” Brooks, “First and Only,” 212.

²⁷ Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 36.

²⁸ See Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 214-15; Brooks, “First and Only,” 216; and Fischer, *America Calling*, 47.

²⁹ Fischer, *America Calling*, 86.

³⁰ Twain, *The Complete Essays*, 326.

³¹ Among the developments he anticipated (by more than thirty years) was the transcontinental (and transterritorial) long-distance phone call. In 1878’s “The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton,” Alonzo at one point hears from New York Rosannah singing in Honolulu.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), this tension is most powerfully expressed by Twain's invocation of a valuable, yet imperiled telephonic infancy. And Twain explores this infancy in a setting suggestive of several American regions. Hank Morgan, a factory foreman and self-proclaimed "Yankee of the Yankees," is knocked unconscious during a brawl with his workers and awakes to find himself transported back in time to sixth-century, Arthurian England. There he encounters characters reminiscent of both the frontier West ("white Indians") and the antebellum South (peasants like "the 'poor whites' of our South").³² Though the novel's action ostensibly takes place in the distant past and across the Atlantic, Twain thus signals the relevance of his tale for thinking about the modernization of America. Hank quickly realizes the advantages of his nineteenth-century technological knowledge and sets about updating medieval England with a patent office, newspaper and telephone communications, the American currency system, "Man-Factor[ies]" for molding sixth-century peasants into a modern workforce, and "all the thousand willing and handy servants of steam and electricity" (*Historical* 296, 503). By exploiting his cultural and technological "foresight," Hank quickly rises to a position of power rivaling that of the nobility and comes to be known across "the nation" by a title that, "translated into modern speech, would be THE BOSS" (265). He thereby nearly realizes his goal of "boss[ing] the whole country" (230). But at the end of the novel the Church incites the gentry to wage war upon Hank and his followers. Hank uses his technological prowess to

³² Mark Twain, *Historical Romances: The Prince and the Pauper, A Connecticut Yankee, Joan of Arc* (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 222, 233, 431. Further citations of this work are given in the text. For other interpretations of the presence of "indians" in *A Connecticut Yankee*, see Sam Halliday, "History, 'Civilization,' and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*" in *A Companion to Mark Twain*, ed., Peter Messent and Louis J. Budd (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 416-30; Walter Benn Michaels, "An American Tragedy, or the Promise of American Life" *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 71-98; and Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

decimate the forces sent against him, exhibiting the kind of instant network manipulation that came to characterize the typical villain of the “wire thrillers” in the period immediately following the publication of *A Connecticut Yankee*: “I touched a button and shook the bones of England loose from her spine!” (528).³³ Ultimately, however, it is Hank’s own remarkable military success that undoes him. Trapped in their stronghold by the numerous bodies of the knights they have killed, his men fall victim to disease and Hank himself is transported back to the nineteenth century by Merlin, who sneaks in to perform one final spell.

That Twain’s Yankee could travel backward in time thirteen centuries and be reminded of the nineteenth-century West and South certainly reinforces the notion—familiar from the technological progress narratives of Marx and Stephen Kern—that such regions on the industrial periphery were supposedly less culturally advanced. Yet the seemingly straightforward invasion of medieval England (and, by extension, the American West and South) by a paragon of Yankee industrialism is complicated by Hank’s valorization of the non-standardized speech of the infant telephone. How can we account for this apparent anomaly in Hank’s pragmatic, factory-trained personality? Thomas D. Zlatich offers one possible answer: “Hank Morgan, a literate Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, is changed by the sixth century as much as he changes it, but the principal transformation is his adoption of the personal, communal values that the oral culture enshrines.”³⁴ However, Zlatich must simplify the early telephone’s technological limitations and its cultural connotations in order to read it as “reinforc[ing] the orality of

³³ For an extended account of the “wire thrillers” take on the telephone, see Robert MacDougall, “The Wire Devils: Pulp Thrillers, The Telephone, and Action at a Distance in the Wiring of a Nation,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Sept. 2006): 715-41, doi: 10.1353/aq.2006.0062.

³⁴ Thomas D. Zlatich, “Language Technologies in *A Connecticut Yankee*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45, no. 4 (March 1991): 476, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3044997>.

the sixth century [by] restor[ing] to distant communication the living present, the intimacy and power of the spoken word.”³⁵ Twain was particularly interested in the tendency of the early medium to alter the messages it carried. In works ranging from “The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton” (1878) to “A Telephonic Sketch” (1880) to “Colonel Sellers as a Scientist” (a play co-authored with William Dean Howells in 1883) to *A Connecticut Yankee* (1889), Twain emphasizes the telephone as a producer of miscommunication.³⁶ Furthermore, such miscommunications notwithstanding, the early telephone could as readily evoke absence as presence, and did so for the spiritualists who adopted it as a tool of their trade.³⁷ Thus, instead of reading Hank’s positive reaction to telephonic infancy as evidence of his conversion by an oral culture, we might attribute the change in Hank to the growing complexity of Twain’s exploration of nineteenth-century technology throughout the course of the novel, which reaches its apex with the introduction of the infant “Hello-Central” toward the story’s end.

Although by 1894 the *Electrical World* describes the telephone as “the voice crying in the wilderness,” the moment of the telephone’s inception (or conception) is analogically related to another, less self-sufficient cry. In Thomas Watson’s account of his 1875 co-invention of the device, he reports that “the faint sound in [Alexander

³⁵ Ibid, 474. Zlatich’s positive evaluation of the sixth-century “oral culture” is itself questionable, as the novel’s most prolific talker—Hank’s eventual wife Sandy—is described mechanistically, and its most beautifully-spoken character—Morgan La Fay—is portrayed as a lethal ruler who does not acknowledge the common humanity of those below her caste.

³⁶ As Joe Boyd Fulton puts it in his description of Twain’s approach to the telephone, “the real miracle of this new invention is that it facilitates miscommunication.” Fulton, “Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*,” *The Explicator* 53, no. 1 (October 1994): 35.

³⁷ For further information regarding cultural connections between the early telephone and spiritualism, see Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*; and Jill Nicole Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

Graham Bell's] receiver ... was the *birth-cry* of the telephone."³⁸ The meaning of this infantile "faint sound" is far less certain than that of a prophetic cry in the wilderness, for while the analogy to infancy suggests the possibility for growth, the fulfillment of that potential was initially by no means guaranteed. Watson and Bell "hasten[ed] to advance [the telephone's] infancy, eager to have their child talk," but doing so required more than simply improving the mechanics of the device.³⁹ They also had to frame early telephonic demonstrations within certain cultural or ideological parameters by delimiting what counted as speech ahead of placing the call. Jonathan Sterne explains, "[C]onventionalized language helped the machine along in doing its job of reproducing. It enacted the *possibility* of reproduction before that function could be fully delegated to the machine. From its very beginnings, sound reproduction required a certain level of faith in the apparatus and a certain familiarity with what was to be reproduced."⁴⁰ In other words, the emergence of the telephone was not, as technological progress narratives suggest, a "cry[] in the wilderness"; new technologies are not given forces of reality acting upon cultural myths; they only make sense and take effect *within* cultural contexts. Though we often forget these contexts once a technology becomes ubiquitous, Twain reminds us of this history by exploring and reproducing the uncertainty of the telephone's infancy, paying particular attention to the pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic noises created by the medium.

In *A Connecticut Yankee*, Hank "fathers" (or perhaps mothers) two technological infants (at least two that are explicitly described as such). The first is the newspaper,

³⁸ Thomas A. Watson, *Exploring Life: The Autobiography of Thomas A. Watson* (New York: D. Appleton, 1926), 73, quoted in Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 258, emphasis added.

³⁹ Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 257.

⁴⁰ Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 247.

which—despite “little crudities of a mechanical sort” (*Historical* 404)—Hank takes a great deal of pride in:

For was not this my darling, and was not all this mute wonder and interest and homage a most eloquent tribute and unforced compliment to it? I knew, then, how a mother feels when women, whether strangers or friends, take her new baby, and close themselves about it with one eager impulse ... I knew how she feels, and that there is no other satisfied ambition, whether of king, conqueror or poet, that ever reaches half way to that serene far summit or yields half so divine a contentment.... Yes, this was heaven; I was tasting it once, if I might never taste it more. (405-06)

Hank’s sentiment here—lauding “motherhood” over conquest—is a far cry from his initial response to finding himself transported backward to the sixth century: “I would boss the whole country inside of three months” (230). In portraying this shift in Hank’s standard of “satisfaction,” Twain points to a nuance of technological development that is unaccounted for by broad-sweeping claims for industrial advancement. While the fully standardized technological system comes to represent a diffuse “counterforce” to the nostalgic “rural myth” in Leo Marx’s conception of the “machine,” the popular discourse surrounding invention, even when authored by an inventor (pace Watson), locates new technologies first within the local logic of domesticity and parenthood. Given the regional nature of the first telephone exchanges, we might read the domestic turn in Twain’s handling of the newspaper and the telephone—Hank’s second technological “child”—as a potent expression of technology’s local rather than universal emergence.⁴¹

The turn toward domesticity and infancy allows Twain to emphasize a state of potential technological growth and also to invoke the perhaps inevitably fleeting nature of this

⁴¹ Seth Lerer offers an alternative explanation for the turn to domesticity in the family scenes with Hank, Sandy, and Hello-Central: “In this episode, Twain offers more than just a glib satire on the fantasies of modern life. Hank’s dreams (tinged, doubtless, with the barely suppressed erotics of the hello-girls that were the object of contemporary journalistic comment) become domestic. And this is precisely what Twain has done to the Arthurian inheritance as a whole. He has transformed the sex and violence of Malory into text and show, family ritual and technological display.” “Hello Dude: Philology, Performance, and Technology in Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*,” *American Literary History* 15, no.3 (Fall 2003): 479.

potentiality. Hence the process of bringing the new technology before an audience convokes both satisfaction and, as Hank's concluding thoughts on the first newspaper's debut suggest, a sense of potential loss—"I was tasting it once, if I might never taste it more."

Twain's invocation of early telephony's potential energy and the loss of this energy with standardization anticipates both valences of what systems theorist Niklas Luhmann terms "double contingency." These valences include, we recall, the initial openness (contingency) of communication and its later delimitation (contingency) by the precedent of prior communications. Bell and Watson's dependence on using conventional, easily understood phrases to successfully demonstrate the early telephone shows that even the newest of communications technologies do not emerge in a vacuum, but must accommodate existing social contexts in order to prove functional. If later progress narratives accept that the telephone "'annihilated' space and time,"⁴² Twain's account of the doubly-contingent telephone recuperates time *within* the history of the technology, reminding us that individual technologies have lifespans ranging from invention to implementation to standardization (and/or obsolescence). Technology is not a given but the result of specific historical developments and cultural associations that were initially fluid and then reinforced by precedent. The industrial "counterforce" Marx describes, in this regard, proves as much a fantasy as the "rural myth" he sets against it. Twain's presentation of the telephone system as an infant powerfully conveys this "double contingency." The fluidity of the first form of contingency in Luhmann's theory maps easily onto the undetermined fate of the infant. The inevitable loss of this flexibility as the child develops a set personality perfectly captures the second form of

⁴² Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 81.

contingency. In characterizing the telephone as an infant, Twain thus reverses the emotional logic of the technological progress narrative, associating nostalgic desire not with the loss of rural or regional space invaded by technology, but with the loss of the fluidity of the emergent technological system.

Twain's treatment of the infant telephone emphasizes this combination of promise and anticipated loss, a technological nostalgia not for what technology obliterates, but for a given technological system itself in an imperiled liminal or "infant" state. While Bell rushed to make the newborn telephone public—"about six weeks after I signed the contract Bell decided his baby had grown big enough to go out doors and prattle over a real telegraph line, instead of gurgling between two rooms"—Hank Morgan's telephone lingers in relatively private space.⁴³ For practical reasons—including the desire not to alarm the church—the telegraph and telephone network that Hank establishes early in the novel is initially conducted through underground wires and restricted in its use to the operators that he and his protégé, Clarence, select. In this early state, the limitations of the medium are a hindrance, one that Hank has a harder time forgiving than the mechanical "crudities" of the first newspaper. After the location of a "miracle" he performs in "The Valley of Holiness" is miscommunicated over his private telephone network as "The Valley of Hellishness," he complains, "'Confound a telephone, anyway. It is the very demon for conveying similarities of sound that are miracles of divergence from similarity of sense'" (*Historical* 378).⁴⁴ But after the telephone has gone public at

⁴³ Watson, *Exploring Life*, 91, quoted in Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 259.

⁴⁴ While the telephone's production of miscommunications ("miracles of divergence") is here merely a nuisance for Hank, the conversion of "The Valley of Holiness" into "The Valley of Hellishness" could be viewed as an implicit critique of Hank's "hellish" use of technology to dominate sixth-century England. If Hank's restoration of the well waters in the Valley of Holiness was a "miracle" intentionally produced through the application of modern technology, the telephone's garbling of that story becomes a counter-

the end of the novel, Hank's technological nostalgia focuses on another, positively rendered version of the imperfect telephonic sound lamented in his earlier complaint.

The birth of Hank and Sandy's daughter, "Hello-Central," literalizes the analogy between technological innovation and infancy. She is the child of a nineteenth-century foreman who brings the telephone to medieval England, and of a medieval woman whose most conspicuous attribute throughout the text is her phonographic verbal "works," which produce "jaw, jaw, jaw, talk, talk, jabber, jabber, jabber" (289).⁴⁵ The girl's name derives from Hank's repeated, failed attempts to connect with the lost nineteenth century through the telephone: "In my dreams, along at first, I still wandered thirteen centuries away, and my unsatisfied spirit went *calling* and harking all up and down the unreplying vacancies of a vanished world" (509, emphasis added). Sandy overhears these unconscious calls, misconstrues them as laments for a "lost darling," and ensures their preservation by "saddl[ing] that cry of mine upon our child" (509). Given Hank's earlier desire to have his performance in a duel witnessed by "a hello-girl of West Hartford" (498), Sandy's misunderstanding is not too far off, though naming this lost darling "Hello-Central," a widely dispersed telephonic greeting, works against the regional specificity of the hello-girl's location and suggests that Hank is in love with the system rather than an individual within it. And yet, the name also, assigned to the child, recuperates the regional potential of the telephone in its infancy. Telephonic miscommunication here serves in a more positive (from Hank's perspective) creative

"miracle", one also produced, but unintentionally, through technology. This is an ethics of miscommunication created by the surplus noise of the communications system.

⁴⁵ Zlatic contends that Sandy, Hank's traveling companion turned eventual wife, is "the novel's chief representative of the oral mind." However, Sandy reads more like a phonograph than an oral storyteller, and the tension we therefore ought to interrogate in the novel is not the longing of a literate Yankee for a "preliterate world" but rather the complicated tension Twain stages around the infancy of the telephone. Zlatic, "Language Technologies," 476-77.

capacity than it did in renaming the “Valley of Holiness” the “Valley of Hellishness.” It is, moreover, explicitly praised in Hank’s response to the babbling of his infant, telephonic daughter.

Watson extends the analogy between invention and parenthood by describing the telephone’s path to speech transmission as a process of overcoming childhood disease: “Getting that famous first sentence through the telephone seemed to exorcise some of the tantalizing imps that always pester the babyhood of a new invention as infantile diseases do a human baby . . .”⁴⁶ As though anticipating this characterization, Twain troubles Hello-Central with croup. And, as with Watson’s characterization of the early telephone, the barometer for wellness with Hello-Central is also her capacity to speak. However, while Watson and Bell want the telephone to achieve perfectly coherent speech, Hank’s celebration of Hello-Central’s speech is specifically rooted in its non-standardization:

As I was devouring the child with last kisses, it brisked up and jabbered out its vocabulary!—the first time in more than two weeks, and it made fools of us for joy. The darling mispronunciations of childhood!—dear me, there’s no music that can touch it; and how one grieves when it wastes away and dissolves into correctness, knowing it will never visit his bereaved ear again. (*Historical* 511)

In this complex formulation, both the telephonic child’s silence and *its*—notice Twain’s gender-neutral and objectifying pronoun choice—speech hold the possibility of bereavement. On the one hand, it may sicken, quiet, and die; on the other, it may become too healthy, grow to speak too well, and thereby grieve the ear of the listener with the loss of its childhood.

At the end of *A Connecticut Yankee* Hank does lose Hello-Central. While her name originated in his unconscious, failed attempts to call the nineteenth century from

⁴⁶ Watson, *Exploring Life*, 80, quoted in Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 258.

the sixth, the final postscript to the narrative features his delusional, semiconscious attempts to call his sixth-century “invention” from the nineteenth: “‘Was that the child? [. . .] Hello-Central! [. . .] She doesn’t answer. Asleep, perhaps? Bring her when she wakes ...’” (538).⁴⁷ Because Hank’s description of Hello-Central’s speech figures two possible causes of bereavement of his ear—diseased silence and, conversely, healthy “correctness”—the answer Hank listens for in his final moments is not only thwarted by the literal death of the child named Hello-Central, but by the successful growth of the telephone network in the late nineteenth century, which built toward greater geographical coverage with the development of long distance and greater semantic clarity through the diminution of noise on the line. Of the final postscript, Jennifer Lieberman observes, “Echoing his earlier claim that he felt suffocated while he was unable to connect to telephonic networks, the conclusion describes him choking on a ‘death-rattle in his throat’ as imminent death compounds his disconnectedness.”⁴⁸ This formal echo is ironic, as it is Hank’s transportation back into the era (and air) of ready connection that creates his final disconnection from what he really wishes to hear—the jabbering of the technological infant. He loses his place as parent in two senses when he returns to the nineteenth century: he is disconnected from Hello-Central and no longer the father/inventor of the telephone and the other technologies he introduced to Arthurian England. Lieberman again: “As he takes to the role of revolutionary inventor with increasing fervor, the reader must bear in mind that Hank’s technical expertise is not

⁴⁷ Fulton makes a similar observation: “[I]n the ‘Final P.S. by M.T.,’ Hank is unable to ‘call’ the past. As Hank moons about Warwick Castle in the nineteenth century, cicerone to the now-dead sixth century in which Sandy and their child languish, his ‘calls’ connect only with ‘unreplying vacancies.’ His deathbed delirium produces again the one-ended telephone conversation that has been an operative metaphor in the novel.” “Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee*,” 35.

⁴⁸ Jennifer L. Lieberman, “Hank Morgan’s Power Play: Electrical Networks in *King Arthur’s Court*,” *Mark Twain Annual* (2010): 72, doi: 10.1111/j.1756-2597.2010.00041.x.

forward-looking: afraid of being subsumed by scientific and industrial practices of the twentieth century, his imagined technological utopia will only reproduce technologies and ideologies of the late-nineteenth.”⁴⁹ The fear of losing private control of these innovations leads Hank to commit a form of infanticide. Though late in the novel the Church’s interdict gravely weakens Hank’s infrastructure—crippling the communicative abilities of the telegraph and telephone during the very period that Hank and Sandy, gone abroad for their child’s health, hope to recuperate Hello-Central’s vocabulary (519)—it is the Yankee himself who sounds the final death knell for his industries rather than see them exceed his control: “In that explosion all our noble civilization-factories went up in the air, and disappeared from the earth. It was a pity, but it was necessary. We could not afford to let the enemy turn our own weapons against us” (528).

Twain’s exploration of telephonic infancy troubles the antagonism between regionalism and modern technology assumed by conventional progress narratives. His handling of infantile telephonic speech is nostalgic, yet this technological nostalgia is not directed toward a past coded regionally, but rather toward a moment of creative technological possibility—“there’s no music that can touch it.” He emphasizes the openness of the infant medium—before standardization and “correctness” have bereaved the ear. Twain’s routing of this telephonic double contingency through the state of Hello-Central’s speech in *A Connecticut Yankee*—his celebration of her verbal “musical” creativity, and his anticipatory lament for its loss with correctness—indicates a conceptual affinity in his thinking between the early telephone system and regional literature (a body of texts perhaps most readily identified by their incorporation of non-

⁴⁹ Ibid, 64.

standard, dialect writing).⁵⁰ Both the early telephone system and regional literature hold out the promise of connecting the caller or reader to different regions, but, again because of the problem of double contingency, the interactions actually staged by the two media are most often culturally and ideologically insular.

III. Speaking (to) Strangers—"Difference" on the Line and on the Page in *Huck Finn*

After the implementation of long-distance, telephone exchanges were no longer as regionally bounded as they had been in their early instantiations, but the majority of telephone conversations were still local affairs. Fischer explains, "[Point-to-point media] might have actually enhanced local cultures because people most often telephoned and drove locally, thereby deepening their ties with people nearby."⁵¹ And even when the geographical distance covered by a call was broad, the cultural distance spanned often proved minimal: "Experience at a distance consisted in recognizing friends, not in becoming acquainted with strangers, and in confirming the idealized pattern of events in industrial societies."⁵² As did the audiences of Bell and Watson's telephone demonstrations, early users of the telephone incorporated the young technology and its new connections into cultural contexts with which they were already familiar. Carolyn Marvin elaborates, "If contact did not reveal people exactly like those at home, it would reveal people anxious to learn from those at home. Never would it reveal things that those at home needed to learn."⁵³ As the technological capabilities of the telephone advanced, the "strangers" that became hypothetically reachable were nonetheless

⁵⁰ Stephanie Foote observes, "Regional fiction's most recognizable formal characteristic was its use of dialect to render the speech of regional speakers." *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 3.

⁵¹ Fischer, *America Calling*, 195.

⁵² Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, 197.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 194.

imagined as remarkably familiar, their voices channeled through culturally recognizable networks.

Post-bellum regional writing often wired “other” voices through an equally limiting set of cultural associations. Much dialect writing was expressly produced to supply the market for “local color,” which “represent[ed] regional life and regional characters as objects to be viewed from the perspective of the nonregional, often urban Eastern reader, and frequently offered for that reader’s entertainment.”⁵⁴ But even those authors (like Twain and William Dean Howells) who largely eschewed the production of local color in favor of greater regional aural realism could not altogether avoid the cultural preconditioning of their readership. Gavin Jones explains:

While appearing to represent a democratic desire to record America’s multifarious speech-ways, much literary dialect attempted to reinscribe a qualitative hierarchy between standard and nonstandard speech. This was the ideological power of dialect literature: the assumption that dialect recorded the way minorities *really* spoke encoded deeper beliefs that this was how they processed and structured reality, that this language revealed their stream of consciousness, their worldview, their very stuff of self.⁵⁵

The reading of dialect writing, like any act of reading, is ideologically weighted. Those regionalist texts that take the most care in reproducing alternative modes of speech, because of their claims to realism, can actually reassert the reader’s preconceptions more powerfully than a more haphazardly parodic rendering of racial, ethnic, or cultural others. We can understand the difficulty in openly encountering difference—whether represented via regional literature or over the telephone—in terms of the constraints placed upon our interactions with “others” by the precedent of our prior communications. Our model for

⁵⁴ Marjorie Pryse, “Reading Regionalism: The ‘Difference’ It Makes,” in *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*, ed. David Jordan (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 48.

⁵⁵ Jones, *Strange Talk*, 45-46.

accepting cultural difference is contingent upon the “conditions on the comprehensibility of communication and the suitability of behavioral modes” within our existing system.⁵⁶

Social systems privilege speed, and this limits the complexity of communication, both in terms of the construction of messages and of their interpretation. Luhmann explains, “Chains of selections that can operate faster suppress those that require one to deliberate how one is going to react. This includes the fact that whoever can operationalize something first enjoys its advantage.”⁵⁷ What Luhmann describes as a “chain[] of selections” that shortcuts deliberation has a more common name, one originally derived from a time-saving technological innovation in the field of printing: the stereotype.⁵⁸ While it is by no means groundbreaking to suggest that stereotypes are mechanisms of intellectual suppression and cultural domination, theorizing them as technologies for rapid communication partly explains their power. According to Luhmann, “chains of selections” help secure “the *advantage of speed*” for the dominant group within the social system, thus allowing that group to limit the time of discourse to a present largely of their own construction: “Along with speed and connectivity, and

⁵⁶ Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 189.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 119.

⁵⁸ In its original, material sense, “stereotype” indicates “[t]he method or process of printing in which a solid plate of type-metal, cast from a papier-mâché or plaster mould taken from the surface of a forme of type, is used for printing from instead of the forme itself.” This process saves money and time because it eliminates the need to reset the type in the event of a later reprinting of the same text. *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “stereotype,” accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/189956>. Sander Gilman also draws attention to this etymology to suggest the appropriateness of critiquing stereotypes through texts. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 15-16. “cliché” carries similar etymological associations: “The French name for a stereotype block; a cast or ‘dab’; applied esp. to a metal stereotype of a wood-engraving used to print from.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “cliché,” accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/34264>. I am interested in how these technological innovations, originally serving to accelerate the speed of print production and dissemination, maintain their role as accelerators once they become conceptual rather than material.

precisely because it secures the advantages of speed and connectivity, the status quo always has its day.”⁵⁹

What does understanding dialect’s ideological freight do to conventional interpretations of Mark Twain’s regional writing? Joe Fulton concisely summarizes the crux of many such interpretations: “One of the central assumptions in much of Twain criticism is the ethical value of dialect and ungrammatical English, particularly in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.”⁶⁰ That book seems to invite such readings by pairing an opening “Notice” prohibiting conventional reading practices (for motive, moral, and plot) with an “Explanatory” emphasizing the “pains-taking” precision with which the dialect has been rendered. However, if claims to realistic phonographic representation do not necessarily guarantee open cultural encounters—but can in fact, according to Jones, reinforce cultural presuppositions—then we must ask whether Twain’s most famous regional work of fiction contains any further mechanism to guard against the familiar ideological messages readers might hear in the book’s multiple dialects. How does Twain model the kind of open reading practice his “Notice” demands once Huck and Jim (and the reader) are downriver?

Twain’s literary engagement with the telephone (or his telephonic engagement with literature) disrupts the self-evidence of the stereotypical present by cross-wiring two of the technologies through which that present is imagined. The early telephone system subtly enacts representational (and hence readerly) reflection for Twain. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck’s aural experience of the Mississippi River—which

⁵⁹ Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 119.

⁶⁰ Fulton, *Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism: The Aesthetics of Race, Class, and Gender* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997), 10. Fulton does not disagree with the attribution of “ethical value” to Twain’s dialect writing, but seeks to supplement it by analyzing the ethical sensibility at play in the numerous instances where Twain has his characters switch positions with each other.

(mal)functions as a natural telephone—counterbalances the stereotypical pitfalls of realist dialect by modeling the importance of contextualized listening for the book’s readers. Huck’s repeated meditations on how sound travels on the river reveal that what one hears is powerfully shaped by the specific contours and conditions of where one listens. In turning to a pre-electrical telephone, Twain slows the speed of transmission in order to emphasize what nearly-instantaneous communication commonly allows us to forget—that one’s (sonic) perception is contingent upon one’s (cultural) environment.

It may seem unorthodox to identify a telephone in a book set roughly three decades before Bell and Watson’s invention.⁶¹ However, the concept of the telephone significantly precedes its electrical manifestation. In an 1895 interview, Twain relates a conversation he had with Thomas Watson: “I was once idiot enough to ask the partner of Mr. Bell as to who was the inventor of the telephone. The reply I got was, ‘Do you not know that 1500 men had been at work on the telephone for 5000 years—do you suppose that anyone could invent any such instrument in any one lifetime?’”⁶² Watson’s hyperbolic response quashes the familiar conceit of conventional progress narratives, where technology emerges instantaneously to forever change a world that had no inkling of it beforehand. The telephone required cultural contextualization in order to function socially; Watson pushes this idea further by arguing that its very development spanned millennia. Twain agrees with this tele-historical view of invention, ultimately using the Watson anecdote to argue that the developmental process “is the same with literature.” The etymological history of “telephone” is relatively modest compared to the 5000 years

⁶¹ Robert Jackson notes that the events of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are set “around 1845.” *Seeking the Region in American Literature and Culture: Modernity, Dissidence, Innovation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 38.

⁶² Twain, *The Complete Interviews*, ed. Gary Scharnhorst (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2006), 256-57.

indicated by Watson's response, but as early as 1835 the word was used to describe "an instrument, apparatus, or device for conveying sound to a distance."⁶³ Water navigation comprised a significant arena for the use of such early "telephones," which included signaling devices such as fog-horns.⁶⁴ This history may partly have inspired the greeting which quickly became ubiquitous in telephone conversations: "American English ... adopted the interjection *hello*, etymologically, from *hallo* or *halloa*, a term of address among sailors between ships."⁶⁵ Therefore, considering the broader conceptual and etymological resonances of the technology, we might argue that telephones frequented the regions accessible via American river networks long before an electrical counterpart supposedly sounded its "cry in the wilderness." Finally, we may note that the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) came in the middle of the period where Twain showed the greatest explicit interest in the electrical telephone.

Twain initially portrays the Mississippi River as a faithful medium for conveying voices and other sounds across great distances. Upon first taking to the river to escape his abusive father, Huck remarks upon its telephonic qualities: "And how far a body can hear on the water such nights! I heard people talking at the ferry landing. I heard what they said too, every word of it" (*Mississippi Writings* 659). In this early meditation, the river seems to transmit speech with absolute accuracy, a realistic precision Huck reiterates when he listens to commands given by a man on a lumber raft later the same evening: "I heard that just as plain as if the man was by my side" (659). The clarity of the medium here gives Huck the illusion of spatial collapse. While Huck's fascination

⁶³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "telephone," accessed September 26, 2013, <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/198718>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Lerer, "Hello Dude," 475. Bell suggested that *ahoy*, another nautical greeting, be used when answering the telephone.

with the river's telephonic capabilities continues at several later points—listening to the sound of a clock “come faint over the water, but clear” (685); listening to “a sweep screaming” across what becomes “a monstrous big river” further south (740)—Twain tempers his faith in the reliability of what he hears by demonstrating the distorting influence river conditions have on the sound transmitted.

When fog sets in on the river it obviously compromises Huck's vision, but Twain also emphasizes the effect it has on his auditory abilities. Two nights out (by their estimate) from Cairo, Huck and Jim encounter a thick fog. Getting into his canoe, Huck tries to tie a line from the raft to a tow-head so he and Jim can wait out the fog, but the line does not hold, and consequently they become separated. Deprived of the ability to navigate by line of sight, Huck attempts to locate Jim by sound: “I heard the whoop again; it was behind me yet, but in a different place; it kept coming, and kept changing its place, and I kept answering, till by-and-by it was in front of me again ...” (705). Huck cannot even be sure, however, that it is Jim he is hearing “and not some other raftsmen hollering.” He admits, “I couldn't tell nothing about voices in a fog, for nothing don't look natural nor sound natural in a fog” (705). In addition to encountering geographical elements that he only belatedly identifies—an island that he initially mistakes for a tow-head and later “a nest of tow-heads” that causes sound to “dodge around so, and swap places so quick and so much” (706)—Huck's difficulty stems from what would seem a rather obvious cause. Both he and Jim are in motion during the entire sequence, but Huck temporarily forgets this fact while he listens: “I kept quiet, with my ears cocked, about fifteen minutes, I reckon. I was floating along, of course, four or five mile an hour; but you don't ever think of that. No, you *feel* like you are laying dead still on the water

...” (705). Twain employs the fog to stress that, contrary to the illusion of stasis, the relative position of the caller and the receiver constantly changes.

The instability of the listener’s position in the fog is readily evidenced by Huck’s inability to relocate Jim until after the river has carried them both under open skies. But Twain does not limit his destabilization of auditory perception to such obvious misconnections. After escaping from the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud, Huck and Jim travel by night and hide out during the day. While hiding, Huck once again marvels at the distance sound travels on the river:

Next you’d see a raft sliding by, away off yonder, and maybe a galoot on it chopping, because they’re most always doing it on a raft; you’d see the ax flash, and come down—you don’t hear nothing; you see that ax go up again, and by the time it’s above the man’s head, then you hear the *k’chunk!*—it had took all that time to come over the water. (741)

While his initial encounter with river telephony stressed the collapse of space—“I heard that just as plain as if the man was by my side” (659)—here the emphasis is on the temporal lag between a sound’s creation and its reception. Even observing a familiar rural spectacle—“they’re almost always doing it”—under conditions of broad daylight, auditory reception is not instantaneous. Twain’s river models an early telephone with a slower speed of transmission than its electric instantiation and in the lag recuperates distance where progress narratives mythologize its “annihilation.”

This distance marks an additional protection against the ideological assumptions Twain’s readers might hear in his characters’ regional dialects. The claims to phonographic precision and realism in his “Explanatory” preceding the work still operate, but he qualifies them by demonstrating that positions are, in reality, fluid; it is realistic for people to change even in the brief interim it takes us to hear what they are saying.

Stacey Margolis observes that a “gap in knowledge”—a temporal lag between characters’ actions and their understanding of the meaning or consequences of those actions—operates throughout *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.⁶⁶ A similar gap, she contends, functions formally in the text to place the reader in the same belated position as Twain’s characters.⁶⁷ Twain’s production of a redundant slave liberation narrative (“set[ting] a free nigger free” [*Historical* 909]) more than twenty years after the Emancipation Proclamation should prevent readers from assuming that the story Huck tells is an accurate barometer of contemporary life in regional spaces. But the “illusion of presentness” in Huck’s narrative style⁶⁸—to which his “authentic” voice contributes—coupled with the tendency of urban readers to see regional life as perpetually pre-modern undermines the explicit time lag between the book’s setting and its publication. Twain’s river telephony, however, reverses the conventional temporal assumptions of the reader of regionalist literature. Rather than casting regional life itself as antiquated, Twain emphasizes the delay in our reception of its sounds. The regional character’s life moves forward in the interval where we await the echo of this life: “you don’t hear nothing; you see that ax go up again, and by the time it’s above the man’s head, then you hear the *k’chunk!*” The reader and not the regional subject thus proves to be behind the times.

To assume otherwise, Twain warns us early in the narrative, is to risk doing violence to that subject. The earliest call placed on the river happens the day after Huck fakes his own death to escape from his father. Assuming, thanks to Huck’s realistic

⁶⁶ Stacey Margolis, “*Huckleberry Finn*; or, Consequences,” *PMLA* 116, no. 2 (March 2001): 332, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463520>. Margolis argues that this “gap in knowledge” shows Twain’s interest in how the late-nineteenth century’s evolving legal understanding of negligence could move the debate over accountability for racial inequality beyond simple questions of intent. In the context of negligence, how one feels about racism (the crux of the sentimental abolitionist novel) matters less than the effects one’s actions have in perpetuating structural inequalities.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

staging of the scene, that the boy's body has been dumped in the river, the townsfolk assemble on the ferry and start "firing cannon over the water, trying to make [his] carcass come to the top" (660). Eventually the group sounding the river comes too close to the very-much-alive Huck Finn: "[T]he cannon let off such a blast right before me that it made me deaf with the noise and pretty near blind with the smoke, and I judged I was gone. If they'd a had some bullets in, I reckon they'd a got the corpse they was after" (661). Because those firing the cannon assume Huck's position on the river is static—dead and drowned—their reverberant search nearly produces the body they expect. And we, reading regional subjects through *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, face a similar danger.

Resisting industrial progress narratives that hold stereotypes of the region and modern technology in opposition, and the ideological role dialect plays in reinforcing such stereotypes, we can understand the emergent telephone and regionalist literature as functionally similar systems. Mark Twain's historical experience of and literary experimentation with the telephone offers cause for reconsidering the "'annihilat[ion]' of time and space" that, according to conventional accounts, such a technology should enable. Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* infantilizes the telephone in order to emphasize that specific technologies are historically and culturally embedded, and that we must therefore be suspicious of the ideological assumptions given seemingly universal authority once a medium becomes standardized. His *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* destabilizes the temporal and ideological assumptions readers might bring to regional dialect literature by using the Mississippi River as a telephone system where the listener's position in space and time is relative rather than absolute. On

Twain's telephone, the line connecting regionalism and modern technology transmits in both directions, if we are willing to keep it open.

IV. Mark Twain *as* Human Phonograph

Tracing the (mal)functions of Twain's literary listening machines, this chapter has argued that his renderings of the phonograph and telephone disrupt the tidy cultural distinctions between subjects and objects and between operators and instruments. Mastery of these technologies, in Twain's work, proves a fantasy. Twain's phonograph and telephone are not the guarantors of a privileged cultural position but of everyone's like susceptibility to having their voices rendered "captive" across space and time; however, their malfunctions are also a defense against such captivity.

In his own (re)production of racial voices, Twain perhaps experiences the same slippage between operator and instrument that his invocations of sonic media thematize. His 1869 assessment of Blind Tom's position as a medium is steeped in the sheer physicality of the black man's body: "coarse casket," "dull clod," "stupid worm." Yet Twain, as previously noted, not only lamented the disturbing behavior he observed but also claimed that he verged on imitating Tom's imitations of the train they rode. While this "opposition express" did not become manifest, later accounts of Twain's fondness for singing African American spirituals suggest he did undergo a kind of bodily change when channeling these songs. Shelley Fisher Fishkin observes, "As his voice projected in song black voices from his childhood, Twain's bearing would become strangely transformed."⁶⁹ Fishkin persuasively argues that Twain's encounters with a black child provided the inspiration for the voice of Huckleberry Finn. She suggests that this act of

⁶⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

racial transgression—projecting a black voice from a white character—may have been unconscious on Twain’s part: “It would not have been unusual for Twain to have taken some of Jimmy’s topics of conversation, habits of expression, and turns of phrase ... and unknowingly recycled them as Huck’s. For Twain had a habit, as he recognized himself, of unconsciously borrowing ideas and phrases from others.”⁷⁰ This logic of unconscious uptake is shared in Robert Jackson’s speculation about how the region of Missouri Twain grew up in may have shaped his literary development: “Or perhaps Twain had less to do with such success than is generally granted: perhaps his accumulated personal relations to this region gained their own momentum and emerged spontaneously as Huck’s irrepressible voice.”⁷¹ Such analyses figure Twain himself as a kind of “human phonograph,” subverting the author’s power over his work. If Twain was a phonograph, he displayed the kind of aural sensitivity fantasized for the device in *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist*; he did not neglect to include the “darling mispronunciations” of the various media he reproduced.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 27.

⁷¹ Jackson, *Seeking the Region*, 44.

CHAPTER 2

STEPHEN CRANE'S PHONOGRAPHIC CORPUS: RECORDING, RACE, REALISM

New York ... roars always like ten thousand devils.
We have ingenious and simple ways of making a din in
New York that cause the stranger to conclude that each
citizen is obliged by statute to provide himself with a
pair of cymbals and a drum. If anything by chance can
be turned into a noise it is promptly turned. We are
engaged in the development of a human creature with
very large, sturdy and doubly-fortified ears.

—Stephen Crane¹

In an 1891 *Tribune* article concerning both of the realist authors Crane would later term his “literary fathers,”² the then nineteen-year-old journalist quoted extensively from Hamlin Garland’s lecture on William Dean Howells. “It is absurd,” Garland argued, “to call [Howells] photographic. The photograph is false in perspective, in light and shade, in focus. When a photograph can depict atmosphere and sound, the comparison will have some meaning, and then it will not be used as a reproach” (457). Beyond its interest as evidence for debunking a certain reductive reading of the relation between realist fiction and photography,³ this passage also alerts us to the emphasis on

¹ Stephen Crane, “London Impressions,” in *Prose and Poetry*, ed. J. C. Levenson (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 971. Further references to this collection will be cited parenthetically by page number(s) only.

² In a letter to Lily Brandon Munroe from March or April of 1894, Crane refers to his “literary fathers—Howells and Garland.” Crane, *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*, eds. Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 1:62.

³ This relation has been productively complicated by studies such as Nancy Armstrong’s *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Stuart

non-visual elements in realist fiction, specifically sound. This is an admonition that we should not need in the case of Crane, whose works resonate with numerous sonic figurations and onomatopoeias, with “visions of a thousand-tongued fear” as well as with “clang and clang,” to borrow from *The Red Badge of Courage* and the opening poem of *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, respectively (98, 1299). But the critical literature on Crane, with the notable exception of recent work by Philipp Schweighauser, remains largely quiet on the subject of sound.⁴

Our investigation of sound in Crane will complicate an account of the politics of American literary realism founded almost exclusively on that period’s visual attentiveness. Mark Seltzer draws upon Crane to theorize “the realist seeing machine,” wherein “[r]elations of power in the realist text are insistently articulated along lines of sight.”⁵ The subject who sees—a person “relative[ly] disembodi[ed]” compared to the object of his scrutiny—is privileged over the one seen. This fantasized “disciplinary relation between seeing (seeing and being seen) and the exercising of power” correlates with a literary invocation of typologies whereby individual characters can be categorized and classified.⁶ As Seltzer contends, “Crane’s stories are populated if not quite peopled by statistical persons.”⁷ Such “persons” are known quantities socially produced and therefore readable as representative objects; they are the data generated by (and

Burrows’s *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1839-1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010). Burrows aptly describes the assumptions underlying this reductive reading: “American realism’s persistent comparison of consciousness to the camera is often held up as evidence for what critics have described as this fiction’s adoption of the ‘camera eye,’ by which they mean an attention to detail and concern with verisimilitude supposedly imitative of photography. Realism’s fondness for characterizing consciousness in photographic terms thus becomes the license for critics to characterize composition in exactly the same manner” (3).

⁴ Philipp Schweighauser, *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

⁵ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 99, 96.

⁶ Ibid, 97.

⁷ Ibid, 106.

generating) “the realist project of accounting for persons as ‘socially constituted,’ that is, as social artifacts.”⁸

To turn to sound in Crane is to abandon neither vision nor the social production of persons. Crane’s writings are by no means devoid of visual “types.” Quite the contrary.⁹ Yet while there is a strong drive in his work to “go close and see”—if we borrow a phrase describing Henry Fleming’s desire in *The Red Badge of Courage*—this drive is but one component of a broader sensorium and politics engaged therein (129). What is at stake when one also considers the sonic aspect of Crane’s work?

At times Crane’s use of sound reinforces the power relations of the “realist seeing machine.” Such is the case in 1899’s “A Self-Made Man,” where the power of one character’s stare—“like two little detective cameras taking pictures of the other man’s thoughts”—is amplified by a verbal emission—a single “Ah”—that causes his target “to shiver like an animal with a broken back.”¹⁰ And in certain of Crane’s soundscapes, such as the slums presented in 1893’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Seltzer’s concept of a disciplinary relation that privileges those who are less visible is somewhat approximated

⁸ Ibid, 99.

⁹ Crane, *The University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 8, *Tales, Sketches, and Reports* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1973), 127, 128. Further references to this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text with page number(s) preceded by Roman numeral *VIII*. To mention only a few of many examples: When *The Red Badge of Courage*’s Henry Fleming spies a group of Confederates during a brief break in the battle’s otherwise poor conditions of visibility, “There was a recognition as he looked at the types of faces.” *Prose and Poetry*, 191. In discussing settlers facing a bitter winter in Nebraska, Crane writes, “They are a fearless folk, completely American. Their absolute types are now sitting about New England dinner tables” (690). In “Coney Island’s Failing Days,” Crane’s description of another’s observation of types implicitly criticizes the loss of compassion such “reading” induces: “As we walked toward the station the stranger stopped often to observe types which interested him. He did it with an unconscious calm insolence as if the people were bugs” (588-89).

¹⁰ Though this scene literalizes the “disciplinary relation between seeing ... and the exercising of power,” the context of the story—wherein Tom, the one who stares and speaks, is merely impersonating a lawyer—suggests the vulnerability of this relation to inversion across class lines. In other words, the position of the looker becomes vulnerable because it may be imitated (which, ultimately, gestures toward the ineffectual nature of visual typology, since visual signs—such as Henry Fleming’s “red badge of courage,” acquired accidentally from a fellow soldier rather than in combat with the Confederates—may be misread).

by a social framework wherein the more powerful are less exposed to noise.¹¹ More commonly, however, sonic perception exceeds the parameters of the viewer/viewed, powerful/powerless dyad. This is not, however, to assign sound an innately liberating function. Rather, Crane's sonic invocations often exceed the components of Seltzer's "seeing machine" by connecting them to broader mechanistic power constructs. Sound's political significance in Crane lies not in its ability to escape the production of subjects (objects) hierarchized according to visual typologies, but in making audible the process of production that—like the sound of the needle captured in *all* phonographic recordings regardless of their content—underlies *all* modern subjectivities.

If, following Seltzer, —and the contemporary critics to whom Hamlin Garland responds in his speech on Howells—"photography is the realist form of representation par excellence," then the limitations of that medium are instructive when trying to understand the political implications of sound in realist literature.¹² At risk of oversimplifying, we may assert that the photograph epitomizes the spectatorial "privilege of relative disembodiment" subtending the "realist seeing machine" by isolating the image in space and by dislocating it in time, which is also to dislocate it from the process of its own production—one does not require the camera in order to view the photograph once developed. The flattening of the object in its photographic representation materializes the spatiotemporal flattening of human visual perception.¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy argues, "[B]ecause of the considerable difference in speeds . . . , while sound spreads, light

¹¹ For an account of the relationship between social position and noise exposure in *Maggie*, consult Schweighauser, *The Noises of American Literature*, 39: "Crane divides fictional space into a silent inside and a noisy outside, and it is clear that Maggie has never gained and never will gain access to the inside. The very contrast outlined here has been absent from Maggie's own noisy world all along."

¹² Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 170.

¹³ Other aspects of the photograph—for instance, the image's indexical relation to the object(s) pictured—do not necessarily have analogous functions in human visual perception.

is instantaneous: the result of this is a quality of presence of the visual distinct from the coming-and-going quality unique to the sonorous.”¹⁴ Light travels so fast as to allow its objects to appear static: “visible or tactile presence occurs in a motionless ‘at the same time.’”¹⁵ The motionless nature of visual perception ensures the distinction between viewer and viewed as (static) separate entities: “In terms of the gaze, the subject is referred back to itself as object.”¹⁶ This separation of distinct entities (viewing subject and viewed object) reinforces a phenomenological binary between inside (I/me) and outside (world).

Social typologies function through the sense of immediate apprehensibility and containment made possible by the “motionless ‘at the same time’” in which visual perception takes place, a sense which is exacerbated by the use of photographs in establishing types.¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize the typological production of subjects in terms of an “abstract machine of faciality” that governs the readability of the individual as he or she approximates or deviates from a normative standard of “the typical European.”¹⁸ Those who do not conform to the standard are not simply outside the system, but are rather subsumed within it through classification under a variety of “divergence-types”: “At every moment, the machine rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious. But only at a given level of choice. For it is necessary to

¹⁴ Nancy, *Listening*, 70n10.

¹⁵ Ibid, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.

¹⁷ Francis Galton’s work on “composite photographs or ‘pictorial statistics’” is frequently cited in this regard. Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 100. See also Bill Brown’s analysis of Galton’s work in *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 222-24.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 176.

produce successive divergence-types of deviance ...”¹⁹ The emergence of this machine is a historical phenomenon, dated by Deleuze and Guattari to the birth of Christ, but its rejections and (re)classifications (occurring “[a]t every moment”) are presented as *fait accompli*, its products alienated from the process of their production.

The material obfuscated by the “facialized” subject is the body: “Bodies are disciplined, corporeality dismantled, becomings-animal hounded out, deterritorialization pushed to a new threshold—a jump is made from the organic strata to the strata of signifi-ance and subjectification. A single substance of expression is produced.”²⁰ Starting from this understanding of the socially-determined “face” as the flattening of the body and the temporal stagnation of its “becomings,” I will ask how Crane’s attentiveness to sensory and mechanical sonic channels adds spatiotemporal depth to, and thereby complicates, the disciplinary structures facilitated by that “single substance.” Doing so will allow us to reinterpret what Seltzer describes as “[t]he impassioned struggle to see, to see inanimated bodies or bodies whose animation has been suspended ... an obsessively recurrent scenario in Crane’s work” by listening to how Crane connects such visually stilled figures to broader sonic networks still in-process.²¹

Sound troubles the multiple forms of contraction—of space, of time, of the sensory/mechanical apparatus—at work in visual perception and visually constituted typologies. Sonic “presence” is not permanent (as light’s speed makes visual “presence” seem to be) but moves through space, time, and matter. Nancy explains,

¹⁹ Ibid, 177.

²⁰ Ibid, 181.

²¹ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 106. This obsession with such inanimate figures is the primary focus of Michael Fried’s work on Crane in *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

The sonorous present is the result of space-time: it spreads through space, or rather it opens a space that is its own, the very spreading out of its resonance, its expansion and its reverberation. This space is immediately omnidimensional and transversate through all spaces: the expansion of sound through obstacles, its property of penetration and ubiquity, has always been noted.²²

Sound waves—which penetrate and move through the human auditory apparatus during sonic perception—destabilize the “privilege of relative disembodiment” at play in visually-coded power fantasies. Seltzer’s account of the “realist seeing machine” posits a similar destabilization through recourse to “the possibility of a dangerously corporeal absorption in a theatricalized watching.”²³ The slippage into “corporeal absorption” facilitated by the “pleasures of seeing” indicates that “[t]his is a seeing machine in which everyone is caught, hesitating both equations of looking and power and the looker’s privilege of relative disembodiment.”²⁴ While this is a perceptive account of a recurrent motif in Crane’s scenes of watching, the author’s invocation of sound and sonic perception allows him to also approach forms of power beyond or beneath the sightlines of the visually structured “machine” Seltzer examines.

To draw upon a report from 1896 by way of example, Crane’s “In the Broadway Cable Cars” initially reads like an affirmation of the primacy of the “realist seeing machine”: “At the present day [the cable cars], by force of color and numbers, almost dominate the great street and the eye of even an old New Yorker is held by these long yellow monsters which prowl intently, up and down, up and down, in a mystic search” (*VIII* 373). Crane visually identifies and catalogs the routines of a variety of different social types with regard to the cable cars. But the “great ride, full of exciting actions,”

²² Nancy, *Listening*, 13.

²³ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

with all its powers of fascination, obfuscates the true power underlying the scene (*VIII* 375). It is a power perceived only when the “eye ... held” by the monstrous cars and the cars themselves are absent, and even then it is still not seen but heard: “Finally the cars themselves depart in the way of the citizen and for the few hours before dawn a new sound comes into the still thoroughfare—the cable whirring in its channel underground” (*VIII* 378). Crane is attentive to the varying visual configurations orchestrated through the cable cars, but he ends the report by insisting upon the power grid that moves these multiple types across the city, a continually resonating electric network become audible beneath distracting spectacle.

This chapter begins on the battlefield, one of the loudest soundscapes in Crane’s oeuvre, and ends in an equally strident civilian space. In *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Crane’s ballistic sounds create a phonographically structured battlefield that inflects the text’s definitional narrative—protagonist Henry Fleming’s attempt to “accumulate information of himself” (88)—with a sense of the ongoing (normally obfuscated) production of typological subjects, a resonant “strangeness” that connects corpses produced by the war to the no-less-manufactured surviving members of the army corps. In the domestic space of *The Monster* (1898), the soundscape invoked by the author—derived from a phonograph recording that was immensely popular from the late 1880s through the early years of the twentieth century—extends the focus on production processes from military types to average citizens, emphasizing the similar mechanical fashioning of even supposedly oppositional (racial) types under the realist paradigm. Sound in Crane’s work does not convey such typological processes by being outside all networks, but rather by entangling a multitude of visual and auditory channels,

connecting and reverberating the apparatuses of human sense perception and mechanical transmission. The epigraph to this section hyperbolically imagines that noise production could be enforced “by statute” and that, consequently, New Yorkers might be “engaged in the development of a human creature with very large, sturdy, and doubly-fortified ears.” By listening to the corporeal and mechanical sonic networks of the texts under consideration here, Crane asks us to take sound’s political resonance seriously.

I. “A Thousand-Tongued Fear”

The great country back of the line of fight—the waiting women, the lightless windows, the tables set for three instead of five—was a land elate or forlorn, triumphant or despairing, always strained, eager, listening, tragic in attitude, trembling and quivering like a vast mass of nerves from the shock of the far away conflicts in the South.

—Stephen Crane²⁵

When Henry Fleming’s regiment of newly enlisted infantrymen finally mobilized to march toward the battlefield in *The Red Badge of Courage*, “he saw visions of a thousand-tongued fear that would babble at his back and cause him to flee, while others were going coolly about their country’s business. He admitted that he would not be able to cope with this monster. He felt that every nerve in his body would be an ear to hear the voices, while other men would remain stolid and deaf” (98). Though the “thousand-tongued fear” is at this point in the novel the imaginative expression of Henry’s “feeling,” it prefigures the sonic concerns of the later battle, and the qualities it attributes to the auditory are therefore instructive. Henry’s fear is not merely a feeling *expressed by* a thousand tongues, but seems inextricably bound up with that multiplicity itself as its

²⁵ Crane, “Harold Frederic.” *Prose and Poetry*, 985.

only qualifying descriptor. Moreover, Henry experiences a complementary dread that this multiplicity will cause his own body to become a multiplicity. He fears that he will become comprised of as many ears as he has nerves, in other words, nothing but ears. Though Henry is never literally reshaped into a creature who is all ears, the war sounds of *The Red Badge of Courage* resonate throughout a broad network—linking mechanical processes to human nervous reception—that continually threatens to (re)produce the bodies of both living and dead as merely automatic listening and playback assemblages, as phonographs.

While Henry's imaginary "vision" demarcates what he feels to be a difference between himself and the others comprising the army, it is soon replaced by the quite literal "din" of the battle, to which the novel insists one cannot in fact "remain ... deaf." The most common elements of the battleground soundscape are "the crackling shots which were to [Henry] like voices" (125). In a setting where guns "argue," bullets "sing," and shells and shrapnel emit "hootings, yells, howls," human bodies struck by these ballistic materiel are torn and figuratively inscribed by them (116, 182, 629). Henry is subject to "noises which had been roared into his ears" (199). Such sounds, like bullets, penetrate his body and occupy space therein: "The youth's ears were filled cups" (200).²⁶ This ballistic sound violently demonstrates the particular vulnerability of the auditory sense. If we consider only the capabilities of the human body itself, we find that vision may be selectively interrupted—either by focusing the spatially limited gaze elsewhere or simply by closing one's eyes—while auditory perception may not. As Nancy explains, "[A]nimal bodies, in general, —the human body, in particular—are not

²⁶ This association between sonic and ballistic penetration is later reiterated, we recall, in the "convulsive" and "shivering" effects George suffers at Tom's "Ah" and his father words that strike him "as if each one was a musket shot" in 1899's "A Self-Made Man."

constructed to interrupt at their leisure the sonorous arrival, as has often been noted. ‘The ears don’t have eyelids’ is an old theme that is often repeated.”²⁷ Like the data channeled through autographic media, our experience of sound, to rephrase the above in Michael North’s terms, is most often filtered by the “processes of selective attention that make our own sense impressions useful to us.”²⁸ But at the strictly physical level of what Nancy calls “listening” (before “hearing” or “understanding” [both conveyed by “entendre” in French]), human auditory perception is no less automatic than the autographic phonograph.²⁹

Read against the vulnerability of the auditory sense, vision in Crane’s text serves a palliative role, promising to reaffirm the intentional capacity of a human being who actively seeks a visual correlate for the war sounds he necessarily receives passively. Shortly after describing how Henry runs from the battle “like a blind man,” Crane informs us, “When he thought of it later, he conceived the impression that it is better to view the appalling than to be merely within hearing. The noises of the battle were like stones; he believed himself liable to be crushed” (120). Certainly the question of dishonor partly explains why “[d]eath about to thrust him between the shoulder blades was far more dreadful than death about to smite him between the eyes” (120). If he is struck from behind, his wound will testify to his cowardice. But Henry’s “impression” is also shared by the soldiers tasked with burying the corpse in “The Upturned Face” (1238) as well as by characters in “The Black Dog” (in almost the same words [504]).³⁰ Such

²⁷ Nancy, *Listening*, 14.

²⁸ Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 104.

²⁹ Nancy, *Listening*, 6.

³⁰ “The maddened four men followed frantically, for it is better to be in the presence of the awful than only within hearing. Their ears still quivering with the shriek, they bounded through the hole in the ceiling, and into the sick room” (“The Black Dog”).

moments suggest the possibility that the desire motivating the disciplinary matrix of the “realist seeing machine” stems from the fear of an undisciplined—because unknown by sight—force operating beyond human comprehensibility, a diffuse entity figured in Crane’s texts as sound before it is represented (if it ever is) as sight. Sound consequently motivates Henry to obtain a “closer” view of the battle. Crane writes, “The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses” (129). While Seltzer’s account of the “realist seeing machine” also considers fascination—“the fascination with seeing opens the possibility of becoming vulnerably ‘transfixed with interest’”—Henry Fleming’s fascination stems from his already corporeally vulnerable sonic state.³¹ The desire to see, therefore, is not just a pleasure that might render one vulnerable, but is itself a response to vulnerability.

Writing of *The Red Badge*, Bill Brown contends that “[t]he persistence with which the youth is pictured as picturing is the persistence with which the novel understands the American conflict as understandable only as a pictorial display.”³² If we take “understanding” here in the sense that Nancy uses the term—as something “superimposed upon listening” or “substituted for listening” by philosophy in order to produce meaning—then I am inclined to agree with him.³³ Henry Fleming, only after having come through the last battle depicted in the book, re-engages his “usual machines of reflection” and is able to make sense of and review his performance through an act of spectatorship: “Those performances which had been witnessed by his fellows marched now in wide purple and gold, having various deflections. They went gayly with music.

³¹ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 97.

³² Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, 145.

³³ Nancy, *Listening*, 1.

It was a pleasure to watch these things” (210). Crane emphasizes the incompatibility of the “immense machine” of battle and these “usual machines.” Despite Henry’s desire to see the “immense machine . . . produce corpses,” Brown notes, Henry does “not . . . witness[] any process of production. . .” He instead “. . . only . . . view[s], as we might now expect, the end result, the visual product.”³⁴ In this regard, the “immense machine” functions like a photographic camera, whose recording act is invisible at the moment of capture, its data revealed only later in “things” (photographs). Brown elaborates, “The degree to which producing corpses was the responsibility not of the battle (not of armies per se) but of an army of photographers (of the complexities and powers of the camera) is the degree to which, in the closing months of 1862, the war machine and the vision machine became one.”³⁵ But the production process can be heard in the spatiotemporally mobile medium of sound.

Crane’s project is not chiefly one of “understanding,” but of “listening,” of opening to the barely audible interference of human and mechanical networks of perception and war, the interference of “usual machines” and “an immense machine.” His description of the battle as the “grinding of an immense and terrible machine” suggests that the “war machine” and the “vision machine,” contrary to Brown’s assertion, are not coextensive.³⁶ “Grinding” is a multifaceted term. While certainly evoking industrial processes and crushing forces, it has a corresponding acoustic connotation that

³⁴ Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, 154.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The quotation from Crane’s “Harold Frederic” (1898) that serves as epigraph to this section—where the “country back of the line of fight” is described as “always strained, eager, listening, tragic in attitude, trembling and quivering like a vast mass of nerves from the shock of the far away conflicts in the South”—reinforces the fact that the war is not exclusively the provenance of photography. Auditory and visual reception are in fact mixed in Crane’s description of Frederic’s response to the “shock” of the conflict: “Those were supreme years, and yet for the great palpitating regions it seems that the mind of this lad was the only sensitive plate exposed to the sunlight of ‘61-’65.” *Prose and Poetry*, 985.

seems particularly appropriate given the loudness of Crane's martial soundscape and his emphasis on the sound of grinding elsewhere. Shortly after he has fled from battle, Henry moves through a part of the forest where "[t]he insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be *grinding* their teeth in unison" (125). In *Maggie*, the title character "regarded some of the grizzled women in the room, mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams and *grinding* out, with heads bended over their work, tales of imagined or real girl-hood happiness, past drunks, the baby at home, and unpaid wages" (34, emphasis added). The association of grinding with sound suggests that Crane's "immense machine"—an organ-grinder in more than one sense—can be more closely aligned with another autographic technology of the period. It is not a far leap from "mechanical contrivances ... grinding out ... tales" to the phonograph.

The structure of the phonograph condenses the dilemma of the battleground soundscape, literalizing through its autographic operations the auditory vulnerability that troubles Henry. Trying to recapture something of the initial strangeness that must have greeted the introduction of the phonograph in the late 19th century, Dave Laing asks, "How did each listener adapt to the voice without a face?"³⁷ To paraphrase this question in more provocative terms, how did each listener adapt to the defacement made possible by the phonograph? Again, as with the photographic camera, at issue is the inability to visually witness the process of production. Laing explains, "Before the 1890s it would have been inconceivable to her (sic) music without seeing it, and seeing it in the process of being produced."³⁸ Unlike the photograph, however, the phonograph cylinder requires

³⁷ Dave Laing, "A Voice without a Face: Popular Music and the Phonograph in the 1890s," *Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1991), 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853005>.

³⁸ Ibid. The inability to hear music that one can see being produced, conversely, does not trouble the audience in Crane's "The Pace of Youth": "A wind, cool, reminiscent of the wave wastes, made the

the presence of the very kind of apparatus that recorded it in order to be played. Where the photograph, speaking in general terms, shifts focus from the absent apparatus to the subject pictured, the phonograph is the only visual provided with the wax cylinder. Laing again: “One way of comprehending what happened with recording is to posit that the scopical drive was displaced from the body of the singer, the musician and the instrument onto a new physical object, the phonograph or gramophone itself.”³⁹ Furthermore, insofar as the phonograph needle retraces the grooves carved in the wax cylinder during the initial recording, playing a phonograph record re-enacts the process of (re)production without the speaker or musician. The process of production is thus simultaneously invoked and denied. If Crane’s “immense machine” does, as I contend, structure *The Red Badge of Courage* as a phonographic battlefield, then its products—“corpses”—should be to some degree readable in terms of wax cylinders and the apparatuses necessary for their playback.

One “thing” is notably absent from the catalog of “things” that Henry takes pleasure in viewing with his “usual machines of reflection” at the end of the novel. Much earlier, shortly after having run from the battle, Henry makes his way into the deep woods and enters a “chapel” where “he stop[s], horror-stricken at the sight of a thing”:

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip.

women hold their wraps about their throats and caused the men to grip the rims of their straw hats. It carried the noise of the band in the pavilion in gusts. Sometimes people unable to hear the music glanced up at the pavilion and were reassured upon beholding the distant leader still gesticulating and bobbing and the other members of the band with their lips glued to their instruments.” *Prose and Poetry*, 470.

³⁹ Ibid.

The youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. He was for moments turned to stone before it. He remained staring into the liquid-looking eyes. The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look....

.....

At last he burst the bonds which had fastened him to the spot and fled, unheeding the underbrush. He was pursued by a sight of the black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes.

After a time he paused, and, breathless and panting, listened. He imagined some strange voice would come from the dead throat and squawk after him in horrible menaces. (126-27)

This scene has already been analyzed in regard to two media: writing and photography.

Michael Fried reads this and other encounters with corpses throughout Crane's works as evidence of the author's "'latent' preoccupation" with the materiality of composition.⁴⁰

Crane, according to Fried's biographically inspired analysis, wrote so slowly that his narrative was constantly in danger of disintegrating into pictures, into letters that took so long to form they no longer cohered into words.⁴¹ Crane's unconscious therefore at once evokes the materiality of writing and necessarily subsumes this evocation back into the "manifest" narrative of his works by linking images of inscription with dreadful elements such as corpses and, in the case of *The Monster*, the disfigured living body.⁴² Brown subverts the antipathy set up by Fried between "writing and picturing," arguing that "the image of the ants all but demands to be read as a figure for the photographic inscription with which the face itself has become visible—or, indeed, has drawn itself into visibility."⁴³

⁴⁰ Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration*, 143.

⁴¹ Fried writes, "[I]t seems reasonable to suppose that a manner of writing that shaped individual letters with extreme slowness would maximize the likelihood of diverting the writer's attention away from the larger flow of meaning in his prose to the letters themselves, or say to the letters as variously configured, conspicuously legible (almost an oxymoron), and undeniably material marks on a sheet of paper, inscribed there by the metal point of a pen dipped repeatedly—every several words—in a container of ink." Ibid, 146-7.

⁴² Ibid, 121.

⁴³ Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, 154.

There is an abundance of visual activity in this scene, moving in multiple directions; Henry is both “being looked at by a dead man” and “staring” at the corpse. But the most striking descriptions of the corpse convey the dissolution of its visibility (its face) and of visual perception (its eyes). The image that “pursues” Henry once he has managed to break away from the bonds of his fascination is that of the corpse’s impending blindness, of “the black ants swarming greedily upon the grey face and venturing horribly near to the eyes.” Brown’s contention that the corpse figures “the photographic inscription with which the face itself has become visible” does not ignore the fact that the face here is precisely withdrawing from visibility. But to overcome this difficulty—which he does not do directly in his consideration of this scene but through his later reading of Henry Johnson’s defacement in *The Monster*—he must assert that defacement is an “allegory of the development process gone wrong.”⁴⁴

We can explain such defacement more directly, however, by recourse to phonographic inscription. Such inscription, when functioning properly, physically cuts into the surface of the wax cylinder. One also encounters in phonography the possibility of re-recording, which does enact an erasure in the very act of preserving something else. As Thomas Edison explained in 1888, “A single wax cylinder, or blank, may be used for fifteen or twenty successive records before it is worn out. But if the record is to be kept, the wax blank must not be talked upon again.”⁴⁵ Moreover, as Laing has argued, the phonograph’s early reception likely produced shock by offering the voice in the absence of a face and by substituting the apparatus for the face. He writes, “Many early photographs or drawings show listeners with their eyes fixed on the phonograph or

⁴⁴ Ibid, 226.

⁴⁵ Edison, “The Perfected Phonograph,” 645.

gramophone itself. The horn/mouth provided a focus for the scopic drive, but a different kind from that provided by a performer in propria persona.”⁴⁶ Neither Fried nor Brown pays any heed to the corpse’s open mouth, and yet Henry’s final response before the novel leaves this “thing” behind is one of fear at the possibility that it might speak. The image of vision’s dismantling is coupled with a sense of sound’s spectral continuation. Once Henry has at last broken off from staring at the corpse, it is the horror of the auditory which is again invoked as “[h]e imagined some strange voice would come from the dead throat.” The open mouth, though of changed color, is horrible, unlike the eyes, because it still threatens to function after the death and defacement of the individual.

What Henry imagines might emerge from this mouth is not the voice of the man. Instead, the “strange voice” that would possess the corpse becomes horrible for its incompatibility with the face decaying around it. For possession by definition defies the facially-informed illusion that one possesses oneself. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “Possession expresses a direct relation between voices and the body rather than a relation to the face.”⁴⁷ Such a “direct relation” makes the body a sounding device (a phonograph) for voices beyond the phenomenological understanding of the self as distinct from objects, of interior life as separate from exterior reality. Though Edison envisioned the phonograph being in part useful for recording “the last words of dying persons”—a use which suggests the historical preservation of the subject’s identity after death—the “strange[ness]” of the voice Henry imagines might come from the corpse indicates that the “dead throat” would not simply reproduce the voice of its onetime owner.⁴⁸ This “strangeness” has a popular culture correlate. Though the Civil War ended a little more

⁴⁶ Laing, “A Voice without a Face,” 8.

⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 176.

⁴⁸ Edison, “The Perfected Phonograph,” 646.

than a decade before Edison conceived of the phonograph, “re-creations of Civil War battles” were popular topics for “early cylinders.”⁴⁹ All phonographic re-enactments of the War are thus by definition experiments in channeling “strange” battlefield voices.

As he makes his way back from the tree “chapel” toward the louder areas of the battlefield, Henry joins a procession of injured soldiers marching away from the front. For Seltzer, the novel’s “primal scenes of battle are, finally, struggles to make interior states visible: to gain knowledge of and mastery over bodies and interiors by tearing them open to view.”⁵⁰ Yet, as we have observed, Henry’s persistent desire to see is not directed toward the products of the “immense machine,” but toward the “grim processes” of their production. The injured men Henry encounters are inscribed by the “immense machine”: “The torn bodies expressed the awful machinery in which the men had been entangled” (131). While the phrasing here—“had been entangled”—marks these soldiers as further products, belated with regard to the “grim processes” Henry strives to see, production to some degree continues in the sonic register. When Henry finds among the injured soldiers a mortally wounded Jim Conklin (“the tall soldier”), the latter’s death throes extend the phonographic implications of the youth’s encounter from a few pages prior. Henry approaches Jim: “Tottering forward he laid a quivering hand upon the man’s arm. As the latter slowly turned his waxlike features toward him, the youth screamed” (133). The description of the face here as “waxlike” and the fact that it “turn[s]” perhaps suggest a connection between the war machine’s effect on the body and phonographic inscription. The “waxlike features” are at this point still readable on an individual level, and thus what Henry screams is Jim’s name: “‘Gawd! Jim Conklin!’”

⁴⁹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 242.

⁵⁰ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 163.

The transformations that Jim undergoes over the several pages preceding his death are readable as sonic reinscriptions of his “waxlike features.”⁵¹ Jim’s initial response to Henry, surprisingly commonplace, is repeatedly interrupted, as he is alternately possessed by fear and automaton-like indifference. Crane writes, “Suddenly, as the two friends marched on, the tall soldier seemed to be overcome by a terror. His face turned to a semblance of gray paste. He clutched the youth’s arm and looked all about him, as if dreading to be overheard. Then he began to speak in a shaking whisper” (134). The content of this fear that “overcome[s]” the tall soldier is that the artillery wagons will “run over” him if he falls down in the road. Jim’s expression of this terror, however, is itself cause for fear, a “dreading to be overheard.” The prevalence of “over” within this short sequence is striking: “overcome,” “overheard,” “run over.” Insofar as guns, as observed earlier, are repeatedly characterized in the novel as speaking, Jim’s very practical concern that his body might be mangled by the artillery wagons could also be construed as a fear of being overrun by voices. If this fear is therefore characterized by a lack of control over the sonic (re)production of the body, the fear of being “overheard” essentially offers a complementary fear of not being able to control the reception of one’s sonic emissions.

Indifference to his fate, seemingly the opposite extreme from fear,⁵² marks the second form of possession affecting Jim. Crane writes, “However, the tall soldier seemed suddenly to forget all those fears. He became again the grim, stalking specter of a soldier” (135). The automatism of Jim’s physical actions at this point is reinforced by the

⁵¹ Jim’s “gory hand” perhaps visually figures such overcoding: “There was a curious red and black combination of new blood and old blood upon it” (133).

⁵² This apparent thematic opposition is undermined by the logic of being “overcome” that governs even Jim’s earlier fear.

reiterative nature of his responses to Henry's attempts to help him: "The youth wished his friend to lean upon him, but the other always shook his head and strangely protested. 'No—no—no—leave me be—leave me be—'" (135). The "always" suggests that this process is repeated numerous times; and the phrasing of Jim's response is indeed repeated in the text (both exactly and nearly exactly) in several places. Moreover, we note that Jim's protest comes "strangely," which recalls the "strange voice" that Henry feared would "squawk after him" following his encounter in the tree "chapel." The sonic form of Jim's strange protest—the repeated monosyllabic long o's of the reiterated "no" and the long e's of "leave me be"—further emphasizes this speech's automaticity, its near reduction to mere tone. So too does the typography, which standardizes even the intervals between speech with dashes that recall the Morse code used in telegraphy, the technology that led Edison, as he attempted to render it autographic, to conceive of the phonograph.⁵³

The final sequence of Jim's death casts his body as the receiver and performer of a vibration coming from some invisible source: "Suddenly, his form stiffened and straightened. Then it was shaken by a prolonged ague. He stared into space. To the two watchers there was a curious and profound dignity in the firm lines of his awful face" (137). The "curiosity" of the tall soldier's face recalls the prior detail of the "curious" intermingling of old and new blood on his hand, the protests he voices "strangely" whenever Henry offers him assistance, and the "strange voice" of Henry's earlier

⁵³ Edison, "The Perfected Phonograph," 642-43: "My own discovery that this could be done came to me almost accidentally while I was busy with experiments having a different object in view. I was engaged upon a machine intended to repeat Morse characters, which were recorded on paper by indentations that transferred their message to another circuit automatically, when passed under a tracing-point connected with a circuit-closing apparatus." Though beyond the specific purview of our analysis here, Crane's "One Dash—Horses" could be the subject of an extended examination of the author's possible typographical invocations of telegraphy.

encounter with the corpse. This motif is further emphasized as “[the tall soldier] was invaded by a creeping strangeness that slowly enveloped him. For a moment the tremor of his legs caused him to dance a sort of hideous hornpipe. His arms beat wildly about his head in an expression of implike enthusiasm” (137). This dance is a further effect of the vibration or “tremor” of Jim’s body.

Henry’s response to this “strangeness”—recalling the desire to see generated in him by the “grinding” of the battle’s “immense machine”—is to try and put an intelligible face on it: “His face had been twisted into an expression of every agony he had imagined for his friend.” But once Jim has died, Henry’s imaginings prove inadequate. Crane writes, “He now sprang to his feet and, going closer, gazed upon the pastelike face. The mouth was open and the teeth showed in a laugh.” Here, as before, Henry’s “close” visual encounter with the corpse is troubled by an open mouth, and, once again, there is a suggestion that this open mouth might speak. In the novel’s next chapter, where Jim Conklin ceases to be identified as “he” and becomes “it” to the text, Henry and the injured soldier who had also “witnessed” Jim’s death “stole softly, treading with their toes. It remained laughing there in the grass” (139). The dead, such language implies, can like the phonograph both hear and speak.

But the invasion of “strangeness” is not just a concern with the dead or the nearly dead in the novel. The body, as I have already examined, is incapable of interrupting sonic perception. This enforced reception is also, because of the resonant operation of the auditory sensory apparatus, an enforced act of reproduction or transmission. Nancy suggests, “[T]he sound that penetrates through the ear propagates throughout the entire body something of its effects, which could not be said to occur in the same way with the

visual signal.”⁵⁴ Like the needle of the phonograph, the human body vibrates as it receives sonic input. Such resonance could even, Crane’s novel implies, manifest itself as sonic emission, or unintentional “babbling.”

There is strangeness in the voice of the gunfire: “For the fire of the regiment had begun to wane and drip. The robust voice, that had come strangely from the thin ranks, was growing rapidly weak” (203). The men of the regiment, subjected to this voice, are themselves characterized as producers, or reproducers, of strangeness:

Many of the men were making low-toned noises with their mouths, and these subdued cheers, snarls, imprecations, prayers, made a wild, barbaric song that went as an undercurrent of sound, strange and chantlike with the resounding chords of the war march. The man at the youth’s elbow was babbling. In it there was something soft and tender like the monologue of a babe. The tall soldier was swearing in a loud voice. From his lips came a black procession of curious oaths. Of a sudden another broke out in a querulous way like a man who has mislaid his hat. (113)

We might therefore qualify Schweighauser’s assertion that “[a]s human speech is rendered impossible by the clamor of war, it is superseded by the voices of the war machinery.”⁵⁵ Intentional human speech is repeatedly frustrated by the war, but the war is responsible for generating another form of “human” sound, the “low-toned noises.”

These noises range from senselessness—the infantile “babbling”—to misplaced mannerisms—“like a man who has misplaced his hat”—to a seemingly appropriate response—“swearing”—nonetheless made “curious.” The passive constructions—“was babbling” and “was swearing”—emphasize the lack of agency on the part of the men receiving and curiously—phonographically—(re)producing these noises; the sounds are

⁵⁴ Nancy, *Listening*, 7-8. “In the external or internal space, [sound] resounds, that is, it re-emits itself while still actually ‘sounding,’ which is already ‘re-sounding’ since that’s nothing else but referring back to itself. To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return it to itself and place it outside itself.”

⁵⁵ Schweighauser, *The Noises of American Literature*, 57.

given precedence of activity, emerging from mere parts of the soldiers: “From his lips came a procession of curious oaths.” Henry Fleming’s own reaction in the midst of battle demonstrates that, before the “usual machines of reflection” can be turned upon the experience, before conscious attempts at understanding, there is sonic reflexion: “Sometimes he prattled, words coming unconsciously from him in grotesque exclamations” (201). Crane’s text does not provide this “prattling” itself but suggests the mechanical and corporeal channels through which it is produced and reproduced.

The phonographic channels evoked in this war story connect the visible and audible grotesqueries of dead and dying human bodies with the “grotesque exclamations” of the living. Crane therein suggests that biological expiration is the extreme form of a more pervasive “death” characterized by the loss of conscious control over the body. This death of consciousness, unlike our commonsense understanding of the death of the body, is characterized by an *inability* to stop functioning. Henry Fleming’s initial fear is figured as the production of an abundance of (unclosable) ears comprising a nervous system with no possibility for interruption, for “remain[ing] deaf.” Consciousness depends upon interruption in order that the representations through which one thinks may be produced. The processes by which data from both “autographic media” *and* “our own sense impressions” are made “useful to us,” to reiterate a point from Michael North, depend upon “selective attention.” Henry’s primarily visual “usual machines of reflection” enact such “selective attention” by reviewing a sequence of contained (and sound-edited) scenes. The mechanical nature of such “usual machines” is—like the camera that produces photographs but is absent from their viewing—obscured by the images themselves. But the extensive sonic network of the battleground suggests—as

does the novel's full title, *The Red Badge of Courage, An Episode of the Civil War*—that Henry's reprieve is illusory, that the invisible "machinery" continues to operate beyond the confines of the narrative episode.

Because it "appears" in a war novel, one might assume that *The Red Badge of Courage's* "immense machine" is a function of the extremity of the situation. In other words, though Crane's war text elaborates a troubling mechanization of the human body, both dead and alive, this may be attributed to the exceptional circumstances of war. This would be an extension of Schweighauser's reading of the exceptionality and hence unintelligibility of Crane's war noises.⁵⁶ But Crane relocates the battlefield's nervous and phonographic networks onto the homefront in *The Monster* (1898). He explicitly suggests such a connection between battlefield and homefront in the epigraph that precedes this section, where the "country back of the line of fight" is described as "always strained, eager, listening, tragic in attitude, trembling and quivering like a vast mass of nerves from the shock of the far away conflicts in the South." In making the additional shift in time to the post-bellum homefront of his later novella, Crane reveals that unusual machines of reflexion are always in operation, even where "usual machines of reflection" are prevalent. As with the corpse Henry Fleming encounters in the tree chapel, once again these issues are most powerfully concentrated around a "thing" (as Henry Johnson is described after the fire) that has been defaced. However, while the corpse threatens to "squawk" in a "strange voice," Henry Johnson's voice after the fire is made strange because it is surprisingly familiar.

II. Defacing Realism: Crane's Phonographic *Monster*

⁵⁶ Ibid, 195.

An evening band performance is interrupted by a fire alarm. Amid ringing bells and shouting voices, local fire companies rush to the blaze with their hose carts. This domestic emergency soundscape surrounds the defacement at the dramatic center of Crane's 1898 novella *The Monster*. But it also describes one of the most popular phonographic entertainments of the late-nineteenth century. "The Night Alarm," composed in 1888 by David Wallis Reeves, was first recorded as a phonogram in 1889 and re-recorded numerous times throughout the 1890s and early 1900s.⁵⁷ A writer for the *New York Sun* reported the widespread and powerful effect this particular "descriptive specialty"—a scene conveyed largely through sound effects—had on audiences:

A number of descriptive pieces have been reproduced on the phonograph, but none were so popular as "The Night Alarm" ... The piece drew many nickels, and people in the large cities as well as those in the smaller ones listened to it in wonder and astonishment. The listener heard the music of a band which was interrupted by loud cries of "Fire!" "Fire!" There were loud shouts, a rush of people, and a buzz of voices. Then the fire bells rang and a hose reel came lashing down the street, the gong ringing, the iron-shod hoofs clattering, and the heavy wheels rattling over the stones.⁵⁸

Several of the narrative and auditory details from "The Night Alarm" reverberate in chapters four through nine of Crane's novella: including the interruption of a band's "popular march," warnings shouted "in chorus," fire wagon gongs "clang[ing] incitingly," and ringing bells.⁵⁹ However, Crane's handling of the scene departs from its

⁵⁷ Patrick Feaster and Jacob Smith, "Reconfiguring the history of early cinema through the phonograph, 1877-1908," *Film History* 21, no. 4 (2009), 314, doi: 10.1353/fih.0.0067. An 1892 recording of "The Night Alarm" performed by Holding's Military Band for the United States Phonograph Company is accessible online via the University of California, Santa Barbara's Donald C. Davidson Library Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project: cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/mp3s/10000/10482/cusb-cyl10482d.mp3 A version recorded for the Victor Record Company by the Metropolitan Orchestra in 1901 can be heard, courtesy of Sony Music Entertainment, through the Library of Congress's online National Jukebox Project: www.loc.gov/item/jukebox.4139/ As will be amply demonstrated throughout this section, I am heavily indebted to Patrick Feaster for his extensive archival work on the history of early phonography.

⁵⁸ "Singing to the Cylinders." *New York Sun*, likely date of publication 1893. Quoted in Patrick Feaster, "The Following Record: Making Sense of Phonographic Performance, 1877-1908" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2007), 377, <http://www.phonozoic.net/following-record.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Crane, *Prose and Poetry*, 399, 400, 400, 407.

phonographic rendering on several fronts. Not limited to a roughly three-minute-long cylinder, the fire's outbreak and aftermath in *The Monster* are both themselves treated more extensively than in "The Night Alarm" and embedded within a larger overarching story. Most notably, while "The Night Alarm" typically ends with the announcement that the fire is out and a celebratory round of song, Crane's fire deals damage from which his characters cannot recover and which his narrative cannot resolve.⁶⁰ Instead of ending in celebration, the fire of *The Monster* claims the Trescott family home and, most importantly, the face of their African American servant, Henry Johnson. The rest of the novella recounts Doctor Ned Trescott's difficulty in caring for Henry—injured while saving the doctor's son—and the growing opposition to the latter's continued presence from many of the town of Whilomville's other residents, for whom Henry is only (il)legible as "a dreadful thing" (429).

The domestic emergency, presented in both "The Night Alarm" and *The Monster* as the impingement of "real" life upon popular entertainment, offers Crane a test case for realism. Can realist representation—whether that of fiction or of the phonographic descriptive specialty—accurately approach "reality," or do the very typological and generic strategies it employs prevent success? Both realist novels and descriptive specialties draw upon social typologies to define their characters and scenes. Racial stereotypes, for example, dictate how African American literary characters like Crane's Henry Johnson look, act, and speak; they also serve to frame the many "coon songs" and minstrel acts that comprise a prevalent subcategory of early commercial phonograph

⁶⁰ For more on these endings to "The Night Alarm," see the recordings cited in note 58 and Feaster, "The Following Record," 377, 382.

records.⁶¹ Stereotypes of all kinds, of course, are fabrications rather than the mere descriptions realism treats them as. As such, they can malfunction, especially when the various indicators—such as appearance and voice—of the same stereotype fall out of alignment. In his monstrous departure from “The Night Alarm,” Crane interfaces literary realism’s visual obsession and phonographic realism’s auditory illusionism; he exploits the tension produced by their competing sensory logics to destabilize the stereotypes upon which they both depend, rendering their artificiality audible.

Literary realism, as I have argued by drawing upon critics like Seltzer and Brown, is heavily invested in visibility, in making social conditions and power relations intelligible through the precise visual classification and representation of distinct sociological categories.⁶² Comparisons to photography (including the typological “composite photographs or ‘pictorial statistics’” produced by eugenicist Francis Galton) are prevalent in critical accounts of realism in general and of Crane in particular.⁶³ Such comparisons were also made in contemporary assessments of the literature, and explicitly resisted by some prominent realist writers. As discussed in the opening to this chapter, Hamlin Garland actively rebutted comparisons between photography and the writing of William Dean Howells. Against the documentary authenticity many assumed photography to possess, Garland emphasized the limited sensory data captured by the camera.

⁶¹ Feaster and Smith note that “early phonograph industry catalogues prominently featured recorded representations of acts on the minstrel stage, and minstrels formed the subject matter of some pioneering experiments at combining phonography with motion pictures.” “Reconfiguring,” 320.

⁶² Crane, whose “stories are populated if not quite peopled by statistical persons,” is a key figure in Mark Seltzer’s account of “the realist seeing machine.” *Bodies and Machines*, 106, 96.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 100.

The phonographic descriptive specialty is also sensorially limited. By contrast to visual accounts of literary realism, the realistic effects audiences praised in phonographic descriptive specialties like “The Night Alarm” were completely dependent upon *invisibility*, on “an aural illusion fostered by the removal of visual cues.”⁶⁴ It is because their production in the recording studio remains unseen that the fire wagon sound effects of “The Night Alarm” excite late-nineteenth-century audiences with their realism. Therefore, when he invokes “The Night Alarm” in *The Monster*, Crane does not answer Garland’s objections by supplementing *photographic* realism with *phonographic* realism. Rather, he evokes the obvious representational limitations of phonographic form—the lack of visual counterparts to phonographic sounds—to gesture toward the incomplete purview of “the realist project of accounting for persons ... as social artifacts” in any medium.⁶⁵ In defacing Henry Johnson, Crane uses the repetitive form of popular phonographic realism to deface—or unmask—the predominantly visual typologies subtending literary realism’s status as pseudoscientific discourse.

Listeners to the various recorded iterations of Reeves’s composition marveled at its realistic special effects, which inspired many to “imagine[] they heard more than they did, and [insist] that they heard the engine working, the steam escaping, and the noise of the water as it went through the nozzle of the hose.”⁶⁶ The very narrative premise of “The Night Alarm”—the interruption of a musical entertainment by an emergency—trades upon the meta-textual illusion of realism this interruption creates to produce greater excitement in its audience and thus make greater profits from the patrons of phonograph parlors and the consumers of home phonograph records. If contemporary

⁶⁴ Feaster, “The Following Record,” 603.

⁶⁵ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 97.

⁶⁶ “Singing to the Cylinders.”

accounts are any indication, this approach worked exceedingly well: “Men, women and children, who will listen unmoved while a masterpiece of classical music is being performed, will go simply wild when the same band plays some light descriptive composition with fire bells, boat whistles, wind storms and sounds of that sort copiously permeating it.”⁶⁷ “The Night Alarm” was a favorite selection in this latter genre, and fueled the craze for realistic sound effects with remarkable consistency for roughly two decades.

In deviating from the customary descriptive fire response plot, Crane at first appears to criticize the translation of an emergency into a realist entertainment by juxtaposing the “real” consequences of a fire against the happy ending that allows listeners to indulge guilt-free in the kind of “wonder and astonishment” reported by the *New York Sun*. His engagement with “The Night Alarm” is not limited, however, to simply dismissing its fire in favor of a truer account of “actual” disaster. The problem is not only that this popular phonogram (in its several versions) offers commercially whitewashed representations of an emergency, but that the very desire for realism it plays upon constitutes a kind of catastrophe.⁶⁸

1900’s “Manacled,” one of the last stories Crane wrote before his death, invokes several of the fire alarm details from “The Night Alarm” and *The Monster* to stage the

⁶⁷ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Sept. 5, 1890, 3. Quoted in Feaster, “The Following Record,” 377.

⁶⁸ Not all phonographic descriptive specialties neutralized the violence of the events they depicted; some marketed themselves by virtue of their violence. Gustavus Stadler has examined “phonographic recordings of the lynching of African Americans ... at least some of which purported to be, and were taken as, ‘real,’ that is, produced on-site, as the events took place.” Such recordings, Stadler argues, comprised “a national network of public phonographic exhibits offering audio representations of ritualized racial violence during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century.” Stadler, “Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity,” *Social Text* 102 28, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 87-88, doi: 10.1215/01642472-2009-061. For analyses of *The Monster* as it may relate to a lynching witnessed by Crane’s brother, see Jean Marie Lutes, “Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist,” *American Literary History* 19.2 (Summer 2007): 456-81 and, especially, Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 105-63.

conflict between realistic representation and a “real” emergency. Performing in a play whose major audience appeal lies in its use of real props—“In the first act there had been a farm scene, wherein real horses had drunk real water out of real buckets, afterward dragging a real wagon off stage, L”—an actor literally falls victim to this craze for realism when a fire breaks out in the theater while he is still confined by “real handcuffs” and “real anklets” (1291). As fire wagons race to the scene outside the theater with “loud clicks of the steel-shod hoofs, hoarse shouts, men running ...” the actor perishes within (1292). Against the safe indulgence of the desire for realistic effects promised by “The Night Alarm” and the unnamed play of “Manacled,” Crane’s realism includes disfiguration and death. But even as the actor of the hero’s part in “Manacled” suffers injuries far more violent than anything incorporated into “The Night Alarm”—“Soon he began to bite the hot steel, and blood fell from his blistered mouth” (1293)—the ending of the story suggests that this graphic description is inadequate to understanding the experiential reality of the situation: “Peace came to him again. There were charming effects amid the flames [. . .] He felt cool, delightfully cool [. . .]” (1293). This ending pits the measurable external reality of a fire against its experiential reality. Against all realist expectations for how the inside of a fire ought to be described, in Crane’s story the man actually dying in that experience feels cool.

We do not know what Henry Johnson feels when, between chapters detailing a loud fire response that recalls the soundscape of “The Night Alarm,” he is defaced in Doctor Trescott’s laboratory.⁶⁹ He is unconscious when “a ruby-red snakelike thing”

⁶⁹ For a persuasive reading of the inaccessibility of Henry’s feelings as Crane’s “own sort of social-scientific study, gauging the impact of an unreadable emotional subject on the town he has constructed upon exteriorized emotional bonds,” see Molly Hiro, “How It Feels to Be without a Face: Race and the Reorientation of Sympathy in the 1890s,” *Novel* (Spring 2006): 188.

spawned of one of Trescott's chemicals "flowed directly down into [his] upturned face" (406). And, unlike the violent account of the actor's burns Crane will later provide in "Manacled," Henry's major injury registers only as a curious blank: "His body was frightfully seared, but more than that, he now had no face. His face had simply been burned away" (411). That Crane insists upon the total erasure rather than mutilation of Henry's face is significant. As noted, Henry's defacement marks *The Monster*'s starkest deviation from "The Night Alarm." However, this major difference suggests less the total abandonment of that phonogram than the intrusion of its mediated form into the realist illusions upon which it (and literary realism) trades. In other words, where the novella's plot diverges most vehemently from that of the phonogram, Crane's text evokes its phonographic form the most strongly. Henry Johnson's defacement turns him into—or reveals him as—a phonographic object, a repetitive "thing."

By reading Henry's defacement as a phonographic critique of typological realism, I do not intend to evacuate the significance of his race from the novella. *The Monster* has generated a protracted critical debate over how and whether to reconcile the story's possibly racially progressive social critique—"with the injury to Johnson's face Crane perceptively represents the way in which the black man has been 'denied a real identity' ... in America"⁷⁰—with the author's use of racial stereotypes in the text and elsewhere in his works. John Cleman summarizes the major trends in criticism that does (misguidedly, he argues) reconcile Crane's or the text's social progressivism with racist

⁷⁰ Joseph Church, "The Black Man's Part in Crane's *Monster*," *American Imago* 45 (1988): 375. Church is citing Milne Holton's version of this argument, which he will strongly reject in his own focus on Crane's racial stereotypes. Stuart Burrows offers a more nuanced example of this progressive strand of critique: "Johnson's monstrosity can be read simply as a literalization of the predicament of black identity, in the sense that the eradication of the black face precisely signals the triumph of physiognomy's reduction of people to their face. Since to be black is by definition to be without interiority, the black subject's face can only be a mask, and hence not a face at all." *A Familiar Strangeness*, 183.

caricature: “Critics of ‘The Monster,’ then, have tended either to ignore the evidence of Crane’s racism, to dismiss it as a cultural influence irrelevant to his larger purposes, or to reconfigure it within his irony in such a way as to enable the story and its author to achieve an unintended racial insight.”⁷¹ Cleman notes Joseph Church among critics adopting the latter strategy. Although rejecting arguments for an intentionally progressive focus to Crane’s work, Church’s psychoanalytic reading recuperates the novella itself as an unintentionally socially progressive document: “Crane’s novella merits further attention because, when it draws the black man into the issue, it begins to reveal latent features of race relations in America that exceed its author’s intended portrayal of the culture.”⁷² In accounting for a novella wherein “Crane regards the relation of persons *to their own actions* as problematic,” as Michael Warner persuasively describes the situation, the most consistent problem critics have faced is the enigma of Crane’s own relation to the act of writing *The Monster*.⁷³ My reading does not resolve this unresolvable debate. I see Crane’s use of African American stereotypes as a key component of his larger concern with rendering the typological structure of realism audible. While this larger project may implicitly be racially progressive—insofar as it destabilizes all types—Crane’s decision to stage it through the phonographic defacement

⁷¹ John Cleman, “Blunders of Virtue: The Problem of Race in Stephen Crane’s ‘The Monster,’” *American Literary Realism* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 121, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27747054>. Cleman, following the example of John R. Cooley, works to reclaim Crane’s racially problematic intentions, which “suggest[] that the Civil War, Reconstruction, and further Northern intrusions in Southern affairs were—to whatever degree matters of conscience—ultimately blunders of virtue” (131-32).

⁷² Church, “The Black Man’s Part,” 376.

⁷³ Michael Warner, “Value, Agency, and Stephen Crane’s ‘The Monster,’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40, no. 1 (Jun. 1985): 88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3044837>.

of an African American also evokes a broader cultural logic that understood (and displaced) the instrumentalism embodied by the phonograph onto racial “others.”⁷⁴

If we now recall Laing’s question—“How did each listener adapt to the voice without a face?”⁷⁵—we find that the answer, for many Americans, was to contain the threat of facelessness by understanding the technology along racial lines. In contemporary accounts of the phonograph’s introduction to “primitive” cultures, confusion and fear are the typical responses attributed to the technologically “inferior” party.⁷⁶ Such reports assert the “normative” (white) culture’s superiority by projecting that same dominant culture’s unease onto outsiders who mistakenly attempt to find the sound’s original source hidden inside the phonograph. Fears that the phonograph prefaces the technological entrapment of humanity are thereby suppressed by reaffirming the distinction between “civilized” and “uncivilized,” between those who master technology and those who are mastered by it. People supposedly at the forefront of technological innovation, however, could also be discomfited by the “voice without a face”: “On 18 April 1888, Edison gave a demonstration to the National Academy of Sciences in Washington. It began with a ‘metallic voice’ saying ‘The Speaking Phonograph has the honour of presenting itself to the Academy of Sciences’. During the presentation audience members fainted and one onlooker remarked ‘It sounds more like the devil every time.’”⁷⁷ Henry Johnson, rumored among the African American

⁷⁴ As I note in my introduction, Mark Goble addresses the possible palliative role race serves in white explorations of phonography: “Race pervades the machine aesthetic of modern culture, mediating, for white artists most of all, the sometimes precarious desire to embody and reflect technology’s ‘impersonality’ without becoming just another body plugged in to its objectifying rationality. Race is what happens when you become the medium of someone else’s instrumentality.” *Beautiful Circuits*, 171-72.

⁷⁵ Laing, “A Voice without a Face,” 8.

⁷⁶ See Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, 122-24 and Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁷⁷ Laing, “A Voice without a Face,” 4.

inhabitants of Whilomville's slum to be "er devil" after the fire, inspires similarly strong reactions from many of those he encounters and, I will contend, for similar reasons (419).

To account for such reactions, both to the phonograph and to Henry's defacement, we must better understand what having a face means. Two conceptions of the "face" are at play here. On the one hand, the face is the key locus of individuality, the physical feature that most readily distinguishes "me" from "you." If the face does not always secure my accurate identification by others—even before the fire, the men in Reifsnyder's barber shop have difficulty positively identifying Henry during his evening promenade through town (396-97)—at least it allows me to recognize myself.⁷⁸ From this perspective, the defacement caused by the phonograph and Crane's fire results in horror because it violently erases this hallmark of the self through an act of disfigurement. In Lee Clark Mitchell's reading of *The Monster*, "Disfigurement tends to deny the identity it also boldly reasserts by compelling us to imagine a perfectly unmarred former configuration, reminding us of a family resemblance at 'all but' the moment we mark the defect."⁷⁹ Henry is thus terrifying not because of his physical appearance post-fire—we do not know what he looks like, hidden first behind bandages and then a veil, after the accident—but because of the contrast between his absent face and the memory of him whole. His persistence in speaking after the fire, according to Mitchell, heightens this contrast: "This is the horror of Henry Johnson: he still has a voice once his face is gone and persists in engaging others in dialogue, eliciting terror

⁷⁸ Lee Clark Mitchell also notes this early (mis)identification of Henry by the barbershop crowd. "Face, Race, and Disfiguration in Stephen Crane's *The Monster*" *Critical Inquiry* 17.1 (Autumn 1990): 181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343731>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

when all he desires is a simple human response.”⁸⁰ The voice, another common synecdoche for the “self,” preserves Henry’s humanity though the town of Whilomville—”unable or unwilling to regard him as human because he lacks a visage”—”cannot hear his altered voice.”⁸¹

On the other hand, the “face” is also the antithesis of individuality. “Faces,” Deleuze and Guattari contend, “are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations.”⁸² The face is a representational surface whose range of effective expression is limited by social conventions. Realist fiction, as noted, depends on such typological thinking to structure its pseudoscientific representations of the world.

Given this second conception of the “face,” we might therefore expect that Henry’s defacement and the introduction of the phonograph both provoke terror because they strip away the surface that makes expression socially intelligible, that each marks a breakdown of the “abstract machine of faciality.” Brown reads *The Monster* in this vein, arguing that Henry’s defacement indicates “a faciality machine that, Kafkaesque, has run amok—as though the relays between individual and type, individual and race, have accidentally lost control, producing the absolute composite of the cipher.”⁸³ Henry as “monster” is socially illegible to the other residents of Whilomville and to readers, for whom he is “a figure that the realist technology seems unable to present.”⁸⁴ His accident—which Brown interprets as “a scene of [photographic] development *within* and

⁸⁰ Ibid, 180.

⁸¹ Ibid, 181.

⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.

⁸³ Brown, *The Material Unconscious*, 224.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 240.

as a chemical accident”—places him “outside the structure of spectacle.”⁸⁵ But, to echo Hamlin Garland’s complaint about photographic assessments of realism, this approach to Crane’s novella is too heavily invested in a limited sensory perspective.

The “face,” in the sense in which Deleuze and Guattari use the term, extends beyond the visual. There are auditory types as well as visual types, “faces” that are heard as well as faces that are seen. Among the former, perhaps none are more prevalent in both realist novels and commercial phonograph recordings than the various dialects employed to indicate a speaker’s race, ethnicity, or class. If, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, “language is always embedded in the faces that announce its statements,” making the face “a veritable megaphone,” it is also true that part of this “embedding” occurs by means of the voice.⁸⁶ When Edison exhibited his phonograph before the National Academy of Sciences, its strange “metallic voice” distressed the audience, but it did so in part because that audience could recognize the familiar, formulaic pattern of the phonograph’s introduction: “The Speaking Phonograph has the honour of presenting itself to the Academy of Sciences.”⁸⁷ The grammar of polite social interaction becomes a bit strained to accommodate the illusion that the device—which refers to itself in the third-person—is speaking, but otherwise the form it uses is commonplace. In its capacity for repetition—“it sounds more like the devil *every time*”—the phonograph highlights the reiterative structure of existing social forms.⁸⁸ Therefore, while it physically presents a “voice without a face,” its speech remains consistent with the “abstract machine of faciality.” The same holds for Crane’s Henry Johnson; the absence of his physiognomy

⁸⁵ Ibid, 226, 234.

⁸⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 179.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Laing, “A Voice without a Face.”

⁸⁸ Ibid. Emphasis added.

discloses the reiterative logic of his auditory stereotype. While Henry is physically defaced during the fire, he is not *defacialized*.

The persistence of Henry's voice after his defacement inspires horror in the residents of Whilomville, but not, as Mitchell would have it, because it has been significantly "altered."⁸⁹ If the tone of Henry's voice has changed after his ordeal, this change occurs around vocalizations that are still embedded in established social and literary types and dialects. When Doctor Trescott transports Henry into Alek Williams's care, Henry produces an odd laugh "like the rattle of pebbles," but it emerges in the midst of banter about horses written in dialect that would be entirely unremarkable coming from a stereotypical African American character (416). This banter is a non sequitur, however, in the context of the conversation Trescott is trying to have with Henry about his future. Henry's speech is out of sync with the situation, but by no means unfamiliar. Later, when Henry inadvertently scares Sadie Winter at a children's birthday party, a boy's description of "a grim figure, bending low and slinking off along the fence" is discounted because of its "repetition of certain forms which he recalled from romances. For instance, he insisted that he had heard the creature emit a hollow laugh" (428). Henry—whom Sadie can only describe to her mother as "simply a thing, a dreadful thing" (429)—remains typologically legible in this encounter; the boy's description is only dismissed because it approximates a romantic type rather than a realist one.

Henry's defaced (but not *defacialized*) speech is terrifying because of its similarity to his speech patterns from before the fire. No sequence from Crane's novella expresses this fact more emphatically than Henry's two interactions with the Farragut family in Watermelon Alley. The first scene occurs at the end of chapter three. Having

⁸⁹ Mitchell, "Race, Face, and Disfiguration."

dressed for a night on the town, Henry is defined by the various people he passes according to racial stereotypes: he is first interpreted as a minstrel cake walker by one of the “profane groups” lining Whilomville’s main street and then misidentified as an extraordinary “coon”—“a Pullman-car porter or someding”—by some of the men in Reifsnyder’s barber shop (396-97). Eventually arriving at the Farragut home, Henry engages with Bella and her mother in an imitative performance of upper class (white) mannerisms:

The duty of receiving Mr. Johnson fell upon Mrs. Farragut, because Bella, in another room, was scrambling wildly into her best gown. The fat old woman met him with a great ivory smile, sweeping back with the door, and bowing low. “Walk in, Misteh Johnson, walk in. How is you dis ebenin, Misteh Johnson—how is you?”

Henry’s face showed like a reflector as he bowed and bowed, bending almost from his head to his ankles. “Good-evenin’, Mis’ Fa’gut; good-evenin’. How is you dis evenin’? Is all you’ folks well, Mis’ Fa’gut?”

...
They bowed and smiled and ignored and imitated until a late hour, and if they had been the occupants of the most gorgeous salon in the world they could not have been more like three monkeys.

After Henry had gone, Bella, who encouraged herself in the appropriation of phrases, said, “Oh, ma, isn’t he divine?” (397-98)

Playing upon the familiar minstrel logic “that it is amusing to watch blacks try, but fail, to be like whites,” this scene classifies Henry and the Farraguts under dehumanizing racial stereotypes.⁹⁰ The narrator informs us that their performance, even were it to occur in a setting befitting high society rather than a small “tumble-down house,” could never be more than a poor imitation (397). In addition to “Henry’s face show[ing] like a reflector” and all three participants producing “a smiling show of teeth that was like an illumination,” Crane’s use of dialect highlights the group’s racial “face,” further securing

⁹⁰ Hiro, “How It Feels to Be without a Face,” 190. Brown also reads Henry actions before the fire as a minstrel performance: “*The Monster* produces in the figure of Henry Johnson—before the fire—a stock character from ‘negro minstrelsy’ ... This stock character is the urbanized and effeminized black dandy traditionally named ‘Zip Coon.’” *The Material Unconscious*, 214.

the boundary between black imitations of white mannerisms and actual upper class speech. The language used by Henry and the Farraguts is not only imitative but also formally repetitive. Phrases are repeated between characters—both Henry and Mrs. Farragut ask “How is you dis ebenin’?” (though Henry pronounces “evenin’” slightly differently)—and within single sentences: “Walk in, Misteh Johnson, walk in.” The effect of so many repetitions is to render the conversation practically non-communicative. None of the various polite social questions asked during this scene from before the fire, for example, are ever answered.

In chapter seventeen, when Henry returns to the Farragut home after escaping Alek’s care, his speech is still racially stereotyped via the same kind of dialect writing and he retains the repetitive form exhibited in the earlier scene. Now, however, his former companions—who had been “spending their evening as usual”—are overwhelmed by his repetitious “gabbling [of] courteous invitations”:

Standing before this wreck of a family gathering, the monster continued to bow. It even raised a deprecatory claw. “Don’t make no botheration ‘bout me, Miss Fa’gut,” it said, politely. “No, ‘deed. I jes drap in ter ax if yer well this evenin’, Miss Fa’gut. Don’ make no botheration. No, ‘deed. I gwine ax you to go to er daince with me, Miss Fa’gut. I ax you if I can have the magnifercent gratitude of you’ company on that ‘casion, Miss Fa’gut.”

...

She grovelled in a corner of the room as the creature took a chair. It seated itself very elegantly on the edge. It held an old cap in both hands. “Don’ make no botheration, Miss Fa’gut. Don’ make no botherations. No, ‘deed. I jes drap in ter ax you if you won’ do me the proud of acceptin’ ma humble invitation to er daince, Miss Fa’gut.” (429-30)

If we take seriously the complete erasure of Henry’s face, then we can understand Bella’s reaction to Henry not as a simple response to graphic mutilation—Henry’s lack of a face, after all, is never described except as covered by bandages or clothing—but as a fear of

the endurance of auditory “faciality” in the absence of a physical face that would at least lend the illusion of individual autonomy. When the faculty for visual “reflection” is removed, Henry’s speech does not allow the possibility of even the limited communication approximated in the earlier scene. In this it resembles the repetitive playback enabled by the phonograph, a device which—as a marketing strategy in the late 1880s and early 1890s—was sometimes made to imitate social protocols in polite society settings. In an 1888 article titled “John G. Graphophone, Esq.,” a Washington correspondent for the *New York Tribune* described one such advertising campaign:

An expert operator is on hand to present Mr. Graphophone to the guests, and to bring out his strong points. But that worthy is generally allowed to introduce himself in a harsh voice, somewhat after the following manner:
 “How are you? (whir). How are you, ladies? (irr), I hope I (snappp) see you well this evening (pop-pop-pop). Let me introduce myself (whirr). I’m um-m ‘raphophone, (pop), John G. Grrraphophone, Esp., etc., etc.”⁹¹

The first Watermelon Alley episode ended with the disclosure that Bella “encouraged herself in the appropriation of phrases.” The second episode suggests the possible horror that one might be “simply a thing, a dreadful thing”—as Henry is described in the chapter immediately preceding this one—that merely reproduces phrases. That this horror was, however, already alive below the surface of Henry’s earlier repetitive interaction is suggested by the transformation the name Farragut undergoes when rendered in dialect: “Fa’gut” phonetically evokes “fagot,” or fuel for a fire. The “self”-resemblance between Henry’s speech both before and after his disfiguration in the fire makes audible a certain

⁹¹ “John G. Graphophone, Esq.,” Washington correspondent of *New York Tribune*, in *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, North Dakota), Dec. 5, 1888, 4. Quoted in Feaster, “The Following Record,” 290. Though beyond the purview of this essay, this example demonstrates how textual representations of phonographic speech—drawing upon onomatopoeia and creative punctuation to indicate the reproduction of unintentional noise—can make even the standard grammar of polite social interaction read like dialect writing.

reiterative, reproductive logic that proves to be an aspect of the town's overall structure, a stereotypical sonic reflexion that becomes horrific in the absence of an equally stereotypical visual reflection.

Crane extends the horror of objectification beyond the borders of Watermelon Alley (and its attendant racist caricatures) through his novella's use of sound, which links not only Henry's repetitive, phonogram-like speech to that of other town members, but the sounds that structure the town to the emergency that threatens it. Trying to save Jimmie Trescott during the house fire, Henry makes his way to the boy's room:

As the door flew open [Jimmie] had before him this apparition of his pal, a terror-stricken negro, all tousled and with wool scorching, who leaped upon him and bore him up in a blanket as if the whole affair were a case of kidnapping by a dreadful robber chief. Without waiting to go through the usual short but complete process of wrinkling up his face, Jimmie let out a gorgeous bawl, which resembled the expression of a calf's deepest terror. (404)

In describing this interruption to Jimmie's "usual short but complete [facial] process," Crane foreshadows Henry's impending defacement later in the chapter.⁹² The "bawl" itself, though produced under extraordinary circumstances, is only unusual because its accompanying visual "process" short circuits. (The comparison between Jimmie's "bawl" and that of a calf makes sense as a further indication of his youth.) As Henry emerges from the room with Jimmie bundled up in his arms, he for a moment loses all hope of success: "He cried out then in a howl that resembled Jimmie's former achievement" (404). On the one hand, the sonic "resemblance" between Henry and Jimmie revisits a connection between them explicitly made early in the novella: "In regard to almost everything in life they seemed to have minds precisely alike" (392).

⁹² In this moment, as he will be after the fire, Henry is still typologically legible, though here the character type comes from beyond the realist genre: a "dreadful robber chief" of boys' adventure stories.

This infantilizing description of Henry reinforces a racist stereotype that portrays African Americans as childlike. On the other hand, there is more to this resemblance than first meets the ear.

Henry's "howl" could resemble Jimmie's "bawl" in sound quality. Perhaps Henry, in his distress, produces a sound that also recalls the bleating of a terrified calf. Sounds are not easily policed. As Evan Eisenberg notes, "Any two sounds that sound exactly the same are the same sound, even if they come from wildly different sources."⁹³ Slippages become particularly likely when—as is the case with the phonograph—visual confirmation of a sound's source is unavailable. In the case of minstrel phonograms and other "coon song" recordings, the lack of such visual confirmation could be unsettling. As Gitelman observes, "All of this recorded 'blackness' without the sight of black, white, or blackened skins was new and uncomfortable, at least for record producers." The minstrel performers whose voices emanated from the phonograph could be of any race, since "[t]here was no single, uncomplicated sound for skin color."⁹⁴ In the descriptive specialty, almost no sound proved "uncomplicated"; the genre's sound effects had to be contextualized by phonogram titles, catalog descriptions, and opening announcements in order to be correctly understood.⁹⁵ This was in part necessary because the same sound effects were sometimes used to describe very different things. For example, within a few

⁹³ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 89.

⁹⁴ Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, 135, 136.

⁹⁵ Feaster analyzes several of these framing devices, including written descriptions intended to guide listeners through "The Night Alarm": "[T]heir listening experience would be guided by advance knowledge of what the bells and whistles were intended to represent, on the chance that they might not actually be able to infer this from the sounds alone. Customers of the mid-1890s who consulted the United States Phonograph Company's record catalog found not only a written description of *The Night Alarm* ('Introducing Fire Bells, Cries, Horse's Hoofs, Winding of Hose Reel, Whistle of Engine, etc.'), but also a line drawing of a horse-drawn fire engine charging forward, steam gushing from its boiler, supplying yet another external source of information about what was supposed to be going on." "The Following Record," 382.

years of *The Monster*'s publication, "the same whistling noise [was] used to convey the impression of whipping a slave in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' (Edison cylinder 8656) and swatting flies in 'Mosquito Parade' (Edison cylinder 7503)." ⁹⁶ If both actions—with their identical sound effect—were recorded onto the same phonogram, the descriptive illusion would be destabilized. To an extent, this is what a sonic detail like "howling" does in *The Monster*, but—because the various "howls" that echo in the novella mostly indicate significantly different sounds—it does so most effectively at the level of form.

The "howl that resembled" does not safely confine Henry's cross-racial resonance to the domain of childhood. Instead, the "howl" proves an incredibly mobile sonic descriptor for Crane. Its invocation condenses a formal "resemblance" that crosses numerous boundaries. Both black and white characters howl: outside the Trescotts' flaming house, their neighbor "was *howling*: 'Johnson is in there yet! Henry Johnson is in there yet! ... Johnson is in there yet!'" (408); before Henry visits the Farraguts for the second time, they "were spending their evening as usual on the little rickety porch. Sometimes they *howled* gossip to other people on other rickety porches" (429). Individuals and masses howl: as the volunteers of "Tuscarora Hose Company Number Six" gather their equipment, they respond to the repeated, "inevitable question" from newcomers—"What district?" "Second," was replied to them in a compact *howl*" (400). Humans and machines howl: when Jimmie interrupts his father mowing the lawn, "The doctor paused, and with the *howl* of the machine no longer occupying the sense, one could hear the robins in the cherry-trees arranging their affairs" (391). ⁹⁷ The various

⁹⁶ Feaster, "Framing the Mechanical Voice," *Folklore Forum* 32, nos. 1-2 (2001): 85.

⁹⁷ The emphases in the quotations cited in this paragraph are mine.

details described as “howls” differ widely in likely sound quality, but they share a repetitive formal logic.

The opening chapter of the novella introduces repetition as the mode of (mis)communication between characters. After he has broken a peony in his father’s garden while pretending to be “engine Number 36” (391), Jimmie’s attempt at confession digresses into simple reiteration: “It seemed that the importance of the whole thing had taken away the boy’s vocabulary. He could only reiterate, ‘There!’” (392). To a certain extent, reiteration is the major mode of childhood diplomacy. When the neighborhood boys debate the comparative virtues of the current and former Whilomville fire chiefs during the fire fighting sequence, their arguments derive their authority as reproductions of their fathers’ statements: “‘My father says’ was a very formidable phrase in argument ...” (409-10). But the devolution of social interaction into mere repetition is not a problem limited to children (or even to childlike African American stereotypes) in *The Monster*.

Doctor Trescott is held in divine reverence by his son and Henry Johnson. For them, he “was the moon,” and falling out of esteem with him is described as a loss of light, as “bec[oming] the victim of an eclipse” (393). Trescott’s position as light source, however, is troubled by the *reflective* nature of his speech. Once he has finally seen what Jimmie was failing to confess in the opening chapter, his response to his son suggests his similar difficulty with reiteration. Jimmie offers, “‘I was playin’ train.’” Crane presents Trescott’s response: “The father *reflected* again. ‘Well, Jimmie, ... I guess you had better not play train any more to-day. Do you think you had better?’” (392, emphasis added). The doctor’s words slightly modify his son’s phrase and then reformulate his

own expression of opinion—"I guess you had better not"—into a question—"Do you think you had better?"⁹⁸ Such difficulties also obtain in the interactions between multiple adults. To take only one of numerous examples, the conversation between Judge Hagenthorpe and Trescott over what is to be done with Henry after the fire is also circular, with the doctor repeatedly asking "What am I to do?" and the judge several times replying with a phrase that echoes the question: "It is hard for a man to know what to do" (414-15). Repetition also structures the interactions of larger groups. The chief of police's explanation for why a mob threw stones at Henry when he escaped Alek Williams's care, even though they didn't want to hit him, ends with "but you know how a crowd gets. It's like—it's like—" (431). It's like the form of simile without substance.

Rather than breaking the repetitive structure of the town's day-to-day interactions, the alarm and the emergency response to the fire emphasize the reiterative logic of Whilomville society. Describing the initial alarm, Crane writes,

Suddenly, without preliminary bars, there arose from afar the great hoarse roar of a factory whistle. It raised and swelled to a sinister note, and then it sang on the night wind one long call that held the crowd in the park immovable, speechless. ... The cry died away to a wail, and then to stillness. It released the muscles of the company of young men on the sidewalk, who had been like statues, posed eagerly, lithely, their ears turned. And then they wheeled upon each other simultaneously, and, in a single explosion, they shouted "One!" Again the sound swelled in the night and roared its long ominous cry, and as it died away the crowd of young men wheeled upon each other and, in chorus, yelled, "Two!" There was a moment of breathless waiting. Then they bawled, "Second district!" In a flash the company of indolent and cynical young men had vanished like a snowball disrupted by dynamite. (399-400)

⁹⁸ Goldsby also draws attention to the problematic nature of Doctor Trescott's speech here: "Mixing his use of the imperative, conditional, and subjunctive verb tenses in their exchange, Dr. Trescott confuses the relation between causes and effects, teaching his son (in a moment that becomes the novella's leitmotif) that his actions and their consequences can be effaced by the very disciplinary authorities that would have him admit his wrongful behavior." *A Spectacular Secret*, 141.

Here the town's young men are physically constrained by sound, their muscles held so as to give preeminence of position to their "turned" ears in receiving the signal. After each note of the alarm, they produce a remarkably coordinated auditory response, which Crane describes, repetitively, in circular terms reminiscent of the turning of a phonograph: "they wheeled upon each other simultaneously" and "wheeled upon each other and, in chorus, yelled ..." Such vocal coordination defies the more chaotic, certainly more diverse set of reactions we might expect to a real fire alarm, but it makes perfect sense in the context of "The Night Alarm." Here, as in the phonogram, a band performance is disrupted by an emergency, but the descriptive fire response that follows is as carefully synchronized as the music it interrupts.

In a deviation from the upbeat mood of "The Night Alarm," Crane's characterization of the violence of the crowd's dispersal—"a snowball disrupted by dynamite"—suggests that the emergency response itself has a destructive aspect. The sequence immediately following the dispersal of the young men extends the seemingly odd notion that this effort at combating a disaster is itself a calamitous proposition. Though the men share in a common "fervor," their collective work is not carried out with any concern for the well-being of each other. In a moment perhaps meant to recall the peony damaged by the wheel of Jimmie's cart, Johnnie Thorpe is nearly crushed by the wheel of Hose Company Number Six's fire wagon after he falls. Released from the "fervor" of the others, he "cast[s] a look of mournful disenchantment upon the black crowd that poured after the machine. The cart seemed to be the apex of a dark wave that was whirling as if it had been a broken dam" (401). Though the fire wagon is obviously

meant to bring one kind of disaster under control, it is here figured as yet another form of catastrophe.

The soundscape of the emergency proves to be only an intensified version of the sonic channels normally in operation in Whilomville. The initial alarm comes from a factory whistle, but it interrupts a sonic “engine” that is also characterized in mechanistic terms:

The band played a waltz which involved a gift of prominence to the bass horn, and one of the young men on the sidewalk said that the music reminded him of the new engines on the hill pumping water into the reservoir. A similarity of this kind was not inconceivable, but the young man did not say it because he disliked the band’s playing. He said it because it was fashionable to say that manner of thing concerning the band. (399)

The comparison—itself only proffered as a form of “fashionable” speech—emphasizes the automatic nature of the band’s playing. Its mechanical vehicle—“new engines on the hill pumping water”—renders the band’s music somewhat phonographic, and recalls the format of “The Night Alarm,” where the band music—as well as the fire alarm that interrupts it—*is* reproduced phonographically. One 1890s version of the Edison Phonograph, the “Water-Motor Phonograph,” was in fact “made for attaching to the ordinary water-supply pipe used in business houses or residences, and operated by pressure.”⁹⁹ Though in *The Monster* the band and the alarm initially read as opposed sonic entities, the latter interrupting the former just as the conductor is “about to order the first triumphal clang of a military march,” the alarm activates a coordinated gathering of companies like a military action. The emergency response—“a dark wave that was whirling as if it had been a broken dam”—is therefore an exacerbation rather than an

⁹⁹ James L. Andem, *A Practical Guide to the Use of the Edison Phonograph* (Cincinnati: C.J. Krehbiel & Co., 1892), 9.

interruption of the band's "engines." The town's bells serve the purpose of reproducing the initial alarm, but their noise production also becomes a purpose unto itself: "The bells not only emphasized the alarm, but it was the habit to send these sounds rolling across the sky in a stirring brazen uproar until the flames were practically vanquished. There was also a kind of rivalry as to which bell should be made to produce the greatest din" (407). Such sounds, detached from their strict communicative roles in emphasizing the alarm, take on value as "stirring brazen" entertainment.

The parallel between the gathering of the fire companies and the outbreak of the fire reinforces the implication that the emergency response participates in the emergency: "After a moment the window brightened as if the four panes of it had been stained with blood, and a quick ear might have been led to imagine the fire-imps calling and calling, clan joining clan, gathering to the colors" (402). Though "[n]o one could have heard this low droning of the gathering clans," what we have heard quite clearly in the preceding chapters is the gathering of the firefighters into their respective companies (402). The order in which Crane presents his chapters places the fire alarm curiously prior to the fire's outbreak. In chapter four, the fire alarm interrupts the band during the town's customary Saturday evening social gathering. In chapter five, Hose Company Number Six retrieves their cart and heads toward the fire. In chapter six, Crane details the outbreak of the fire—the appearance of smoke, Henry's plunge into the burning house to find Jimmie, the "telegraph[ing]" of the emergency by "a twist of the wrist of a neighbor who had gone to the fire-box at the corner"—and, by the chapter's end, comes full circle to "the time when the whistle roared its hoarse night call, smiting the crowd in the park" (403-04). By presenting the fire alarm and its immediate effects *before* describing the

start of the fire, Crane destabilizes narrative expectations of causality. In the chronology of the story—once we backtrack in chapter six—the fire’s outbreak precedes the fire alarm. But in the order we encounter the chapters, the explosion of the fire response—“like a snowball disrupted by dynamite”—precedes the fire’s actual ignition. Such ordering creates the uncanny sensation that the fire alarm, and not the fire itself, precipitates the tragedy.

This order makes perfect sense, however, in the context of “The Night Alarm,” where the fire is of secondary importance to the exciting soundscape of the fire response. The market for this brand of realism—upon which Crane’s novella plays—demands the fire, and thus Henry’s injury foreshadows the fate of the unnamed actor from “Manacled” who cannot escape the all-too-real restraints in vogue with his realist theater.¹⁰⁰ Rather than presenting the fire itself as a non-event compared to the emergency response—as most recordings of “The Night Alarm” do—Crane makes it the occasion for disclosing the violence of realism’s typological logic. In phonographically defacing (but not defacializing) Henry—whom he presents both before and after the fire via racial stereotypes—and cataloging his formal resemblance to the novella’s other characters, Crane renders audible the repetitive nature of all stereotypes.

¹⁰⁰ Goldsby also notes the convoluted ordering of these chapters: “Though the narrator’s cross-cutting between these scenes is formally astute—cinematic, even—the technique marginalizes Johnson from the center of the novella’s plot, thus creating a gap wherein the black man naturally disappears as a function of the narrator’s superior sense of form.” *A Spectacular Secret*, 145. According to Goldsby, Henry’s disappearance here mirrors the larger disappearance of Robert Lewis’s 1892 lynching from the story, the event that inspired *The Monster* but which Crane ultimately suppressed from the novella so he could market it. She argues, “*The Monster*’s description of the burning scene therefore enacts why—because realist fiction was a commodity like any other for sale on the corporate marketplace—the violence of lynching was too real for white Americans to understand” (159). While I do not read Crane’s novella as a suppressed lynching, the story’s possible evocation of “The Night Alarm” does suggest that realism’s status as a marketable good jeopardizes its claims to accuracy.

Fittingly, *The Monster* does not so much resolve by the end as promise to repeat. Doctor Trescott—who continuously voices his obligation to Henry for saving Jimmie—becomes a social pariah for refusing to remove Henry from Whilomville by either sending him to “a little no-good farm up beyond Clarence Mountain” or to “a public institution” (446). In the novella’s final sequence, he tries to console his wife, whose normal Wednesday social tea has been boycotted by most of her friends:

Glancing down at the cups, Trescott mechanically counted them. There were fifteen of them. “There, there,” he said. “Don’t cry, Grace. Don’t cry.”

The wind was whining around the house and the snow beat aslant upon the windows. Sometimes the coal in the stove settled with a crumbling sound and the four panes of mica flushed a sudden new crimson. As he sat holding her head on his shoulder, Trescott found himself occasionally trying to count the cups. There were fifteen of them. (447-48)

This passage layers repetition upon repetition. The “mechanical” nature of Doctor Trescott’s counting is reinforced by the repetition of the number: “There were fifteen of them.” His speech, like most of the dialogue in the preceding twenty-three chapters, is structured via repetitions. His formulaic, barely communicative words of consolation—”There, there”—echo his son’s lapse into repetition during the story’s opening scene, where Jimmie, struggling to confess the damage he has done to a flower, “could only reiterate, ‘There!’” (392). Such “mechanical” interactions are the rule throughout *The Monster*, their ongoing typological violence made audible by the injury to Henry Johnson. As if promising to replay the emergency, the closing narration describes the stove—“the four panes of mica flushed a sudden new crimson”—in detail that recalls the outbreak of the fire, where “the window brightened as if the four panes of it had been stained with blood” (402).

CHAPTER 3

HER “MASTER-PIECE” VOICE: GERTRUDE STEIN’S CONTINUOUS GRAMOPHONE

When you are writing who hears what you are writing.
That is the question.

—Gertrude Stein¹

“I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be” (*II* 288). So writes Gertrude Stein in “Portraits and Repetition,” one of the lectures from her 1934-35 publicity tour of America. Stein’s proclivity for reusing similar words in quick succession—what we might conventionally understand by “repetition”—makes this claim appear paradoxical. Her puzzling yet somehow self-evident argument against repetition (“really how can there be”) depends upon her redefinition of the term. Repetition does exist, but it does not inhere within the exact reproduction of her printed text (in the seemingly repetitive, *typed* words of Stein’s lectures); rather, repetition for Stein connotes a kind of *typological* thinking whereby we identify individuals on the basis of whom or what they resemble. In the same lecture, she explains:

Remembering is repetition anybody can know that. In doing a portrait of any one, the repetition consists in knowing that that one is a kind of a one,

¹ Gertrude Stein, “Henry James,” in *Writings 1932-1946*, eds. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 151. Further references to this volume will be cited parenthetically by page number with Roman numeral *II*. References to the first volume, *Writings 1903-1932*, eds. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: The Library of America, 1998), will be cited parenthetically with Roman numeral *I*.

that the things he does have been done by others like him that the things he says have been said by others like him, but, and this is the important thing, there is no repetition in hearing and saying the things he hears and says when he is hearing and saying them. And so in doing a portrait of him if it were possible to make that portrait a portrait of him saying and hearing what he says and hears while he is saying and hearing it there is then in so doing neither memory nor repetition no matter how often that which he says and hears is heard and said. This was the discovery I made as I talked and listened more and more and this is what I did when I made portraits of every one I know. I said what I knew as they said and heard what they heard and said until I had completely emptied myself of all they were that is all that they were in being one hearing and saying what they heard and said in every way that they heard and said anything. (*II* 295)

While we might consider the above sequence verbally repetitive—for example, it uses “say” or variants of it sixteen times and “hear” or its variants thirteen times—Stein instead defines “repetition” as an awareness of typological resemblance, “knowing that that one is a kind of one.” The world offers a surfeit of such resemblances: “any one does of course resemble some one” (*II* 293). The problem with drawing upon typological classifications, for Stein, is that doing so ignores the particularity of the subject’s temporality. In another of her *Lectures in America*, she recalls “the difficulty of putting it down”: “Types of people I could put down but a whole human being felt *at one and the same time*, in other words while in the act of feeling that person was very difficult to put into words” (*II* 276, emphasis added). Given that one’s actions have already “been done by others like him” and one’s words have already “been said by others like him,” what differentiates the portrait subject from his type is the temporality of his actions rather than their content: “there is no repetition in hearing and saying the things he hears and says *when* he is hearing and saying them” (emphasis added). Typological thinking, which generates true “repetition,” is inadequate to the demands of this temporality because it

functions retrospectively; the resemblance must be recalled: “*Remembering* is repetition ...”

To put down the temporality of a “whole human being felt at one and the same time,” Stein relies upon what, in her 1926 address “Composition as Explanation,” she terms the “continuous present” (*I* 524). Anticipating her later insights about how the temporality of the subject and his portrait mark his difference from a typology built upon remembered resemblances, she writes, “everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition” (*I* 522). Stein employs the “continuous present” to avoid backsliding into typological definitions, resemblances forged by comparison with static memories. Using a limited vocabulary that at first glance seems extremely repetitive, Stein, in Paul Stephens’s words, “create[s] ‘a continuous present’ in the mind of the reader” capable of accommodating each subject’s unique time.²

Though Stein’s writing, “run[ning] generally counter to the Taylorist notion of a discrete, normative duration for ‘the assembling of a thing,’” thus deviates from standardized industrial time, it does not abandon the mechanical in its assertion of the subject’s particular temporality.³ Cinema, for example, serves as a key analogy for Stein. Using “thing” initially to refer to the process of classification through resemblance, she writes, “Funnily enough the cinema has offered a solution of this thing. By a continuously moving picture of any one there is no memory of any other thing and there is that thing existing, it is in a way if you like one portrait of anything not a number of them” (*II* 293-94). The continuous movement of the cinema, like the “continuous

² Paul Stephens, “‘Reading at It’: Gertrude Stein, Information Overload, and the Making of Americanitis,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 145.

³ *Ibid.*

present” Stein strives for in her writing, prevents remembering; instead of a number of static photographs, the film frames become “one portrait” when run through the projector. Susan McCabe approaches Stein from this cinematic perspective: “With its elements of succession and variation, amnesia and movement, film seemed to solve the apparent conflict between inanimate mechanical reproduction and ‘existing,’ and formed Stein’s prototypic medium for embodying the vital flux and crisis of a ‘continuous present.’”⁴ The cinematic source of this “solution” is likely “funny” to Stein because—as with her seemingly repetitive writing—temporal difference is secured through a mechanical process.

While Stein’s explicit comparisons between her writing and the cinema have been fruitfully examined, the rhetoric of “saying” and “hearing” that also permeates her meditations on time and composition suggests that film tells only part of the story. Stein’s desire to construct a portrait that could capture each subject’s particular emphasis and timing—to “make that portrait a portrait of him saying and hearing what he says and hears while he is saying and hearing it”—evokes the phonograph’s ability to record and replay auditory input in real time. But Stein’s explicit identification of cinema as a “solution” already promises to convey such temporal particularity in the way film preserves the movement of the subject. Does the gramophonic analogy, therefore, merely recast the cinematographic analogy in terms of a different sense organ? And, if so, are we merely “repeating” (in the negative valence Stein gives this word) cinematic insights when we think about Stein’s writing as gramophonic?

⁴ Susan McCabe, “‘Delight in Dislocation’: The Cinematic Modernism of Stein, Chaplin, and Man Ray,” *Modernism/modernity* 8, no. 3 (Sept. 2001): 430, doi: 10.1353/mod.2001.0070.

Yes. There are many similarities between a cinematographic and a gramophonic reading of Stein's work. At times the distinction between sight and sound seems hardly to matter. As Stein challenges us in "Henry James": "Think of your ears as eyes. You can even think of your eyes as ears but not so readily perhaps" (*I* 159). Viewed (or heard) in this way, whether we frame our reading through a cinematographic or a gramophonic lens, we approach the same issue—the time of/in the composition. A simple gramophonic account of the temporality of Stein's writing, such as the one G. Johnston offers of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, thus resembles the cinematographic account: "Stein, though she does not mention the gramophone, enacts some of the gramophone's positive functions: she has kept Toklas's voice fluid and alive (without freezing it) ..." ⁵ The gramophonic sensibility of Stein's text, in this interpretation, does for the movement of the voice what film does for the movement of the body.

And yet. Despite the similarities between (or potential fusion of) sight and sound in Stein's thinking, a more nuanced gramophonic interpretation of her work "insists" differently than a cinematographic interpretation does, offering several further insights into the temporality of/in composition. First, we note the pseudo-gramophonic structure of several of the early experiments in "motor automatism" she conducted with Leon Solomons, and hence the importance of sound to Stein's investment in and development of her automatic writing. Second, the early gramophone—which was hand-powered and

⁵ G. Johnston, "After the Invention of the Gramophone: Hearing the Woman in Stein's *Autobiography* and Woolf's *Three Guineas*," in *Virginia Woolf Miscellanies: Proceedings of the First Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Mark Hussey and Vara Neverow-Turk (New York: Pace University Press, 1992), 93. Though Johnston identifies the gramophone as his or her primary technological focus, the reading he/she offers of Stein through the gramophone relies heavily on visuality: "We might, through concepts of activity and passivity in gazing and listening, liken the gramophone to the recipient of the gaze, while Stein's and Woolf's texts redefine their voices. Instead of being objects of an audience's gaze, the voice controls that gaze" (94).

therefore not perfectly standardized in its timing—offers a popular example of cultivated motor automatism contemporaneous with Solomons and Stein’s experiments and an alternative way of reading the mechanical metaphors Stein uses to account for composition, one which gives us additional insight into how Stein negotiated the temporality of reading in/of her own texts. Third, the powerful insistence on fidelity in The Victor Talking Machine Company’s branding—emblemized most forcefully by the trademark image of the terrier “Nipper” listening to a record of “His Master’s Voice”—demonstrates that even media that can capture movement are not immune to being co-opted for “remembering” and hence “repetition.” This is, after all, another interpretation of what the gramophone does; although it can capture the movements of a particular voice, in the commercial context it also aspires to exactly (re)produce that voice ad infinitum in accordance with the “master” recording. What becomes of Stein’s “solution” to the problem of remembering once the record (gramophonic or cinematographic) is published? Read in this context, one of Stein’s frequent refrains from her 1930s writings—“I am I because my little dog knows me”—fuels a meditation against the drive toward memorialization. And finally, a gramophonic interpretation can provide an additional explanation for why Stein first develops the “prolonged present” (a precursor to her “continuous present”) through the production of racialized voices in “a negro story called Melanctha” (I 524). Michael North has argued that “[m]odernism ... mimicked the strategies of dialect and aspired to become a dialect itself” in order to challenge standard language and values, and he reads Stein’s “Melanctha” in this vein.⁶ But black voices were (as I discussed at length in chapter one) culturally coded as aurally

⁶ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), i.

imitative or proto-phonographic, suggesting that Stein's use of dialect in "Melanctha" could be viewed as a means by which she reimagines (or retimes) her writing as an aural medium.

I. Automatic Writing/Reading/Hearing/Speaking

In their 1896 article, "Normal Motor Automatism," Leon Solomons and Gertrude Stein describe a series of experiments designed to determine how the subconscious, automatic actions of "normal" subjects compare to those of "hysterical subjects."⁷ They focus their exploration around four "*essential* elements" commonly attributed to the hysteric's "second-personality" and test the limits of these same elements in "normal" subjects, using themselves as representatives of the normal (NMA 493). The elements they identify are the following:

1. General tendency to movement without conscious motor impulse.
2. Tendency of an idea in the mind to go over into a movement involuntarily and unconsciously.
3. Tendency of a sensory current to pass over into a motor reaction subconsciously.
4. Unconscious exercise of memory and invention. (NMA 494)

They devote by far the most time to explaining the third element. In both of the experiments they describe in this third section, the "sensory current" employed takes the form of dictation. The "motor reaction" produced in response to this dictation is, in the first case, written and, in the second case, spoken. Automatic speech recording and reproduction thus lie at the core of Solomons and Stein's theory.

In the first experiment outlined here, the operator dictates words while the subject, who "ke[eps] his pencil moving constantly, scribbling when no dictation [is] going on,"

⁷ Leon M. Solomons and Gertrude Stein, "Normal Motor Automatism," *Psychological Review*, 3, no. 5 (Sept. 1896): 492. Further references to this text will be cited parenthetically by page number with the indication NMA.

tries to keep his attention “occupied as fully as possible in reading” (NMA 497).

(Although the pronouns used throughout the article are masculine, Stein was the subject taking dictation in these experiments.)⁸ With sufficient practice, the subject can continue to read without shifting the focus of her attention from reading to hearing with each word dictated. Eventually, the middle steps in the process of taking dictation—“a feeling of effort” and “the formation of a motor impulse”—can drop out of the subject’s consciousness. With the loss of this impulse, “The writing is conscious, but non-voluntary and largely *extra personal*. The feeling that the writing is *our* writing seems to disappear ...” (NMA 498). Though still aware that she is writing at this point, Stein claims to lose control over the transcription of what she hears. The article goes further, suggesting that for brief intervals Stein experiences (without registering) the “dropping out of consciousness of the other two elements, heard sound, and return sensations from the arm.” No longer aware in these moments that she has even heard anything or that she has written it down, Stein achieves what is described as “real automatism” (NMA 499). While this “real automatism”—which translates sound into letters rather than capturing its frequencies—does not produce indexical recordings like the phonograph does, it nonetheless shares some of the device’s characteristics. For example, the constant motion of the pencil, which “scribbl[es]” even “when no dictation [is] going on,” recalls the constant movement of the stylus across the surface of the record when uninterrupted by discernible sound. In their analysis of the “general tendency to movement,” the first “essential element” of the hysteric, Solomons and Stein suggest that the human arm itself tends toward a certain kind of “elliptical movement” when not directed otherwise (NMA

⁸ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 227.

495).⁹ Moreover, the loss of conscious control over the aural reception and written reproduction of dictation places Stein—although temporarily—in an analogous position to the phonograph. Finally, we should remember that, while Stein’s written output may be symbolic (composed of words) rather than real (comprised of sound waves), *phonography*, as its name suggests, was originally imagined as a form of writing.¹⁰

If their first exploration of this “essential element” traces a potential channel between ear and hand, the second experiment Solomons and Stein describe—“*Automatic Reading*”—charts the “sensory current[’s]” movement both between eye and mouth and along “an automatic path from ear to mouth” (NMA 503, 504):

The subject reads in a low voice, and preferably something comparatively uninteresting, while the operator reads to him an interesting story. If he does not go insane during the first few trials he will quickly learn to concentrate his attention fully on what is being read to him, yet go on reading just the same. (NMA 503)

Here the voice of the reading subject, rather than her hand, is the final link in the automatic assemblage. The text the subject reads is not the only source of automatic speech in this experiment. Among the “absurd mistakes ... occasionally made in the reading of words,” Solomons and Stein identify “a tendency to insert words from the reading which is attended to. (Here it will be noticed appears an automatic path from ear to mouth)” (NMA 504). This human “automatic path” recalls the gramophone’s instrumentality, though, once again, we must note that the sound reproduced is not indexical. If the subject repeats the operator’s words, she still does so in her own voice.

⁹ Solomons and Stein write, “Sometimes it is possible to ‘teach’ the arm some special movement, which it will then go on making of its own accord. For example, the operator may start the planchette to making *m* strokes, and as soon as the hand has caught the movement—shown by the absence of resistance—stop. The arm goes on making the strokes. Gradually, however, it gets them more and more out of shape until it has got into an elliptical movement which is more natural to it, apparently.” “Normal Motor Automatism,” 495.

¹⁰ If we wanted a closer technological analog for the dictation experiments Solomons and Stein describe, we might think of them as early, embodied examples of speech-to-text recognition software.

And yet, the ownership of this voice is also thrown into question. As with the subject taking dictation in the earlier experiment, the reading subject experiences a “feeling of extra personality”: “Whenever it happened, that is, that the subject after a period of automatic reading suddenly began to *hear* what he was reading, his voice seemed as though that of another person” (NMA 504). Most of us have probably found our own voices equally strange at one point or another as the result of listening to ourselves on an audio recording.¹¹ Solomons and Stein describe a similar phenomenon, but one produced within the confines of the body rather than through an external medium.

They conclude their analysis of the “[t]endency of a sensory current to pass over into a motor reaction subconsciously” by describing the results of a variation on the automatic reading experiment where “both read equally loud” (NMA 504). When the operator and the subject’s volume are thus matched,

It is not possible to hear only the other person’s voice. If the centers for the consciousness of sound are in a condition to respond to afferent currents at all they respond to all, or, at least, do not discriminate except at haphazard. But it is possible to *grasp the meaning* of one only, the other being in the condition of the words written, but not remembered, in the automatic writing. (NMA 505)

The sense of hearing is inherently inclusive. Or we might say, to return to a point from Jean-Luc Nancy emphasized during last chapter’s account of Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, “The ears don’t have eyelids.”¹² To navigate the potentially overwhelming mass of auditory data directed toward/produced by the subject in this test, that subject (“if

¹¹ The difference in the way we sound to ourselves versus the way we sound in a recording (and to others) is produced by the resonance of the voice through the body while we speak, which affects our hearing. When the voice is recorded and reproduced through a medium external to the body, we experience it without this same internal resonance. Katherine Biers, in her phonographic reading of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, describes this experience as “the uncanniness of a phonograph recording in which the listener hears for the first time the acoustical vibrations that have always already been present in his speech.” Biers, *Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 117.

¹² Nancy, *Listening*, 14.

he does not go insane during the first few trials”) can attend to only one voice at a time. In this regard, Solomons and Stein’s experiment in amplification approximates the same conditions as those facing early audio listeners.

As we have already seen in our consideration of both Twain and Crane, the first few decades of audio recording and reproduction were very noisy. Phonographs and gramophones indexed not only the voices, musical instruments, or sound effects of performances but also the mechanical conditions of their recording (the rasp of the phonograph or gramophone itself). To establish the fidelity for which audiences praised these early machines, listeners needed to routinize their own listening practices through the cultivation of what Jonathan Sterne has termed “audile technique”:

Audile technique ... was, thus, presupposed by the most basic functional criteria for sound reproduction. The point was not to produce a perfectly silent apparatus (which would not happen for decades). Rather, it was to produce an apparatus that listeners could *pretend* was silent, a machine that could hear anything but with no voice of its own—a surrogate appropriate to the audile technique to be employed.¹³

By distinguishing between foreground and background sound, listeners attempted to filter out—through the modulation of their own processes of attention rather than of the audio stream—irrelevant data. Solomons and Stein remind us, however, that refusing to listen attentively to certain sounds is not the same as not receiving them at all. Rather than simply dismissing the audio feed whose meaning is *not* “grasped” in their automatic reading experiment, they describe this “afferent current” as “being in the condition of the words written, but not remembered, in the automatic writing.” The unattended to auditory “sensory current” is still channeled through the body. But to what effect? In the case of automatic writing, the written words remain as the record of the currents received

¹³ Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 259-60.

subconsciously. The voice heard but not attended to, however, seems to produce no discernible record. Does this other current therefore simply dissipate, or might it be somehow inscribed, beyond memory, in the body or the mind, and if so, can it ever be accessed?

At this point, Solomons and Stein exercise their own form of filtering by relegating the questions they raise about audile processing to the background of their argument: “This affords a most interesting field of observation, but as it concerns a different problem from the one in hand I speak no further of it here” (NMA 505).

Although the question of negotiating multiple audio feeds and simultaneous listening and talking is set aside in “Normal Motor Automatism,” it powerfully resurfaces in Stein’s later writings about writing. There, we will suggest, she attempts to hold off the kind of listening practiced in “audile technique” by keeping her powers of attention in suspension, thus subverting the tendency to “*grasp the meaning* of one only.” The point here is not to claim a direct line of influence between “audile technique” and Stein’s work, but to suggest that the two contemporaneous discourses treat similar questions of listening and attention (though with opposing objectives), and that putting them in conversation might therefore produce new critical reverberations helpful for understanding both.

II. “The Motor Going Inside”

While audile technique cultivated attentive listening—and Stein’s automatic writing (I am arguing) instead courts the breakdown or short-cutting of the processes of audile attention—there is another aspect of the contemporaneous public engagement with the gramophone that perhaps aligns more closely with Stein’s interests in automatism.

For Friedrich Kittler, the “discourse network of 1900” is epitomized by the transition of data storage from handwriting to autographic media like the phonograph and cinema. Into this discourse network, “psychophysical experiments,” including those performed by Solomons and Stein, “were incorporated as so many random generators that produce discourses without sense or thought.”¹⁴ But even though the drive behind automatic writing, for Kittler, approaches the “thoughtlessness” of automatic media, its reliance upon handwriting leaves it at the periphery of the transition between discourse networks. Handwriting cannot accommodate the speed of modern information production, and hence “psychophysics had to join with the new media that revolutionized optics and acoustics circa 1900. These ... are Edison’s two great innovations: film and the gramophone.”¹⁵ And yet the speed of the gramophone is still, in its early stages, intimately linked to the speed of the human hand. The hand gramophone, as its name implies, was powered by manually turning a wheel. A user’s manual for the device published in 1894, only two years before Solomons and Stein published “Normal Motor Automatism,” describes a method for training the hand toward automatism:

Place the machine before you, as shown in the picture ..., resting the arm fully upon the table, and turn the hand-wheel with a *wrist* movement at the rate of about 150 times a minute. To acquire this regularity of motion, practice it a number of times with the level and sound-box lifted off from the turn-table. *Hold the handle loosely, so that that (sic) it slides readily through the fingers.*¹⁶

As with Solomons and Stein’s later experiments, hand gramophone operation required the mastery of simultaneous processes. After completing the recommended silent practice, one would need both to listen to whatever was playing on the gramophone

¹⁴ Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, 229.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “Owner’s manual for seven-inch American Hand Gramophone, dated 1894, EB, scrapbook 3.” Quoted in Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 268.

record and maintain the speed at which one turned the hand-wheel to power the reproduction. We can easily imagine how, as with Solomons and Stein's experiments in automatic reading, "absurd mistakes" might be produced by any crossover between the playing record and the speed at which it is turned. If one adopted the rhythm of the performance, rather than maintaining the standard 150 turns per minute, the fidelity of the reproduction would be compromised. Of course, even when "absurd mistakes" in tempo don't happen, achieving a perfect 150 turns per minute is impossible for the human hand. (This level of precision only becomes possible when using a mechanical "governor" to regulate the speed of reproduction.) The hand gramophone thus—during the period in which Stein was undertaking her first investigation into automatic writing—aspired toward the mechanical, exact reproduction of audio, yet could not help but leave room for the slightly different temporal "insistence" each user brought to powering the repetition.

The imperfectly standardized hand gramophone offers a popular example of cultivated motor automatism contemporaneous with Solomons and Stein's experiments and an alternative way of reading the mechanical metaphors Stein uses to account for composition. In "Portraits and Repetition," in addition to cinema, Stein also invokes the automobile to describe the way in which she attempts to convey individual "insistence" (rather than typological "repetition") by "being one who is at the same time talking and listening":

It is really that that makes one a genius. And it is necessary if you are to be really and truly alive it is necessary to be at once talking and listening, doing both things, not as if there were one thing, not as if they were two things, but doing them, well if you like, like the motor going inside and the car moving, they are part of the same thing. (*II* 290)

Unlike the subject of the “Automatic Reading” experiments—who, when faced with two audio streams of equal volume, consciously attends to one—the “genius” is able to hold her attention in suspension so as to avoid completely reducing “talking and listening” to “one thing” or completely separating them as “two things.” The automotive analogy allows Stein to cast both auditory production and reception in automatic terms without invoking the most prominent 1930s technological embodiment of automatic sound reproduction, the gramophone. As we will see, while the functionality of the early hand gramophone might well have suited Stein’s account of composition, the technology also carried cultural associations—with memorialization, repetition, and fidelity—that were in many ways directly antithetical to her project. Because of this set of associations, it is perhaps not surprising that the gramophone does not explicitly constitute one of her mechanical metaphors for the time of/in composition.

But one of the concerns she expresses through her automotive analogy strongly resonates with the challenges facing the user of the hand gramophone. This is, as suggested earlier, the potential difficulty of keeping the rhythm of the sounds reproduced from disrupting one’s timing in operating the machine. Stein writes, “As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going. And had I in these rather beautiful portraits I had been writing had I a little lost this thing” (*II* 305). Stein fears she has lost her sense of the movement of the “motor” by paying too much attention to the sonic productions of this movement: “I found that I was for a little while very much taken with the beauty of the sounds as they came from me as I made them” (*II* 306). The simultaneity of “talking and listening” is compromised as the

“beauty” of the talking causes a shift in Stein’s automatism. She elaborates slightly later on, “And this then began to bother me because perhaps I was getting drunk with melody and I do not like to be drunk I like to be sober and so I began again” (*II* 308). The sound (or the destination, in keeping with Stein’s automotive analogy) has taken over the process and begun to affect the temporality of the “motor.” Stein is not completely against melody in her work, only its predominance: “Melody should always be a by-product it should never be an end in itself ...” (*II* 309). The intoxication of “beautiful” melody structures Stein’s writing along aesthetic rather than automatic principles and, in so doing, compromises the integrity of her portraiture as she loses something of “the strictness of not letting remembering mix itself with looking and listening and talking” (*II* 306). Invoking traditional musical composition, melody suggests a standardized time signature and a limited set of notes. It is historical (allows for “remembering”) both in terms of internal structure—its movements repeat and develop in deference to what has come before—and the history of the art form—the work is categorized according to pre-existing musical genres. The system of musical notation connoted by “melody” cannot accommodate the range of “insistence” that Stein hopes to convey through her portraiture. In cultivating “automaticity,” she seeks instead what Barbara Will has termed “the ground-zero murmur of the psyche, the sound-hum of the human motor.”¹⁷ To approach the “motor going inside,” Stein works beyond or underneath traditional conceptions of melody (whether musical or metrical) by “remain[ing] sober,” as she phrases it.

¹⁷ Barbara Will, “Gertrude Stein, Automatic Writing and the Mechanics of Genius,” *Forum For Modern Language Studies* 37, no. 2 (2001): 170, doi: 10.1093/fmls/37.2.169.

If musical structure (melody) is inadequate to capturing the temporality of “talking and listening,” one must wonder whether writing is any better? After all, even when writing is not overtly “melodic” (not formally metrical), its sounds are nonetheless limited to what Kittler describes as “a system of 26 letters [that] categorically exclud[es] all noise sequences.”¹⁸ How, in other words, does Stein push past merely recording “types of people” to record “a whole human being,” as she puts it in “The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*,” when her medium is typed? The answer lies within her determination to communicate the varying temporal “insistence” of the individuals of whom she writes. Thus it is not imperative that these individuals use different words or that their particular pronunciations be transcribed through unique orthography. (Even when Stein practices dialect writing, as she does in “Melanctha,” her orthographic adaptations are rather slight.) So far, we have considered Stein’s ambition to write the temporal “insistence” of each subject from the perspective of her pseudo-phonographic experiments with Leon Solomons and the in/commensurability of her later compositional theories with discourses around audile technique and hand-gramophone operation. Having thereby examined something of Stein’s conceptual framework in relation to its contemporaneous sonic media context, we will now turn to the consideration of how she approaches the “continuous present” through auditory means at the level of the sentence.

Critics have repeatedly invoked film form to describe how Stein’s (anti)grammatical constructions produce the “continuous present,” and with good reason. Stein herself, as we observed earlier, declared that cinema had “offered a solution” to the challenge that “remembering” posed to her portraiture. Following this line of thinking,

¹⁸ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 3.

Sarah Posman notes, “Stein’s portraits, it is clear, are not snapshots. In tracing a rhythm, they highlight the fact that the making of a portrait takes time. Stein’s strategy to render this process in writing is to present it as a string of successive moments; a filmstrip, if you like.”¹⁹ The process takes precedence over the individual moment captured by the “snapshot.” And, like a filmstrip, each frame must move with a certain amount of speed in order to be perceived as a continuous motion rather than a collection of still frames. Stephens describes one of Stein’s well-noted (anti)grammatical strategies for encouraging such speed in the reception of her works: “by minimizing the role of commas . . . she in effect speeds up reading . . . What is at issue is not necessarily the actual speed of reading, but the ability to create ‘a continuous present’ in the mind of the reader.”²⁰ With the number of pauses thus reduced, Stein accelerates our understanding of her work, or perhaps defers “hermeneutical” understanding in favor of what Brian Reed has described as an emphasis instead on enjoying the “sensuous particulars” of the work.²¹ McCabe, reading Stein alongside Man Ray and Chaplin, describes another of her (anti)grammatical innovations: “By repeating articles and divesting a sentence of a subject . . . Stein enacts a comic rhythm that suspends resolution . . .”²² Stein’s automatic writing pushes against the temporal distinction between (slow) writing and (fast) modern media drawn by Kittler by imagining that writing could attain the frame rate of film. Speaking in terms of the directionality of the two media and not their narratives (which can be rerouted, circled back, and subverted in a multitude of ways), both the filmstrip and the sentence unfold in

¹⁹ Sarah Posman, “Time as a Simple/Multiple Melody in Henri Bergson’s Duration and Simultaneity and Gertrude Stein’s Landscape Writing,” *Mosaic* 45, no. 1 (Mar. 2012): 108, doi: 10.1353/mos.2012.0000.

²⁰ Stephens, “‘Reading at It,’” 145.

²¹ Brian Reed, “Now Not Now: Gertrude Stein Speaks,” *English Studies in Canada* 33, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 106.

²² McCabe, “Delight in Dislocation,” 443.

a linear fashion. The film projector plays from the outside to the center of the reel. The reader moves from the top left to the bottom right of the page. Acceleration causes the gap between film frames to become imperceptible, and a cinematographic account of Stein's work has her trying to similarly obscure the gap between words, to speed over what Justin St. Clair describes as "the diachronic nature of linguistic exposition," which leads us to take a text in one word or image at a time.²³

Though it has received less critical attention, Stein's auditory imagination offers another route into the "continuous present." Given the high level of synesthesia between hearing and seeing in her work, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the auditory replays the cinematographic analogy with a new insistence. Through the consideration of sound, Stein imagines that her writing can do something that not even film can do—achieve genuine simultaneity of input; not merely disguise, but eradicate the temporal gap between individual frames or words completely. To understand how this could be possible, we must investigate how Stein rethinks audition.

In "Henry James" (from 1933's *Four in America*), Stein redefines a number of key terms—"sound," "hear," "listen," "audience"—in unexpected ways. "What is a sound," Stein asks, and answers, "A sound is two things heard at one and the same time but not together. Let us take any two words. That is a sound heard by the eyes, that is a sound" (II 157). A sound is multiple data ("two things") encountered simultaneously ("at one and the same time") without being reduced to identity ("but not together"). The

²³ Justin St. Clair, *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature: Novel Listening* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 6. St. Clair views the "diachronic nature" of writing as a means by which the postmodern novel critiques the "heterophonia" of postmodern life: "[E]ach successive image of sound in a novel must necessarily be apprehended individually (unlike, for example, real life or a film soundtrack ...). The result, then, is that despite the overall cacophony, a reader's attention is focused on only one individual aural image at any given moment, a distinct advantage when it comes to aural critique." Stein, by contrast, imagines that readers could indeed "hear" multiple "sounds" at the same time.

ability to hear multiple things at once is not unusual. We do this on a daily basis, and it is because of the hyper-receptivity of the sense of hearing that audile technique becomes necessary for separating foreground sound and background noise when listening to early audio recordings. What is unique about Stein's account of "sound" is her choice to assign this same quality to writing. Stein suggests that the "sound" of writing does not merely speed over the gap between "two words," but that in it these words can be "heard" simultaneously. And it seems clear, from the way she redefines "hearing," that this simultaneity is not an echo effect caused by reading her writing aloud (where the word just uttered continues to resonate in our ears even as we begin to speak the next word). In fact, the possibility of reading writing aloud seems counterintuitive to "hearing" it in the sense Stein uses that verb.

"Hearing" is instead entangled with vision: "That is a sound heard by the eyes ...". What does it mean for a sound to be heard by eye, or to be seen by ear, as Stein suggests is possible elsewhere in the same work? Garrett Stewart has observed that even while we read "silently" we nonetheless (nearly) activate some of the same muscles and sensory channels employed while reading aloud.²⁴ But Stein's synesthetic account of the hearing-seeing complex doesn't seem to require even this subliminal level of stimulus translation from one sense organ to the receptors of another sense organ: "Think of your ears as eyes. You can even think of your eyes as ears but no so readily perhaps" (*II* 159). The ears don't trigger the visual cortex; they function *as* eyes. The eyes don't stimulate the ear canals; they function *as* ears. And this synesthesia is not, Stein contends, her invention, but instead a commonplace: "All natural people say ... I have seen it called, I

²⁴ "Silent reading locates itself ... in the conjoint cerebral activity and suppressed muscular action of a simultaneously summoned and silenced enunciation." Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phontext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

have heard it shown. They say these things and they are right. One sees much better than one hears sounds” (*II* 161).

So does the same text always produce the same sound? On the one hand, no. The example Stein offers to support her redefinition of “sound”—“Let us take any two words. That is a sound heard by the eyes, that is a sound”—makes it impossible to bracket specific words into two-piece units we might identify as discrete sounds. She follows a generality—“any two words”—with a definite article—“that”—that seems not to logically refer to anything. Put differently, which “two words” comprise the “sound” here? “That is” suggests a singular antecedent. “any two words,” if the phrase were considered one unit, could be the reference point for “That,” but then the example violates the definition by containing three words rather than “two.” We encounter a similar counting problem if we assume that “That” itself could be the “sound”: “*That* is a sound,” but if so, then a sound doesn’t have to be comprised of “two words.” Stein essentially omits the specific example but leaves the framework for introducing it, so that “any two words” from the text really could be “the sound.” “Which two?” remains an open question.

On the other hand, Stein suggests elsewhere in “Henry James” that the choice of particular word pairs really doesn’t matter when determining the “sound” of writing. Using Shakespeare as an example, Stein confronts us with another word and sound counting quandary:

Shakespeare wrote plays and in these plays there is prose and poetry and very likely every time one word that makes two words, is next to each other, it makes three sounds, each word makes a sound, that is two words make two sounds and the words next to each other make not only a sound but nearly a sound. (*II* 159)

One is tempted to revise this equation in the following way: “[E]very time ... two words [are] next to each other, [they] make[] three sounds, each word makes a sound, that is two words make two sounds and the words next to each other make ... a sound.” This math makes a certain amount of sense: each word of a pair contributes one sound by itself, and the combination of the two words creates a third. But Stein’s language resists this easy resolution by confusing tense and pronoun agreement in terms of number (e.g., “*is next to each other*”) and by introducing another category—“nearly a sound”—that throws the definition of “sound” into further confusion. What follows immediately after “nearly a sound” is structured as though to offer a conclusion, but really opens onto yet further uncertainty: “This makes it readily that any two words next each other written by any one man make the same sound although all the words and their meaning are different” (*II* 159).²⁵ It does not matter, this sentence suggests, which two words we examine, because any two adjacent words by the same writer produce “the same sound,” regardless of differences between the signifiers involved and their meanings. Stein imagines a “sound” beyond our conventional musical or metrical understandings of the term, one that remains self-consistent across words with otherwise very different sounds and senses. While this initially seems a contradiction, the phonographic nature of her

²⁵ The subsequent sentence offers one possible way of thinking about what “nearly a sound” might look like: “This makes it readily that any two words next each other written by any one man make the same sound although all the words and their meaning are different” (*II* 159). As so often happens in Stein’s writing, an expected word is omitted. In this case, we might expect Stein to write, “This makes it readily *apparent* that any two words ...,” or, “This makes it readily *evident* that ...” But instead she doesn’t include an adjective. And yet we still almost *see/hear* something between “readily” and “that.” What is the status of this absent yet almost perceptible word? Is it “nearly a sound”? My inspiration for thinking about sounds that are brought to mind by reading despite not being included in text comes from Jessica Teague, “‘Come on and Hear!’: John Dos Passos and the Gramophone” (paper presented at the annual Modern Language Association convention, Vancouver, BC, January 9, 2015). In her paper, Teague explains how Dos Passos’s *U.S.A. Trilogy* evokes an absent soundtrack by mentioning but not reproducing recorded songs with which 1930s readers would have been well familiar. Given our contemporary lack of familiarity with this soundtrack, Teague suggests that we have lost the ability to listen to the *U.S.A. Trilogy* as originally conceived.

thinking around this time—as already explored in this section’s earlier account of 1935’s “Portraits and Repetition”—suggests an answer. The “sound” that remains consistent regardless of word choice is that of “the motor going inside.” Like the rasp of the needle beneath the gramophone music, the “sound” of the author’s “motor” remains the same despite variations in the content produced (“where the car goes”).

But Stein immediately follows this contention with a qualification that further complicates her take on the “sound” of writing. Having just stated that “any two words next each other written by any one man make the same sound,” she continues, “That is they do if he feels alike” (*II* 159). This “feels” does not refer to the writer’s emotional state, but instead to whether the writing occurs automatically or attentively. Earlier in the piece, she raises the question of the writer’s identity and addresses it through an exploration of “audience” and “listening”:

Anything anybody writes is written.
Anything anybody reads has been written.
But if anything that anybody writes is written why is it that anybody
writing writes and if anybody writing writes, *in whom is the writing that is
written written.*
That is the question.
This brings me to the question of audience of an audience.
What is an audience.
Everybody listen.
That is not an audience because will everybody listen. Is it an audience
because will anybody listen.
When you are writing who hears what you are writing.
That is the question.
Do you know who hears or who is to hear what you are writing and
how does that affect you or does it affect you.
That is another question.
...
On the other hand if you who are writing know what you are writing,
does that change you or does it not change you.
That is that might be an important question. (*II* 151, emphases added)

Stein's "Henry James" opens by asking about "the difference between Shakespeare's plays and Shakespeare's sonnets" (II 149). And in this passage a few pages in, from which the epigraph to this chapter is taken, Stein multiplies the famous existential "question" voiced by Hamlet into a plurality of questions. Though plagued by his "To be or not to be," Hamlet is at least certain of its centrality: "That is the question." Here Stein undermines such certainty by playing upon this phrase in several variations. The identities of the writer ("in whom is the writing that is written written") and of the audience ("who hears what you are writing") are brought into question. These entities may be one and the same, but they may also each be comprised of a number of malleable possibilities. Fittingly, Stein's translation of Hamlet's speech is not a soliloquy but comes in a section labeled "DUET." Who performs this "duet"? Is it the multiple possible versions of the writer? We have already seen how, in Solomons and Stein's experiments in automatism, the subject could not only operate on multiple levels (the attentive and the automatic) but also how, when the subject's attention returned to her automatic activities, the arm or the voice came to "seem[] as though that of another person" (NMA 504). Or is the "duet" a performance undertaken between writer and "audience"?

Stein's query into "audience" in this passage evokes the term's etymological associations with hearing: "What is an audience. / Everybody listen."²⁶ So the "audience" is comprised of those who listen to what is written. Yet Stein immediately complicates this definition by pointing to the writer's lack of control over the audience: "That is not an audience because will everybody listen." And even if one were assured

²⁶ "audience" derives from "classical Latin *audientia* act of listening, attention, body of listeners." *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. "audience," accessed March 21, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/13022>.

that “everybody” would indeed obey the imperative to listen, to what would they be “listening”? In colloquial usage, “Everybody listen,” or the later “Listen to me” (*II* 165), demand the auditor’s attention to one’s meaning. The goals of this kind of listening align with those of audile technique. However, it seems at least equally likely that these commands are trying to encourage the kind of listening to the writer’s “motor going within” that Stein later aspires to by “at once talking and listening.” Or perhaps these moments in the imperative tense are meant to encourage readers to listen to their own internal processes. “Now listen a minute,” Stein writes in 1936’s *The Geographical History of America* (*II* 411). Is this another colloquial usage calling for attention to meaning, or might Stein actually want us to listen for a prescribed amount of time? If we paused in the middle of reading, might we “hear” our own reading bodies and minds at work, in a kind of literary precursor to John Cage’s experience when he entered Harvard’s anechoic chamber in 1951 only to discover the sounds of his own nervous system and circulating blood?

The writer and reader participate in a “listening” that inspires Stein to engage in the same kind of flexible mathematics she undertook when defining “a sound”:

Also what the relation of a writer is to his audience, oh yes an audience that is suddenly clear, whether one and one and one makes one or three and just as often one and two, all this all this is clear.

But most of all oh most of all just why two words next to each other make a different sound one way than they do the other way and why oh yes and why. (*II* 164)

The various iterations of the writer as/and audience are allowed for by Stein’s open counting system, wherein all possibilities—from the writer himself containing multiple persons to the harmony or disharmony between writer and external reader(s)—remain viable alternatives. And the range of imaginable configurations of this relation account

for another difficulty Stein articulates: “why two words next to each other make a different sound one way than they do the other way.” When the circuit of writing contains only the writer, and the writer “feels alike,” then “any two words next each other written by any one man make the same sound.” However, when the writer is divided within himself, or when the audience consists of external listeners not attuned to the writer’s “motor,” even the same adjacent words “sound” differently. To return to the earlier example of the hand gramophone, we might think of these different soundings of the same words as equivalent to the effect of playing a recording back at a different speed from that at which it was made.

Stein describes the existence of multiple “listenings” (and hence differentiated “sounds”) as a problem of temporality. It is very hard for the writer to remain in the “continuous present” once a composition has been written, and even more difficult for the non-writer reader to enter the “continuous present” of a printed work. In “Composition as Explanation,” Stein describes how, while she was writing *Three Lives* (especially “Melanctha”), “there was a groping for a continuous present,” but that she encountered a problem upon rereading what she had written: “Having naturally done this I naturally was a little troubled with it when I read it. I became then like the others who read it. One does, you know, excepting that when I reread it myself I lost myself in it again” (I 525). Separated from “the time of the composition,” she loses something of her grasp on “the time in the composition” and becomes as off-tempo in her encounter with the work as any other potential audience member (I 522). She overcomes this separation by “los[ing] myself in it again.” She must empty out her identity, her “self,” again before she can encounter the work as she did while creating it. But the problem she has discovered

continues to vex her. Later in the same essay, she writes, “The quality in the creation of expression the quality in a composition that makes it go dead just after it has been made is very troublesome” (*I* 528-29). And this remains a pressing issue a decade later in the 1936 lecture, “What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them,” where she explains the problem with renewed insistence: “I once said that nothing could bother me more than the way a thing goes dead once it has been said. And if it does it it is because of there being this trouble about time” (*II* 361). While Stein’s reiteration of this problem at first seems ironic—she reintroduces the problem of how things “go dead” immediately after their genesis in the form of a quotation (“I once said”)—the change in emphasis from *making* (“after it has been made”) to *saying* (“once it has been said”) reflects the auditory inflection of the work she has done on this problem in the interim between the two lectures.

We have examined a number of ways that Stein’s compositional theories and methods might be considered gramophonic: from the phonographic implications of her 1890s experiments in automatic writing and reading with Leon Solomons, to the contemporaneous discourse in automatism surrounding the operation of the hand gramophone, to the way her redefinition of “a sound” allows her to imagine that writing might achieve not just advanced speed but the “continuous present” necessary to record “the motor going inside.” Her writing, we suggested earlier, offers a very different approach to the gramophone than that cultivated by the contemporaneous cultural discourses that produce what Sterne labels “audile technique.” Yet, as conducive as Stein’s experiments and writings are to a gramophonic reading in the automatic sense pursued thus far, the gramophone’s more popular cultural associations—with attentive

listening, identity, and memory—run directly counter to Stein’s objectives. In the next section, we examine how Stein addresses this prioritization of the static past by engaging with the twentieth-century’s best-known symbol of auditory fidelity in “What Are Master-Pieces.”

III. Her “Master-Piece” Voice

From its inception, automatic sound recording was culturally figured as enabling more comprehensive remembering. Thomas Edison, reflecting on the improved device in 1888, explained, “[The phonograph] will retain a perfect mechanical memory of many things which we may forget, even though we have said them.”²⁷ But the phonograph, according to Edison, would not only remind us of our forgotten utterances, it would also serve as the key medium through which individuals would be remembered by the future. Among the uses Edison enumerates for the phonograph in his 1878 introduction to the device (a use which he reiterates in 1888) is the production of the “*Family Record*”: “For the purpose of preserving the sayings, the voices, and *the last words* of the dying member of the family—as of great men—the phonograph will unquestionably outrank the photograph.”²⁸ The *phonograph*, like the *photograph* before it, promised to democratize the historical record by preserving a trace of anyone, whether or not he qualified as one of the “great men.” Early sound recording was thus deeply entangled with memory, especially the memory of the dead.

This discourse of memory and memorialization extends to The Victor Talking Machine Company’s famous trademark image: that of the terrier Nipper sitting

²⁷ Edison, “The Perfected Phonograph,” 649-50.

²⁸ Edison, “The Phonograph and Its Future,” 534.

attentively before a gramophone that plays, the title informs us, “His Master’s Voice.”²⁹ Painter Francis Barraud, who received Nipper after his brother’s death in 1887, created the image: “Occasionally, Francis would recall his brother by playing the records of his dead brother’s voice. At these times, he noticed how Nipper, perplexed, would cock its head and look around the room at the sound. He thought it would make a good subject ...”³⁰ This image, Patrick Feaster contends, “is emblematic of ‘fidelity’ on multiple levels.”³¹ Among the levels Feaster identifies are “audio fidelity” (the voice is accurately reproduced and thus recognizable), “performative fidelity” (the voice recording has “the same effect” on Nipper as “the original”), and “social fidelity” (the recording maintains prior expectations for social relations).³² Given the circumstances of the origin story, “His Master’s Voice” also symbolizes faith to the (dead) past. (An apocryphal version of the story maintains that the shiny wooden surface upon which both gramophone and Nipper sit is in fact the highly polished, closed lid of a coffin.)³³ It is our responsibility, “His Master’s Voice” suggests, to listen loyally (i.e., attentively) to this past. Feaster observes, “If Nipper is obeying his master’s voice, then he is doing so simply by sitting at attention, modeling the attentive listening behavior that the playback of recorded musical performances was generally expected to elicit from human listeners.”³⁴

²⁹ Describing “His Master’s Voice” as “[i]nstantly recognizable in its heyday,” Irv Lichtman reports that “more than 1,000 images of this trademark—often fondly referred to simply as ‘Nipper’—have appeared over the years on countless items, including shirts, glassware, trays, belt buckles, salt and pepper shakers, jackets, ceramic dogs, papier-mâché, and jewelry.” “Nipper: The Long-Lived Trademark.” *Billboard* 112, no. 19, May 6, 2000.

³⁰ Jeff Nilsson, “His Master’s Voice—The Backstory,” *Saturday Evening Post*, May/June 2014: 98.

³¹ Patrick Feaster, “‘Rise and Obey the Command’: Performative Fidelity and the Exercise of Phonographic Power.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 365.

³² *Ibid.*, 366.

³³ “Whether a record of the dead, or of the merely absent,” observes Mark Goble, “the voice of the phonograph speaks from a position of great loss.” *Beautiful Circuits*, 134.

³⁴ Feaster, “Rise and Obey,” 366.

There is a refrain that appears in a number of Stein's writings from the 1930s (for example, in *Four in America*, *The Geographical History of America*, and *Everybody's Autobiography*): "I am I because my little dog knows me." In a reading that places *Everybody's Autobiography* in conversation with the film *Grand Hotel*, Mark Goble invokes "His Master's Voice" to supplement his discussion of how media (telephones) and dogs in both works compensate for desires that cannot be directly articulated by opening new, indirect channels through which to express one's identity:

"I am because my little dog knows me" neither announces out loud nor secretes (sic) away the truth of Stein's sexual identity, but rather communicates that identity in much the same way that the telephone communicates her social identity as a celebrity or her economic identity as a best-selling author: with a great deal of interference.³⁵

My reading of Stein in the context of "His Master's Voice" is indebted to Goble for first bringing the literature and the trademark together (even if he does so indirectly through *Grand Hotel*). However, I understand this crossover differently. Goble elaborates on the work Stein's refrain does: "'I am because my little dog knows me' implies nothing so much as a zone of privacy within the language of identity, a way of showing who you are without saying what you are."³⁶ The dog emblem speaks to Stein and Toklas's relationship by not naming it: "Stein and Toklas's 'life with dogs' is a sly suggestion of the domestic itself, a way of acknowledging 'community property' and putting on display an erotic relationship that was otherwise unrepresentable."³⁷ While I agree that Stein is invested in resisting typological thinking ("what you are") in favor of individual insistence ("who you are"), I don't see the gramophonic resonances of her "little dog" refrain as facilitating this kind of resistance. Goble, as is demonstrated in the first two

³⁵ Goble, *Beautiful Circuits*, 139-40.

³⁶ Ibid, 144.

³⁷ Ibid, 136.

quotations above, repeatedly omits the second “I” from the refrain. It may be a small omission, but it proves a not insignificant one. “I am” suggests that one is about to explain his or her identity, and in this context “I am because my little dog knows me” could be seen as resisting a more reductive social or sexual categorization (like “I am a lesbian”). “I am I,” on the other hand, is more tautological in structure. In this version, the “little dog know[ing] me” may be the means through which a reductive identity (“I am I”) is imposed rather than resisted.

In “What Are Master-pieces,” Stein links the “little dog” refrain to the problems caused for composition by memory and time. “Remembering,” we recall from our earlier examination of 1935’s “Portraits and Repetition,” produces “repetition” rather than the “insistence” that Stein seeks to channel in her writing. And this remains true for the 1936 lecture on “master-pieces”: “At any moment when you are you you are you without the memory of yourself because if you remember yourself while you are you you are not for purposes of creating you” (*II* 356). This “you are you,” although echoing the structure of “I am I,” in the context of “What Are Master-pieces” does not appear to carry the same potential tautological resonance as the latter formulation. The time “when you are you” is designated as provisional; “[a]t any moment” implies that you may easily be “not ... you” at other times. And the deciding factor that differentiates between “you” and “not ... you” is “if you remember yourself.” If you do, “you are not for purposes of creating you.” This part of the line can be interpreted in a couple of ways. Is there an interposition? “you are not[,]*for purposes of creating*[,] you”; you cease to be yourself in the way required for undertaking “insistent” composition. Or is there an omission?

“you are not [*prepared/equipped*] for purposes of creating you”; you lose the ability to continuously create yourself; your identity stagnates. These readings are complementary.

“Memory” is the answer to the second half of the unpunctuated question that comprises Stein’s title, and further on in the lecture she, like the advertisements for Victor Talking Machines, connects “remembering” with the “little dog”:

And so then why are there so few of them. There are so few of them because mostly people live in identity and memory that is when they think. They know they are they because their little dog knows them, and so they are not an entity but an identity. And being so memory is necessary to make them exist and so they cannot create master-pieces. (*II* 359-60)

Because the “little dog knows [people],” they are “an identity” rather than “an entity.”

An “entity,” in its predominant, concrete sense, is “Something that has a real existence; an ens n., as distinguished from a mere function, attribute, relation, etc.”³⁸ Being “an identity,” in Stein’s juxtaposition, means then being only a partial (as opposed to a “whole”) person and hence being dependent on something or somebody else for securing one’s existence: “memory is necessary to make them exist.” Put differently, “an identity” requires a certain degree of memorability, of fame, in order to be maintained.

I agree with Goble’s contention that the little dog “sentence and its many variations address ... problems of fame, publicity, and a new economy of writing” that confronted Stein after *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* became a bestseller and made her a celebrity. But I differ insofar as I see the “little dog” as representative of these problems rather than of their solution.³⁹ This refrain, read in the context of “His Master’s Voice,” does not run interference for Stein and thereby aid her project of

³⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “entity,” accessed March 23, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/62904>.

³⁹ Goble, *Beautiful Circuits*, 135.

complicating identity by making portraits in the “continuous present”; it instead powerfully indexes the widespread cultural investment in showing fealty to the past. Furthermore, the gramophonic “past”—unlike that suggested by Edison’s democratically inclusive phonographic “*Family Record*”—only contains celebrities. The Victor machines did not allow users to make their own records. As William Howland Kenney explains, “The phonograph companies reserved the recording function of the phonograph to themselves, thus exercising control over their consumers.”⁴⁰ This fact creates what Kenney describes as a “revealing inconsistenc[y]” in the “His Master’s Voice” logo: “[T]he dog could only have been listening to his master’s voice if his master were a ‘recording star.’”⁴¹

By 1936, following the success of *The Autobiography* (1933) and of her subsequent American lecture tour (1934-35), Gertrude Stein was becoming a star. And she expressed her anxiety about the effect that her celebrity status might have on her writing by alluding to one of her contemporary culture’s most prevalent images of “audience”:

There is another thing to say. When you are writing before there is an audience anything written is as important as any other thing and you cherish anything and everything that you have written. After the audience begins, naturally they create something that is they create you, and so not everything is so important, something is more important than another thing, which was not true when you were you that is when you were not you as your little dog knows you. (*II* 363)

⁴⁰ William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2003), 54.

⁴¹ Ibid. This inconsistency exists because the original version of Barraud’s painting featured Nipper listening to an Edison cylinder phonograph, which *could* be used to make personal records. When Barraud sold the painting to The Gramophone Company (and its American partner, The Victor Talking Machine Company), he painted the now famous version that instead features the gramophone. Kenney also notes a more minor “inconsistency” with the “His Master’s Voice” image: “[T]he painting shows the turntable braking mechanism in the On position.” Mechanically speaking, therefore, Nipper is technically painted as listening to nothing.

The question of “audience,” as we saw in Stein’s exploration of that term in “Henry James,” is entangled with listening: “What is an audience. Everybody listen.” In the case of a lecture, like “What Are Master-pieces,” Stein’s audience literally listens to her, in the conventional sense of listening. (Although, by attending too closely to what she says, the audience may well fail to really “listen” to her in the way that Stein’s “Henry James” redefines listening.) Stein is concerned about the feedback effect that writing for an audience has on her work. As a successful writer, she finds it more difficult to access “the motor going inside”; she has no longer only herself to “lose” while writing (as she puts it in “Composition as Explanation”) but also the persona created by her celebrity: “After the audience begins, naturally they create something that is they create you ...” By the 1930s, a similar feedback effect had already occurred in the world of audio recording, where both producers and audiences came to expect performances that would sound “like the recording.”⁴² Stein’s description of what changes in her writing as a result of this feedback recalls her meditation on “sound” in “Henry James.” There “any two words next each other written by any one man make the same sound” provided that “he feels alike.” Here “before there is an audience anything written is as important as any other thing and you cherish anything and everything that you have written.” But once the “audience” is involved “not everything is so important, something is more important than another thing.”⁴³ We might gloss this “something” in a number of ways: the signature piece, the hit, the trademark. In a paradox of celebrity, the more

⁴² Sterne discusses an example of this feedback: “The Edison Company provided exacting standards for the performers, and, although it is quite unlikely that these standards were met in every case, they did tend to result in the company employing performers who were able to ‘play like the recording.’” *The Audible Past*, 262.

⁴³ Stein’s description of the effect fame has on her writing reenacts, at the level of the sentence, the basic logic of celebrity itself: “something is more important than another thing.”

recognizable Stein becomes, the less well she is known. And the “little dog” emblemizes the slide from unknown, autonomous/automatic “entity” into famous, dependent “identity”: “when you were you that is when you were *not* you as your little dog knows you.”

IV. Automatic (Racial) Machinery

At the start of this chapter, we examined how Stein, by redefining “repetition” in 1935’s “Portraits and Repetition,” describes a way of writing about individuals without reductively classifying them according to type:

Remembering is repetition anybody can know that. In doing a portrait of any one, the repetition consists in knowing that that one is a kind of a one, that the things he does have been done by others like him that the things he says have been said by others like him, but, and this is the important thing, there is no repetition in hearing and saying the things he hears and says when he is hearing and saying them. (*II* 295)

We then followed the gramophonic and anti-gramophonic resonances of Stein’s work toward the “continuous present” across a number of her writings and their contemporary sonic media contexts.

If we return now to this set of issues, it is with a different text and in pursuit of a different “insistence.” Stein, as noted, identifies “Melanctha” as the place where she initially encountered the possibility of an alternative time of/in composition. In 1926’s “Composition as Explanation,” she recalls,

In beginning writing I wrote a book called *THREE LIVES* this was written in 1905. I wrote a negro story called *Melanctha*. In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present. (*I* 524)

Does this initial stage in Stein's thinking about the temporality of writing ("a marked direction in the direction of being in the present") also provide the first example of how her work undermines typological thinking? Does she, in other words, portray the characters in "Melanctha" as "whole human being[s]" rather than racial "[t]ypes of people" (to recall the language Stein uses in "The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*")? Or does the racial identification of this work—the label of "a negro story," the use of dialect—instead suggest that Stein's recalibration of her medium, despite her attempt to think beyond typology, depends upon upholding stereotypical assumptions about blackness and automatism?

"Melanctha" tells the story of title character Melanctha Herbert's life: her troubled upbringing, her several strained relationships (both heterosexual and homosocial), her unfavorable social reputation, and her death from consumption. Despite Stein's identification of "Melanctha" as the starting point for her innovations in the temporality of composition, there is much in the work that contradicts the anti-typological ambitions of the "continuous present." The portrayal of individuality in "Melanctha" depends on a logic of exceptionalism that allows only certain characters to be read somewhat against the grain of their (racial) types. For example, Stein articulates the strangeness of Melanctha's interactions with Rose Johnson in terms of the former's deviation from racial norms:

But why did the subtle, intelligent, attractive, half white girl Melanctha Herbert, with her sweetness and her power and her wisdom, demean herself to do for and to flatter and to be scolded, by this lazy, stupid, ordinary, selfish black girl. This was a queer thing in Melanctha Herbert. (I 211)

While Melanctha's actions may defy expectations, the cause of her "queerness" (and of the narrator's palpable disdain for the situation she puts herself in) is still grounded in a color-coded value system ("half white" trumps "black"). In the 1920s and 1930s, Stein's exploration of the "continuous present" suggests that, at least in theory, individuality could be recorded beneath/beyond any typological identity. Unfortunately, this possibility remains largely unrealized in Stein's work where race is concerned. In "Melanctha" there is a limit to which "[t]ypes of people" can be written as "whole human being[s]." And this limit is still in effect in some of Stein's final works.⁴⁴

Melanctha the character represents a more inclusive version of Stein's later thinking about typology and the "continuous present" than "Melanctha" does as a story. She refuses to quickly judge others on the basis of presuppositions, and she protests Jeff Campbell's proclivity for judging people in that fashion: "[Y]ou never can see anything that ain't just so simple, Jeff, with everybody, the way you always think it" (I 187). Dr. Campbell, whose love affair with Melanctha occupies the majority of the story, is obsessed with diagnosing and verbally defining Melanctha's nature, and she comments on this aspect of his personality: "I certainly never did see no man like you, Jeff. You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling. I certainly don't see a reason, why I should always be explaining to you what I mean by what I am just saying" (I 190). Jeff wants to clearly (simply) label Melanctha's

⁴⁴ Reading Stein's *Brewsie and Willie* (1946) alongside mid-century American radio, Sarah Wilson notes that both the novella and its contemporary radio culture exclude African Americans from real participation in the national conversation: "*Brewsie and Willie*'s resistance to the *formal* integration of actual black voices (as opposed to white 'racial ventriloquism' in the style of *Amos 'n' Andy* or white paternalism in the style of earnest white liberals on many of the discussion shows) follows that of mid-century radio" (272). In a recuperative move that seems overly generous to Stein, Wilson suggests that the novella's exclusion of African American voices from its communal conversation is a form of critique rather than simply the result of a deaf ear. She writes, "Stein seems quite aware of this formal failure of the radio. *Brewsie and Willie* attempts to critique this limitation by enacting it" (273). Sarah Wilson, "Gertrude Stein and the Radio," *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (Apr. 2004), doi: 10.1353/mod.2004.0048.

feelings. As Michael North explains, “Jeff demands words that justly represent habitual feelings, words that commit the speaker. For Melanctha, however, words are something that she is ‘just saying.’”⁴⁵ While Jeff seeks to interpret stable, essential truths about Melanctha from her words, Melanctha counters that her speech is less representative and more situational.

The difference between Jeff and Melanctha’s use of words is complemented by their competing modes of “remembering.” As described by Melanctha, Jeff’s “remembering” means what we conventionally understand by remembering—looking backward across a gap in time toward past events:

“It certainly is all easy for you Jeff Campbell to be talking. You remember right, because you don’t remember nothing till you get home with your thinking everything all over, but I certainly don’t think much ever of that kind of way of remembering right, Jeff Campbell. . . . [A]nd then you go home Jeff Campbell, and you begin with your thinking, and then it certainly is very easy for you to be good and forgiving with it.” (*I* 197)

Jeff only processes their conversations retrospectively, when he interprets and translates what has been said in preparation for his next carefully planned response to Melanctha. Melanctha, however, explains how she “remembers” in a sense completely contrary to what we usually mean by that word. She says, “‘No, Jeff Campbell, its real feeling every moment when its needed, that certainly does seem to me like real remembering. And that way, certainly, you don’t never know nothing like what should be right Jeff Campbell’” (*I* 197-98). What Melanctha paradoxically calls “real remembering” is a life lived in continuous responsiveness to the present. This second, anti-historical mode of “remembering” is the closest the story gets to describing Stein’s later explanation of the “continuous present.”

⁴⁵ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 74.

The thematic anticipation of the “continuous present” in “Melanctha” is of secondary importance, however, compared to the formal discovery Stein makes in writing this “negro story.” Of the story’s two registers—the narrative and the dialogic—it is the dialogue, written in racial dialect, that formally anticipates Stein’s later (anti)grammatical innovations. In “Normal Motor Automatism,” Solomons and Stein observe that one kind of text proved particularly unsuitable for their experiments in “Automatic Reading”: “The words read must be familiar for the automatism to work well. Dialect stories do not go well at all” (NMA 504). But this would not prove the case for Stein’s later work in the “continuous present,” which formally seems to grow out of her dialect writing. Although she drops the few orthographical dialect indicators she employed (the superfluous *s*’s, the “ain’t”s, etc.), she continues to experiment with the disagreements in verb tense and pronoun number, the jumbled syntax, the compound verb phrases, and the limited vocabulary that first appeared in the dialect passages of “Melanctha.” In North’s account of “Melanctha,” he argues that Stein (and Picasso) “don[] the African mask to make a break with their own cultural past. The affectation of racial difference represents the radical difference Stein and Picasso felt between themselves and those to whom they had been born.”⁴⁶ Our analysis of “Melanctha” and the “continuous present” suggests that we might replay this claim with a different “insistence.” Stein’s dialect writing suggests to her a method of not only “break[ing] with [her] own cultural past,” but also breaking *the* past.

Ironically, stereotyped racial speech provides the thematic and formal inspiration for Stein to cultivate an automatic writing style that hopes to record “whole human being[s]” rather than “[t]ypes of people.” While blackness largely disappears from the

⁴⁶ Ibid, 66.

thematic surface of Stein's later texts, the stereotypical assumptions formally embedded in dialect writing persist as the engendering tempo beneath her compositions in the "continuous present," as the rasp of the automatic (racial) machinery that makes it all possible. And it is in this regard that one final comparison between Stein's writing and the gramophone becomes apropos. As I discussed at length in chapter one, stereotypical cultural associations between blackness and automatism powerfully influenced the discourse around sound recording and reproduction. In 1878, Edison described the phonograph's abilities using the rhetoric of "fugitivity" and "captivity" familiar from America's then recent slaveholding past. Thus, even as he imagined that the phonograph would democratically preserve anybody's voice as part of a "*Family Record*," he described the mechanical functions that produced this record in terms reminiscent of the largest erasure of individual voices and families in American history. And the association between blackness and automatic sound reproduction, if we recall "Blind Tom" (the man later memorialized as "The Human Phonograph"), predated the invention of the phonograph by at least two decades. "Blind Tom," who reportedly could replay any song by ear and was a skilled vocal imitator, was repeatedly described as the instrument, rather than the owner, of a remarkable gift. As Goble, who also writes about these stereotypes, eloquently puts it, "Race is what happens when you become the medium of someone else's instrumentality."⁴⁷ With this in mind, we might read the legend of The Victor Talking Machine's famous trademark image differently. What if the "His" in "His Master's Voice" refers not to the dog but to the gramophone? Stein's "master-pieces," as examined throughout this chapter, both resist and repeat such "mastery."

⁴⁷ Goble, *Beautiful Circuits*, 172.

CHAPTER 4

“LOWER FREQUENCIES”: AMERICAN CULTURE AND RALPH ELLISON’S RADIO

He saw the singers still staring, and as though to betray him he heard his own voice singing out like a suddenly amplified radio:

“[...] *Gave proof through the night
That our flag was still there [...]*”

It was like the voice of another, over whom he had no control. His eye throbbed. A wave of guilt shook him, followed by a burst of relief. For the first time in your whole life, he thought with dreamlike wonder, the words are not ironic. He stood in confusion as the song ended ...

—Ralph Ellison¹

This chapter examines the unexplored conceptual role played by radio technology and discourse in Ellison’s social and aesthetic understanding of the American subject. 1920s radio science altered our understanding of human perception by redefining human sensory capabilities in relation to a much larger frequency spectrum. The radio magazines that facilitated Ellison’s first experiments with “building crystal sets and circuits consisting of a few tubes” would have introduced him to the notion that human vision and audition occupy a comparatively miniscule frequency range in an otherwise

¹ Ralph Ellison, “In a Strange Country,” in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 146. This story, first published in the July 1944 issue of *Tomorrow*, offers an early instance of Ellison’s use of radio to conceptualize a kind of sonic (dis)possession that repeatedly factors into *Invisible Man* and his essays on American culture.

largely invisible/inaudible electromagnetic world.² These magazines also reported the existence of variances in sensory attunement between different individuals and the possibility of receiving (without perceiving) frequencies above or below the capabilities of the sense organs. Ellison appropriates this radio discourse about realities beyond and differences within the human sensorium, adapting it to analogize racism as a form of limited (and limiting) social perception.³ The possibility that we might receive frequencies without perceiving them and the reality of sonic transmission over invisible and inaudible (wireless) waves enable Ellison to conceive of a permeable American radio subject. This is a subject who may be technologically proficient but who is nonetheless *subjected to* receiving and amplifying frequencies of various (sometimes indeterminable) social and cultural origins. Such a subject exists, politically, at an ambivalent juncture. On the one hand, he may be appropriated as a speaker through which other parties attempt to broadcast their message. On the other, the very permeability of this subject ensures that no single broadcast station can predominate. Building on this idea of the permeable subject, Ellison imagines how “American” culture transmits across social boundaries and hierarchies. Such radio culture carries both promise and peril, and this is reflected in Ellison’s analogical recourse to the medium’s “lower frequencies” for a “sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy.”⁴ Ellison

² Ellison, “That Same Pleasure, That Same Pain: An Interview,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 4.

³ Ellison’s use of this discourse, however, does not mean that he naturalizes racism as a kind of inherent, biological difference in sensory attunement between races. His radio-inspired model of cultural perception amplifies a tension between understanding the narrowness of white perception (racism) as a choice and understanding it as the effect of a system implemented by whites but now operating beyond their conscious control. The problems and possibilities Ellison explores through this tension are discussed at greater length in section one.

⁴ Ellison, “Introduction,” in *Shadow and Act*, xiii. Reflecting on the seeming paradox of several young African American kids (himself included) aspiring to the ideal of the Renaissance Man, Ellison states that “there is no true sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy.” I am suggesting

describes the genesis of and imagines the reception of his *Invisible Man* in terms of radio transmission on such “lower frequencies,” and the novel is shaped by and participates in a form of cultural communication in excess of conventional understandings of American subjectivity.

I. Radio Perception

1920s American radio magazines geared toward amateur technicians described a complex world at once unified and radically divided. This world was unified insofar as it was saturated with energy waves radiating from, through, and between all manner of people, spaces, and objects. “[The] heat wave,” wrote Laurence Cockaday, “is of exactly the same nature as the sound wave except that it has a different frequency and produces different results.”⁵ Or, as E.E. Free explained, “All of these rays and waves, light and wireless and others, are waves in the ether, waves of the kind called electromagnetic.” He elaborated, “All are of the same race and nature, alike just as the pond wavelet and the great ocean roller are alike. And they differ only as these two differ—in size.”⁶ The two measures by which these authors account for difference—wave frequency and size—are inversely related: shorter wavelengths have higher frequencies; longer wavelengths have

that radio constitutes an anti-sociology for Ellison. Unlike conventional sociology, the radio analogy is true to “the dispersion of ideas” because it maintains that this dispersion is essentially borderless (and hence eludes sociological narratives).

⁵ Laurence M. Cockaday, “How Radio Waves are Sent and Received,” *Popular Radio* 1.1 (May 1922): 48, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1922-05.pdf>. I am not asserting the scientific accuracy of this material. Much of the content of these magazines (especially the articles devoted to the question of whether the earth might be receiving radio signals from Mars or whether we could tune in the spirit world) now reads like science fiction, and even many of their more mundane theories have been superseded in the roughly ninety years between initial publication and the time of this writing. This does not, however, diminish the potential significance of this material’s influence on Ellison’s developing worldview. All of the 1920s radio articles referenced in this chapter were first accessed in April and May of 2014 through an expansive digital archive maintained by David Gleason.

⁶ E.E. Free, “Wireless That We Can See,” *Popular Radio* 1.2 (June 1922): 84, 85, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1922-06.pdf>.

lower frequencies. Under this paradigm, shorter and longer, higher and lower describe a wave's relative position on an entire wavelength/frequency spectrum. Sound waves, for example, occupy a lower frequency range than heat waves; light operates at higher frequencies than both sound and heat; meanwhile X-rays occupy a yet higher frequency range than light does.⁷

Such accounts provided a broader scientific worldview at the expense of the authority of the human view. Human sensory capabilities like sight and hearing were defined in terms of the frequency ranges they could receive, and these ranges comprised a rather small part of the overall frequency spectrum. As Free explained, "The fact that vision or visible light depends on a bodily organ—the eye—is evident, also in the limited number of wavelengths which constitute this visible light; that is, it is limited in comparison with the many wavelengths of heat waves or of wireless waves."⁸ While the discussion of different frequencies of electromagnetic waves seemed to provide an objective, quantifiable account of the world, it also helped destabilize the centrality of human perception to this world. The vast majority of waves could not be detected by (unaided) human sense organs. Without requiring supernatural explanations (though at times not shying away from such speculations), popular radio science described a real world whose energies were mostly invisible and inaudible. Moreover, this discourse also revealed that variances could exist even within the narrow ranges commonly perceptible to human beings: "The limits of wavelength that mark off the different colors, as determined for the average human eye, are as follows ... Of course these figures are only approximate. Eyes differ much in ability to see different colors even when people are not

⁷ Cockaday, "How Radio Waves," 48.

⁸ Free, "Wireless That We Can See," 90.

consciously color-blind.”⁹ While human beings were excluded en masse from sensing the majority of the electromagnetic spectrum, some people might perceive an even more restricted frequency range without realizing it.

Ellison’s explanation of invisibility both corresponds to and diverges from this understanding of human sensory (mis)perception. The notion of a frequency *range* of human vision and hearing means one does not need to be devoid of vision to be blind to certain frequencies, or completely lacking audition to be deaf to them. If such deviations from the “full” range of sensory perception do not consciously register, then inferior sensory perception might simply seem “normal.” One could look at something (or someone) with the greatest apparent scrutiny and still not really see it. In the case of (mis)perceiving race from the perspective of racist power, as Fred Moten reminds us, “invisibility ... has hypervisibility at its heart.”¹⁰

On the first page of the prologue to *Invisible Man*, the narrator explains his invisibility in terms recalling the physics explored by the 1920s radio magazines Ellison cut his technological teeth on:

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.¹¹

Invisibility is not an innate quality but an effect of limited perception.¹² Ellison takes the idea of differential perception—determined by the limitations of the sense organs—and

⁹ Ibid, 89-90.

¹⁰ Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 84.

¹¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1952), 3. Further references to this source will be cited parenthetically by page number(s) only.

¹² Ellison’s description also makes it clear that race is a relation rather than an innate essence. In Johnnie Wilcox’s terms, “blackness is a network effect.” “Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Callaloo* 30.4 (Fall 2007): 1003, doi: 10.1353/cal.2008.0047. Or, as Alexander

disembodies it. “Physical eyes” prove to be only the (secondary) medium of vision.

Imagining a form of vision dependent on organs that are themselves wholly invisible (and incorporeal?)—“*inner eyes*”—Ellison shifts the mechanics of perception from the realm of physics and biology to the realm of the subject’s interior. This distinction between a physical and an inner sensorium works against the idea that racism is somehow a natural fact of biology. It is, instead, a kind of internal (in)capacity. A few lines earlier, the narrator asserts, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (3).

The focus on the inner sensorium would seem to support this claim: the protagonist’s invisibility is a result of others’ ability to refuse to see him, not their physical incapacity to see him. Yet while Ellison’s notion of “*inner eyes*” delegitimizes the notion of innate biological differences in racial perception, it also troubles the assumption of *inner* agency that such a refusal presumes. While these eyes may not be corporeal, they in a sense still determine (rather than are determined by) the perspective of their possessor. Their “construction” occupies the ambivalent zone between inherent fixity and artificiality.¹³

Who or what constructs the inner eyes that “refuse to see” the protagonist?

While the study of electromagnetic waves helped demonstrate the (sometimes variable) limitations of human perception, it also facilitated a discussion of frequencies that the human body might receive above or below the threshold of sensory recognition and what the effects of such unsensed reception might be. In an article titled “Do Radio

Weheliye argues, “By way of explicating how he is refused representation in the field of vision, the protagonist ... insists on the intersubjective workings of his invisibility, rather than construing it as an ontological absolute.” *Phonographies*, 49.

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s second definition for “construction, n.” reflects this ambivalence: “The manner in which a thing is artificially constructed or naturally formed; structure, conformation, disposition.” Note that Ellison also uses the latter term when describing the (equally ambivalent) “peculiar *disposition* of the eyes.”

Waves Affect Living Creatures?,” Free wrote of the mechanics of human reception beyond the perceptible limits of the sense organs:

There is no dispute about this. The human body is really a delicate and complicated electrical machine; a machine far more sensitive than the most perfect radio receiver ever built. There would be no surprise, therefore, about a conclusion that the radio waves which now pulse so mightily and pervasively through the ether all around us were modifying in some fashion these mechanisms that we call men and women.¹⁴

Although individual senses are limited in the frequency ranges they can perceive, the body as a whole, Free suggested, is actually more sensitive than the kind of technology that allowed us to explore the frequency spectrum in the first place. But this sensitivity does not equate to perception. Hence the ambiguity of Free’s description of the effect radio waves might have in “modifying in some fashion” the human. Such modifications presumably occur without being recognized by the subjects affected (subjects already described as “mechanisms” *before* their radio modification). The effect of radio depends not entirely upon the exercise of human control over technology—not upon the content intentionally broadcast over radio waves and amplified by radio receivers—so much as upon an interface between two kinds of mechanism and the unaccounted for changes wrought by one of them (radio) upon the other (human) through imperceptible (“lower”) frequencies. Radio, in this account, is a technology we created that comes to (re)create us as technology.

These two related radio concepts—of reception beyond the limits of conscious perception and of (technological) effect as an amalgam of human intention and accident—inform Ellison’s exploration of the construction of the subject, the dispersion

¹⁴ E.E. Free, “Do Radio Waves Affect Living Creatures?” *Popular Radio* 6.4 (Oct. 1924): 354, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1924-10.pdf>.

of American culture that participates in forming this subject, and the role of fiction in transmitting (on) these lower frequencies.

II. Radio Subject(ion)

Critical accounts of Ellison's novel frequently draw upon the narrator-protagonist's handling of technology to explicate his journey from subjection to subjectivity. Such analyses focus on a variety of devices and media, including the X-ray (Maureen Curtin, 1998), the phonograph (Alexander Weheliye, 2005), electricity (Johnnie Wilcox, 2007), the typewriter and the gramophone (Jan Hein Hoogstad, 2008), automata (Scott Selisker, 2011), and the cinema (Jodi Brooks, 2013).¹⁵ Many of these accounts—whether or not they explicitly cite Donna Haraway—figure the narrator as a kind of cyborg subject who finds technological means to resist racism.¹⁶ As Curtin writes, “In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison ... mak[es] his protagonist something of a cyborg, who uses his technological hybridity as a tool against the systemic racism that

¹⁵ Jodi Brooks's analysis uses the temporal “breaks” imagined by Ellison's novel to reevaluate the temporality of the cinema. “Invisibility's Beat: Ralph Ellison, Rhythm, and Cinema's Blind Field,” *Thamyris/Intersecting* 26 (2013): 149-68. At present, no extended account of the role cinema plays in *Invisible Man* has yet been rendered. Such an account would likely pay close attention to the description of Tod Clifton's death: “I saw a flight of pigeons whirl out of the trees and it all happened in the swift interval of their circling, very abruptly and in the noise of the traffic—yet seeming to unfold in my mind like a slow-motion movie run off with the sound track dead” (435). There is also a “dubbing” error that occurs in the narrator's later drunken encounter with Sybil: “‘Don't answer, boo'ful,’ she said, her voice coming through suddenly, out of time with the working of her mouth” (526). One might also attempt a comparison between Ellison's novel (1952) and James Whale's film *The Invisible Man* (1933), which serves as an important example for Michel Chion of the “*Acousmètre* ... A kind of voice-character specific to cinema that in most instances of cinematic narratives derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen” (221). *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Ed. and Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

¹⁶ Curtin, Wilcox, and Christopher Hight explicitly read the invisible man as a cyborg. Weheliye's “subject of sonic Afro-modernity” could be conceived of as a necessary sonic revision to Haraway's cyborg, who/which fights on the limited battleground of language: “Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs ... Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication ...” Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 176.

characterizes the Brotherhood's principles and operations."¹⁷ The emphasis here and in similar readings is on the agency the protagonist exercises in his (re)configuration of technology against the grain of institutional power; this agency affirms his subjectivity against a racialized (visual) schema that oppressively denies him the status of subject. Wilcox, for example, describes the protagonist as "perhaps American literature's (and the entire world's) first bona fide network hacker, occupying the first nodes of a network yet to come."¹⁸

No technology from *Invisible Man* has been so thoroughly explored in this regard as has the phonograph the narrator keeps with him in his hole while "hibernating."¹⁹ He lives rent and utility-bill free in the basement of a building occupied by whites, where he has tapped into the electrical lines of Monopolated Light & Power to fuel the 1,369 light bulbs that he—as a participant in "the great American tradition of tinkers" (7)—has

¹⁷ Maureen F. Curtin, "Materializing Invisibility as X-Ray Technology: Skin Matters in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 9.4 (1998): 304, doi: 10.1080/10436929808580225.

¹⁸ Wilcox adds, "*Invisible Man* chronicles the acquisition of technical mastery by a black male, offering a counternarrative to historical representations which restrict technological proficiency to white males." Wilcox, "Black Power," 988. In reading Ellison's fictionalization of radio against the grain of the agency acquired through its "technical mastery," I do not mean to suggest that agency could not be exercised through radio. Such agency, for example, is emphasized by the woman Ellison interviews in "The Way It Is": "'You see that radio there? Well, William made that radio. It ain't no store set, no, sir, even though it looks like one. William made it for the kids. Made everything but the cabinet, and you can hear way down to Cuba and Mexico with it.'" *Shadow and Act*, 289. And radio analogizes a form of discursive agency in "Hidden Name and Complex Fate": "'A small brown bowlegged Negro with the name 'Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones' might sound like a clown to someone who looks at him from the outside,' said my friend Albert Murray, 'but on the other hand he just might turn out to be a hell of a fireside operator. He might just lie back in all of that comic juxtaposition of names and manipulate you deaf, dumb and blind—and you not even suspecting it, because you're thrown out of stance by his name! There you are, so dazzled by the F.D.R. image—which you *know* you can't see—and so delighted with your own superior position that you don't realize that its (sic) *Jones* who must be confronted.'" *Shadow and Act*, 150.

¹⁹ The narrator's 1,369 lights have likely been commented upon at least as frequently, if not more so, than the phonograph, but Moten's and (especially) Weheliye's phonographically-informed analyses of *Invisible Man* are more extensive than most other accounts of subjectivity in the novel that address the narrator's (relationship to) technology. Though this is something of a false distinction, since Moten and Weheliye are also interested in the networking of the phonograph and the light bulbs in the prologue. As Weheliye notes, "Ellison masterfully stages the interdependency of the sonic and the visual by charging both sound and vision with the electrical currents of modern technologies, namely the phonograph and the lightbulb." *Phonographies*, 51. Ellison's familiarity with the electromagnetic relation of sound and light (as waves on a frequency spectrum) allows us to further emphasize this relation.

meticulously wired to the ceiling. In contrast to this abundance of lights, the protagonist possesses only one radio-phonograph, but he “plan[s] to have five” (7). In an often-cited passage from the novel, he explains the invisible poetry of Louis Armstrong’s music and describes how one night—under the influence of marijuana—he took a journey to the charged underworld of a phonographic recording of Armstrong performing “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue”:

Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those positions where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music.

...

So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout:*

“Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness.’” (7-9)

After listening to a call and response sermon on the “Blackness of Blackness,” the narrator returns (re-ascends) to the singer of spirituals, learning that she has poisoned her master in order to keep her sons (fathered by him) from killing him. He upsets her by

asking what she means when she speaks of “freedom,” and the sequence ends when he is attacked by one of her sons, “*wander[s] down a dark narrow passage*,” is partially skinned by “*a speeding machine*” while trying to cross a road, and eventually “ascend[s] hastily from this underworld of sound” (12).

The narrator’s phonographic engagement with the multiple levels underlying Armstrong’s music has been productively read as opening new possibilities for thinking about black subjectivity beyond the (visual) confines of hegemonic discourse. Alexander Weheliye contends that this encounter enables “a sonic subjectivity that does not lose sight of the black subject’s visual interpellation but noisily ‘rings’ and ‘clangs’ beyond, above, below, and beside the optic nonetheless.”²⁰ While no simple affirmation of the sonic over the visual, Weheliye’s reading of Ellison depends to a certain extent upon the privacy the phonograph—in keeping with his hibernation—allows the protagonist: “The phonograph lends itself well to eschewing the social by allowing the listener to consume music in private... So, in short, without the phonograph, there would be no ‘ideal time’ for the protagonist, since ... the presence of a human sound source would undoubtedly have altered this listening event.”²¹ The phonograph provides the protagonist a high degree of control over the setting for his encounter with Armstrong’s music.²² Listening to Armstrong is a favorite activity of the narrator, one powered by the energy he has used

²⁰ Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 70.

²¹ Ibid, 62. Weheliye does complicate this point by adding that “the phonographic listening modality also bears the traces of sociality, which paradoxically constitutes this scene as private, since the listening subject is drawn out of him/herself by encountering the technologically mediated sounds of other subjects—we might even go so far as to suggest that the phonograph itself functions as a subject.” This seems a different kind of technological sociality, however, than that suggested by a potential radio connection between the outside world and the protagonist’s hole.

²² However, the fact that Ellison’s protagonist only discovers his “new analytical way of listening” while “under the spell of the reefer” works against the sense of his control over his phonographic encounter. The verb chosen to describe this way of listening reflects the ambivalence of the narrator’s role in it: “you *slip* into the breaks.” On the one hand, “slip” suggests the same sly approach the protagonist has taken to setting up his other mechanical hacks. On the other, “slip” suggests the unintentional, accidental nature of his listening.

his technological prowess to divert from a monopoly. The fact that Armstrong comes to him in the form of a mass-produced recording, played through what likely is a mass-produced phonograph, enables rather than detracts from the protagonist's encounter with the music. According to Weheliye, "Ellison locates the aura not in the original musical utterance but in the mode of mechanical reproduction itself, making him one of the foremost intellectual architects of sonic Afro-modernity."²³ This is an embrace and elaboration of what Moten has characterized as "the material reproductivity of black performance," which, contrary to traditional valuations of the "original" or the "authentic" over the reproduction, shows how "apparent nonvalue functions as a creator of value."²⁴ The narrator, in these accounts, discovers phonographic "lower frequencies" where racist (visual) subjection is not simply forgotten, but where, certainly, the protagonist and other black cultural producers find greater "freedom" in "the ensemblic improvisation that evades the encounter of others as a natal occasion."²⁵ The logic of the "natal occasion" by which "blackness" is socially always already produced in the encounter with the (white) other—familiar from the works of theorists like W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Fanon—is unsettled by the possibilities opened up by the phonographic encounter.

In adding the consideration of radio to the existing technologically-inflected body of Ellison scholarship, I intend neither to supersede its valuable insights nor to merely jump on the bandwagon (or bandwidth). The fact that the protagonist listens to Louis Armstrong on a *radio*-phonograph goes unremarked by Moten and Weheliye. Though seemingly a small point, given that we are told Armstrong's voice comes from a record,

²³ Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 47.

²⁴ Moten, *In the Break*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

the device's hybrid functionality disturbs the autonomy of listening in the narrator's hole, and the technological mastery the other, more-prevalent electrical components (i.e., the 1,369 light bulbs) exhibit. Radio-phonograph speakers can amplify both the enclosed, private listening event facilitated by recordings *and* radio feeds originating from elsewhere. If he happened to tune into a broadcast of the same Armstrong recording, the protagonist's control of such listening would still be, comparatively, limited. Perhaps most importantly, even when not heard from, the radio is a reminder of a world connected through mostly invisible and inaudible channels that transmit regardless of whether anyone happens to be listening to them. The question is what effect these transmissions might have even on (especially on) individuals who are not intentionally tuned in to them. How might "the radio waves which now pulse so mightily and pervasively through the ether all around us," to once again borrow Free's language, be "modifying in some fashion these mechanisms that we call men and women"?

Radio, I contend, interfaces Ellison's fictional development of counterhegemonic black cyborg subjectivity with his complicated position on the relationship between individuals and the diverse cultural transmissions of the larger American society they inhabit. If the radio half of the radio-phonograph is not explicitly heard from in the protagonist's musical descent, this does not mean that it is totally inoperative in the underground of the prologue and epilogue; the narrator's withdrawal below ground does not—contrary to what one might first assume—necessarily move him out of range for possible radio communication.

The novel has (at least) two "undergrounds," both of which include references to radios that are unheard from. The protagonist's introduction to the socialist organization

the Brotherhood occurs at “an expensive-looking building” called the “*Chthonian*,” a name which gestures (ironically) toward the underground nature of the movement (299).²⁶ Here the protagonist learns something about the organization and what his preparation as one of its speakers will involve. In addition to describing the luxurious décor of the party, Ellison establishes the auditory configuration of the scene. There is a piano played intermittently in the apartment, most significantly late in the scene when a drunken Brother—believing that ““*all* colored people sing””—asks the protagonist to perform a spiritual and is subsequently berated by Brother Jack for his ““unconscious racial chauvinism”” (312). I will return to consider this moment at greater length, but of equal importance are the more subtle earlier details Ellison provides regarding what is *not* heard in this space. The narrator takes “a sound-proof elevator” up to the party, where, looking back down to the street, he notes, “the window was so high that I could barely hear the sound of traffic below” (301, 303). The soundproof nature of the Chthonian is an early indication of what the narrator will only realize much later—that the Brotherhood is hopelessly out of touch with realities on the ground. Their theory of history cannot account for what the protagonist eventually tells Brother Tobitt is ““a whole unrecorded history”” spoken in ““the gin mills and the barber shops and the juke joints and the churches”” (471).²⁷ The Brotherhood’s exclusively written account of history, according to Weheliye, acts as a “shield (perhaps it’s a certain kind of deafness to

²⁶ Chthonian is a variant of chthonic. “chthonic, adj.: Dwelling in or beneath the surface of the earth.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. That the building carries the name Chthonian is ironic because architecturally it extends far above the ground (the portion occupied by the Brotherhood’s party is “up very high” [303]).

²⁷ A further foreshadowing of the Brotherhood’s disconnection comes in the contrast between the soundproof Chthonian and the protagonist’s return to Mary’s at the end of the chapter, where he “listened to the night sounds of the house. The clock ticked with empty urgency, as though trying to catch up with the time. In the street a siren howled” (317). The next chapter (chapter fifteen) strengthens this contrast when the narrator is awakened by and then protests a building-wide knocking on the steam line (because of the lack of heat) by himself knocking upon the steam line with a racial-caricature coin bank he finds in his room (318-21).

the lower frequencies that [the protagonist will] come to embrace?).”²⁸ As the narrator explains, “[I]t is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers judge their power by” (439). Ellison’s rendering of the Brotherhood’s historiographical deafness makes an important commentary on the dangerously limited cultural suppositions that can lie hidden within even the most seemingly inclusive of political movements.

The speech of those whose lives are commonly excluded from historiography, however, is not the only sound on *Invisible Man*’s “lower frequencies.” While this phrase is most commonly used by critics to refer to the narrator’s descent below Louis Armstrong’s recorded music in the prologue, it actually only appears in the novel’s epilogue, in the last line: “And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581). This is not to say that the term does not also apply to the phonography of the prologue, but the uncertainty expressed by this final question stems from the influence of another medium operating on the “lower frequencies.” Radio magazines, as we have seen, collected diagrams for set construction as well as essays that repositioned human perception in the context of a much larger, mostly insensible frequency spectrum and speculated about how radio waves might be changing us without our knowledge. It is in this context that I read the “silent” radio the narrator notices in the study at the Brotherhood’s Chthonian party: “I slid out of my overcoat and looked around. The dial of the radio built into a section of the natural mahogany bookshelf was lighted, but I couldn’t hear any sound” (301). Here there is an indication that the radio is receiving (the dial is lighted, the set is on) without amplifying.

²⁸ Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 77. His third chapter, “In the Mix,” deals extensively with how phonographic practices (including the mixing strategies of Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* and of contemporary DJs) can work against/around such limitations.

The narrator does not observe any speakers connected to this built-in bookshelf radio—at least, not any conventional audio speakers. Ellison’s inclusion of the detail that the radio is built into the bookshelf contributes to the description of the party’s decadent setting, but it also provides a space for the mutual housing of radio and text. Instead of being surrounded by accessory audio components (at least not by any that the narrator observes), the radio is surrounded by books. Could we understand these books as components of a radio assemblage, transmitting and perhaps amplifying inaudible frequencies? Such a comparison gestures toward Ellison’s concept of the role fiction plays in the dispersion of American culture (the topic of this chapter’s fourth section), and we will return to this image—of a lighted radio dial built into a bookcase in a largely soundproof building—when discussing this concept. But there is another “speaker” in this scene for whom/which the protagonist does not account, one who/that (dis)embodies and amplifies what I have been referring to as Ellison’s concept of radio subject(ion).

The Brotherhood hires the protagonist as a speaker, and the possible mechanical implications of this designation run throughout the novel. After leaving his things in the study and returning to the main party, the narrator overhears a brief conversation between Jack—the Brotherhood’s primary leader—and another member:

I heard a series of rich arpeggios sound on the piano behind me and turned to look, hearing the woman Emma say not quite softly enough, “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?”

“Shhh, don’t be a damn fool,” Brother Jack said sharply. “We’re not interested in his looks but in his voice.” (303)

Like a singer or speaker one might hear over a radio-phonograph, the protagonist’s value to the organization is judged entirely in the acoustic realm. In his interior monologue, he reacts angrily to Emma’s commodification of his visual appearance: “What does she

want, a black-face comedian? ... Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal, tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man or a natural resource?" (303). He does not view Brother Jack's expression of interest in his voice as a similar commodification. This seems instead to help build the protagonist's favorable opinion of him: "I was being hired by Brother Jack ... not this Emma woman" (303). The overt visual racism of Emma's comments overshadows the more subtle malignancy of Jack's desire to control his voice. This structure—the superimposition of an overt (higher) instance of racism over a covert (lower) form of racism—is repeated later in the scene, when a drunken Brother asks the protagonist to sing a spiritual:

"The brother *does not sing!*" Brother Jack roared staccato.
"Nonsense, *all* colored people sing."
"This is an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism!" Jack said.
"Nonsense, I *like* their singing," the broad man said doggedly.
"The brother *does not sing!*" Brother Jack cried, his face turning a deep purple. (312)

The belief that "*all* colored people sing" is a racist generalization, but Jack's protestation employs a similarly problematic generalization. He combats a racist stereotype with its inverse without altering its logic: the protagonist and presumably all African Americans working for the Brotherhood do *not* sing.²⁹ The overt racist assumption in this passage attempts to exert control over the protagonist by activating his voice; Jack's rebuttal successfully controls the protagonist by deactivating his voice. In either case, he becomes in this confrontation little more than an instrument whose controls are the object

²⁹ Merely inverting the existing racist paradigm fails to get at the root of the problem and can in fact worsen it. Hight, for example, contends that "the harmonic system of representation provided a consensual and preconscious norm for 'whiteness'" and that "inver[sions of] the harmonic system ... gain[] their radical sense only by further deepening our belief in harmonic ordering as the normal and natural system." Hight, "Stereo Types," 14, 16.

of dispute.³⁰ The all-or-nothing nature of both sides in the argument disturbs the protagonist; he wonders, “Shouldn’t there be some way for us to be asked to sing?” (314).

Throughout the novel, various parties try to exercise a kind of radio control over black voices. Following his disenchantment with the Brotherhood late in the story, the narrator thinks of all those who have humiliated him: “They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices” (508). Echolocation identifies the mechanism by which the powerful groups depicted in the novel maintain their positions of privilege. To produce this echo, they objectify the minority subject as a mere instrument to amplify their own voices (“voices” here in the metaphorical sense of ideology or worldview). On the college campus, the northern millionaires “Came smiling, inspecting, encouraging, conversing in whispers, *speechmaking into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces*” (37, emphasis added). The language here suggests the reductive equivalence of raced faces and receptive auditory organs (ears but perhaps microphones as well); the high level of receptivity expected of the black students thus defaces them. And the narrator returns to this notion when the students later become amplifiers (re)producing the sounds these millionaires want to hear: “Around me the students move with faces frozen in solemn masks, and I seem to hear already the voices mechanically raised in the songs the visitors loved” (111). This detail suggests a

³⁰ In a sad and brilliant irony, Ellison suggests that one way to disturb the underlying racism of Brother Jack’s supposedly more evolved social position is to reinvolve more easily recognizable racist icons. Tod Clifton’s selling of dancing paper Sambo dolls earns him the status of “traitor” with the Brotherhood (467). Wilcox argues, “the abject subject position of the Sambo enacts a powerful blackface critique of existing power structures.” “Black Power, 987. Shelly Jarenski reads the moment in a similar fashion: “Although the narrator originally conceived of black people as falling out of this groove [of history] (434), he realizes that they actually ‘plunge’ out (447), implying that they choose to go outside rather than being forced into it.” “Invisibility Embraced: The Abject as a Site of Agency in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *MELUS* 35.4 (Winter 2010): 98.

temporal disconnection between the students' bodies and the sounds supposedly produced by those bodies. *The* voices are somehow already present in the absence of any visible indication of their source—the movement of *the* faces. (Note that Ellison does not describe either faces or voices as belonging to the students.) The songs exist in a kind of disembodied state, as inaudible vibrations merely awaiting amplification. Giving a speech to the campus population before the visiting millionaires, the blind reverend Homer A. Barbee activates what Ellison describes as a “reverberation” in the students: “Then Barbee’s voice began again, disembodied now, and it was as though he had never paused, as though his words, reverberating within us, had continued their rhythmic flow though their source was for a moment stilled” (126). The potential violence of such reverberations comes through most strongly in Ellison’s description of one student singer:

She began softly, as though singing to herself of emotions of utmost privacy, a sound not addressed to the gathering, but which they overheard almost against her will. Gradually she increased its volume, until at times her voice seemed to become a disembodied force that sought to enter her, to violate her, shaking her, rocking her rhythmically, as though it had become the source of her being, rather than the fluid web of her own creation.

I saw the guests on the platform turn to look behind them, to see the thin brown girl in white choir robe standing high against the organ pipes, herself become before our eyes a pipe of contained, controlled and sublimated anguish, a thin plain face transformed by music. (116-17)

At the beginning of this sequence, the illusion of private will—conveyed by the impression that the singer, though performing for an audience, is somehow singing only for herself—comes under threat from overhearing. As the song progresses, however, Ellison suggests that the sound was already external to the singer. It is no longer something that the black singer cannot keep within herself but “a disembodied force,”

one she cannot keep out of her body and described in disturbing overtones of sexual violence (enter, violate). After the performance, “The white guests exchanged smiles of approval” (117).

One could locate a seemingly obvious point of resistance to this violent echolocation in a refusal on the part of the protagonist (and of other black subjects) to faithfully amplify the broadcasts he receives. However, given the disembodied, often inaudible transmission of the frequencies reverberating through (black) bodies in *Invisible Man*, it is unclear whether such conscious refusals are possible.³¹ The body cannot refuse audio transmissions even on the standard frequencies perceivable by human hearing. To reiterate and expand upon an argument from Jean-Luc Nancy that has served as a kind of refrain throughout this study,

sonorous presence *arrives*—it entails an *attack* ... And animal bodies, in general—the human body, in particular—are not constructed to interrupt at their leisure the sonorous arrival, as has often been noted. ‘The ears don’t have eyelids’ is an old theme that is often repeated. Moreover, the sound that penetrates through the ear propagates throughout the entire body something of its effects.³²

Sound not only “penetrates”; it also “propagates” or—to use the term applied to Barbee’s voice—*reverberates* through the body. Here we find the same kind of fearful sonic (dis)possession as was exemplified in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Monster* (see chapter 2)—a dispossession once again routed through a black body—

³¹ Furthermore, a refusal might simply move the protagonist from one racially-suspect frequency to another. For example, in the altercation between Jack and the drunken brother, both singing and not singing are weighted with meaning beyond the protagonist’s control.

³² Nancy, *Listening*, 14. This description of sound’s penetrative quality raises an interesting possibility when paired with the narrator’s contention that his invisibility is “a matter of the construction of [the] *inner* eyes” of those who “refuse” to see him. Do “*inner* eyes” have eyelids? In other words, could one intentionally shut down his or her socially-determined gaze?

but rendered even more unsettling by dint of the inaudibility and greater range of transmission of radio frequencies.³³

The viability of refusing to receive and amplify hegemonic transmissions on the “lower frequencies” is to a certain degree tested when the protagonist—after being exiled from the campus to New York and injured in an explosion at Liberty Paints—is literally wired into the factory hospital’s (sound) system. He receives a form of electroshock therapy whereby he is “pounded between crushing electrical pressures; pumped between live electrodes like an accordion between a player’s hands” (232).³⁴ Throughout the initial sequences in the hospital, he hears sounds that he cannot quite place: “The static sounds became a quiet drone. Strains of music, a Sunday air, drifted from a distance. With closed eyes, barely breathing, I warded off the pain. The voices droned harmoniously. Was it a radio I heard—a phonograph? The *vox humana* of a hidden organ? If so, what organ and where?” (234). Though he describes the sounds as arriving “from a distance,” the reference to the “*vox humana*” recalls his earlier transformation into an “accordion” and also the campus’s “brown girl in white choir robe standing high against the organ pipes, herself become before our eyes a pipe.” Given this, the protagonist himself may be the organ, the radio, the phonograph (the radio-phonograph).³⁵ Wilcox explains,

³³ In “Stephen Crane and American Fiction,” Ellison writes, “‘The Monster’ reminds us that [Crane] not only anticipated many of the techniques and themes of Hemingway, but that he also stands as the link between the Twain of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Huckleberry Finn* and the Faulkner of *The Sound and the Fury*.” *Shadow and Act*, 76.

³⁴ The possible medical applications of electricity and radio waves were a further topic of discussion in 1920s radio magazines. For example, Free reported, “High-frequency electricity has been employed by physicians to cure various bodily ills, especially hardening of the arteries and high blood pressure. The results do not seem to be very conclusive. But it is difficult to secure conclusive results on a machine so variable and complicated as we are. That will come in time.” “Do RadioWaves,” 360.

³⁵ Popular 1920s radio magazines included stories of individuals who had supposedly become part of the apparatus they were building or who had developed into receivers through prolonged exposure to radio

Vox humana usually refers to the stops in a pipe organ used to mimic the timbre of the human voice. Here, however, the narrator has become the ‘hidden organ’ of a technical ensemble that produces human sounds, namely his own screaming. The Liberty Paints Factory hospital is a cybernetic orchestra featuring a music maker who shrieks, the narrator no longer a mere human being, but also a cyborg—a manipulated, screaming, singing machine.³⁶

Was the protagonist ever, however, “a mere human being” before he became a cyborg? Or, to shift the emphasis of the question, is “a mere human being,” in Ellison’s account, ever not already a cyborg? When the narrator is eventually “freed” from the machine by the doctors, he thinks, “I dared not believe it. What if they were transferring me to some even more painful machine?” (244). Even with his metal umbilical cord cut, the narrator does in fact continue functioning as a component of a larger American radio (“wireless”) network.³⁷

The protagonist attempts to escape from the hospital machine by “short-circuiting” it, but repeatedly comes up against an obstacle: “I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction. It was exhausting, for no matter what the scheme I conceived, there was one constant flaw—myself” (243). Destruction of the machine comes at too great a cost; he cannot remove himself from the (sound) system without destroying himself. But perhaps he can use this

waves. Gelett Burgess reported, “Listen; as an honest boob, I swear that, with no aerial whatever, no lead-in, no spreaders, no insulators, no anything but your humble servant, I heard again that same old immortal tune! Through my own arm and fingers—horrible though it sounds—that fox-trot was pulsing out of my demoniac machine. . . . I was a part of that magic machine. I had become my own aerial. My fingers were mere antennas.” “My Fool-Proof Set,” *Popular Radio* 5.3 (Mar. 1924): 244, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1924-03.pdf>. An anecdote reported by Carl H. Butman suggests a similar conversion: “Then there is the story of one oldtimer who declared that he no longer needed headphones, his ears having become so tuned to the notes of code stations that he could pick up messages from almost anywhere!” “Unexplained ‘Bogies of the Ether,’” *Popular Radio* (July 1924): 101-02, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1924-07.pdf>.

³⁶ Wilcox, “Black Power,” 1002.

³⁷ “I felt a tug at my belly and looked down to see one of the physicians pull the cord which was attached to the stomach node, jerking me forward” (243).

connection to his advantage, undermining the machine from within. This would involve the wresting of (technological) agency away from hegemonic organizations in a maneuver akin to the protagonist's eventual tapping into Monopolated Light & Power to supply his 1,369 light bulbs and his radio-phonograph in a refusal to play by the rules of the system. Wilcox argues, "By the end of the novel, which is also the novel's beginning, the narrator has learned to do his network hacking surreptitiously, covertly stealing energy from the power grid."³⁸ However, arguments that locate a form of resistant agency through such demonstrations of "the acquisition of technical mastery by a black male" deal only with the visible (wired) networks of power.³⁹ The protagonist's explicit attempt to undermine the Brotherhood's machinery from within—by "becom[ing] a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions"—proves unsuccessful, as he inadvertently furthers their hidden agenda in the very act of what had seemed defiance (508). In the midst of the violent Harlem riots that will eventually chase him underground, he laments, "I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree I *had* indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death" (553). The protagonist, acting from his limited perspective, becomes the mechanism of unintended consequences.⁴⁰

One cannot, Ellison suggests, assert definitive control over the invisible and inaudible frequencies moving among, between, and through various social formations

³⁸ Wilcox, "Black Power," 999.

³⁹ Ibid, 988.

⁴⁰ For a brilliant account of the shift in legal definitions of culpability from the question of intention to that of the consequences (foreseen or unforeseen) of one's actions, see Stacey Margolis's "*Huckleberry Finn*; or, Consequences," *PMLA* 116.2 (Mar. 2001): 329-43. Though Margolis explores the significance of this shift for Twain, her argument could also shed light on the complex notion of "responsibility" Ellison offers in *Invisible Man*.

and individuals. Seemingly “freed” from the hospital machine without having his fear of “transfer[] to some even more painful machine” realized, the protagonist nonetheless continues to be a conduit for thoughts and sounds whose source(s) he cannot definitively identify. In the exit interview he goes through before leaving the hospital, his voice seems “unreal” to him and he has the disjointed sensation of “listen[ing] to [him]self” (246, 248). He reflects,

I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me. Like the servant about whom I’d read in psychology class who, during a trance, had recited pages of Greek philosophy which she had overheard one day while she worked. It was as though I were acting out a scene from some crazy movie. Or perhaps I was catching up with myself and had put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed. Or was it, I thought, starting up the walk, that I was no longer afraid? ... I *was* no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such; for knowing now that there was nothing which I could expect from them, there was no reason to be afraid. Was that it? I felt light-headed, my ears were ringing. (249)

The protagonist senses that something strange has happened to him, but he cannot define it. His “talking beyond [himself]” could either be a sign of possession by “some alien personality” or, conversely, it could indicate that he has finally taken possession of himself by expressing formerly suppressed feelings. While to a degree evoking Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness,” Ellison’s characterization of the protagonist’s sonic turmoil also unsettles its terms.⁴¹ “It is a peculiar sensation,” Du Bois writes, “this

⁴¹ Weheliye also reads Ellison’s conception of the subject in the context of Du Bois: “Ellison constructs a model of subjectivity that augments, but does not displace, the Du Boisian subject of double consciousness ..., bearing witness to specificities of black life while gesturing toward a more general condition of Western modernity.” *Phonographies*, 47. Reading Ellison’s subject in the context of radio’s uncontrollable “lower frequencies”—rather than those frequencies encountered in the productive cultural engagement of black subjects with “that explosive audiovisual disjuncture engendered by the phonograph” (48)—moves us more toward a “general condition of Western modernity” than “the specificities of black life.” As we will see in section three, the whole matter is immensely complicated by Ellison’s model of cultural influence. In “Some Questions and Some Answers,” he asserts, “It must, however, be pointed out that due to the close links which Negro Americans have with the rest of the nation these cultural expressions are

double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body ...”⁴² The boundary dividing the sides of this “two-ness” is blurred (or perhaps resonated)—without being abolished—in Ellison’s sonic rendering. On the “lower frequencies,” below “double-consciousness,” he evokes a kind of *unconscious* transmission across or through the “veil.”

The novel connects (counteracts and augments) the protagonist’s technological mastery with his eventual acceptance of the reality that “self-control”—“that frozen virtue, that freezing vice” (259)—is illusory; it is an illusion that, when upheld, maintains the power of the various antagonists he encounters, guaranteeing their continual blindness in a dream of “self”-affirmation represented throughout the novel as unidirectional sonic transmission and perfect amplification (the echolocation of the blind). In undermining “self-control,” Ellison does not abandon the “subject” but he does destabilize it.⁴³

Weheliye contends, “As a whole, the novel transacts the problem of the subject as a process and in doing so allows us to surmise how a subject comes to be rather than how it is.”⁴⁴ The subject is not an ontological category but a production. Rather than

constantly influencing the larger body of American culture and are in turn influenced by them. Nor should the existence of a specifically ‘Negro’ idiom in any way be confused with the vague, racist terms ‘white culture’ or ‘black culture’; rather it is a matter of diversity within unity” *Shadow and Act*, 263. Weheliye recuperates the often-unacknowledged influence of black cultural production in/on Western modernity, correcting the misguided notion that black culture is anti-modern. I am not sure, however, that he would agree with Ellison’s near dissolution of the border between black and American culture.

⁴² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007 [1903]), 8.

⁴³ Weheliye, among others, has noted “the irony in the dissolution, and perhaps even abandonment, of the subject as a category of critical thinking just as minorities are being recognized as subjects within academic discourse.” *Phonographies*, 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

exclusively thinking about “*the* subject as a determinate linguistic category,” Weheliye suggests we also consider “*a* subject as an indeterminate sonic opacity.”⁴⁵ Such moments of indetermination are opened up by “that explosive audiovisual disjuncture engendered by the phonograph” and the black cultural practices this disjuncture has enabled.⁴⁶ Radio participates in this destabilization of “*the* subject” (as ontological category), but it also troubles the agency of “*a* subject” insofar as it does not assume a subject’s ability to “productively engag[e] the split between sound and source.”⁴⁷ Radio subject(ion), in other words, often comes across as accident, as the overreceptivity to multiple frequencies rather than a cut or break initiated by technologically-proficient practices such as phonographic mixing.⁴⁸

The protagonist’s various speeches provide examples of this kind of overreceptivity at work. The first speech he gives in the novel—after competing in the battle royal—contains an element of political dissonance that is characterized as an unintentional repetition. In the midst of a sequence where the town’s powerful white men quite explicitly exert their control over the protagonist’s voice, he makes a “mistake” that disturbs their pleasure in his humiliation:

“Social [...]”
“Louder.”

⁴⁵ Ibid, 69.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 7-8.

⁴⁸ A phonographic equivalent to the kinds of radio “accidents” I examine is the unintentional noise picked up and (re)produced by a phonograph. This kind of unintentional recording is suggested, for example, in the passage cited earlier, where the protagonist compares his sense of “talking beyond [himself]” to the anecdote of “the servant ... who, during a trance, had recited pages of Greek philosophy which she had overheard one day while she worked” (249). Jan Hein Hoogstad reads the gramophone in Ellison’s work from this angle: “The importance of the gramophone lies in the fact that it is a low rather than high fidelity sound device. Its capacity to store noises rather than symbolic data flows, transforms the in-between from a black hole into a rich space stuffed with forgotten, repressed or excluded sounds, smells and images. In fact, it is exactly this transformation that takes place in both the introduction of *Invisible Man* as well as ‘Living with Music’.” “New Adventures in Low Fidelity. Towards a media-epistemic pluralism,” *Image [&] Narrative* 22 (May 2008).

“[...] responsibility.”

“More!”

“Respon—”

“Repeat!”

“—sibility.”

The room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private.

“Social [...]”

“What?” they yelled.

“[...] equality—” (31)

Though the audience dictates the volume of his voice and demands that he play back (“Repeat!”) particularly “amusing” phrases from his speech, this instance of phonographically-structured racial dominance is interrupted by the intrusion of a sonic transmission with origins in both racist “newspaper editorials” and private discussions. It is a remix of cultural materials, but not one that could be considered intentional.

The Brotherhood, as we have noted, hires the protagonist as a “speaker,” one meant to amplify the unheard frequencies tuned in by the radio set in their Chthonian bookcase. His first official speech for the organization carries indications of this sonic instrumentalization—later he will be appointed “the new *instrument* of the committee’s authority” in the Harlem District (363, emphasis added)—as well as evidence of its possible disruption. An initial obstacle to the protagonist’s speech is literally mechanical. He is unfamiliar with speaking into a microphone.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Even though the speaker and audience occupy the same building, the protagonist’s inability to see his audience suggests something of the daunting task faced by radio performers, for whom the microphone could become a (frightening) substitute addressee. Homer Croy wrote about “[t]he strange panic that sometimes seizes those who come face to face with the microphone for the first time.” “Micro-Fright,” *Popular Radio* 10.2 (June 1926): 114, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1926-06.pdf>. Ellison’s narrator explains, “I couldn’t see them so I addressed the microphone and the co-operative voice before me” (342). The existence of the “cooperative voice” and the ability of the protagonist to feel/hear the audience’s responses marks an important divergence from the radio analogy. (Although many early radio studios had program directors and listeners responsible for calling in feedback regarding how well live broadcasts were transmitting.) His hypervisibility beneath the spotlight that renders the audience invisible to him offers another literal

The microphone was strange and unnerving. I approached it incorrectly, my voice sounding raspy and full of air, and after a few words I halted, embarrassed. . . . I leaned toward the vague audience closest to the platform and said, “Sorry, folks. Up to now they’ve kept me so far away from these shiny electric gadgets I haven’t learned the technique [...] And to tell you the truth, it looks to me like it might bite! Just look at it, it looks like the steel skull of a man! Do you think he died of dispossession?” (341)

Stalling for time until “someone came and made an adjustment,” the protagonist voices the humorous reaction of a country bumpkin unfamiliar with “shiny electric gadgets.” His suggestion that the microphone might be alive—“might bite”—also borders on the popular advertising image of animals, children, or childlike racial “primitives” responding to the gramophone as though it actually contained the source of its sound within it.⁵⁰ His uncomfortable, seemingly naïve response to the microphone, however, also conveys a possible critique of the larger systemic “dispossession” at work in society. The explicit objective of the rally is to address the problem of evictions and the dispossession of the lower classes. But the comparison of the microphone to “the steel skull of a man” suggests another kind of “dispossession”: the dispossession caused by being plugged into an audio system and used as a mere amplifier (or microphone) for another’s agenda.

With the assistance of the technician and the sense of connection provided by an unidentified voice from the front of the arena, the protagonist begins his speech. Unable to “remember the correct words and phrases from the pamphlets” he “select[s] one of the political techniques that [he’d] heard so often at home” and quickly builds the audience’s

divergence between his arena speech and radio—radio listeners cannot see the source of the frequencies they tune in. However, given the definition of invisibility offered in the prologue—and Brother Jack’s insistence that the protagonist’s looks are irrelevant compared to his voice—he may be as invisible as a radio voice to the audience’s “inner eyes.”

⁵⁰ For extended analyses of this motif, see Lisa Gitelman’s *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* and Michael Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity*.

energy level (342). While the political technique the protagonist chooses is not the “scientific” approach to which the Brotherhood is accustomed, Jack still finds it potentially conducive to the organization’s objectives in Harlem. There is, however, one point at which he interrupts:

They were mine out there, and I couldn’t afford to lose them. Yet I suddenly felt naked, sensing that the words were returning and that something was about to be said that I shouldn’t reveal.

“Look at me!” The words ripped from my solar plexus. “I haven’t lived here long. Times are hard, I’ve known despair. I’m from the South, and since coming here I’ve know (sic) eviction. I’d come to distrust the world [...] But look at me now, something strange is happening. I’m here before you. I must confess [...]”

And suddenly Brother Jack was beside me, pretending to adjust the microphone. “Careful now,” he whispered. “Don’t end your usefulness before you’ve begun.” (345)

The narrator’s selection of a technique at the beginning of the speech suggests his modicum of control over the situation, but the above passage makes it clear that his continued possession of the crowd (“They were mine out there”) depends upon a certain self-dispossession. Despite his intention “only to make a good appearance,” he channels words that are “completely uncalculated, as though another self within [him] had taken over and held forth” (353). If this description of “another self within”—producing what is identified as a “confession”—seems to locate the source of the speech in the protagonist’s interior, his continued reflection on the event destabilizes this interior. He observes, “as at the eviction I had uttered words that had possessed me” (354). Despite the Chthonian suggestion of the Brotherhood’s radio-control over the protagonist, it becomes clear that the words that possess him here are not (entirely) of that organization’s making. And so Jack steps in under pretense of “adjust[ing] the microphone” in an attempt to control his “speaker.”

Such moments—demonstrating the protagonist’s radio (dis)possession—create disruptions in hegemonic broadcasts. These disruptions are not caused by destroying political or social machinery, or by refusing the (often-barely-detectable) transmissions of “systemic racism.”⁵¹ And it is not a question, at least not entirely, of “hacking” the system from an agential off-grid position.⁵² Rather, the disruption emerges in the hyperreceptivity to transmissions whose sources are uncertain. There is a degree of automatism to this notion. Scott Selisker argues that the figure of the automaton in *Invisible Man* “satiriz[es] and critiqu[es] the political consequences of new scientific discourses that were central to a new approach to racism in the United States.”⁵³ Such discourses, exemplified by the work of sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, understood African Americans as culturally belated; African American politics and aesthetic productions, under this schema, were merely responses to normative white culture. However, the automatic hyperreceptivity to the “lower frequencies” I am examining does not place African Americans in a simply reactionary role in American society. (White characters, though their strategy of echolocation attempts to suppress them, are also subjects of or subjected to “lower frequency” transmissions.)⁵⁴ Ellison destabilizes the “self”-coherence of both black and white culture, as well as any sense of a chronologically linear narrative of influence between them. In the epilogue that does not conclude so

⁵¹ The phrase, also cited at the start of this section, is borrowed from Curtin, “Materializing Invisibility,” 304.

⁵² Wilcox, we recall, describes the protagonist as “American literature’s (and the entire world’s) first bona fide network hacker.” “Black Power,” 988.

⁵³ Scott Selisker, “‘Simply by Reacting?’: The Sociology of Race and *Invisible Man*’s Automata,” *American Literature* 83.3 (Sept. 2011): 572-73, doi: 10.1215/00029831-1339872.

⁵⁴ The confrontation at Brotherhood headquarters following the unapproved funeral for Tod Clifton offers perhaps the most striking example of this. There Jack “splutter[s] and laps[es] into a foreign language” immediately before what the narrator learns is a glass eye “seem[s] to erupt from his face” (473-74). But even the protagonist’s early encounter with Mr. Norton hints at the possibility of white hyperreceptivity. The narrator describes an unconscious Norton thusly: “The head moved from side to side in the pale glow of the light bulb, as though denying some insistent voice which I could not hear” (89-90).

much as it multiplies questions, the narrator asks, “Weren’t we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died? I can’t figure it out; it escapes me” (575). By the final line of the novel, the narrative voice—the identity of the “I” who asks the questions—is itself under interrogation: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

Invisible Man’s hyperreceptive radio subject is a product and (re)producer of American culture, which, according to Ellison, continually evolves through often-imperceptible transmissions. Radio therefore not only participates in the creation of American culture but also provides Ellison with a model by which to understand it. After examining this model of radio culture, we will explore its implications for the (re)production and reception of fiction, and return one last time to the question of “the lower frequencies” raised by the novel’s closing line.

III. Radio Culture

Ellison’s turn in the epilogue to the question of America has been read as an abandonment of the improvisational potential to be found on the phonographic “lower frequencies” accessible through Louis Armstrong (and through black radical experimentation more broadly). Moten characterizes the narrator’s refusal or inability to linger in the phonographic underground as a “domestication” of the potential opened up underneath the music: “This domestication is a kind of nationalist reconfiguration wherein the music is presented as the trope of a certain understanding of totality as America, of representation as America, of democracy as America, of the future—which is to say the end—as America.”⁵⁵ Where in the prologue we encounter the multiple

⁵⁵ Moten, *In the Break*, 69.

levels through which the narrator passes in his Dantean descent below Armstrong's music, in the epilogue we are confronted by such observations as "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain" and "Our fate is to become one, and yet many— This is not prophecy, but description" (577). It is to this kind of rhetoric that Moten objects:

The break that drives and is *Invisible Man* constitutes the continuity and the incommensurability of the prologue and the epilogue, which is to say the continuity between and the incommensurability of the intimation of the improvisational and affirmative agency of ensemble and its etiolated calculation as the synthesis of one and many, individuality and collectivity, difference and universality.⁵⁶

"Ensemble" provides a form of improvisational agency; in its transformation into "synthesis" by the end of the novel, it is weakened, becoming "the nonimprovisational (because formed within the opposition of individual and collective, race and humanity) ..."⁵⁷ The turn to such fixed oppositions, even if they are to ultimately find synthesis, limits improvisation to a prescribed field of possibility.

In Ellison's conception of American culture, however, the terms of these oppositions are anything but fixed. And, as the narrator's possession of a *radio-phonograph* suggests, such cultural concerns—though unheard from—are already networked with the possibilities of the improvisational phonographic encounter facilitated by Louis Armstrong. How much "agency" is involved in (unconsciously) receiving and amplifying transmissions through the radio half of the radio-phonograph is—as we have already seen—debatable. Yet Ellison's destabilization of agency extends throughout the entire radio network, and so individuals or groups, influenced by American culture, also influence it by transmitting (on) a variety of lower frequencies.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 72.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 73.

Radio enables Ellison to conceive of American culture at large as “the mix”—to borrow a concept discussed by Weheliye—without a DJ. In “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” the essay in which he also discusses “play[ing] around with radio” in the 1920s, Ellison writes, “Culturally everything was mixed, you see, and beyond all question of conscious choices there was a level where you were claimed by emotion and movement and moods which you couldn’t put into words.”⁵⁸ This being “claimed,” as with the radio (dis)possessions we have examined in *Invisible Man*, is neither inherently good nor bad.

In his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison discusses a mystery of cultural transmission he encountered while growing up in 1920s Oklahoma:

Anything and everything was to be found in the chaos of Oklahoma; thus the concept of the Renaissance Man has lurked long within the shadow of my past, and I shared it with at least a half dozen of my Negro friends. How we actually acquired it I have never learned, and since there is no true sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy, I doubt if I ever shall. Perhaps we breathed it in with the air of the Negro community of Oklahoma City, the capital of that state whose Negroes were often charged by exasperated white Texans with not knowing their “place.”⁵⁹

This was also the period in which he began experimenting with radio, “building crystal sets and circuits consisting of a few tubes, which [he] found published in the radio magazines.”⁶⁰ Therefore, seemingly out-of-place concepts—like that of the Renaissance Man—could not only be metaphorically “breathed ... in with the air” but also tuned in on the airwaves. Writing of this same period in another essay, Ellison recalls, “It was the era of radio... The big media of communication were active for better or worse, even then,

⁵⁸ Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 11.

⁵⁹ Ibid, xii-xiii.

⁶⁰ Ellison, “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” in *Shadow and Act*, 5.

and the Negro community was never completely isolated from their influence.”⁶¹ Such “big media” influences—insofar as they seemed to explode the geographically-, racially-, and financially-circumscribed channels through which sociological narratives had been written—ensured the impossibility of any “true sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy,” but they also challenged Ellison to craft a more adequate account of such dispersion. And he took up the challenge in his essays and in *Invisible Man*. “[O]ne of the things I wanted to do,” he told a group of West Point cadets who had read his novel, “was to provide the reader with—or discover for myself—some sense of how *ideas* moved from one level of society to another.”⁶² Ellison was not alone in this ambition, but was tuning in and modifying a debate about cultural transmission that had been ongoing at least since radio’s rise to popular prominence in the 1920s.⁶³

The debate over radio’s effect on culture included both celebratory and condemnatory appraisals of the medium. Believers in radio’s potential often waxed utopian about the kind of national (or global) unity it would enable by providing greater access to cultural resources. In the first issue of *Popular Radio* (May 1922), James Collins predicted, “Out of the present-day ‘radio’ will undoubtedly grow programs making the musical, educational and recreational facilities of the greatest cities available to people everywhere, with the city apartment and the farmhouse wired for radio just as it is wired for electric light.”⁶⁴ The radio, by this account, would collapse the cultural distinction between rural and urban space, bringing “educational” and “recreational”

⁶¹ Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” in *Shadow and Act*, 236.

⁶² Ellison, “On Initiation Rites and Power,” in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 51.

⁶³ Radio was by no means the first technology to inspire reevaluations of American cultural dispersion. See, for example, the discussion of the telephone in chapter one of this study.

⁶⁴ James H. Collins, “The Genius Who Put the Jinn in the Radio Bottle,” *Popular Radio* 1.1 (May 1922): 33, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1922-05.pdf>.

illumination to previously unconnected parties. Writing only a few years later, Percy Mackaye suggested radio would effect an even more radical collapse of social divisions: “Necessarily its [the University of the Ether’s] doors must be open to all ages, both sexes, and to all races—and necessarily no consequent social disharmony can result. For our new higher learning there is no racial problem involved; there is no age limitation to admission; there are no examinations; there are no compulsions of any sort whatsoever.”⁶⁵ Despite the expansive composition of this radio university’s student body and the loosening of traditional university strictures (“no examinations”), Mackaye’s vision nonetheless gestured toward a culturally-limited curriculum, citing as early examples of radio’s educational potential the “broadcasting [of] the works of the world’s greatest composers, through performances of symphonies and operas.”⁶⁶ In this vision of the radio university, more people than ever before would have access to culture, but the boundaries of what qualified as culture proper wouldn’t necessarily change. James Harbor’s utopian evaluation of radio as a mechanism for the achievement of world peace brought such normative cultural assumptions—this time in the colonialist parlance of spreading “civilization”—to the fore. “Here,” he wrote, “it seems to me is disclosed the big job of radio—to be the messenger of a new age to the countless millions of human beings who are still living in the dark ages.”⁶⁷ Those “living in the dark ages,” his examples make clear, are often racial outsiders:

Some scientists, who have studied the matter carefully, have concluded that the oriental mind is just as keen as the occidental, and, given equal

⁶⁵ Percy Mackaye, “The University of the Ether.” *Popular Radio* 5.1 (Jan. 1924): 39, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1924-01.pdf>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁷ James G. Harbord, “Radio—the Pacifist.” *Popular Radio* 4.3 (Sept. 1923): 205, “AmericanRadioHistory.com,” <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1923-09.pdf>.

opportunity, the yellow race may prove just as progressive as the white. Closer contact with our civilization through the agency of radio will undoubtedly speed up the rejuvenation of China's own.⁶⁸

Harbor did not discuss the role of radio *within* American society, but the above identifies the “progressive” aspect of American civilization as exclusively “white.” The utopian take on radio, exemplified in the three accounts cited above, maintained a unidirectional model of (white) cultural transmission.⁶⁹

One of the strongest rebuttals to the optimism surrounding radio's ability to transmit (high) culture comes from Theodor Adorno. In 1941's “The Radio Symphony,” he directly responds to “those who optimistically assume that radio brings great symphonic music to people who never heard it before.”⁷⁰ A combination of the private setting in which radio is consumed (in the home rather than the concert hall), the technical limitations on the intensity and range of sound transmitted via radio, and radio's contribution to “the avalanche of fetishism which is overtaking music and burying it under the moraine of entertainment” leads Adorno to dismiss the idea that radio provides true cultural access to the masses.⁷¹ All of these factors prevent the “symphonic contraction of time which annihilates, for the duration of the adequate performance, the contingencies of the listener's private existence” and “enable[s] him to ‘enter’ the door of

⁶⁸ Ibid, 210.

⁶⁹ Jason Loviglio observes, “Radio ... was an apparatus that helped produce a new kind of social space—the intimate public—in which the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ came to represent a complex web of social performances perpetually in play rather than distinct and immutable categories. This new space promised listeners a fantasy of social mobility, *even as it reminded them of the importance of social hierarchies* in protecting their own relative privilege.” *Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvi-xvii, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Radio Symphony: An Experiment in Theory,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 253.

⁷¹ Ibid, 252. On the problems raised by the private setting of radio listening, see 257; on the loss of subtle symphonic differences over radio, see 260; on radio entertainment's fetishization of symphonic details, see 266.

the sound as he would enter through the door of a cathedral.”⁷² One is, by contrast, too aware of time when a symphony is transmitted via radio.⁷³ Adorno, like the radio optimists examined earlier, thus maintains the privileged status of a certain (Western, white) canon of culture.⁷⁴ He differs from them in denying that this canon can be adequately transmitted via the radio, but his model, like theirs, notes that what is transmitted (which he denigrates as “entertainment”) moves in a unidirectional flow from producers to “passive” consumers.⁷⁵

To an extent, unidirectional transmission was the reality of the “big media.”

Ellison was aware of arguments about the negative cultural impact of the mass media.⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid, 256.

⁷³ Ibid, 261. “The time the radio symphony consumes is the empirical time.” Both Adorno’s account of listening to a live Beethoven symphony and Ellison’s account of listening to a phonographic recording of Louis Armstrong (from *Invisible Man*’s prologue) deal with questions of time and the listener’s (re)location within the music. Adorno writes of “entering” the symphony through the “contraction of time” enabled by its form. Ellison’s narrator explains how “[i]nvisibility ... gives one a slightly different sense of time” and then describes how, under the influence of a reefer, he “found [him]self hearing not only in time, but in space as well. [He] not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths” (8). And Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (Adorno’s ideal example of symphonic form) factors into the soundscape of Ellison’s factory hospital scene: “They were holding me firm and it was fiery and above it all I kept hearing the opening motif of Beethoven’s *Fifth*—three short and one long buzz, repeated again and again in varying volume, and I was struggling and breaking through, rising up, to find myself lying on my back with two pink-faced men laughing down” (232). While somewhat off topic here, a comparison of these two accounts of listening might reward further scrutiny. One cannot state definitively that Ellison read Adorno’s essay, though the latter was originally published in English, so it is possible.

⁷⁴ In an offhand remark at the beginning of his critique—about an analysis one could pursue, but that he will not—Adorno suggests that some forms of entertainment (as opposed to culture) may actually be not only compatible with but also analogous to radio form: “Or one would have to investigate to what extent the technical conditions of jazz in themselves establish a configuration of quasi-mechanized technique with quasi-subjective expression weirdly analogous to that of the actual mechanization of radio transmission” “The Radio Symphony,” 251-52.

⁷⁵ Adorno writes, “The transformation of the symphonic process into a series of results means that the listeners receive the symphony as a ready-made piecemeal product which can be enjoyed with a minimum of effort on his part. Like other ready-made articles, radio symphony tends to make him passive: he wants to get something out of it, perhaps to give himself up to it, but, if possible, to have nothing to do with it, and least of all to ‘think’ it” (268). Another road not taken but suggested at the beginning of Adorno’s essay (and to an extent underlying many of his objections to the radio symphony) is “the problem of the role played in traditional serious music by the ‘original’—that is, the live performance one actually experiences, as compared with mass reproduction on the radio” (251). As Moten and Weheliye argue, Ellison destabilizes the authority of this division between the “original” and the “reproduction.”

⁷⁶ Ellison was aware but also somewhat skeptical of these arguments against big media. Writing of the mass market publications that fed his early love of reading in “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” he asks,

To these he added his own critical observations of the problematic ways such media could deleteriously affect the American racial situation. His novel acknowledges the fact that white men controlled the major media outlets at mid-century. Early in the novel, Dr. Bledsoe tells the protagonist, ““These white folks have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you’re lying, they’ll tell the world even if you prove you’re telling the truth”” (143). In “Beating That Boy,” a review essay published around the time Ellison began work on *Invisible Man*, he describes the racial influence of the mass media in terms even more condemnatory than the cynicism he would later voice through Bledsoe: “And not only have our popular culture, our newspapers, radio and cinema been devoted to justifying the Negro’s condition and the conflict created thereby, but even our social sciences and serious literature have been conscripted—all in the effort to drown out the persistent voice of outraged conscience.”⁷⁷ This “voice of outraged conscience” disappeared “into the underground” of the American cultural scene, according to Ellison, “after the Emancipation and the return of the Southern ruling class to power in the counter-revolution of 1876.”⁷⁸ Since that time, “the racial situation has exerted an influence upon the [white] writer similar to that of an x-ray concealed in a radio. Moving about, perhaps ignoring, perhaps enjoying Jack-Rochester or a hot jazz band, he is unaware of his exposure to a force that shrivels his vital sperm.”⁷⁹ Here the radio disguises undetectable frequencies—frequencies much higher than those perceived as light by human eyes—formed in the production of

“[H]ow could I ever join uncritically in the heavy-handed attacks on the so-called Big Media which have become so common today?” *Shadow and Act*, 155.

⁷⁷ *Shadow and Act*, 99.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 100-01.

hypervisibility, the seeing-through of x-ray that also threatens the viewer with impotency.⁸⁰ This is a bleak view of the role mass media (specifically radio) might play in allowing whites to repress their racial conscience, but elsewhere Ellison writes of undetected cultural frequencies as carrying the potential for sensitizing (rather than desensitizing) their recipients.

1920s radio programming facilitated Ellison's personal development of greater cultural awareness beyond the confines of his own community. More importantly, the form of radio transmission—invisible frequencies able to cross geographical and social boundaries and potentially affect us without our knowledge—served as a model for his understanding of American cultural dispersion.⁸¹ In “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” Ellison ponders “those individuals we sometimes meet whose refinement of sensibility is inadequately explained by family background, formal education, or social status.”⁸² In other words, they are puzzles for conventional sociology. Ellison continues,

These individuals seem to have been sensitized by some obscure force that issues undetected from the chromatic scale of American social hierarchy: a force that throws off strange, ultrasonic ultrasemi-semitones that create within those attuned to its vibrations a mysterious enrichment of personality. In this, heredity doubtless plays an important role, but whatever that role may be, it would appear that culturally and environmentally, such individuals are products of errant but sympathetic vibrations set up by the tension between America's social mobility, its universal education, and its relative freedom of cultural information.⁸³

⁸⁰ Analyzing this moment, Curtin argues, “exposure to X-rays has become deadly, the more terrifying because deployed as an instrument of communication, a conduit of pleasure. . . . [Ellison identifies] the master-slave dynamic driving Jack Benny's comedy and the music of hot jazz . . . with the cauterizing potential of X-rays.” “Materializing Invisibility,” 288.

⁸¹ Michele Hilmes contends, “Radio was in many ways unique: significantly different from any preceding or subsequent medium in its ability to transcend spatial boundaries, blur the private and public spheres, and escape visual determinations . . .” *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.

⁸² Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 8.

⁸³ Ibid.

“American social hierarchy,” in this analogy, is defined as both a musical scale and a color spectrum (with “chromatic” suggesting these related meanings). In contrast to such audible/visual frequencies, an “obscure force” produces individuals in a process “undetected” by the social hierarchy. This force is analogized here to higher (“ultrasonic”) rather than lower frequencies, but its effect on the individual is similar to that of the lower frequencies in *Invisible Man*. The novel’s suggestion of uncontrollable cultural transmissions in excess of hegemonic intention is here explicitly stated; these sociologically anomalous individuals “are products of errant but sympathetic vibrations” that sensitize them. Such transmissions, moreover, “sensitize” in multiple directions. Elsewhere, Ellison is very clear that “[Negro American] cultural expressions are constantly influencing the larger body of American culture and are in turn influenced by them.”⁸⁴

We have to this point discussed several of the ways radio influenced Ellison’s work. In the final section, we turn to a consideration of how Ellison’s novel perhaps exerts a “sensitizing” influence on its readers “on the lower frequencies.”

IV. Radio Fiction

Ellison describes the writer’s development, and the specific genesis of *Invisible Man*, as a kind of subconscious radio-phonograph-like reception. He reflects,

Writers, in their formative period, absorb into their consciousness much that has no special value until much later, and often much which is of no special value even then ... So, long before I thought of writing, I was claimed by weather, by speech rhythms, by Negro voices and their different idioms, by husky male voices and by the high shrill singing voices of certain Negro women, by music; by tight spaces and by wide spaces in which the eyes could wander ...⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ellison, “Some Questions and Some Answers,” in *Shadow and Act*, 263.

⁸⁵ Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” in *Shadow and Act*, 157.

Ellison's account of the writer posits him as a kind of receiver "claimed by" multiple transmissions, many of them sonic. The ability of such "lower frequency" transmissions to subvert conscious intentions is not only a theme of *Invisible Man*; it enabled the very creation of the novel. While working on a different novel—about an African American who finds himself the ranking officer among a group of white soldiers in a Nazi POW camp—Ellison was "interrupted by an ironic, down-home voice that struck [him] as being as irreverent as a honky-tonk trumpet blasting through a performance, say, of Britten's *War Requiem*" (xv). At first he attempted to refuse this "disembodied voice," but he soon found that he could not: "I was still inclined to close my ears and get on with my interrupted novel, but ... I had floundered into a state of hyperreceptivity; a desperate condition in which a fiction writer finds it difficult to ignore even the most nebulous idea-emotion that might arise in the process of creation" (xiv, xviii). Unable to ignore this voice from the underground, he follows it, eventually "locat[ing] its owner living—and oh, so garrulously—in an abandoned cellar" (xviii). But locating the voice, as we have seen, does not diminish its power to destabilize boundaries. Despite his hibernation, the narrator both receives and transmits in the underground.

The narrator's hole—the scene of writing in which he attempts "to put invisibility down in black and white" (14)—does not permit enough sound saturation to suit his preferred mode of listening. He explains, "Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue'—all at the same time" (8). This acoustical deadness recalls (and anticipates)

the soundproof details of the novel's other "underground," the *Chthonian* hotel.

Although a hindrance to the kind of reception the narrator desires, acoustical deadness would meet the major criterion for successful broadcasting. In *Popular Radio*'s May 1923 issue, C.L. Le Massena and William H. Easton explained, "[I]f the studio is perfectly echoless and reflects no sound waves whatever, then all points within it will be equally good for [microphone] reception. This degree of perfection is probably impossible to secure, but evidently the better the sound-proofing the less the distortion and the better the artistic results."⁸⁶ I have already discussed how we might understand the protagonist's position as "speaker" for the Brotherhood as enabling (and disrupting) a kind of radio control exerted over him through that movement's literature—a situation epitomized by his observation that, in the study at the Brotherhood party, the "[t]he dial of the radio built into a section of the natural mahogany bookshelf was lighted, but I couldn't hear any sound" (301). Does the underground the protagonist inhabits—where he composes the novel—also suggest not only radio reception but transmission as well?

I close by thinking about how Ellison's novel may transmit to its audience on "the lower frequencies" and how their subsequent amplification of such transmissions makes them participants in his complex, radio-inspired model of American culture. To do so, I return to the epilogue of *Invisible Man*, which, after conveying the narrator-protagonist's decision to emerge from his underground hibernation, concludes with the following:

"Ah," I can hear you say, "so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!" But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really

⁸⁶ C.L. Le Massena and William H. Easton, "Mixing Music in the Microphone," *Popular Radio* 3.5 (May 1923): 335, "AmericanRadioHistory.com," <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1923-05.pdf>.

happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (581)

This meditation simultaneously distinguishes between the narrator (I) and his audience (you) and scrambles that distinction. The major confusion of the speaker's identity comes in the form of the novel's final question, but even before that disclosure the boundaries between I and you are blurred. In the preceding lines the narrator does (imaginatively) speak for his audience, though framing the words as an act of listening: "I can hear you say." And what he "hears" is the second-person's mischaracterization of his story as a rave, also phrased as a listening act: "'He only wanted us to listen to him rave!'" Twisting pronouns like an Abbot and Costello routine, the first-person (I) "hears" the second-person (you)—as ventriloquized by the first-person—incorrectly "listen" to the first-person, now referred to by the second-person (as imagined by the first-person) in the third-person (he). Ellison's closing lines thereby perform the fluid positioning of the "disembodied voice" that his narrator's message is reduced to in its transmission to an unseeing audience. As the narrator explains a page earlier: "You won't believe in my invisibility and you'll fail to see how any principle that applies to you could apply to me" (580). Although the narrator's invisible invisibility—his audience's failure to see their very failure to see—inhibits communication, it does not necessarily dismantle all forms of transmission between narrator and audience (whether that audience be conceived of as auditors or readers). In the absence of mutual recognition, the subject (and object) positions of all parties are at risk of destabilization.

The narrator closes the novel by expressing this risk in terms of radio transmission: "And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower

frequencies, I speak for you?”⁸⁷ This question suggests several levels of ambiguity. First, “lower frequencies” is a relative term. Sound waves, for example, operate at a lower frequency than light waves. All speaking, therefore, in a sense takes place “on the lower frequencies.” But the narrator’s inability to define the controlling identity of the “speaker” suggests that the “lower frequencies” verge on the inaudible; they are imperceptible, subconsciously received but nonetheless influential impulses. Second, the clause “I speak for you” condenses the slipperiness of the preceding back-and-forth between first-, second-, and third-persons into a single entanglement of subject, verb, and prepositional object. Grammatically, the first-person (I) is the subject of this clause, but the verb and prepositional phrase (speak for you) bring the agency of this subject into question. What does it mean to “speak for” another? Who controls our interaction if “I speak for you”? On the one hand, I may be assuming authority over your part in our discourse by speaking in your place. On the other, I may merely be the medium through which you transmit your message, a mechanical “speaker” like those amplifying a radio feed. This latter possibility would explain why the narrator is frightened by his final question. Though he and his radio-phonograph have hibernated for the composition of the story, perhaps the radio dial in the Brotherhood’s chthonian bookshelf extends its influence to his underground novel as well.

There is, however, another possible reading of “I speak for you” that casts the effects of the “lower frequencies” in a more hopeful (though still invisible) light. How might the novel speak for or through its readers on the lower frequencies? The narrator’s

⁸⁷ Curtin suggests, “His question ... implies a transition from X-rays to radio waves, but to know how this develops would require ‘hearing around corners,’ for which Ellison left inadequate prescription.” “Materializing Invisibility,” 303. However, as this chapter contends, we can look/listen for this prescription “on the lower frequencies” of Ellison’s writing and of the cultural contexts shaping his understanding of radio.

invisibility is described as a matter of choice on the part of those who do not see him. A few sentences into the prologue, he explains, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (3). And this explanation is reiterated in the closing to the prologue, where the agent of refusal becomes not “people” but “you”: “But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?” (14). Can one, however, really refuse to receive the “lower frequencies”? If they operate at a level below conscious perception, then the answer is likely no. Could *Invisible Man* therefore be transmitting something to its imagined audience in spite of their disbelief in the protagonist’s invisibility? The narrator in part fears that his “speak[ing] for you” indicates a lack of control over his voice akin to that which is in evidence throughout the entirety of the story.⁸⁸ But, by this same network logic of transmission and amplification, it may also be possible that his voice resonates through his imagined (and real) auditor-reader.

The protagonist’s speech-writing and the auditor-reader’s reception of it are tuned to the same “lower frequencies” at the level of grammar. This attunement occurs because of the indeterminate relationship between the narrative voice and the reading voice.⁸⁹ It is easy to imagine the reading act as an amplification of the text when we are talking about reading out loud. If you read *Invisible Man* aloud, then Ellison’s narrator does

⁸⁸ Wilcox’s suggestion that this final question is addressed to other “invisibles” therefore seems unlikely. He argues, “When the narrator asks ‘Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?’ readers should understand that they, too, are as ‘invisible’ as the narrator and the millions of others whose efforts are materialized in the work of people such as Edison. . . . The novel tells invisibles about the possibility of cybernetic miscegenation, that technical mastery was never solely the domain of white men, and that what history constructs as the achievement of white men is, in fact, the achievement of many persons beyond those white men.” “Black Power,” 1005. The novel does suggest such things, but not in the final question (at least not directly), where the narrator’s uncertainty casts doubt upon whether he is really in control of his underground “cyborg” existence.

⁸⁹ My inspiration for thinking about narrative and reading voice along these lines comes from Julie Beth Napolin, “The Fact of Resonance” (paper presented at the annual American Comparative Literature Association conference, New York, NY, March 2014).

“speak for you” (in the sense of dictating your words) and you in turn “speak for” the novel (in the sense of vocalizing its text). However, even silent reading participates in this confusion of source and amplifier (two possible interpretations of “speaker”) when the narrative voice employs the first-person.⁹⁰ Like two radio stations broadcasting on the same (lower) frequency, the narrative “I” of *Invisible Man* and the self-referential “I” the reader uses to narrate his own life alternatively compete, intermingle, and generate static. The narrative “I” thus always speaks for “you” on the lower frequencies—below conscious politics or explicit sentimentality.⁹¹ And perhaps the effect of this “speaking” is a sensitization and hence expansion of the reader’s powers of perception. In addition to demonstrating the comparatively narrow range of human perception, radio discourse also imagined how newly discovered frequencies might serve a reparative function for our senses:

The effect of the wave, while *unnoticed by either the deaf persons or others*, is to *sensitize* deaf ears to the reception of sounds which would not otherwise be heard, or which if heard, would be unintelligible, like the confused jumble of distorted radio reception.

⁹⁰ The seemingly commonsense physical distinction between reading silently and reading aloud may also only obtain on the higher, conscious frequencies. Garrett Stewart explains, “This somatic locus of soundless reception [the reading body] includes of course the brain but must be said to encompass as well the organs of vocal production, from diaphragm up through throat to tongue and palate. Silent reading locates itself, that is, in the conjoint cerebral activity and suppressed muscular action of a simultaneously summoned and silenced enunciation.” *Reading Voices*, 1. Silent reading, understood from this perspective, is not the polar opposite of vocalization but “the place where what is called up is voice but only under suspension” (2). Our bodies, in other words, still receive impulses toward vocalization from our “silent” engagement with the text, but we do not amplify them as conscious speech.

⁹¹ This is not to suggest by any means, however, that the author exercises unilateral control over the reader through this transmission. In “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison explains, “Once introduced into society, the work of art begins to pulsate with those meanings, emotions, ideas brought to it by its audience and over which the artist has but limited control.” *Shadow and Act*, 38. In his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, he provides yet a further model for understanding cultural transmission through/as reading: “The pleasure which I derived from reading had long been a necessity, and in the *act* of reading, that marvelous collaboration between the writer’s artful vision and the reader’s sense of life, I had become acquainted with other possible selves—freer, more courageous and ingenuous and, during the course of the narrative at least, even wise” (xx).

The wave is preferably *of a low frequency* and of suitable amplitude to suit the peculiar case of deafness that is to be relieved ...⁹²

⁹² Byron E. Eldred, "How a Loudspeaker Device Brings Hearing to the Deaf," *Popular Radio* 7.4 (Apr. 1925): 311-12, "AmericanRadioHistory.com," <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1925-04.pdf>. Emphases added.

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