

Writing Sound:  
Poetry, Media, and the Matter of Prosody, 1845-1961

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## Abstract

Prosody has often been seen as one of the chief casualties of modernism's rejection of meter in the early twentieth century. When poems are no longer structured around regular rhythmic units, the logic runs, would-be prosodists are left with little to scan. This dissertation seeks to revise the narrative of prosody's obsolescence by expanding our sense of what prosody might take as its object. In this study, prosody refers not only to such traditional considerations as meter and rhythm but to the broader range of media that both supported and rivaled prosodic analysis between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. During this period, an efflorescence of new technologies revolutionized the way sound was preserved, analyzed, and reproduced and thereby, I contend, revolutionized the possibilities for prosodic thought. The most iconic of these devices, Thomas Edison's phonograph, announced in its name an ambition to "write sound" that paralleled prosody's—and, more specifically, scansion's—ambition to parse and notate the phonetic components of language. As this and other tools entered the cultural mainstream, poets turned to them to reimagine the nature of prosodic form. Thus Edgar Allan Poe figures his famous raven as a proto-modern sound reproduction device that disrupts book-based modes of interpretation. The modernist Ezra Pound lambasts the commercial gramophone yet betrays a fascination with its acoustic principles. And Langston Hughes, though often praised for presenting unmediated records of African-American speech and music, produces a highly mediated last book of poems complete with multicolored paper and ink, musical scoring, and vinyl record-like "liner notes." Through close readings of these poets, my dissertation develops a theory of prosody not as a neutral, self-coherent system of measurement but as a collective, performative, and media-conscious act.

*for James and Clara*

## Acknowledgements

The first course I taught at the University of Virginia was a writing course on “Life in the Age of Recorded Sound.” On the first day of class, I asked my students to work in groups to sketch a drawing of Thomas Edison’s revolutionary phonograph. “The year is 1877,” I told them, “and you’ve been tasked with recording and reproducing sound for the first time in human history.” After a few minutes, one group had produced something fairly like an early record player: box, cylinder, horn. When I asked them how their device worked, however, they offered a cheeky response: “There’s a parrot inside, and it repeats back whatever you say.” Though I realized it only later, my dissertation took shape in that moment, in that witty making strange of the media that house our human language.

Many people have been my teachers over the past five years, not least my students, and it is a pleasure to thank them here. I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my dissertation committee, which gamely entertained my loftier flights of fancy while helping me keep my feet on the ground. Chip Tucker demonstrated in word and deed how much fun prosody can be. Jerry McGann showed me that poems are made objects, patchworks of details bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners. Jahan Ramazani, my stalwart adviser and fellow administrator of the Center for Poetry & Poetics, modeled a level of scholarship and professionalism I doubt I’ll encounter again. In Jahan’s hands poems are revealed as sites of local attachment but also transnational affiliation, individual talent but also cultural exchange, generic particularity but also discursive porousness. It is hard to imagine a defter or wiser advocate for poetry in our global age, or indeed a more considerate mentor.

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P. M.

*Charlottesville*

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## Introduction:

### The Matter of Prosody, 1845-1961

Surveying a Victorian inheritance, Ezra Pound warns against prosodic conformity: “You don’t ask an art instructor to give you a recipe for making a Leonardo da Vinci drawing. Hence the extreme boredom caused by the usual professorial documentation or the aspiring thesis on prosody. The answer is: LISTEN to the sound that it makes” (201). Pound’s pronouncement, which appears in his 1936 *ABC of Reading*, echoes others of his strictures on prosodic form: “As regarding rhythm...compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (*Literary Essays* 3), Pound writes in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste.” Or as he reminisces in the *Cantos*, “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave” (538). As recent scholarship has shown, Pound’s reading of Victorian verse culture smoothes over a heterogeneous field of prosodic experimentation in order to accentuate the radicalism of modernism’s turn to free verse. Yet for all his oversimplifications, Pound gets one thing right: nineteenth-century literary culture was indeed rife with “professorial documentations” concerning the technical and social applications of prosody. Already by 1848, Edgar Allan Poe, in a long prosodic treatise of his own, could smugly suggest that, “When a topic is thus circumstanced, the readiest mode of investigating it is to forget that any previous investigation has been attempted” (1387). That Poe could find such a ready target for satire in so seemingly esoteric a subject speaks to the fact that prosody, in the nineteenth century, was a serious matter indeed.

Prosody in the twentieth century was not, or so most histories of Anglo-American poetry



tell us. After roughly 1910, the narrative runs, Pound and his fellow modernists, along with Harlem Renaissance poets and others, rendered prosody obsolete by producing poems that dispensed with traditional meters. From haiku-like Imagist lyrics to bookish limited editions, blues poems inspired by popular song to forbiddingly polylingual epics, the canon of modern poetry does not parse readily into iambs. As Charles Hartman observes, during modernism “the ‘science’ of prosody was at stake,” to the extent that by the mid-twentieth century “prosody—as a system, as a theory, as an object of study—almost ceased to exist” (*Free Verse* 7). By 1993, as specialized and sympathetic a source as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* felt obliged to concede that prosody had come to seem “a stony little patch of ground frequented only by eccentrics, fanatics, and pedants” (Brogan 1068). And despite recent efforts to reclaim certain bodies of metered verse as formally experimental, prosody persists in seeming something of a throwback, a charming emblem of a time before mass electrification, automobiles, and world wars.

This dissertation seeks to nuance the narrative of prosody’s obsolescence by expanding our sense of what prosody might take as its object. In the pages ahead, prosody will come to refer not only to such traditional considerations as meter and rhythm but to the broader range of media that both supported and rivaled prosodic analysis between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. During this period, an efflorescence of new technologies revolutionized the way sound was preserved, analyzed, and reproduced and thereby, I contend, revolutionized the possibilities for prosodic thought. The most iconic of these devices, Thomas Edison’s phonograph, announced in its name an ambition to “write sound” that paralleled prosody’s—and, more specifically, scansion’s—ambition to parse and notate the phonetic components of language. An even earlier sound recording device, the phonautograph of Édouard-Léon Scott de

Martinville, pursued a still more explicitly prosodic goal, inscribing its sound recordings not into wax but onto sheets of soot-blackened paper. For Scott, reproducing sound was beside the point. He simply wanted to see the tracings of sound recorded in his paper records and use them to study the contours of the human voice.

As these and other tools entered the cultural mainstream, they unsettled existing print modes of representing sound and, in doing so, allowed poets to reimagine the nature of prosodic form. In the chapters ahead, Poe figures his famous raven as a proto-modern sound reproduction device that disrupts book-based modes of interpretation. The modernist Pound lambasts the commercial gramophone yet betrays a fascination with its acoustic principles. And Langston Hughes, though often praised for presenting unmediated records of African-American speech and music, produces a highly mediated last book of poems complete with multicolored paper and ink, musical scoring, and vinyl record-like “liner notes.” Through close readings of these poets, my study proposes that prosody should be understood not as a neutral, self-coherent system of measurement but as a collective, performative, and media-conscious act. This theoretical proposition in turn supports an historical one: that prosody in the twentieth century didn’t disappear as much as it absconded into new territory—into linguistics, psychology, ethnography, and, most of all, music recording, technical and social-scientific fields whose nineteenth-century versions shared with literary studies terrain that would be increasingly subdivided in the decades to come. Modernism’s rejection of the pentameter, in other words, could also be seen as a canny generic rebranding during a paradigm shift that saw poetry’s prosodic monopoly broken up into newly professionalized fields. A prosodic analysis of this body of work, then, must pursue something of a meta-prosody, scanning not only for words and syllables but for the media that embody them.

In positing a reciprocity between prosody, associated with Victorianism, and modern sound media, associated with modernism, I revise a critical narrative that has viewed these terms as largely antithetical. In his influential 1986 study *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, the media theorist Friedrich Kittler argues that modern sound recording—specifically the modern music industry—effectively coopted the kinds of rhyming and rhythmic language that had previously been the purview of poetry. In an age of phonography, Kittler suggests, “writers are left with few options. They can, like Mallarmé or Stefan George, exorcise the imaginary voices from between the lines and inaugurate a cult of and for letter fetishists...Or for marketing reasons they can move from imaginary voices...to real ones, in which case a poetry of nameless songwriters appears, or reappears, on records.” As Kittler’s stark dichotomy insinuates, in an age of recorded sound serious poetry must abandon its claims to real-time sound effects and instead embrace its visual and material aspects, becoming in the most extreme case “a form of typographically optimized blackness on exorbitantly expensive white paper” (80).

Kittler is right to posit a tension between poetry’s normative modern venue—the codex book—and new forms of sound recording that, by casting in relief the book’s objective silence, threatened to deconstruct the trope of printed voice sustaining the lyric tradition. But as recent work in sound studies has shown, modern sound reproduction technologies crystalized, as much as inaugurated, changes in discourses about sound and hearing already well underway in the nineteenth century. The media historian Lisa Gitelman emphasizes the degree to which Edison’s phonograph, rather than simply replacing print modes, signified within “a cluster of mutually defining literacy practices, texts, and technologies” (*Scripts* 1). Jonathan Sterne similarly suggests that modern sound technologies should be viewed as “artifacts of vast transformations in the fundamental nature of sound, the human ear, the faculty of hearing, and practices of

listening that occurred over the long nineteenth century” (2).

We get a sense for prosody’s role within this evolving “cluster” by consulting one of the earliest modern efforts to write sound, Joshua Steele’s 1779 *Prosodia Rationalis*. As Steele’s subtitle explains, the book is *An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols*. Steele’s “peculiar symbols” (see Figure 0.1) incorporated elements of musical scoring but did so toward technical and phonetic, rather than musical and aesthetic, ends. Steele’s symbols, in other words, were a manual form of sound

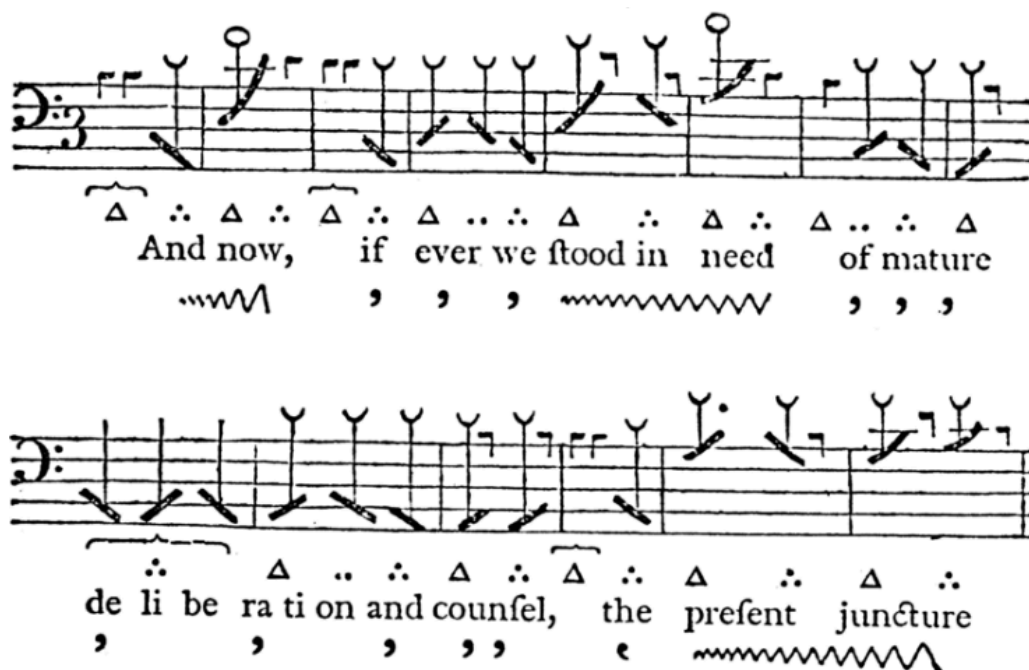


Figure 0.1

writing that anticipated the automated mechanical form achieved a century later by Scott’s phonautograph. And a century after this, the grooves of Edison’s phonograph records similarly appeared, to Theodor Adorno, “a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing” (56). While many differences separate Steele in 1779 from Scott in 1857 from Adorno in 1934, each partakes of the same slow cultural shift during which “sound itself became an object and a domain of thought and practice, where it had previously been conceptualized in terms of particular idealized

instances like voice and music” (Sterne 2).

However, if sound between 1779 and 1934 came to be understood in increasingly empirical terms, poetry during the same period came to be understood in increasingly idealized, dematerialized terms. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have shown, between the Romantic and modernist periods, the genre of “lyric” grew increasingly abstract and capacious until it designated not a set of generic traits as much as the assumed mode of virtually all poems.<sup>1</sup> This process of what Jackson calls “lyricization” is often linked to figures such as William Wordsworth and John Stuart Mill, whose aesthetic theories downplayed contingencies of mediation while stressing poetry’s expressive and emotional qualities. “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (79), Wordsworth writes in the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, while “[a poet] is a man speaking to men” (85). Prosody, within these terms, would appear a non-issue since, as Wordsworth notes, “some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose” (82).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to a certain Romantic

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<sup>1</sup> The locus classicus for this thesis is Jackson’s 2005 study *Dickinson’s Misery*, which contemplates the standardizations of punctuation, spelling, syntax, and medium undergone by Emily Dickinson’s poetry following her death. Such standardizations are, for Jackson, simply the more visible markers of the larger transformative process by which all poetic writings, generically indeterminate or not, become legible *as* poems. A key aspect of this transformation is publication in book form, which sorts potentially miscellaneous textual materials into coherent aesthetic objects worthy of critical interpretation. See also Jackson’s entry on “Lyric” in the 2012 *Princeton Encyclopedia*, as well as the introduction to Jackson’s and Prins’s edited collection *The Lyric Theory Reader*.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, Wordsworth’s poetic theory does not entirely match his practice. The very title *Lyrical Ballads* signals the book’s participation in multiple, indeed conflicting, prosodic modes. On one hand are the titular ballads, poems like “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” whose rhyming tetrameter stanzas and use of “the real language of men” (76) marked them as conspicuously rustic. On the other hand are the poems we often today label “lyrics,” poems like “Tintern Abbey,” whose enjambed blank verse registered for contemporary readers as less prosodically boisterous and thus more aesthetically refined. I develop this argument in my essay “William Wordsworth and the Invention of Culture.” See also Jerome McGann’s essay “Romantic Subjects and Iambic Laws.”

fundamentalism, prosodic analysis is the very bane of poetry—a second-order operation that, by definition, interrupts the stream of uninhibited lyricism.

I dwell on the epochal moment of *Lyrical Ballads* because it offers a useful point of departure for the two historical narratives this study seeks to correlate. One narrative, charted by scholars such as Jackson and Prins, sees poetry codified, under the long shadow of Romanticism, in terms of the increasingly idealized, dematerialized genre of lyric. The other narrative, charted by scholars such as Sterne and Gitelman, runs something of the inverse course and sees sound after roughly 1800 as something that, with the aid of new technical media, could be recorded, reproduced, and analyzed as an object of study in its own right. Drawing together these two narratives, my dissertation argues that the lyricization of poetry is haunted by the mediatization of sound, and that this haunting manifests at the level of prosodic form. Following John Guillory's assertion that new technical media such as the phonograph "seemed to reposition the traditional arts [e.g. poetry and music] as ambiguously both media and precursors to the media" (322), we might say that prosody between 1845 and 1961 comes to seem ambiguously both a sound medium and a precursor to sound media. It is a tool for recording and measuring voice, but it is also that which is replaced by newer tools for recording and measuring voice.<sup>3</sup>

That is the historical way of framing the study ahead. The other way is theoretical, oriented not toward cultural processes but general critical principles. For while the period I

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<sup>3</sup> In his important 2010 essay "Genesis of the Media Concept," Guillory demands that scholars "take equally seriously both the mediation of literature by technologies such as print...and the long-durational forms of writing, such as genre. No cultural work comes to us except through such multiple categorical mediations, never simply reducible to the effects of technical media" (361). My study could be seen as an attempt to take up Guillory's charge, in that it develops a theory of prosody as a composite of multiple mediating agents, including but not limited to the physical media that embody a poem's text.

examine witnesses particularly interesting changes in prosodic mediation, the point I draw from these changes is not period specific. That point, taking a cue from Gitelman, is that a poem's prosody might best be understood as a "cluster" of media—a matrix of text, technology, and literary practice that reproduces sound while making evident its modes of reproduction. A poem's prosody, from this perspective, is not a measurable quality inherent to a text but rather an effect a reader produces via a more or less complex assembly of media. Some of these media are tangible (e.g. paper, ink, vinyl), while others are less clearly so (e.g. iambs, phonemes, musical form). The first group can be readily pinned down to specific documents or recordings; the second group is more elusive. (Where, exactly, is a poem's meter?) Approaching prosody in this way—as a cluster of both tangible and intangible media—allows us to view poems neither as transhistorically stable "texts" nor as historically bounded artifacts, but as hybrids of the two. A poem's prosody, in other words, is not something made up on the spot from one reading to the next, but neither is it a stable quality that can be pinpointed within the physical or linguistic materials embodying the poem. It is rather a kind of interference effect produced at the intersection of readerly performance and poetic media.

In framing my intervention this way, I mean to position my dissertation as a mediator between the historicist and formalist wings of what has become, over the past decade, something of a prosody revival. Indeed, the very vigor of this revival has increasingly exposed divisions in the ranks.<sup>4</sup> An historical prosodist, for instance, would likely find in Caroline Levine's recent

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<sup>4</sup> On the historicist side, notable studies include Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho* (1999), Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter* (2012), Jason Rudy's *Electric Meters* (2009), Jason David Hall's *Nineteenth-Century Verse and Technology* (2017), and Hall's edited collection *Meter Matters* (2012). On the formalist side, see Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric*

turn to prosody as a tool for thinking comparatively about “the temporal patterning of universities, economies, governments, and theme parks” (53) an overly abstracted, lyricized stance toward poetic form. Conversely, a formally inclined poetry scholar confronted with historical prosody’s “multiplication of categories” might posit a durable heuristic value in “the gauges and terminology that traditional anglophone prosody borrowed centuries ago, God bless it, from the versification of classical antiquity” (Tucker 28n8, 26). And a scholar of experimental poetry might find in both approaches a Romantic disinclination to cope with the multimedial, anti-lyric prosodic effects characterizing “the revolution in poetry we associate with Eliot and Pound, Stevens and Williams, Gertrude Stein, H. D., and Mina Loy” (Perloff “Review” 261). To some extent these are partisan disagreements. But they might also be seen as an index of a tension at the heart of prosody, since as a century of modern linguistics has made clear, it remains impossible to say with certainty what the smallest or most universally meaningful prosodic unit of language really is. Or, as I have been phrasing it here, the shape and quality of poetic sound is itself determined by the media we use to parse that sound. Like the proverbial tree falling in the forest, prosodic form presupposes, even as it produces, certain embodied acts of attention.

Approaching prosody in this way, as a cluster of media rather than a single interpretive method, lets us see that formalist and historicist approaches to prosody are not categorically opposed. They simply foreground different elements of the cluster. When Jonathan Culler prioritizes “the lyric event” (353) he means to stress the importance of discerning a poem’s

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(2015), Derek Attridge’s *Moving Words* (2013), Herbert Tucker’s essay “Unsettled Scores” (2014), and Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (2015).



rhythmic, tonal, and otherwise prosodic textures in real-time performance. Conversely, when Meredith Martin suggests that prosody and meter comprise “a powerful discourse” (5) she is pointing out that a given prosodic system can be presented as a language’s natural adjunct in order to promote a broader political or educational agenda. At the level of critical and pedagogical praxis, the two approaches could be said to disagree over the degree to which the mediating units of prosodic form (e.g. iambs and trochees, within a traditional schema) can and should be considered transhistorically stable. Formalist approaches are typically content to explore continuities of prosodic structure across periods and traditions, whereas historicist approaches tend to interpret prosodic structure within and against the cultural discourses of relatively narrow historical periods.<sup>5</sup> Both approaches carry risks. Formalism risks glossing over historical changes in the way prosodic form has been theorized, standardized, and mediated, while historicism risks collapsing prosody into discourse, thereby minimizing its role as a meaningful affective experience available to individual readers across periods. All of which is to say that neither approach makes much sense without the other. Poetic sound without some more or less sophisticated parsing method is just speech, while prosodic debate untested by embodied verbalization is just an archive.

Most broadly, then, my dissertation attempts to reconcile historicist and formalist approaches to prosody by framing the issue as one of media theory and, more specifically,

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<sup>5</sup> As Ben Glaser puts it, historical prosody seeks to trace “the historically specific interplay between a poem’s prosodic repertoire and, insofar as it can be determined, the horizon of prosodic expectation” (“Modernist Scansion” 605). With which we might contrast Tucker’s contention that, while such historically and/or linguistically specialized methods are often “*descriptively* richer than the stiff old talk of anapestic trimeter and so forth, in *analytic* terms their yield is more blurred. They concede too much to the idiosyncrasy of the individual specimen and defer too grudgingly to the authority of the defining type” (27).

critical sound studies. That my first chapter begins with Poe may therefore seem anachronistic, since Poe, dead by 1849, did not live to see the arrival of modern sound technology. I begin where I do because I want to offset the limiting assumption that pre-modern sound reproduction technologies (e.g. meter, musical scoring) are somehow rendered non-technological, homogeneous, or obsolete by the arrival of modern sound reproduction technologies like the phonograph. Poe in particular is important because his work so exemplifies my claim that prosodic structure operates as a cluster of multiple sound media rather than a stable textual feature. In his poems and essays, Poe gathers various media and then reveals how these media produce different prosodic effects when engaged by different kinds of readers. Poe's emblem for this prosodic multiplicity is his famous raven. Introduced as "a non-reasoning creature capable of speech" (1378), Poe's raven is a kind of proto-modern phonograph, which reproduces speech without being able to comprehend it. The bird's repeated "Nevermore!" is thus a contentless speech act, and yet the poem's narrator, a scholar of "forgotten lore," assigns it a definite human meaning and is driven insane. In this way, the poem critiques the presumption that a single media platform—in this case, scholarly print culture—can fully account for the range of prosodic effects contained within a poem.

My second chapter turns to the modernist Ezra Pound, who discards the regular meters and prosodic conventions that Poe and his nineteenth-century peers cultivated. In further contrast to Poe, Pound despises forms of mass culture, including those associated with modern sound recording. "Our ears are passive before the onslaught of gramophones" (*Ezra Pound and Music* 49), he writes in 1917. One influential critical narrative has pointed to Pound's disdain for meter and pop culture as evidence of modernism's decisive break with the prosodic practices of the Victorian past, finding proof of this break in Pound's turn to the visuality of the book form. Yet

Pound, too, is concerned with poetry's sonic and verbal measurement. Furthermore, many of Pound's critical writings employ technical language associated with modern phonography. "Rhythm is a form cut into TIME" (198), Pound declares in his *ABC of Reading*, evoking early analog recordings that cut their temporally continuous sound files into wax. Analog acoustic principles appeal to Pound and shape his prosodic thinking, I argue, because they more accurately capture how the ear itself registers sound. This reading helps explain Pound's fascination with cultural objects that attempt to merge sonic and visual form—Ernest Fenollosa's ideograms, the "phonoscope" of Jean-Pierre Rousselot, the time signatures of the poet's own opera *Le Testament de Villon*—and, more broadly, offers an alternate take on modernism's visualist turn.

My third chapter turns to Langston Hughes, focusing on his last book of poetry, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. Scholarship on Harlem Renaissance poetry has tended to emphasize its turn away from English prosodic convention and toward a body of black vernacular speech and folk sources. Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad, for instance, considers the poet's 1927 collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew* his "greatest" for presenting a "barely mediated recording of the sounds...of black life" ("Fine Clothes" 146). Yet *Ask Your Mama* is a conspicuously mediated work. The most visually ornate of Hughes's books, the 1961 collection comes with "liner notes" that suggest the work is also, paradoxically, a vinyl record. This audiovisual back-and-forth is captured by the "12" in the title, which refers alternately to the number of sections in the book, the twelve-bar blues, the chromatic scale, and most significantly, the Dozens, the game of vernacular one-upmanship traditional in African-American communities. The cumulative effect of these features is to point a reader in two seemingly contradictory directions: on one hand, these features call attention to *Ask Your Mama's*

bookishness, its status as a silent printed object; on the other hand, these same features are what invite dynamic collective performance of a kind traditional prosodic analysis is ill equipped to evaluate. Attending to this dual operation, I suggest, helps deconstruct idealized notions of black folk lyricism that Hughes often stands in for, while also checking the tendency to view Hughes's poems chiefly as indices of narrow cultural or historical moments.

In a brief epilogue, I consider the implications of my study within a global anglophone context, taking as a case study the BBC radio program *Caribbean Voices* (1943-58). Recorded in London and broadcast to the West Indies on Sunday evenings, the program helped launch the careers of such contemporary writers as Derek Walcott, Louise Bennett, and Kamau Brathwaite, in part by offering them a gateway to the London literary scene. Yet the BBC program itself was an aural event: listeners in the West Indies lacked the framing devices of book pages, stanzas, line breaks, and other visual features central to the then-current New Critical sense of poems as verbal icons. Focusing on the figures of Bennett and Brathwaite, my epilogue elaborates the value of a transmedial prosody within our increasingly global, multimediated present.

1.

Prosody Machines:

Edgar Allan Poe's Verbal Media

In a passage from his long treatise on prosody “The Rationale of Verse,” Edgar Allan Poe invites readers to join him in imagining a scene of poetic interpretation. “Now let us suppose that, a thousand years hence, when the ‘American language’ is dead, a learned prosodist should be deducing from ‘careful observation’ of our best poets, a system of scansion for our poetry” (1423). This prosodist of the far distant future will not be merely gathering data, Poe implies, but entering into a complex aesthetic experience shaped by the cultural and technological differences between America in 1848 and his own interpretive community in 2848. The “system of scansion” this prosodist produces, we are to infer, will say as much about his own culture as about the “dead” world of antebellum America. Poe exaggerates his timescale to make his point, but he means it to apply at any scale. When we read poetry from the past, we nonetheless access its prosodic form using the media of the present.

Poe had much to say about the technical and cultural stakes of prosody. Yet this aspect of his work has long held a rather dubious standing within anglophone literary criticism. One reason for this has to do with the severe irony Poe’s poetry and criticism bring to a cultural discourse—metrical and prosodic theory—that, as Meredith Martin and others have shown, was in the nineteenth century a quite serious matter. Poe’s chief entry into this discourse, “The Rationale of Verse,” despite opening with the tenable argument that the visual logics of print have obscured the acoustic core of poetry, concludes by offering a still more arcane system of

visual scansion to support his argument. Another reason is that it remains difficult to disentangle the critical edge of Poe's prosody from his image as a social outsider and literary charlatan, an image calcified during the literary and media revolutions of modernism.<sup>6</sup> Emerson's early putdown of Poe as "the jingle man" (Chubb 285) retains its sting and captures a broad academic sentiment rearticulated the following century, if in more nuanced terms, by T. S. Eliot. Assessing Poe's significance for American and indeed World literature, Eliot concludes that "sound and sense must cooperate; in even the most purely incantatory poem, the dictionary meaning of words cannot be disregarded with impunity" ("Poe" 332).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Eliot concedes, "one cannot be sure that one's own writing has *not* been influenced by Poe," since certain of his poems "are as well remembered by everybody, as any poems ever written" (327). Poe's sonorous poetry, Eliot implies, hovers in the collective unconscious like a radio jingle, hollow if examined closely, but pervasive and, in its own way, profound.

In this chapter, I approach Poe's prosody not as a stable, self-identical textual feature but as a sound reproduction technology dependent on its users. Or more specifically, a cluster of sound technologies. As I will demonstrate, Poe's poems and critical essays gather various sound media—phonetic script, meter, scansion, musical form, talking ravens, bells—and then show how these media reproduce language according to divergent prosodic logics when engaged by

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<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship has tempered this romanticized image of Poe by detailing his canny and thoroughgoing engagement with, and by, contemporary print culture. See chapters 4 and 5 of Meredith McGill's *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (2003), Eliza Richards's *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (2004), and J. Gerald Kennedy's and Jerome McGann's edited collection *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture* (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Generally the anglophone modernist academy took a still more negative stance toward Poe. See, for instance, the opinions of Laura Riding and Yvor Winters. Harold Bloom reasserts the consensus for our own time: "I can think of no American writer...at once so inevitable and so dubious" (3).

different kinds of readers. As this description suggests, one of the goals of this chapter is to develop my larger claim that the prosodic structure of a poem comprises multiple overlapping sound media, which are not coextensive with that poem's printed text. Approaching poems in this way keeps us alert to the fact that prosodic structure is not self-identical: different readers can produce different prosodic effects when reading the same poem, as indeed can a single reader on subsequent readings. Thus, to my dissertation's largest question—whether prosodic form can be said to have an historical character—Poe proposes a way forward by answering yes and no. Yes, all poetic verbalizations are historical acts linked to specific physical media. But no, we cannot historicize these acts in the way modern literary criticism tends to, since the psycholinguistic processes that respond to these media to bring prosodic form into palpable being are ultimately singular and inscrutable.<sup>8</sup> We can and should continue to recover documentary evidence that speaks to how prosodic form was experienced, defined, and regulated in the past. But we should also acknowledge that this is not the same as knowing what readers in 1800 or 1900 or 2000 actually felt as they enunciated a poem's language and sensed its form take shape. That kind of knowledge, Poe suggests, is inescapably a knowledge of the present.

## **Sound Writing**

Before turning to Poe, I want to consult two early forms of sound recording, one well known, one not. These will help situate the subsequent discussion of how prosody, and its visual

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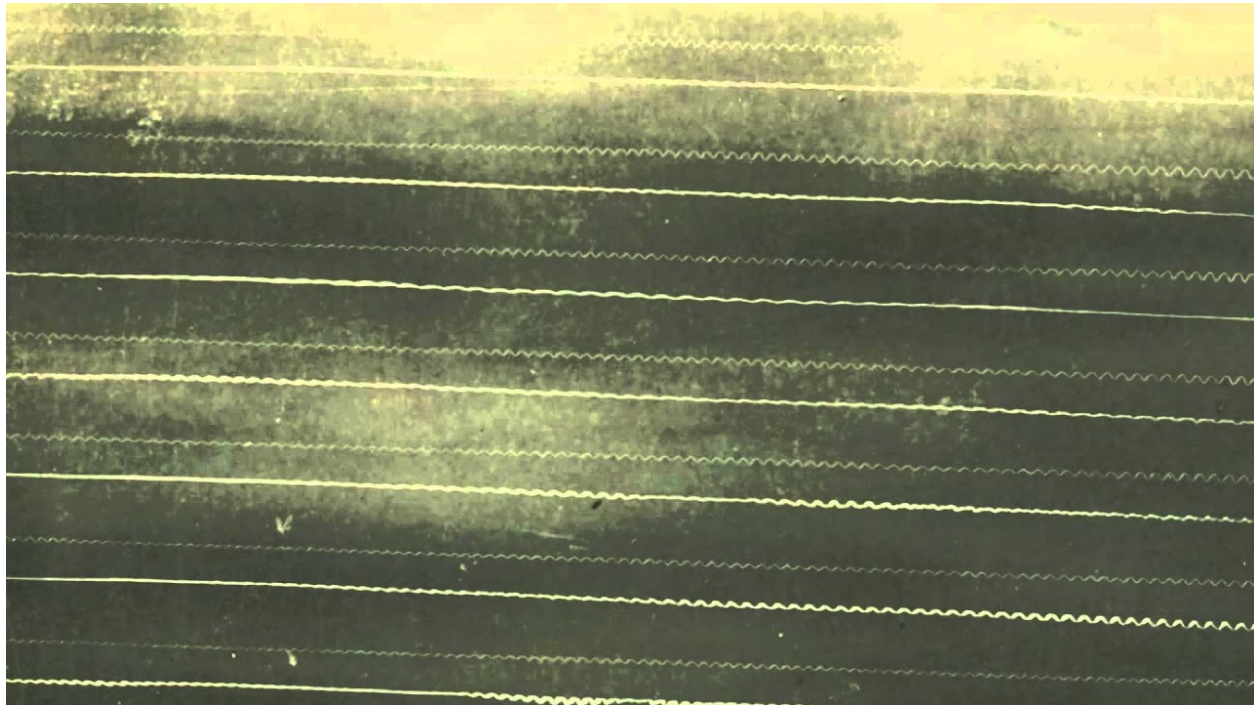
<sup>8</sup> Here I mean to imply a distinction between the historicity of prosodic form and that of, say, the novel. Enunciating a novel's language also activates a reader's prosodic protocols, but the acoustic-temporal contours of this enunciation are, compared to poetry, less generically determinant than such higher-order concerns as plot, theme, and character development.

application via a system of scansion, might be seen as a form of media theory and, more specifically, critical sound studies. The better known of these sound technologies is Thomas Edison's phonograph, often credited with inaugurating the era of modern sound recording, its name itself promising the ability to "sound write." "Just tried experiment with a diaphragm having an embossing point," jotted a thirty-year-old Edison in 1877. "Held against paraffined paper moving rapidly the spkg vibrations are indented nicely & theres no doubt that I shall be able to store up & reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly" (qtd. in Israel 144). Four months later, Edison had proven himself correct, as he turned a crank, recited "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and stood transfixed as his phonograph played back the sounds of his performing voice. "I never was so taken back in my life," he would later recall. "Everybody was astonished. I was always afraid of things that worked the first time" (qtd. in Burgess 6). Edison assumed his device would be used to help create and share linguistic texts. Automatic letter-writing, dictation, and audiobook creation were the first three applications he envisioned (531-33). With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the most lucrative application of Edison's invention was not in sharing written or spoken words, but in sharing music, an application that launched the modern music industry.

The phonograph's multi-billion-dollar legacy obscures that of an even earlier sound recording device, the phonautograph, far less lucrative but no less significant in the cultural and technological history of sound recording. Patented in 1857 by a Parisian typesetter named Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, the phonautograph operated similarly to Edison's device, but inscribed its sound recordings onto sheets of soot-blackened paper rather than tin foil or wax. Because of their fragility and near-two-dimensionality, Scott's sound recordings could not be replayed acoustically, but existed only as graphical transcriptions of sound (see *Figure 1.1*). For



Scott, sonic reproduction was beside the point. Instead, he wanted to use his transcriptions as a means of isolating the prosodic components of human speech. The phonautograph, Scott believed, would dispense with the arbitrary alphabetic tools of linguistic preservation and instead create records perfectly analogous to the sound of speech itself. Years later when the fanfare



*Figure 1.1*

surrounding Edison’s phonograph reached Scott, he deemed the device a gimmick because it “merely reproduced sound—it was not a *sound-writer*” (qtd. in Sterne 46).

Surprisingly, Scott’s pathbreaking work was virtually unknown to the public until fairly recently. His recorded phonautograms, as he called them, languished in the French Academy of Sciences until the mid-2000s, when they were rediscovered by the media historian Patrick Feaster. Feaster arranged for scans to be made of the phonautograms, which were then sent to a team of experimental physicists at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in Berkeley, California. Using a technique called optical metrology developed in experiments at the CERN particle

collider in Switzerland, this team was able to create ultra-accurate three-dimensional measurements of Scott's soot-on-paper phonautograms. From these digitized physical measurements, they were able to evoke sounds of a human voice that had been encoded in them nearly 150 years earlier. This 1860 recording, later identified as Scott himself singing the French folk song "Au Claire de la Lune," is the oldest human sound on record.<sup>9</sup> So while Scott now beats Edison to the award for the first sound recording in history, this changing of the guard happened, ironically, only after Scott's visual artifacts entered the realm of the auditory.

This abridged technical history may seem rather removed from literary concerns with prosody. Yet recent work in sound studies and historical poetics converges in notable ways, revealing how the fields' respective objects of analysis—radio, say, or meter—are not neutral containers of vocal data, but historical forms that both reflect and produce vocal subjectivities. In what ways, then, might the ambitions of sound recording and prosody overlap? For one thing, the tension between audible and visible sound represented by the competing legacies of Edison and Scott highlights a tension at the heart of prosody. For prosody properly denotes both the sound of poetic language and a reader's analytic engagement with that sound, a dual commitment to acoustics and psycholinguistics revealed materially when a system of scansion supports the reading of a poem. "As a visible notation of an imagined performative utterance, for which it serves concurrently as record and as guide," observes Herbert Tucker, "scansion both confesses and exposes that acoustic nostalgia which has inhabited the printed voice in its virtual orality ever since poems first fell from the air onto the page" (25-26). Scansion, we might say, by scoring tonal features of a poetic text while also underscoring that text's written remove from real-time vocalization, functions as both phonograph and phonautograph, as both record and

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<sup>9</sup> For details on the rediscovery and reproduction of Scott's phonautograms see Wilkinson.

guide, as Tucker puts it.

This dual commitment is in fact one of the chief virtues of prosodic analysis, in that it illustrates how poetic language itself makes commitments to both preexisting literary forms and contingencies of real-time performance. But prosody's doubleness can also be used to mask forms of culture under the sign of nature. This is the thesis Meredith Martin advances in her study *The Rise and Fall of Meter*, which excavates a dynamic history of prosodic debate in the later nineteenth century to caution against "[taking] meter's meaning for granted as merely the measure of the line" (5). Instead, Martin argues, theories of meter and prosody comprise "a powerful discourse that interacts with and influences discourses about national culture" (5). Martin's study is exemplary of recent work in historical poetics interested in ways that non-semantic formal features of poetry (e.g. meter, rhythm, rhyme) are also historically contingent discursive functions delimiting cultural or identitarian boundaries. Much of this work constellates in the Victorian and early modernist periods, and given its predominant concern with sonic features of poetry it would benefit from consulting contemporaneous developments in sound media in England, Europe, and America. We might note, for instance, that as Edison's phonograph was capturing and reproducing the actual tones of human voices and musical instruments for the first time, "tone" was disappearing from anglophone definitions of prosody. As Martin observes, "As the science of linguistics was growing—indeed developing the science of phonetics—the perceived 'problems' of pronunciation in prosody that may have required 'tone' were, perhaps, no longer necessary" (40). Martin does not discuss sound technology, but the linguistic sciences she refers to depended on it. Indeed, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, new sound technologies underwrote a host of scientific, anthropological, and literary efforts aimed at preserving and analyzing human voice as one of the chief indices of

cultural difference.<sup>10</sup> And as prosody ceded its claims on “performance, voice, and affect” to modern sound media, it was recast as a “grammar with applicable and clear rules” (Martin 40).

Modernism rejected these rules in turning to free verse.<sup>11</sup> Pound in particular railed against the expanding archive of prosodic theory: “You don’t ask an art instructor to give you a recipe for making a Leonardo da Vinci drawing. Hence the extreme boredom caused by the usual professorial documentation or the aspiring thesis on prosody. The answer is: LISTEN to the sound that it makes” (*ABC* 201). Pound seems to want back the “tone” that official prosodies had given up, but without the pedantic rules. Yet his language conspicuously evades the fact that page-based poetic sound is always a collaboration between human physiological processes and a material linguistic text; Pound instead treats the aesthetic object—“it”—like a sound recording which one can simply listen to. Indeed, Pound and other modernists developed a fraught and often self-contradictory stance toward “the sound that [poetry] makes” in an age of recorded sound, as we will see in the next chapter. Liberated from regular metrical and rhyme schemes, advocates of free verse sought to explore new nuances of vocal pitch and intonation, but these remained largely invisible in their poems’ printed texts. Modern sound recording technology could have captured just such nuances, and some poets turned to it for just this purpose, yet the phonographs and gramophones appearing in modernist literature are often darkly ironized,

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<sup>10</sup> For the phonograph’s importance to these these fields, see Kittler 21-114; Golston 1-58; Peart; Brady; Hall, *Nineteenth-Century Verse* 165-206; Rudy; and Parry xxxv-xxxviii.

<sup>11</sup> As Martin and others have shown, modernism’s rejection of meter and prosody oversimplified the past as well as the present. Many early twentieth century poets worked within inherited meters and prosodic expectations, updating them rather than rejecting them wholesale. See Glaser, who points to Robert Frost’s “loose iambics” to consider “the incongruity between modernism’s self-defined aesthetics and the historical, technical, and broadly public practice of scansion as it exists up to and through the early twentieth century” (“Modernist Scansion” 603).

emblems for the mechanizing forces of commercialized mass culture.

I invoke modernism's ambivalent stance toward sound recording not to rehash the familiar narrative of techno-cultural rupture, but rather to open the door to thought about how different historical modes of "sound writing" engage similar ethical and aesthetic problems across time. For the "prosody wars" (Martin 12) of the Victorian period and the "gramophone problem" (Saint-Amour 15) developing during modernism emerge out of and speak back to perennial concerns with how human voices get recorded and to what end. Should voices be recorded for artistic reasons or scholarly ones? What assumptions about language and human psychology are embedded in the tools respective to prosody, phonography, and other forms of vocal capture? Perhaps most germane to the literary scholar, in what ways are beliefs about genre also functions of the physical media used to share literature?

## **The Jingle Man**

Edgar Allan Poe's poetry operates at the intersection of these questions, raising issues of voice, media, and cognition that will come to a head during modernism. Poe presents it as axiomatic that a poem should be experienced in real time, should prioritize sound effects, and should engage human affect. "A poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul" (1431), Poe writes in "The Poetic Principle." Because "all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient," poems are by definition brief. "After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such." *Paradise Lost*, Poe suggests, is best understood as "a series of minor [i.e. short] poems" (1431). Poe therefore turns repeatedly to music as the art form poetry should strive

toward, going as far as to define poetry simply as “*The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*” (1438). In this, Poe is reacting against the Romanticism he sees represented by Wordsworth and the American transcendentalists, who had succumbed in his opinion to what he calls “the heresy of *The Didactic*” (1435), the misguided belief that poetry is a vehicle for intellectual debate or moral suasion.

Poe’s own poetry is motivated not by thematic or sociological concerns, but by a more granular concern with the verbal and sonic protocols coded by written language. A characteristic feature of Poe’s poetry is its tendency to obscure and ironize the semantic and lexical divisions between words, as in the opening lines of “Dream-Land”: “By a route obscure and lonely, / Haunted by ill angels only” (79). If we commit to honoring the regular trochaic stress pattern established by line 1, we find ourselves enunciating the rather off-putting phrase “**bile angels**” in line 2; alternately, if we choose a different “route” by privileging semantics over metered phonetics, the end of line 2 yields a weird syncopation built on imperfectly alliterative vowel sounds (“**ill angels only**”). Similar tactics inform “Ulalume—A Ballad,” which undercuts its title’s promise of musicality with a host of prosodic feints. Most off-putting is the way Poe denies his lines, and his readers, the satisfaction of the fourth beat we feel the ballad form should entitle us to:

And now, as the night was senescent,  
And star-dials pointed to morn—  
As the star-dials hinted of morn—  
At the end of our path a liquescent  
And nebulous lustre was born, (89)

To call this a case of anapestic trimeter and leave it at that is to absolve oneself of the local

challenges to performance and interpretation the poem raises.<sup>12</sup> Consider line 4. Its syntax and the poem's halting three-beat rhythm seem to position the terminal word "liquescent" as a noun. But the word reveals itself, after a grammatical double-take, as an adjective, its object ("lustre") displaced onto the next line. This isn't merely an enjambment; it's an ironic joke about enjambment as a critical category.

In ways like this, Poe's poetry exposes the inevitably imperfect fit between real-time prosodic effects and the array of interpretive media—metrical and generic convention, musical form, lineation, grammar and syntax—that we use to parse and classify such effects. It exposes, that is, the cluster of media that characterizes prosody generally. Poe makes this project explicit in "The Raven" by positioning his famous bird and the poem's narrator at extreme ends of the sound-sense spectrum. Claiming to have based his "Nevermore" refrain based purely on the aptness of "the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant" (1378), Poe explains in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" that

The next *desideratum* was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word "nevermore."

In observing the difficulty which I had at once found in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition, I did not fail to perceive that this difficulty arose solely from the pre-assumption that the word was to be so continuously or monotonously

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<sup>12</sup> The point I am making is not that "anapestic trimeter" isn't the best reading for these lines, but that such a reading does not fully account for, indeed risks neutralizing, the meta-prosodic joking these lines perform. In more concrete terms, we might observe that, while most anapestic trimeter passages establish a "silent" fourth beat at the termination of their lines, "Ulalume" seems to revel in the syntactical hiccups this silent beat produces. In the case of "Dream-Land," it is certainly accurate to describe its second line as trochaic tetrameter with an iambic substitution in the second foot. The salient point, however, is that this diagnosis cannot finally describe the charming prosodic strangeness of those "bile angels."

spoken by *a human* being—I did not fail to perceive, in short, that the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech, and very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended *tone*. (1378)

This is Poe’s most overt troping of his poetry as a form of sound media, and though the poet died before the invention of modern analog recording technology, he imagines his raven’s sound reproduction capability in recognizably analog terms. That is, Poe chooses his bird because, at least to his mind, it processes language merely as a function of continuous acoustic frequencies rather than discrete semantic meanings. While the “*non*-reasoning” raven can accurately reproduce the sounds of speech, it lacks the psycholinguistic ability to segment this sound into phonological units that can be meaningfully rearranged and re-voiced in the future.<sup>13</sup> It lacks, in other words, any measure of prosodic self-consciousness.

With the technical and philosophical stakes of the poem thus established, “The Raven” proceeds by contrasting the linguistic orientations of bird and narrator. If language is to the bird a meaningless stream of acoustic matter, to the poem’s human narrator, a scholar of “forgotten lore” (81), language is a meaningful textual affair, a writeable and analyzable set of letters, syllables, and words. As readers, we know that the narrator should realize that the intrusive raven

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<sup>13</sup> Poe’s interest in the biomechanics of human and non-human speech extends beyond “The Raven.” See his tales “The Black Cat,” “The Man Who Was Used Up,” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the last of which, Jason David Hall observes, endeavors to “[distinguish] rational, educated speech from vocalizations that are ‘absolutely alien from humanity’ (foreign voices, the raving of madmen, animal cries)” (44). Poe would surely be intrigued by recent work in cognitive science that has recorded “evidence...for a form of imitation, vocal segmentation, by a Grey parrot,” which suggests the bird “has phonological awareness” (Pepperberg 1).



cannot comprehend the symbolic codes of the human world and so cannot speak truthfully to that world. Initially, the narrator does realize this: “Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly, / Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore” (83). But even as he discounts the raven’s capacity for meaningful “discourse,” the narrator, “linking / Fancy unto fancy” (84), deduces an origin story for the bird’s linguistic competence: “‘Doubtless,’ said I, ‘what it utters is its only stock and store / Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster / Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore’” (84). The narrator, we come to realize, can’t help translating the raven’s meaningless soundings into the facticity of print. And once the “ebony” bird has perched on the “pallid” bust of Pallas—a black character on a white surface—it begins to speak a maddening human message about the lost love Lenore. The narrator is the victim, as it were, of over-zealous prosodic analysis.

We are too. If the poem is about a scholar who over-interprets a tissue of meaningless sounds and goes insane, the poem also *is* that tissue. Poe could have written “The Raven” without its propulsive rhythm and interlocking rhymes. With these prosodic elements, we ourselves become the scholar in the poem the moment we make an interpretive decision about why he succumbs; we, too, take a series of monotonously repeated sounds and turn them into human meanings that they, in themselves, do not possess. Once we fall into Poe’s trap, it can be hard to see the poem as anything but a cautionary tale about the dangers of fixing stable historical meaning to something as fleeting as poetic sound. Historical prosodists beware, the poem seems to say, throwing a prescient smirk toward Eliot and other scholarly types hoping to make sound and sense cooperate.

The poem’s reception history would seem to underscore this warning. For as scholars including Eliza Richards and Meredith McGill have demonstrated, one of the most attractive

features of Poe's poetry for nineteenth-century readers was not its self-identical, historically stable character, but its openness to creative reproduction and repurposing. "The Raven" in particular, a poem openly cobbled together from past sources, during and after Poe's lifetime came to denote not a single text as much as "a discursive network that mediated a range of cultural conversations via proliferation" (Richards "Poe's Lyrical Media" 209). "Poe casts the poem," writes Richards, "as a linguistic machine abandoned by its maker that invites readers to discover its mode of functioning and take over its operations" (206). Indeed, so simultaneously derivative and generative were the sounds of Poe's poetry that, McGill observes, his work was frequently attributed to less well known writers even as their work was attributed to him (141-4). The ongoing repurposing of Poe's poetry across the twentieth century and into our own, moreover, makes clear that this dimension of his work was not simply a nineteenth-century phenomenon.

It may seem that I am opposing scholarly prosodic analysis to uncritical popular performance—that is, narrator versus raven and, more broadly, literary academy versus popular culture. But popular repurposings of Poe's poetry also entail prosodic judgment, whether called that or not. For as readers perform and modify a poem like "The Raven," they necessarily gain a more reflective understanding of its verbal structures, its prosody, often precisely by modifying these structures. One reason this creative modification can be hard to see as a form of prosodic analysis is that academic criticism tends to think of literature in terms of stable printed texts. Indeed, our professional and pedagogical obligations presuppose, in a quite practical sense, our being on the same page as students and fellow scholars. This chapter relies on a printed edition of Poe that chooses certain versions of his texts and not others. Yet as Richards and McGill have shown, such a model does not capture the "complex forms of authorial agency" (McGill 149)

that underwrite not just Poe's printed texts but his poetics more broadly. Thus these critics turn frequently to the language of sonic reproducibility in their accounts; and thus I, too, present sound media as a helpful rubric for approaching Poe's poetry and prosody. Though printed editions are by definition meant to present functionally equivalent texts to readers, when it comes to something as intimate and idiosyncratic as prosodic form, no text is self-identical. "The Raven," its reception history, and Poe's commentary on the poem insist on this point by revealing how minute, seemingly neutral phonological features of a verbal text (e. g. "the long *o*...in connection with *r*") can signify in drastically different ways when engaged by different people using different media platforms. Each prosodic rubric brought to bear on a poem, regardless of sophistication, will not simply measure verbal structure but will help determine it. Historicist scholars, Poe suggests, might therefore acknowledge more readily the multiplicity of prosodic effects that all poetical texts admit even, perhaps especially, when attempting to assign those texts historical meanings.

### **"The Rationale of Verse"**

And yet "The Rationale of Verse" suggests the opposite. If Poe's poetry, as I have proposed, performatively exposes the dialectical entanglement of local prosodic effects and larger prosodic rubrics, his long treatise on prosody and versification seems intent on collapsing this dialectic. Claiming to have developed a one-size-fits-all prosody that will reveal poetry's basically oral, acoustic nature, the essay proceeds as if the raft of developments in literary and media history from the origins of human vocalization to the present—chief among them, writing and print—could be seamlessly integrated into this oral poetics; as if, in other words, these

developments did not themselves alter the nature of poetic composition and reception. The essay's many logical contradictions and its bombastic, vituperative tone have led generations of critics to wonder if Poe is writing in jest or is simply off his rocker.<sup>14</sup> As Poe's editors Stuart Levine and Shirley F. Levine admit, "Viewed in the terms in which we customarily think of English verse, 'The Rationale of Verse' seems perverse and not very sensible" (77). I suggest, however, that the essay's perversions and self-contradictions are deliberate. By staging its brazenly transhistorical argument, "Rationale" casts in ironic relief the centuries-long sedimentation of media and literary practice that comprise the modern poetic voice, and that no strictly formalist theory of prosody or method of scansion can adequately parse.<sup>15</sup>

I should note that, given the many ironies and contradictions of "Rationale," I have found it most effective in this section to present Poe's salient claims *as* claims before critiquing or contextualizing them. This method allows the essay's long ironic arc to become visible, though, it should be stated, it is no substitute for reading the essay oneself. As in Poe's poetry, the critical or intellectual content of "Rationale" emerges as a function of readerly performance. The difference in this case is that the performance develops over the course of forty rather dense pages of prose.

Poe begins "Rationale" by locating the origin of poetry in what he calls a universal human predilection for acoustic "equality," for affective experiences of sonic patterning that yield a sense of "similarity, proportion, identity, repetition, and adaptation or fitness" (1393).

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<sup>14</sup> See Stedman and Woodberry 6:xiv and Quinn and O'Neill 2:1087.

<sup>15</sup> Poe's penchant for critical hoaxing has been more thoroughly documented in relation to "The Philosophy of Composition." Stéphane Mallarmé calls the essay a "pure intellectual game" (217), while Dennis Pahl suggests we read it as another one of Poe's tales, "just as highly wrought and complex" (2).

With equality as a “natural principle,” Poe proposes that, “The rudiment of verse may, possibly, be found in the *spondee*. The very germ of a thought seeking satisfaction in equality of sound, would result in the construction of words of two syllables, equally accented” (1394). From the primordial spondee, Poe posits, poets would have proceeded to develop verse of greater rhythmic complexity until a need to “[curtail]...the length of a sequence” (1396) would have led them to establish the concept of the poetic line as such. “Lines being once introduced, the necessity of distinctly defining these lines *to the ear*, (as yet written verse does not exist,) would lead to a scrutiny of their capabilities *at their terminations*:—and now would spring up the idea of equality in sound between the final syllables—in other words, of *rhyme*” (1397). Even as poets developed these layers of sonic complexity, Poe stresses, their verse would have maintained a regular temporal pulse: “The principle of *equality* in verse,” Poe explains, “admits...of variation at certain points, for the relief of monotone...but the point of *time* is that point which, being the rudimental one, must never be tampered with at all” (1403).

Yet how to represent and enforce these temporally equal intervals? That is, how should they be mediated? This is less of a problem in the pre-literate “night of Time” (1398) in which “Rationale” imaginatively begins, an age whose primary orality well suits a purely acoustic poetics. In a modern age, however, poetry’s sounds are represented by printed or scripted alphabetic texts whose discrete, approximate mode of capturing speech sounds—unlike the continuous mode of, say, a phonographic raven—opens the door to prosodic variance when those texts spur future readings. Anticipating media theorists such as Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan, Poe cautions readers to keep in mind the “oil and water of the eye and ear” (1414) when scanning lines of verse.<sup>16</sup> Ideally, he suggests, a reader confronted with a poem’s printed

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<sup>16</sup> See McLuhan 26, Ong 32.

text should not need to adjust her reading practices in order for the poem's prosodic features to be accurate and audible. "*That* rhythm is erroneous," Poe elaborates, "which *any* ordinary reader *can*, without design, read improperly. It is the business of the poet so to construct his line that the intention *must* be caught *at once*" (1408).<sup>17</sup>

Poe cites the opening lines of Byron's "Bride of Abydos" as an example of a poem whose text has been crafted to support this kind of democratic prosody. "The flow of these lines...is very sweet and musical," Poe observes. "Yet I have heard men, professing to be scholars, who made no scruple of abusing these lines of Byron's on the ground that they were musical in spite of *all law*" (1412). Such bookish prosodies, according to Poe, transform poetry that "flows so smoothly to the ear" into "a mere jumble of catalecticism, acatalecticism, and hypermeter—not to say worse" (1414). To cleanse his reader's audiovisual palate, Poe relineates Byron's poetry as prose, marking the divisions between audible poetic feet only to underscore that such visual markings are, in fact, superfluous: "Know ye the | land where the | cypress and | myrtle Are | emblems of | deeds that are | done in their | clime— Where the | rage of the | vulture, the | love of the | turtle Now | melt into | softness, now | madden to | crime?" (1414). Poe's point is that whether one calls these units *dactyls*, *triplets*, or *whatchamacallits*, nearly all anglophone readers will feel, in the act of enunciation, the regular musical beats this poetic text lays down.

Yet not all verse employs rhythmically regular units, as Poe concedes. Many poems incorporate metrical substitutions or extra syllables that risk throwing off the "flow" of the prosody. Poe points to a line by Pope:

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<sup>17</sup> At the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, we should note the irony, here and elsewhere, of Poe's liberal usage of italics—printed prose's coarse prosody—to demand acoustically felicitous poetic rhythms.

or laugh | and shake | in Rab | elais ea | sy chair, | (1403)

In this line of iambic pentameter the fragment “elais” poses a problem, Poe notes, because it contains two syllables instead of the single “short” or “unstressed” syllable. To fix this, Poe suggests, “each syllable must be pronounced as distinctly as possible...but with twice the rapidity in which the ordinary short syllable is enunciated” (1403). Poe is, in effect, requesting a musical subdivision. He is asking that readers perform “elais ea” as two sixteenth notes followed by a quarter note, in order to fit an iambic schema that normally runs as one eighth note followed by a quarter note. A trickier prosodic case presents itself in lines Poe cites by the American poet Christopher Pearse Cranch:

Many are the thoughts that come to me

In my lonely musing;

And they drift so strange and swift

There's no time for choosing (1407)

These lines eventually settle into a squarely trochaic ballad meter, but the very first foot squeezes in four syllables (“Many are the”) where there would normally be just two. To maintain the strict 2:1 temporal relationship Poe requires between a trochee’s “long” and “short” syllables, the poet suggests the final three syllables of the foot (“y are the”) must be made to occupy precisely half as much time as the first syllable (“Man”). In other words, the final three syllables must each be performed six times as fast as the first syllable. This rhythm could certainly be put toward satisfying ends in a piece of music, but as an unaccompanied poetic speech act it is highly unnatural. The final three syllables (“y are the”) are simply too fast as Poe would have them. Slow them down to compensate, and the first syllable (“Man”) becomes comically elongated.

We should pause here to note the irony that has developed around Poe’s stated goal of

theorizing a purely oral, acoustic poetics. Putting aside the question of whether individual rhythms are performable or not, we can't help noticing how thoroughly "Rationale" exploits the visual and spatial affordances of print—segmented words, citation, odd diacritical marks, sheer paginated length—to mount its argument. This irony reaches its apex near the end of the essay when Poe unveils an elaborate model of visual scansion that, he claims, "will answer the real purpose...the purpose of expressing to the eye the exact relative value of every syllable employed in Verse" (1417). Featuring a mix of whole numbers and fractions, some placed above the line, some below, the arcane visual language of Poe's scansion is anything but an aid to rhythmically accurate performance (see *Figure 1.2*). Even if it were, we should recall the import

$\frac{3}{2}$   
 Many are the | thoughts that | come to | me  
 $\frac{6}{2}$   $\frac{6}{2}$   $\frac{6}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   
 In my | lonely | musing, |  
 $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   
 $\frac{3}{2}$   
 And they | drift so | strange and | swift  
 $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   
 There's no | time for | choosing |  
 $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{3}{2}$   
 $\frac{3}{2}$   
 Which to | follow | for to | leave  
 $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   
 Any, | seems a | losing. |  
 $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{2}$

*Figure 1.2*

of "The Raven," which builds its phonological parable around "o" and "r" precisely to demonstrate that there is no such thing as "the exact relative value of every syllable employed in Verse." Different readers will respond to the "same" textual material in different ways. Poe accentuates these ironies by glossing his system's new-and-improved poetic feet with some of the essay's funniest, most absurd statements. "That the syllables *elais ea* do not compose an anapæst is evident, and the signs of their accentuation are erroneous. The foot might be written



thus ( — — — ), the inverted crescents expressing double quick time; and might be called a bastard iambus” (1403-4). To the “bastard iambus” and “double quick time” Poe adds a “bastard trochee,” “quick trochee,” and a caesura that is “always *longer than ‘long’*” (1418). The caesura, Poe explains, “must be accented, above [the line], with 1½; for this is the relative value of the iambus...For the complex 1½, however, it would be advisable to substitute the simpler expression ¾ which amounts to the same thing” (1419). Anticipating questions regarding the quick trochee’s absent counterpart, Poe explains: “The quick iambus is not yet created, and most probably never will be; for it would be excessively useless, awkward, and liable to misconception—” (1418).

It would be hard to find a better assessment of “Rationale” as a whole, which having opened with an affect-oriented acoustical poetics, ends very near the “jumble” of bookish jargon Poe first set out to overturn. Indeed, as Stuart and Susan Levine observe, “had [Poe’s system] caught on...foundries would have cast special type to handle it. Since it did not, each reprinting of ‘The Rationale of Verse’ has involved improvisation, errors, or both” (79).<sup>18</sup> Moving from primitive spondees, to acoustic “lines” of verse defined by end-rhyme, to scripted poetical texts, to a paratextual system of scansion aimed at print distribution, Poe’s attempt to strong-arm the prosodic contours of verse into a temporally homogenized, ahistorical grid exposes the swath of media and literary history that make such an effort so open to critique. I take this irony to be deliberate, but in an important sense, the essay makes the same point whether or not we think Poe is in on the joke. That point comes in the form of a warning to formally-inclined readers

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, even typing this chapter, in Word for Mac 2011, I had to resort to some digital legerdemain to render Poe’s wonderful “¾.”

against taking prosodic theory as natural law.<sup>19</sup> Ingeniously, Poe administers this warning by enlisting us in a long-form performative exercise: in physically articulating his extreme rhythms or attempting to reproduce his scansion typographically, we are made to realize the basically ad hoc nature of all prosodic systems. What “Rationale” finally suggests, then, is not that scansion and prosodic analysis are useless, but that they are partial and, when administered on broad social scales, ideological. Products of culture, these analytic tools register and privilege certain classes of sonic features over others. They do not sit neutrally apart from what Poe calls “the poem *per se*” (1375) but, once evoked, themselves become mediating agents in the production of prosodic form.

### **Sounding “The Bells”**

We might summarize the previous two sections by observing that, if “The Raven” makes glaringly evident the subjective, multimedial aspects of prosodic analysis, “Rationale” ironically attempts to standardize them. The first instance alerts historicist approaches to the limits of assigning singular historical meaning to something as ephemeral and idiosyncratic as phonetic sound, while the second instance alerts formalist approaches to the limits of homogenizing formal features in order to open them to transhistorical comparative analysis. In this section, I turn to a single poem to illustrate further how Poe’s double critique plays out in practice, which is to say in real-time performance interspersed with prosodic reflection. The poem I have in mind

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<sup>19</sup> The closest thing to a natural prosodic law may be what modern linguistics terms *isochrony*, the division of speech into perceptibly equivalent temporal units. Christopher Aruffo argues that “Rationale” is a straight-faced attempt to articulate a theory of isochrony. See Patmore and Lanier for examples of later nineteenth-century poets who developed isochronous theories of prosody.

is “The Bells.” A perennial favorite for “spectacular recitation” (McGann 173), the poem has also enjoyed a particularly dubious reputation among academic readers. If the conceit of “Rationale” is that we are enlisted in judging Poe’s misguided attempt to synthesize and supersede centuries of prosodic debate, the invitation of “The Bells” seems at first glance far more simple: enunciate the poem’s language as it is scripted, and you will “hear” the bells of the title. Taking the poem from the top, an academic reader’s first impulse may be to scan the opening lines, and most of the poem, as a series of trochees:

**Hear the sledges with the bells—**

**Silver bells!**

***What* a world of merriment their melody foretells! (92)**

The trochaic reading gets the natural stress patterns of individual words correct, and from a certain perspective is quite acceptable. But the overall result is pretty heavy-footed. How else might we perform these lines?

A second option takes the poem in a more explicitly musical direction. For while its irregular lineation disguises the fact, other aspects of the poem’s text—syntactic structure, syllabic rhythms, italicization—map out a musical framework of regular beats and four-beat bars. The virtue of this reading is that it decreases the accentual-syllabic density of the trochaic model by introducing the fleeter sixteenth note as the smallest unit of prosodic measure. In this reading, the first two words of the poem (“Hear the”) serve as sixteenth-note pick-ups to the downbeat arriving on “**sledges**”:

	1		2	
	Hear the <b>sledges</b> with the <b>bells</b> —			
		3		4
		Silver <b>bells!</b> [ <i>silent beat</i> ]		
1	2	3		4
<b><i>What</i> a world of merriment their melody foretells!</b>				

1                      2  
 How they **tinkle**, tinkle, **tinkle**,  
                             3                      4  
                             In the **icy** air of **night**!  
                             1                      2  
 While the **stars** that oversprinkle  
                             3                      4  
 All the **heavens** seem to **twinkle**  
                             5                      6  
                             With a **crystalline delight**; (92)

Note how Poe arranges his text to vary what might otherwise be a pretty incessant and uniform string of sixteenth notes, while still maintaining the beat. Some lines (1, 3, 5) end with words that receive the temporal value of an eighth note; others (4, 6, and 7) enjamb propulsively into the next in a flurry of unbroken sixteenths; and one line (2) ends with a word (“bells!”) that insists we wait two full beats before proceeding to the following downbeat, which Poe cues—precisely, in italics—on “*What*.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet if the musical reading addresses the poem’s initial trochaic sluggishness, it is not a long-term fix. In fact, it is by accepting the musical structure as normative that, in a turn befitting Poe’s self-defeating ironies, our performance is subsequently sabotaged. That anomalous six-beat phrase in section 1, in other words, is merely a foretaste of the challenges to come. Try performing aloud the opening of section 2 according to the musical structure:

Hear the mellow wedding bells

Golden bells!

*What* a world of happiness their harmony foretells!

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<sup>20</sup> If this musical reading of “The Bells” seems wishful or idiosyncratic, I would point to performances of the poem by musicians such as Phil Ochs and Buddy Morrow, who tend to follow the structure I have sketched, or something near it. Better yet, try performing the poem with my posited musical beats shifted either left or right by half and see how unnatural it feels: “What a **world** of merriment their melody foretells!”

Through the balmy air of night  
How they ring out their delight!  
From the molten-golden notes,  
And all in tune,  
What a liquid ditty floats  
To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats  
On the moon! (92-93)

The prosodic shape of the first three lines echoes fairly exactly that which opens section 1 and thus reaffirms the poem's larger four-beat musical structure. After this, however, the syntax and phrase lengths, rhymes and rhythms, and even typography so conspire to syncopate the line that the music is fled. Things are perhaps salvageable through line 6, but the pretty baldly iambic line 7 causes problems. Treating the words "And all in" as unaccented pick-up notes buys some time, but at the cost of making "tune" the end of a musical phrase even as it is, syntactically, very much in the middle of things. The poem's keyword "What" in line 8 may seem to promise a fresh start, but here it lacks italics. Does that mean it isn't a downbeat this time around? Later in the poem, lines like "By the **side** of the **pale-faced moon**" (93) do not add or syncopate beats as much as scuttle the tempo entirely. Such lines can with practice be accommodated to the poem's four-beat musical bar, but it requires an anticipatory phonemic jiu-jitsu that is virtually impossible to pull off on a first or even second reading.

"The Bells," in an extreme but characteristic demonstration of Poe's prosody, presents itself as a palimpsestic layering of incongruous sound reproduction media: trochees that dissolve into sixteenth notes, rhymes that strengthen and then distort grammar, musical form dispelled by intransigent phonetic script. These media are gathered by the stable printed object we call a

poem, and yet this poem's prosodic structure is not self-identical. This is the case not only because each reader engages the poem differently, but because each of the poem's constituent sound media has a different way of "Keeping, time, time, time" (92). When these media are engaged by readers, they may well constellate into certain larger prosodic structures (e.g. a "trochaic" or a "musical" structure), but these structures are, crucially, a matter of consensus rather than a feature of the poem's language as such. We can probably all agree that the poem's most notorious lines ("Of the bells, bells, bells, bells— / Bells, bells, bells—" [93]) all but mandate a single prosodic option: namely the primitive, lockstep spondee Poe claims in "Rationale" to be the rudiment of verse. But this is the conformist exception that Poe uses to prove the rule of prosodic multiplicity. The utter temporal regularity of "bells, bells, bells, bells" casts in relief the enunciative indecision the poem induces at so many other points. This indecision, to reiterate a key point, is a function of the poem's language as a mediated—rather than an ideal or abstract—substance. And all mediating elements are potentially significant. At 113 lines, for instance, "The Bells" takes up at least three pages in nearly any printed edition. Anyone performing the poem from a book must therefore contend with that most basic challenge to continuous sounded reading: the page turn. Such considerations tend to disappear in theory; in practice they cannot. This is what Jacques Derrida is getting at when he singles out "The Bells" as a cardinal instance not of language, but writing, and applauds Poe for throwing "semantic and thematic [meanings]...into indecision by the swinging or the suspended beat, the oscillation of the tongue" (157).

One way to respond to these performative gambits is to do what popular renditions of "The Bells" have often done to the poem: edit it. Such editing, I suggested earlier, is not non-prosodic. Rather, it registers and engages prosodically thorny spots in Poe's text precisely by

editing them out, modifying the text to better conform to an adjacent, internally consistent prosodic logic, such as that offered by music. Consider, for instance, the 1964 recording of “The Bells” by the folk singer Phil Ochs. Like nineteenth-century readers who approached Poe’s poetry not as self-identical visual texts but as “discursive networks[s] that mediated a range of cultural conversations” (Richards “Poe’s Lyrical Media” 209), Ochs edits the poem to meet his current aesthetic needs.<sup>21</sup> The point to keep in view is that, regardless of whether we literally edit Poe’s text, voicing “The Bells” entails a score of split-second editorial decisions, verbal shapings of, and in response to, the sound media the text assembles. This voice is an aspect of history, not autonomous lyricism. But the very multiplicity of prosodic options enabled by the poem’s media is also a reminder that this voice’s historical character is not the only one the poem can be said to possess.

### **Prosodic Modernity**

Prosody, in the theoretically capacious sense this chapter has elaborated, is a mediator of media, a tool for registering a reader’s relationship to the constituent sound media that embody, even as they embed in, a poem’s language. Poe’s poetics models this kind of prosody and, in turn, broadens our sense of what prosody might take as its object. It need not confine itself to meter, crucial though meter has been in shaping English-language poetry. Neither must prosody follow modern linguistics in taking language as such as its object, an approach that tends to

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<sup>21</sup> Notably, the earliest material for “The Bells” was composed in mid-1848 not by Poe but by his friend Marie Louise Shew. Over the next eighteen months Poe reworked the text into three distinct versions of the poem, two of which were published in November and December of 1849, following Poe’s death (Quinn 563-564).

minimize contingencies of mediation so interesting to literary history and theory alike. Rather, prosody as Poe imagines it attends to exactly these contingencies. It considers the various media that poems gather to shape their sonic contours, some of which are visible aspects of written and printed discourse (e.g. phonetic script, lineation, typography), others of which are not (e.g. meter, musical form, generic convention).

Beyond clarifying the critical edge of Poe's poetics, expanding prosody's purview can productively destabilize periodization. In particular, it can provide alternate routes in and out of the literary period following Poe's, namely modernism. During this period, meter (and prosody with it) is typically thought to become an outmoded cultural category, while "media" is thought to become newly decisive. But as this chapter has suggested, prosodic modernity entails an accretion rather than a supersession of new and old modes of writing sound. Modern sound media do not replace meter as much as they reveal meter to have been a sound medium all along. Seen in these terms, Pound's famous rejection of meter could be understood as a canny response to the fact that the social functions previously performed by meter and prosody were, during modernism, increasingly being performed—with the help of analog recording tools—by fields such as linguistics, ethnography, psychology, and folklore.

Robert Frost acknowledges this shift, if somewhat indirectly, when he observes in a 1914 letter to Sidney Cox that, "When men no longer know the intonation on which we string our words we will fall back on what I may call the absolute length of our syllables which is the length we would give them in passages that meant nothing. The psychologist can actually measure this with a what-do-you-call-it" (59). The sound recording device whose name Frost can't quite summon is likely not a phonograph but one of various non-commercial devices that created visual transcriptions of speech acts, a boon to early phoneticians and, indeed,



psychologists. Frost organizes this line of thinking into his suggestive notion of the “sound of sense.” “The best place to get the abstract sound of sense,” Frost explains in a letter to John Bartlett, “is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. Ask yourself how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied” (59). Frost is in effect asking Bartlett to imagine processing audible language like his “what-do-you-call-it,” not as discrete semantic units but as continuous frequency vibrations, what the poet calls “pure sound—pure form” (59). And yet, Frost continues, “if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre” (60). Frost’s ideal poet functions something like a DJ, splicing and “breaking” analog sound files against a binaristic beat. This action is important to Frost because it dramatizes in local miniature the normally opaque psycholinguistic process by which the human mind segments continuous phonetic matter into discrete phonological bits. The modern poet’s duty, Frost implies, recalling the function of Poe’s raven, is to enhance a reader’s consciousness of this process, and along the way unsettle the assumption, common in a late age of print, that poems are coextensive with their visual texts. “Words exist in the mouths,” Frost explains, “not in books” (62). He is not saying that printed poetry should offer a form of mimetic vernacular recording or should only be presented orally, but that a visual poetic text comes into being *as* poetry at the point that it engages a reader’s linguistic and physiological faculties.

Frost’s comments help illustrate the sense in which analog sound media are, so to speak, prosody machines. These tools, like meter, can in the right hands expose the cluster of text, media, and literary practice that characterizes prosody generally. T. S. Eliot implies something similar in section 3 of *The Waste Land*, where lines in a conspicuously iambic meter culminate in the image of a gramophone:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone. (*Poems* 1: 64)

Though the mechanical pentameter seems to double the mechanical gramophone in offering a negative, ironic judgment on the woman's automated urban existence, neither sound technology operates as straightforwardly as we might expect. If we examine Eliot's prosody more closely, we note that while each of the lines contains ten syllables, the first is far from smoothly iambic. Its closing "and," which adds the final requisite syllable but also produces a highly awkward enjambment, gives the impression that the word has been "shovelled [sic] in to fill a metric pattern," as Pound had put it a few years earlier (*Literary Essays* 3). If we nonetheless take our marching orders from "and" and scan iambically from the top, we produce a choppy, rather Poe-like effect in which the line's metrical feet actively disrupt lexical boundaries: When love | ly wo | man stoops | to foll | y and. Once we make it through this metrical jostling and the left-footed trochee "Paces" that opens line 2, we find ourselves on relatively firm iambic ground for the remainder of the passage.

What is going on here? Eliot offers a clue in his 1917 essay "Reflections on *Vers Libre*," which offers the following advice: "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse" (187). Notably, Eliot casts meter not as soporifically metronomic, as does Pound, but as quite the opposite. Meter stands vigilant guard, advancing and rousing us as needed, only to slip back under cover of darkness as we wake. The lines above are not free verse, but they do seem to operate according to the prosodic logic Eliot describes, with the "ghost" of meter lurking in line

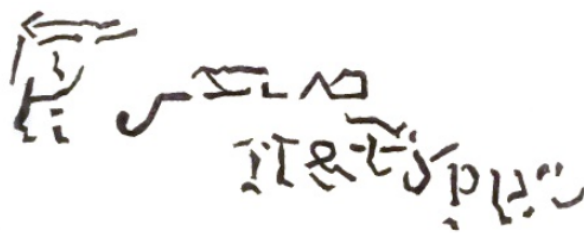
1, advancing into prominence in lines 2 through 4, and then, in the lines following those excerpted above, receding. If this is meter's virtue, the vice it combats might be, if not prose per se, then a prosaic, utilitarian stance toward language uninterested in contemplating the tension between phonetic patterns and semantic borders (*ly wo | man stoops*) on which poetry builds its appeal. We might single out the non-sentient gramophone as the emblem of this passive stance toward language, but this isn't quite accurate. For one thing, the gramophone is no more or less passive than the poem's meter; both are sound technologies dependent on their users, who can employ them in a more or less "critical" fashion. Moreover, popular music and jazz pervade Eliot's poetry, implicating the work in networks and technologies of sound reproduction that cannot be disowned through a single ironic reference. Rather than seeing meter and phonography as allied in their innate passivity, then, or opposed based on the latter's relative modernity, we might follow Yopie Prins in seeing each as "yet another technology for [the voice's] mediation" ("Robert Browning" 216).

The changes in sonic and linguistic mediation brought about by analog recording technology are met with the most profound ambivalence by the arch-modernist Pound, who I will explore in greater detail in the following chapter. As a segue into this material, let us consider a final scene from Poe that casts in fairly literal terms the mediated terrain of modern prosodic interpretation. I refer to the scene near the end of Poe's faux-memoir *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in which the seafaring narrator Pym and his companion Peters, marooned at the South Pole, wend their way through a series of linked subterranean chasms. In the third and final chasm, Pym and Peters discover

a range of singular-looking indentures in the surface of the marl forming the termination of the *cul-de-sac*. With a very slight exertion of the imagination, the left, or most

northerly of these indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters, and Peters was willing, at all events, to adopt the idle opinion that they were really such. I convinced him of his error, finally, by directing his attention to the floor of the fissure, where, among the powder, we picked up, piece by piece, several large flakes of the marl, which had evidently been broken off by some convulsion from the surface where the indentures were found, and which had projecting points exactly fitting the indentures; thus proving them to have been the work of nature. Figure 4. presents an accurate copy of the whole.

*Figure 4.*



(1167-8)

Though Pym determines these indentures to have been result of natural, rather than human, processes, a “Note” following the memoir suggests that, when not only the indentures but also the shapes of the chasms themselves are transcribed, the images “constitute an Ethiopian verbal root” (1181). “It is not impossible,” concludes the note’s author, “that ‘Tsalal,’ the appellation of the island of the chasms, may be found, upon minute philological scrutiny, to betray either some alliance with the chasms themselves, or some reference to the Ethiopian characters so mysteriously written in their windings” (1182).

This scene may appear rather far removed from the specialized treatment of prosody Poe offers in “The Rationale of Verse.” But Poe covers prosodic ground here, too—and looks ahead

to prosody's fate under modernism—when he entertains this orientalist fantasy of a written language derived from an inscrutable blending of human and natural forces. Poe's ideogrammic characters prefigure Pound's, Ethiopia standing in for China as a figure for an ancient society in which “words are alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated” (Pound *Instigations* 371). Poe's characters—pseudo-semiotic, a visual equivalent of Frost's sound of sense—also prefigure the mechanism of analog sound recording, which encodes acoustic signals into what Theodor Adorno calls “a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing” (56). It is the very illegibility of this writing that, in the context of this chapter, appears to square the prosodic circle once and for all by establishing a perfectly analogous relation between sound and its material representation. As Adorno elaborates, the phonograph's writing “can be recognized as true language to the extent that it relinquishes its being as mere signs” and is instead “inseparably committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove” (59).<sup>22</sup>

Though Poe, dead by 1849, could not have anticipated the particular discourses developing around Edison's phonograph, Frost's “what-do-you-call-it,” or Scott's phonautograph, his work looks presciently into a future of analog recording technologies that challenged, displaced, and also enriched existing print modes of capturing human voices. Poe's purported goal in “Rationale,” for instance—to develop a scansion that “[expresses] to the eye the exact relative value of every syllable employed in Verse” (1417)—anticipates a phonographic writing “committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove.” Nevertheless, the many

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<sup>22</sup> Wolfgang Ernst elaborates Adorno's observation: “The indexical relation between writing and vocal sound that the phonetic alphabet had aimed at in vain (because symbolic notation cannot transcend discrete inscription) could be achieved only when writing became technical instead of symbolic, as a direct (analog) function of the acoustic signal as characterized by vibrations and waves—two-dimensional events in time, almost mathematically authentic and close (*ana*) to speech (*logos*) indeed” (179).

ironies of “Rationale,” and of Poe’s prosodic project generally, serve also to send up the modernist fantasy of “true language,” of poetry so technically proficient that it escapes the degradations of popular culture. No prosodist, no matter how learned or historically proximate to a given poetic composition, can ever close the gap between real-time verbalization and second-order mediation, perceived form and received discourse. This is what poems like “The Raven” and “The Bells” so cleverly show and tell us. So, we balance historicist and formalist methods, teasing out the material, historical basis of poetry’s media while also acknowledging the finally idiosyncratic, ephemeral, and opaque aspects of prosodic form. We can and should follow Poe’s “learned prosodist” of the distant future in recovering evidence that speaks to how poetry was sounded in the past. But Poe’s fable is also a reminder that the value of this recovery can only ever manifest from the vantage of the present—the only place, after all, where we can form a poem’s language and feel it forming ours in return.

## 2.

### Modernist Grooves:

#### Ezra Pound in the Age of Sonic Reproducibility

Between Poe's death and the advent of modernism, modern sound reproduction technologies transformed cultural landscapes around the world. Did poetry benefit? Not according to Friedrich Kittler, one of the most influential and controversial media theorists of recent decades. In his 1986 book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Kittler argues that the arrival of modern sound technology effectively rendered obsolete the prosodic protocols that gave rise to poetry in the first place:

At the origin of poetry, with its beats, rhythms (and, in modern European languages, rhymes), were technological problems and a solution that came about under oral conditions. Unrecognized by all philosophical aesthetics, the storage capacity of memory was to be increased and the signal-to-noise ratio of channels improved. [...]

These necessities are obliterated by the possibility of technological sound storage. It suddenly becomes superfluous to employ a rhythmical tick-tock (as in Greece) or rhyme (as in Europe) to endow words with a duration beyond their evanescence. Edison's talking machine stores the most disordered sentence atoms and its cylinders transport them over the greatest distances. [...] Technology triumphs over mnemotechnology. (80)

Kittler's account may be overstated, but his reading of early twentieth century literary history feels compelling. If poetry isn't quite "obliterated," its traditional prosodic features—rhyme and especially meter—are indeed singled out for extermination by modernist tastemakers such as

Ezra Pound. “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave” (538), Pound writes in his epic poem the *Cantos*. Moreover, much of the poetry Pound and other modernists produce appears to back up Kittler’s observation that in an era of phonography, serious poetry must abandon its claims to real-time vocal capture and instead embrace its visual and material aspects, becoming in the most extreme case “a form of typographically optimized blackness on exorbitantly expensive white paper” (80).<sup>23</sup>

In recent years literary scholars have begun to question the premise that poetry becomes modern by turning bookish, often by drawing on insights and methods from the nascent field of sound studies. T. Austin Graham, for instance, asks “whether the crisis of language that Kittler describes was really so pressing...whether recording technology might not have had quite the opposite effect, enriching the sensory possibilities of language” (22). In readings of T. S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, and others, Graham explores how modernist poets invite readers to sing or play along with their poems via textual allusions to current popular music, effectively enlisting readers in the larger cultural phenomenon of audio reproduction (112). In a similar vein, Andrew Peart points to the folksongs recorded and collected by Carl Sandburg and John Lomax to argue for “a modernist poetics of song” (693). This strain of modernism, Peart suggests, emphasizes “acoustic” rather than “linguistic” features of literary language, thereby exploiting the textual

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<sup>23</sup> Kittler’s account receives contextual support from one of the main lines of modernist literary studies, which affirms his conclusion that poetic modernism comes into its own by embracing visual and bibliographical logics. The entry on “Modernism” in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* begins, “For many of its protagonists, the opening phase of literary modernism signaled a decisive shift from music to painting as the privileged model for a new poetry” (Nicholls 889). Influential studies of modernist poetry’s visual and bibliographical commitments include Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1986); Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989); and Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993).



possibilities of the phonograph record as opposed to the book. Work by Graham, Peart, and others has helped revise Kittler's account by demonstrating the broad significance for modernist poetics of sound recording technology, as either a complement or an alternative to the movement's visual, spatial, and bibliographical modes.<sup>24</sup>

One figure this effort has yet to bring into the fold is Pound. This is not surprising. When Pound mentions phonographs and gramophones he nearly always frames them as grave threats to aesthetic experience and cultural memory. "Our ears are passive before the onslaught of gramophones," he writes in the *Egoist* in 1917. "By persuading ourselves that we do not hear two-thirds of their abominable grind, we persuade ourselves that we take pleasure in the remainder of what they narrate... We pride ourselves on having exact transcripts of Arabic and Japanese and Zulu and Malay music; we take a sentimental pleasure in being reminded (in spite of the drone and wheeze, in spite of shriek and squeak), that we once heard the voice of [the opera singer] Chaliapine" (*Ezra Pound and Music* 49). Pound denounces the gramophone for the kind of shallow anthropological tourism it affords. Instead of producing aesthetic experiences themselves, he suggests, modern Westerners would rather have records of exotic cultures "narrated" to them in the comfort of their own homes. As producers are transformed into consumers, Pound continues, those who still create their own aesthetic experiences do so with increasing "rigidity" (47). "The old way of music," he observes, "teaching a man that a piece of

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<sup>24</sup> See also Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (2008), Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (2008), Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to the Spoken Word* (2011), and Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (2012).

music was a structure, certain main forms filled in with certain decorations, stimulated his intelligence, spurred on his constructive faculty. You might play the same lute-piece as many others, but you thought about playing it differently (i.e. with different notes), of playing it better. In a sense this is true of any performer, but the contemporary way of approach lays stress on having a memory like a phonograph; the reflex-centres are as highly thought of as is the main conception” (48). Conflating aesthetic objects with their abstracted constituent parts (e.g. notes, words), modern artists and audiences have in Pound’s view developed “memory like a phonograph,” which understands artworks not as structures in need of imaginative modification, but texts in need of accurate reproduction.

Statements like these from Pound clearly echo Kittler’s negative account of the effects of phonography. Yet the poet’s cynicism toward this new medium sits oddly with aspects of his own artistic theory and practice. For one thing, just a few months before bashing the phonograph for offering listeners a touristic hodgepodge of “Arabic and Japanese and Zulu and Malay music,” Pound had published in *Poetry* early drafts toward his epic *Cantos* project, whose admittedly “rag-bag” organizing principles would ultimately generate the most ambitiously and controversially multiculturalist poem of the twentieth century (“Three Cantos” 113). Given the importance to Pound of such bardic figures as Homer and the Provençal troubadours, the phonograph might have offered him—as it did early-century linguists, folklorists, and anthropologists<sup>25</sup>—a tool for exploring the nature of orality and literacy in a modern age. Perhaps most to the point, many of Pound’s arguments about poetic and musical form seem to

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<sup>25</sup> See Golston 1-58; Peart; Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (1999); Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (1987), xxxv-xxxviii; Peter H. Kylstra, “The Use of the Early Phonograph in Phonetic Research” (1977).

borrow from the rhetoric of analog sound recording and modern acoustics over and against the rhetoric of traditional prosody and music theory. Is Pound's project phonographical as well as bibliographical? Does his poetry betray ambivalence regarding the fitness of the codex book as a platform for recording voices and sustaining cultural memory?

This line of questioning may seem willfully counterfactual, even perverse. Pound published his poems as books, not records. As textual scholars such as Jerome McGann have demonstrated, these books' material features, their "bibliographical codes" (13) play a crucial role in conveying their meaning and aesthetic effects, particularly in the *Cantos*. Equally problematic is the fact that the "technophobic" (73) Pound, as Graham describes him, clearly despises the gadgets of popular culture, phonographs included.<sup>26</sup> If pop songs appear in the poetry of the modernist Eliot, they do not appear in Pound. What I mean to suggest, then, is not that Pound harbors a secret fondness for forms of sonic mass culture, but rather that analog acoustic principles appeal to the poet and shape his work because they more accurately describe how the ear itself registers sound. "The ear is an organ for the detection of frequency" (*Antheil* 23), Pound will observe in 1924. At the same time, if the ear works more like a phonograph than a book, books and the phonetic scripts they contain have for millennia been the tools for maintaining the literary and cultural record of the West. The *Cantos* constitute "a poem including history" largely because they reflect self-consciously on the textual protocols by which that history is preserved.

Focusing on this tension, this chapter argues that Pound is caught in a double

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<sup>26</sup> There are exceptions. In an appendix to *Noh, Or Accomplishment* (1916), Pound writes, "I doubt whether the Noh music can be rendered intelligibly by our notation...A phonograph record would be, I believe, the only efficient means of recording the Noh singing for us" (257). J. J. Wilhelm records that Pound "was always the star dancer" at Ford Madox Ford's house parties in Paris, "as the phonograph ground out the hits of the twenties" (290).

commitment to sound and text, to voice and media, which modern phonography exacerbates and exposes. “[Poetry] is an art of pure sound bound in through an art of arbitrary and conventional symbols” (*Selected Prose* 33), Pound observes in 1911. This commitment to voice and media, I will demonstrate, is discernible in his work as a *groove*, a troping of verbal performance as the dialectical obverse of material inscription. In the previous chapter I argued for an understanding of prosody as a mediating cluster of text, technology, and literary practice. This chapter locates one striking modernist response to the prosodic cluster in Pound’s troping of the groove. Though such a troping could be said to obtain for all written texts, which dislocate language from speech, the premise of this chapter is that the arrival of phonographical “sound writing” as a culturally pervasive form accompanies an increased self-consciousness among writers concerning the relation of voice to media. Writing with such self-consciousness is writing in, and against, the groove.

In what follows, I trace evidence of the groove in certain formal features of Pound’s *Cantos*, a work characterized by Marjorie Perloff as “encyclopedic” and “essentially spatial” (499) whose title nonetheless signals its countervailing concern with song and lyricism. As I will elaborate, the groove in Pound is defined by a kind of uncertainty principle: embodied acts of enunciation blur knowledge of media, even as the second-order act of determining a text’s material basis interrupts the real-time flow of speech. All the while, voice and media are codependent, if never simultaneously visible. Focusing my inquiry on the exemplary figure of Pound, this chapter proceeds in three sections. The first details the acoustic, analog underpinnings of some of Pound’s more ostensibly visual lines of thought: Imagism, the ideograms of Ernest Fenollosa, and Vorticism. In the next, I offer a fuller definition and theory of the groove, locating it within *fin de siècle* linguistic and literary thinking, before tracing its

impact on the form of Pound's first two cantos. In the final section, I turn to Pound's original opera *Le Testament de Villon* to consider how the groove operates in a work intended for audible performance rather than print distribution. The chapter concludes with a reading of the *Pisan Cantos* that gathers and summarizes key points.

## **Magic Amber**

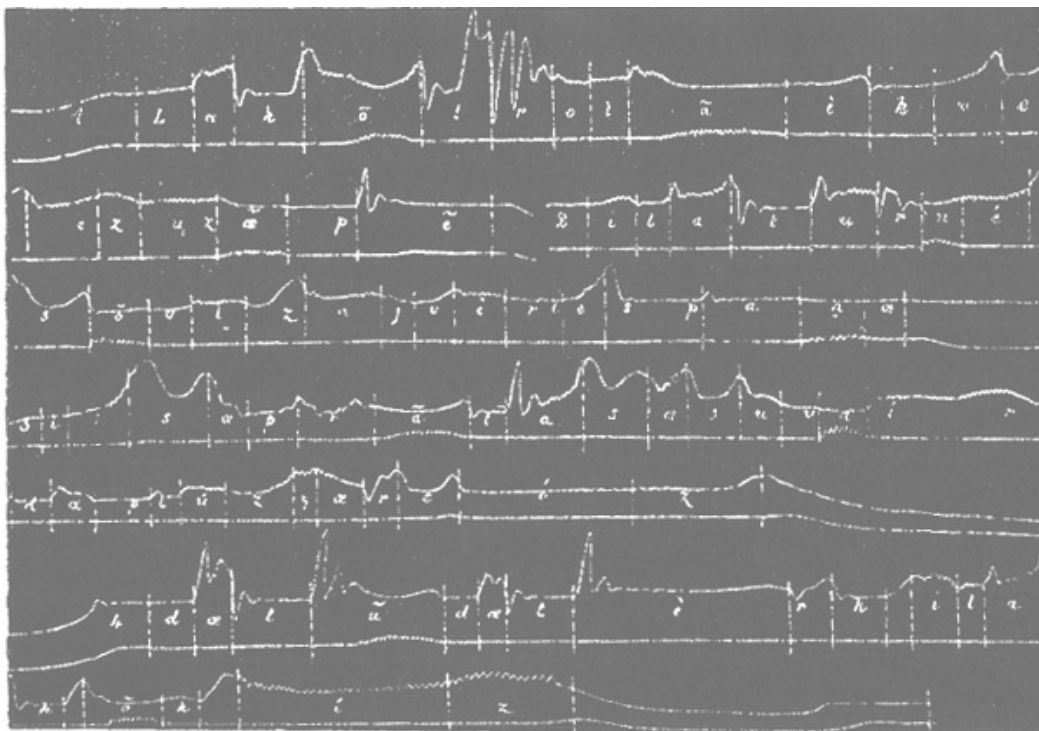
Pound's critical writings frequently evoke technical language and acoustic principles associated with forms of mechanical sound recording. Some of these instances are innocuous enough. When Pound declares that "Rhythm is a form cut into TIME" (*ABC of Reading* 198), he could be recalling that early phonographic recording cut its temporally continuous sound files in wax, but he could just as easily be trading on his well-documented habit of drawing metaphors from sculpture and the visual arts. Similar dynamics attend Pound's observation that "The performing musician cuts his form in the air and in the time flow. He writes it as in less stable water" (*Guide to Kulchur* 170). With such examples in view, Michael Golston suggests that Pound "vacillates in his writing on rhythm between analogies drawn from sculpture (rhythm is a 'shape,' it cuts) and analogies drawn from music" (62). I take this vacillation to be deliberate and generative. Whether or not Pound has in mind specific mechanical processes in such statements, his imagery casts what is typically considered a temporal phenomenon—sounded poetic or musical rhythm—as a function of space. Rhythm is not simply a fleeting acoustic effect but a physical structure that could theoretically be measured. As such, the equation can be run in the other direction: when Pound praises sculpture, it tends to be for its ability to produce in static objects a sense of living, restive energy. Across artistic media, then, Pound prizes a work's

ability to reflect the interconvertibility of space and time.

Modern sound recording achieves something very near this, spatializing temporal sound and temporalizing space via the grooves of the phonograph records Theodor Adorno would dub “acoustic photographs” (57). Musical scores and poetical texts had for centuries served a similar purpose, allowing humans to encode sound for later activation. But the phonograph’s distinctly “analog” form of sonic reproduction was something new, for it re-presented sound not as a series of theoretically posited intervals (e.g. diatonic musical pitches, metrical feet) but as a temporally continuous function of frequency vibrations (Ernst 179). It is this quality that, in Kittler’s view, made the device a threat to poetry, which could now be preserved technologically without recourse to the traditional prosodic tools of rhyme and meter. The distinctly analog quality of Pound’s spatio-temporal thinking comes into clearer view in his 1924 *Treatise on Harmony*, which begins by observing that, “The element most grossly omitted from treatises on harmony up to the present is the element of TIME” (*Antheil* 9). Pound elaborates: “The former treatises on harmony dealt with static harmony...they did not consider that the lateral motion, the horizontal motion, and the time interval between succeeding sounds MUST affect the human ear, and not only the ear but the absolute physics of the matter. The question of where one wave-node meets another...must be considered” (17). “To make my simple statement even simpler; let us consider the nature of the ear, and of sound. Sound, we are told, consists of vibrations of from 16 to 36,000 per second. The ear is an organ for the detection of frequency” (23). Though Pound in his *Treatise* is writing about harmony, about music, he feels the acoustic principles subtending his argument should bear on poetic composition, too. “I believe in an absolute rhythm” (13), he writes, restating an idea first put forth in his 1910 translation of Cavalcanti. This “absolute rhythm,” as Pound elaborates across his career, is not something that can be standardized or

described in primers on versification or musical composition. Rather, it names the very ground of rhythmic experience, necessarily singular and idiosyncratic, but at the same time universally vouchsafed by the jointly analog character of both sound (“the absolute physics of the matter”) and human aurality.

Pound received what he considered empirical proof of his ideas about rhythm and poetic sound during either 1912 or 1913—the record is unclear—in the laboratory of the French phonetician Jean-Pierre Rousselot, who had invented a device he called the phonoscope. By measuring the vibrations of a speaker’s vocal apparatus, the phonoscope (“sound seer”) could inscribe on soot-blackened paper the durational value of individual vowels and consonants comprising the words of a given speech act (see *Figure 2.1*). Pound read his poem “The Return” into Rousselot’s device and would later reflect on its usefulness for holding poets and scholars accountable to the sounds of spoken verse. The phonoscope provided “the scientific justification



*Figure 2.1*

of *vers libre*,” Pound writes in 1920, and with it “the scientific proofs that a lot of ‘rules’ and ‘laws’ of prosody as taught in the text-books, have no sort of relation to spoken reality” (“The Island of Paris” 639). Pound elaborates by pointing to textual material from “The Return”:

“Given the phonoscope one finds definitely a reason why one cannot *hear* the *in the* in a phrase like *in the wind*, as a ‘long.’ It isn’t long. Whatever the Greeks may have done, one does not *hear* the beginning consonants of a word as musically part of the syllable of the last vowel in the word preceding; neither does the phonoscope so record them. All of which with many other finer distinctions can now be examined with great saving of breath and paper, whenever the questions are considered of sufficient interest, either by professors, or by neophytes in the arts of versification” (639). Pound’s specific complaint is somewhat opaque, but broadly he is objecting to prosodic conventions, whether Greek or English, that force poets to distort the natural cadences and intonation patterns of speech in order to fit a metrical schema. Individual words and phrases, Pound suggests, possess a temporal-acoustic integrity that it is the modern poet’s duty to preserve. Rather than “[chopping] your stuff into separate *iamb*s” or “[making] each line stop dead at the end,” he suggests in “A Few Don’ts,” “Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave” (*Literary Essays* 6). Anticipating his language of “waves” and “vibrations” in the *Treatise on Harmony*, Pound during his brief Imagist phase admired in Rousselot’s phonoscope its ability to honor the analog contours of “spoken reality.”

A comparison might be drawn between the sound-pictures the phonoscope produced and the painterly Chinese “ideograms” that Pound, via Ernest Fenollosa, would in late 1913 incorporate into his poetic thinking. If Rousselot’s device produced visible writing that bore a direct, proportional, and continuous relation to the phonetic sounds it registered, the Chinese ideogram, in Pound’s and Fenollosa’s eyes, offered a form of writing that more accurately



captured the innate temporal energy of objects in the world:



“A true noun, an isolated thing,” Fenollosa explains, “does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots.” A person viewing an ideogram, Fenollosa writes, “sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things” (*Instigations* 364). Fenollosa was only partially correct about the degree to which classical Chinese was a pictographic as opposed to a phonetic script, as scholars have long acknowledged. Yet we might note the correspondence between the spatio-temporal principles Fenollosa imputes to Chinese ideograms and the analog acoustic principles that Pound draws on in his prosodic thought. That is, we might note that the enticingly analog phonoscopic pictures Pound saw in Rousselot’s laboratory were “ideogrammic” precisely in the sense Fenollosa wishfully believed Chinese was: by following the “natural suggestion” of a thing in nature—sound waves—these drawings arguably did “[get] back to the fundamental reality of *time*” (363).

If Fenollosa’s ideograms appealed to the poet in part for their seemingly analog rendering of the spatial world, then so too did the “Vortex” Pound would soon claim as an icon not only for his own poetic project but for modernism as a whole. Fed up with an ossifying Imagist movement, Pound turned to the Vortex to underscore the temporal dynamism he understood all well-crafted artwork to possess. Insofar as Pound’s poetry remained after 1913 a poetry of the “image,” this revamped image was not static but was “a radiant node or cluster...a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 106). In the first issue of *Blast* Pound’s friend Wyndham Lewis drew the Vortex like this:



Like Fenollosa's ideograms and Rousselot's phonoscopic tracings, the Vortex, even as it focused attention on points of relative intensity, rendered these points not as free-floating but as functions of a larger network of constituent force vectors. The Vortex, in other words, was spatio-temporally proportionate: the movement at its central axis also happened at its edges, but at a different scale and speed. In appearance and structural conception, then, the Vortex resembled nothing so much as a phonograph record, or perhaps an original Edison cylinder, which too revolved around a central axis in order to encode, and then decode, sonic data whose material instantiation bore a temporally continuous structural relation to all other sounds cut into it.

In making this comparison I don't mean to suggest that Pound's Vortex is somehow a phonograph in disguise, but rather that analog forms of inscription—whether technically so (Rousselot's phonoscope) or figuratively so (ideograms, the Vortex)—capture the poet's imagination because they produce durable material texts while still registering language the way human ears do: as continuous frequency vibrations rather than predefined semantic or prosodic units. Analog inscription, in other words, seems to let Pound have language both ways, both seen and heard, durable and fleeting, spatial and temporal. This double commitment is what allows Pound to, on the one hand, bemoan overly bookish approaches to prosodic analysis and, on the other, write poetry that draws its energy from charting the semantic and ontological integrity of texts over time. Yet this double commitment is also what establishes the fault line of Pound's aesthetics, as the poet implies in the "Envoi" at the center of his 1920 poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Recalling a woman "that sang me once that song of Lawes" (*Selected Poems* 70),

Pound's speaker wistfully imagines a "magic amber" that, unlike print, could preserve human voices without stripping them of their acoustic vitality. This substance would allow the woman's graceful singing to live

As roses might, in magic amber laid,  
Red overwrought with orange and all made  
One substance and one colour  
Braving time.<sup>27</sup> (70)

The speaker is not simply entertaining an inward musing, but as the "Envoi" presents it, is dictating a message to his "dumb-born book" intended for the singer. This message admonishes "her that sheds / Such treasure in the air" (70) for not knowing the history behind the song she sings—that, for instance, its text was composed by the English poet and statesman Edmund Waller and only later set to music by Henry Lawes. Yet even while chastising the singer for lacking such textual information, Pound's speaker remains equally convinced that her song's beauty depends on its status *as* song, as something acoustically singular and evanescent.

## Beach Grooves

In an abstract sense, the opposition I have set up between audible and visible poetic form is not a new one. Northrop Frye framed it in terms of the different demands of "babble" and

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<sup>27</sup> Appearing in a work fixated on verbal mediation and published at the dawn of the Jazz Age, Pound's "magic amber" would surely have conjured for some readers the resinous shellac of the gramophone records currently taking the world by storm, which allowed voices to "brave time." We might further note that the most popular brand of the day, "His Master's Voice," sported a red label "overwrought" with orange lettering, a presumably coincidental parallel to the red and orange substance in *Mauberry* given Pound's stance toward commercial phonography.

“doodle,” whose mature forms he called, after Aristotle, *melos* and *opsis* (278). For John Hollander it was “resonance” and “vision.” And for Pound it was *melopoeia* and *phanopoeia*, which he triangulated with a third term, *logopoeia*: “the dance of the intellect among words” (*Literary Essays* 25).<sup>28</sup> The argument I want to make, however, is that media conditions complicate and nuance this audiovisual opposition. Particularly within historical moments witnessing profound shifts in media, it becomes less a neutral rubric predicated on the transhistorical distinctness of human hearing and seeing and more a subject of poetic contemplation in its own right. Here we can see more clearly what Kittler’s account gets right as well as the argumentative license it takes. Changing media conditions indeed alter the tools and technologies with which human societies preserve cultural memory, thereby altering the nature of memory itself and the types of artwork people produce. Yet the advent of phonography does not supersede bibliographical practices. As sound studies scholars following Kittler have observed, modern sound reproduction technologies crystalize, as much as inaugurate, changes in discourses about sound and hearing already well underway in the nineteenth century. When studying the impact of phonography on modernist poetry, then, we can look for instances where phonographical and bibliographical logics collaborate as well as compete, without turning to a narrative of obsolescence.

Above I suggested that one such instance appears in the “analog” character of some of Pound’s more ostensibly visual lines of poetic thought. In this section I turn to Pound’s early *Cantos* to show how this audiovisual dialectic appears formally as a *groove*, a troping of material inscription as the obverse of singular verbal performance. Before turning to Pound’s poetry, however, I want to zoom out briefly in order to locate the groove as a broader phenomenon of

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotle’s schema is, like Pound’s, a triad, comprised of *melos*, *opsis*, and *lexis*.

linguistic and literary thinking at the turn of the twentieth century. For while the *Cantos* prove particularly alert to the groove, it is not a feature of Pound's poetry per se as much as an altered sense of textual media that develops in an age of mechanical sound-writing.

So, what's in a groove? By definition, nothing. But a spatially significant nothing. Among the word's oldest meanings the *OED* lists: "a mining shaft; a mine, pit" (c. 1400); "a channel or hollow, cut by artificial means, in metal, wood, etc." (c. 1660). Already in these two early definitions we can locate a move from semi-natural to decidedly "artificial" sources of the groove: a "mine" in the earth becomes the more conspicuously crafted "channel or hollow...in metal, wood, etc." Following this, craft becomes industry, grooves in furniture become grooves in rifles, and the word at the *fin de siècle* takes its distinctly modern turn, as "The spiral cut in a gramophone record (earlier, in a phonograph cylinder) which forms the path for the needle." Not long after, the verbal action latent in each of the groove's spatial definitions becomes active in its phonographic context, yielding: "to play jazz or similar music with 'swing'; to be 'in the groove'; to dance or listen *to* such music with great pleasure; hence, to make good progress or co-operate; to get on well *with* someone; to make love." And then this verbal definition is fed dialectically back into its nominal one and comes to denote a sense of rhythmic "pulse," "an unspecifiable but ordered sense of something that is sustained in a distinctive, regular and attractive way, working to draw the listener in" (Feld 76). It is this modern groove's active and reciprocal blurring of space and time, object and action, noun and verb that becomes its cardinal feature. For a groove in space suggests the manner of its "cutting," while a groove in time posits a structuring spatial logic that is "ordered" even if opaque.

Within a linguistic context, this blurring of space and time takes the form of a blurring of sense and sound. Semantics dissolve into acoustics, words into frequency vibrations. Thomas

Edison offers one of the earliest meditations on the groove's linguistic implications, if not in precisely those terms, in an 1888 article entitled "The Perfected Phonograph." Here the American inventor can be found discussing audible language not in terms of its written meanings, as he had done a decade earlier,<sup>29</sup> but in terms of natural physical properties made newly evident by his device:

We have all been struck by the precision with which even the faintest sea-waves impress upon the surface of a beach the fine, sinuous line which is formed by the rippling edge of their advance. Almost as familiar is the fact that grains of sand sprinkled on a smooth surface of glass or wood, on or near a piano, sift themselves into various lines and curves according to the vibrations of the melody played on the piano-keys. These things indicate how easily the particles of solid matter may receive an imparted motion, or take an impression, from delicate liquid waves, air waves, or waves of sound. Yet, well known though these phenomena are, they apparently never suggested until within a few years that the sound-waves set going by a human voice might be so directed as to trace an impression upon some solid substance, with a nicety equal to that of the tide in recording its flow upon a sand beach. (642)

Foregrounding sonic materiality over abstract semantics, Edison's meditation demonstrates the groove's relation to broader shifts in linguistic thinking occurring around the turn of the century. During this period, scholars of language found themselves caught between two intellectual paradigms: the philological paradigm of the nineteenth century, which had erected a humanist

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<sup>29</sup> See Edison, "The Phonograph and Its Future" (1878), 531-33, which names automatic letter-writing, dictation, and audiobook creation as some of the most likely applications for the device.

science around tracing language's historical meanings as preserved in material texts; and the nascent structuralist paradigm of the twentieth century, which was turning an ear for the first time to the acoustic and phonetic properties of spoken language that made it socially and physiologically meaningful. The groove, in this broad linguistic context, names the intermingling of newly analog, phonetic conceptions of language with existing phonological ones.

Within literary circles, one of the implications of this intermingling is a revitalized interest in the nature and history of orality and literacy, and with it the inauguration within technologically developed societies of what Walter Ong would term “secondary orality” (i.e. aural media subtended by networks of print). There is perhaps no better illustration of this aspect of the groove than the case presented by the classical scholar Milman Parry. That Parry's fieldwork in the 1930s among illiterate Slavic *guslars* coalesced what we today call the oral-formulaic theory of Homer is well known. Less often remarked is the fact that Parry's breakthrough depended in large part on a pair of modified phonographs, which he hauled to Yugoslavia and used to record hundreds of hours of live performance. It was by applying analytic procedures developed during four centuries of printed scholarship to an aggregated non-alphabetic audio archive that Parry was able to demonstrate the mnemonic, improvisatory, and communal basis of works that had at times been considered the crowning textual achievements of Western culture (Parry xxxv-xxxviii). While we tend to think of Parry's work as opening a portal backward in time to the performance practices of ancient Greece, we should also consider the perhaps more profound sense in which his work augments and hybridizes the material basis of “Homer” in the present. After Parry, Homer can be said to exist in the phonograph records housed in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard for the same reason Homer exists in the Venetus A manuscript in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice: because these specific

documents have proven decisive in shaping our conception of Homer's textuality. This is true even though the words Parry recorded were not "Homer's words," indeed were not even Greek.<sup>30</sup>

Many more pages could be filled detailing the groove's appearance in modernist literary and linguistic thinking.<sup>31</sup> I offer the examples above for the light they shed on Pound, who spent his life exploring what Ong termed "the technologizing of the word" from Homer to the present. How does the groove manifest in the *Cantos*? In an 800-page poem composed over fifty years and ultimately left unfinished, any answer to this question will be both selective and incomplete. But the groove is at play already in the earliest material Pound composed for his epic, which offers a good starting point. Canto 1 opens, famously, in mid-stream:

And then went down to the ship,       (3)

Tantalizing us with narrative action that came before while removing it from view, Pound's opening underscores that this is a poem occurring *in* time, in the singular moment of its telling. Pound produces the same effect, in reverse, in the very last line of the canto:

Bearing the golden bough of Argicida. So that:       (5)

Here, instead of wondering what came before, we wonder what is coming next. Together, the opening and closing lines reinforce a sense that the text presented in canto 1 is an incomplete

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<sup>30</sup> Outside the esoteric context of Parry's fieldwork, early phonographic recordings took on artifactual heft in the minds of popular audiences, too, as Lisa Gitelman observes: "Phonograph exhibitors ran through pounds of tinfoil, and audiences scrambled for keepsakes. In their sonic 'capture' and later, in their mute evocation of public experience, pieces of tinfoil in private hands formed souvenirs of immense power. They were belongings that vouched for belonging. They were artifacts that vouched for facts" ("Souvenir Foils" 166).

<sup>31</sup> By this I do not mean to refer simply to the appearance of phonographs and gramophones in modernist literature, which has been well documented in the scholarship. My interest is specifically in the intermingling of speech and media. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, for instance, not only ends on the image of a "graphophone" but speculates on the notion of language as "significant shape" (173): words are "[shapes] to fill a lack" (172).



record of continuous verbal matter. The poem was happening before Pound started transcribing it, and continues after he stops. We might read canto 1 as an extrapolation into narrative space of Pound's notion of rhythm as "a form cut into TIME." It is a spatial structure that captures, but by the same token interrupts, the real-time unfolding of language.

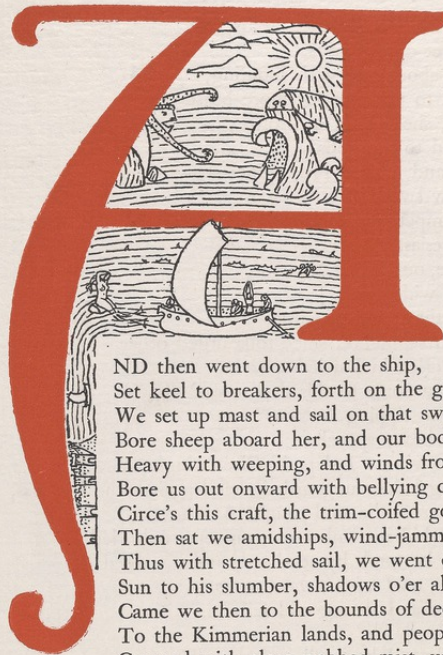
In this, the visual text of canto 1 rhymes with another "cut form" hidden in plain sight. I refer to the woodcut capital A opening the first line, a feature typically omitted out of typographical expediency when the poem is quoted in critical works or included in anthologies. In fact, decorated capitals open each of the *Cantos*. Here's how the capital in canto 1 looks in the 1996 printing by New Directions:



Like the visibly broken syntax opening and closing the canto ("And then" / "So that"), the woodcut A spatializes verbal time, rendering into visual form the phonemic matter contained in a single vowel. While this transcriptive process is involved anytime a phonetic script is used to represent spoken language, Pound's visually arresting capital reminds us of the fact, slowing down and denaturalizing the process whereby a reader's eye turns sight into sound, space into time. This effect occurs even more dramatically when we read canto 1 not the 1996 New Directions edition but the earliest, 1925 printing of the *Cantos*, produced by Henry Strater in collaboration with Pound at the Three Mountain Press in Paris (see *Figure 2.2*). Sprawled across the first page of the poem, so large that it can be inhabited by miniature illustrations of the action to come, the deep red 1925 capital A makes its later equivalents appear comparatively drab.

Noting that such visually ornate features are simplified or omitted in later printings,

# THE FIRST CANTO



AND then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward  
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.  
Then sat we amidships, wind-jamming the tiller,  
Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day's end.  
Sun to his slumber, shadows o'er all the ocean,  
Came we then to the bounds of deepest water,  
To the Kimmerian lands, and peopled cities  
Covered with close-webbed mist, unpierced ever

Νεκρομαντεία

With glitter of sun-rays;  
Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from heaven,  
Swartest night stretched over wretched men there.  
The ocean flowing backward, came we then to the place  
Aforesaid by Circe.  
Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,  
And drawing sword from my hip  
I dug the ell-square pitkin;  
Poured we libations unto each the dead,  
First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.  
Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death's-heads;  
As set in Ithaca, sterile bulls of the best  
For sacrifice, heaping the pyre with goods,  
A sheep to Tiresias only, black and a bell-sheep.  
Dark blood flowed in the fosse,  
Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides  
Of youths and of the old who had borne much;  
Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,

Ai

Figure 2.2

textual critics have emphasized the value of reading Pound's *Cantos* in their earliest published versions. As George Bornstein observes, beginning already in 1933 the more spartan design of the New Directions *Cantos* jettisons "whole levels of meaning...levels particularly pertinent to the project of a poem that begins with an entire canto on cultural transmission" (37). Working from Jerome McGann's distinction between "bibliographical code" and "linguistic code" (i.e. the physical features of a text as distinguished from its words), Bornstein argues that later reprintings of modernist works that "emphasize only the linguistic code...correspond to the withering of the aura. They tend to set the text free from its original time and place, locating it in our own principally as an aesthetic rather than historicized object" (7). Provocatively applying Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura" to print as opposed to photography, film, and other new media dependent on "mechanical reproducibility," Bornstein details how intellectual and political valences of works can be tacitly suppressed when texts are adopted without critically evaluating their provenance.

At the same time, the *Cantos*' reciprocal troping of voice and media, its attendance to the groove, warns against treating the poem as an art object per se, as something whose form and aesthetic import inhere in physical materials themselves.<sup>32</sup> To be fair, Bornstein does not suggest that we read only first editions, but that we "[examine] modernism in its original sites of production and in the continually shifting physicality of its texts and transmissions" (1). Yet even this qualification of an historical-materialist approach opens itself to question. What *are* the "original sites of production" in the case of the *Cantos*? Presumably Bornstein means the early printed editions. But in a theoretically complete sense should this not mean the original

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<sup>32</sup> We might note that Benjamin's famous essay points specifically to "the woodcut" as an early instance of mechanical reproducibility (20), and not as a singular aura-generating art object, as Bornstein approaches it.

manuscripts, considered within the social circumstances of their inscription, as Virginia Jackson suggests in her study of Dickinson? Or perhaps even the “odd inarticulate chant” (Kenner “Notes” 21) with which Pound shaped the sound of his lines before settling on specific words? An objection could be raised that manuscripts and inarticulate chants are not intended as public materials, whereas printed books are. Yet a mere ninety copies of *A Draft of XVI Cantos* were printed in the 1925 edition. If virtually no one was reading these texts in their “original time and place,” does privileging them provide a better or worse sense of the material intersection of Pound’s poetry with literary history? We should also note that word “Draft” in *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, which persists through the first three *Cantos* printings (1925, 1928, 1930) and then reappears in the final printing (1968), where it designates the still unfinished nature of Pound’s epic. To the extent that Pound considers all of the published *Cantos* “drafts” to some larger project, what is the material horizon of that project, and what is its historical character? While Pound imagines the *Cantos* as “a poem including history,” he also strenuously resists the idea that his epic, or any aesthetic work, should be reduced to an “historicized object.”

One way the *Cantos* resist objectification is by citing myriad other texts, implicating the work in a network of reference that exceeds the bounds of a single book. Often this takes the form of discrete acts of citation or apostrophe, as in the opening of canto 2: “Hang it all, Robert Browning” (6). At the beginning of canto 1, however, Pound pulls other texts into his orbit more subtly, through a kind of sustained vocal accretion that renders a passage from Homer’s *Odyssey* in language inflected by the accents, alliteration, and caesural pauses not of Greek, but of the Anglo-Saxon of the *Seafarer* poet. Pound produces, in other words, a prosodic rather than citational allusion:

We set up mast and sail on that swart ship.

Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward  
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess. (3)

In these lines "Homer's words" reveal themselves to be interpenetrated by the verbal traits of a later poetic tradition. Though Pound was himself skeptical of Parry's oral-formulaic theory, an analogy presents itself in the form of those Slavic *guslars*: their phonographically preserved voices are now woven inextricably into the voice we call Homer's, as is the *Seafarer* poet's voice in canto 1. The words in these later texts are not "Homer's words," yet their sonic structures alter our sense of the epic tradition's material basis.

Emphasizing the prosodic effects of canto 1 while downplaying its bibliographic commitments may seem obtuse, considering the famous bibliographical reveal at the end. Pound, speaking in the voice of Odysseus, having poured libations into an "ell-square pitkin" (3), confronts the shade of his mother Anticlea. Just as she appears, however, two more voices emerge from seemingly outside the narrative space the canto has established:

And then Anticlea came.  
Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus,  
In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer. (5)

The "I" in these lines is no longer Odysseus, but the modernist poet-translator, who outs himself in conceding that he has not been working from the original Greek but from a 1538 Latin edition of Homer by the Renaissance scholar Andreas Divus, which Pound had picked up at a Paris bookstall "[in] the year of grace 1906, 1908, or 1910" (*Literary Essays* 259). This is undoubtedly one of the great moments of modernist intertextuality, and might therefore be read as a

celebration of the codex form itself. Yet we should also note that, as the canto presents it, Divus's interruption is something the modernist poet-translator would rather have avoided. His grudging, fumbling acknowledgment of his source ("I mean, that is..."), while establishing an intertext, is also at face value an assertion that he would have preferred to keep his cribbed voices hidden, where they could shape his prosody without showing up on his Works Cited page. When critics point to the Divus episode to observe a lamentable irony in later editions of the *Cantos* failing to preserve their own bibliographical codes, then, this observation is itself somewhat ironic. For canto 1 is not about honoring bibliographical codes as such, but about the happy ease with which linguistic codes—the text of a Latin *Odyssey*, say, or *The Seafarer*—can be stripped from books and braided into a poet's verbal imagination.

If, as I am suggesting, the groove of the *Cantos* tropes verbal performance as the obverse of material inscription—voice as the obverse of media—then Pound's little-studied 1938 audio recording of canto 1 might be understood as an almost literal instantiation of what is, for the most part, a figurative effect. On the cusp of World War Two, Pound had returned briefly to the United States from Italy on the hope of gaining an audience with President Roosevelt, and he recorded some of his poems during a visit to Harvard. The phonograph recording of canto 1 complicates a purely visual, book-based understanding of the *Cantos* by adding to the poem's textual field an audiotext performed in Pound's own voice. Listening to this recording, we gain an appreciation of how important tonal effects are to Pound's poems. The most dramatic tonal shift in Pound's performance of canto 1 comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the line beginning "Lie quiet Divus," where he accentuates the poem's speaker's bashfulness at having had his sources compromised. ("In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer.") Having spoken until this point in a highly performative, almost chanted register, Pound's voice raises in pitch and gains a

colloquial edge. This tonal accentuation carries a huge amount of dramatic information that the printed text leaves out, since other than a line break there's no visual indication that the arrival of Divus is the key to the entire canto. By contrast, someone experiencing canto 1 for the first time via Pound's audio recording would almost certainly sense that *something* happens in the Divus line, even if they don't know what. That "something," we grow to appreciate after studying the poem, is the visceral sense that all utterance is haunted by dead voices, that prosody masks intertextuality. In fact, it is only half correct to say that canto 1's visual text offers no paratextual indication of Divus's importance. This is true for the New Directions editions. The 1925 *Draft of XVI Cantos*, however, marks Divus's arrival and signals his importance with a conspicuous marginal gloss. What canto 1 loses bibliographically after 1925, then, Pound restores phonographically in 1938 through the tonal contours of his Harvard recording. Precisely what he restores is harder to say, since the linguistic material that disappears is not the acoustic material Pound adds, and yet these two things perform the same aesthetic function within the poem.

As this reading suggests, the groove of the *Cantos* is not a feature that is easily pinned down. It doesn't inhere "in" a given text. Rather it is a relation *to* text, a condition or stance that perceives a text's materiality to be tangled up with the prosodic and physiological mechanisms that bring it into verbal being. Such slipperiness compels Michael Golston, in his study of modernist poetic rhythm, to conclude that "Pound develops a prosody of 'hidden' rhythms, that is, rhythms that must be *inaudible* and *invisible*" (63). Luckily, there are moments in the *Cantos* where the groove appears in a more literal, localized form, bringing down to earth what would otherwise be a pretty elusive effect. One of these grooves is the "pitkin" that Pound-as-Odysseus digs in canto 1: "I dug the ell-square pitkin." What *is* a pitkin? From context we infer that it is a hole created by a downward cutting motion, another "cut form," but its origin remains obscure.

And for good reason, for if we turn to the *OED* for a definition we find a single entry: “*nonce-wd*. A small pit. 1917 E. Pound. *Lustra* 199.” The word is Pound’s neologism. Yet if “pitkin” is technically unprecedented, its meaning remains legible (“pit” is an old word), as Pound confirms a few lines later when he offers another archaic word as a synonym: *fosse*, “a deep, wide-mouthed hollow or excavation.” Reading for the groove, we notice that this last definition fits nicely with the two early definitions of “groove” cited above: “a mining shaft” (c. 1400); “a channel or hollow, cut by artificial means” (c. 1660). Yet it is “pitkin” we should keep our eye on, for this word in particular aspires to the condition of pure groove. With this inscriptive coinage Pound seeks to merge utterance with reference, time with space—seeks, that is, to momentarily collapse the prosodic dialectic on which the groove turns. And he might have, too, but for those overzealous *OED* editors, whose inclusion of “pitkin” means we can experience the word in a book that is not the *Cantos*, experience it outside the groove.

A still more obvious groove of the early *Cantos* goes by that name, appearing near the beginning of canto 2 in the phrase “the wave runs in the beach-groove” (6). This “beach-groove” joins the “pitkin” and “fosse” from canto 1. Like those earlier instances, this groove names a space where liquid and solid forces combine to summon the voices of the dead:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,  
there can be but the one “Sordello.”  
But Sordello, and my Sordello?  
Lo Sordels si fo di Montovana.  
So-Shu churned in the sea.  
Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,  
Sleek head, daughter of Lir,



eyes of Picasso

Under black fur-hood, lithe daughter of Ocean;

And the wave runs in the beach-groove:

“Eleanor, ἑλέναυς and ἐλέπτολις!”

And poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat,

Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men’s voices (6)

In contrast to canto 1, the opening of canto 2 flaunts its many interlocutors. Where to begin? We might start from the bottom and work up, since the play of audible and visible language Pound associates with Homer (“blind,” but with an “ear for the sea-surge”) activates the groove’s audiovisual dialectic while locating it in a literal “beach-groove.” Beginning with “old men’s voices,” then, we might glance ahead a couple lines to note how these syllables shift into “Grecian faces” and seven lines later into “Grecian voices,” phonemic modulations which translate vocal to facial data and back again.<sup>33</sup> These effects are rendered in writing, yet they trope themselves as a kind of Great Vowel Shift in miniature, a gradual phonetic drift that in turn shifts the ground of semantic meaning. Conversely, the Greek alphabet a few lines above (“ἑλέναυς and ἐλέπτολις!”), inscrutable to many anglophone readers, reminds us that pronunciation can also be visually cued, *scripted* by fixed material forms. The groove here figures as a subtle oscillation between phonemes and graphemes, “voices” and “faces,” water

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<sup>33</sup> Here and in portions of what follows I pursue a version of the method of “phonemic reading” Garrett Stewart develops in his study *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, which charts how “cross-lexical slippages” in the act of silent reading (i.e. phonic blurrings of graphic word divisions) can “generate an aural ambiguity that does indeed return writing to the condition of orality without the predetermined inflections of public oratory or private vocalization” (20). Stewart’s primary focus is the ways consecutive printed words can blend to allow provocative meanings to emerge, whereas my focus in the *Cantos* includes the ways Pound pursues phonemic displacement in non-continuous textual fields.

and sand.

What of the “beach-groove” itself? It’s a curious kenning, which on a first pass invites misreading as the more poetically legible “beech grove”: a cluster of trees, a *selva oscura* perhaps. Twenty years after publishing *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, writing without access to his own books in a Pisa prison camp, Pound will himself misremember (knowingly transform?) the phrase in just this way, offering in canto 76 “live wind in the beech grove / as strong air amid cypress” (477). Slipping phonemically toward “grove” while denoting material inscription, Pound’s “beach-groove” is pure groove indeed, all the more so since “the wave [running] in the beach-groove” looks a lot like a stylus tracing the grooves of a phonograph record, both of which motions elicit sound from matter, time from space. That “groove” and “grove” are allied and blurred in Pound’s thought is further substantiated by a 1934 comment about James Joyce: “Joyce’s mind has been deprived of Joyce’s eyesight for too long...He has sat within the grove of his thought, he has mumbled things to himself, he has heard his voice on the phonograph and thought of sound, sound, mumble, murmur” (“E. E. Cummings Alive” 210-11). In fact, Joyce’s work may have had a still more concrete impact on the imagery of canto 2. For when Pound locates the voice of the Homeric tradition in the “beach-groove,” he does so having recently helped see into print a story about a fictional Irishman named Stephen Dedalus who plods along a Dublin beach reading the language of the sea, whom readers are to imagine as a modern Telemachus. “These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here” (35), muses Joyce’s wayward aesthete, in an episode titled “Proteus” whose “art” is Philology. Earlier in the day, he had traced his own phono-graphic line in the sand with his signature ashplant: “Steeeeeeeeeeephen!” (17). Now, he stands still, eyes closed, listening: “fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, ooos” (39).

The subtly displaced phonemic modulations of Pound's canto 2 are in Joyce's rendition a condensed and continuous "wavespeech" of pure signification, which in figuratively melding sign and signified under the banner of acoustic inscription partakes of the modern groove. It is likely coincidental, but nonetheless significant, that both Pound and Joyce in their respective beachside musings retrace fairly exactly the ground Thomas Edison covered in his own beachside essay of 1888. There Edison observed that "sound-waves set going by a human voice might be so directed as to trace an impression upon some solid substance, with a nicety equal to that of the tide in recording its flow upon a sand beach." The implication is that, in an age of analog sound recording spoken language can be broken down and analyzed according to smaller conceptual units than alphabetic book-based methods have so far allowed. The word "phoneme," we might note, first appears in English in 1879, two years after the word "phonograph" does. In the opening of canto 2, it might initially seem that Pound's quicksilver allusions partake of the logic of the book more than the logic of the phonograph. What but a library could contain and interlink the wide-ranging subjects he rattles off, beginning with the obscure thirteenth-century Italian poet Sordello? While a bibliographical logic is undoubtedly in play, so too is an acoustic, phonetic logic, which reveals itself in just two letters: *so*. Or more accurately, in two phonemes, /s/ and /oʊ/, which link such keywords as **Sordello**, **So-Shu**, **Seal sports**, **Picasso**, and (in inverted position) **Ocean**, and do so phonetically rather than semantically. Like Edison's phonograph, these phonemes process sounded frequencies rather than written meanings. In this, we could think of them as sonic equivalents to the woodcut capitals opening each canto, phonemic forms cut in time echoing graphemic forms cut in space. They are, like Homer, "blind," but with an "ear for the sea-surge."

## Song Books

Yet the fact remains that Pound published his poetry in books. And so normative is the bibliographical horizon of modern literary expression that the acoustic strand of my argument may seem, in a word, immaterial. In an important sense, it is. The groove names a dialectic in which evanescent vocality is held in tension with the fixity of writing and other physical media. For these reasons, consulting a work of Pound's intended expressly for audible performance and not bibliographical distribution can help flesh out the acoustic strand of my argument. The work I have in mind is Pound's opera *Le Testament de Villon*, which he composed in collaboration with the American composer George Antheil between 1920 and 1924, the same period in which Pound was revising his early *Cantos*. In approaching *Le Testament*, we should recall that Pound makes a much less stark generic distinction between his musical and poetic work than the works themselves might seem to suggest. "Poetry attained its highest rhythmic and metrical brilliance at times when the arts of verse and music were most closely knit together" (*Literary Essays* 91), Pound suggests in 1913. Writing about the *Cantos* in 1934, Pound insists that "All typographic disposition, placings of words *on* the page, is intended to facilitate the reader's intonation, whether he be reading silently to self or aloud to friends. Given time and technique I might even put down the musical notation of passages or 'breaks into song'" (*Selected Letters* 322). Though the idea of a musical *Cantos* shared among friends may sound absurd, Pound believes his poetry is literally musical, his original music poetic.

In the case of *Le Testament*, this manifests in Pound's granular attention to the speech rhythms of Old French, the language of the opera's libretto. In an unpublished essay entitled "Dissertation on Rhythm," Pound links his dedication to rhythm to a quantity he provocatively

terms “time-space”:

In 1923, that is to say two years after the completion of the original total manuscript of [*Le Testament*], arrived Mr. George Antheil; not until then particularly interested in the twelfth century, or the fifteenth, and ignorant of the language of my libretto (French of Villon); but exceedingly interested in “time-space.”

To my considerable surprise he was also very much interested in observing the difference between what I did in the division of time; to what I did differently from Mssrs. Stravinsky, Debussy, etc. In fact he proceeded to spend several months of his time finding out. He observed that I was exceedingly sensitive to duration, and he produced from my repeated dictation a new *graph* of the opera. Which, apart from any possible merit as music, ought to have a value as psychological experiment. Probably no two people have ever spent as much energy on producing so careful a record of durations in sequence. (“Dissertation on Rhythm” 8-9)

The musical score Antheil produces (see *Figure 2.3*), which Pound calls its “graph,” honors the poet’s purported hypersensitivity to duration by employing a series of super-precise time signatures: 11/16, 25/32, and 7/8 are some of the more idiosyncratic examples. Designed to map more accurately the speech sounds of Old French, Antheil’s time signatures pursue a kind of jerry-rigged manual phonography, attempting to employ the binaristic visual tools of traditional music notation to produce an accurate “record” of continuous verbal data. Pound makes these analog aspirations all but explicit when he notes that one could assess the notation’s accuracy by “[recording the opera] on Monsieur L’abbé Rousselot’s phonoscope” (11). Recalling his visit to the French phonetician’s lab in 1912 or 1913, Pound reiterates his belief that the device captures “spoken reality.”

1

Le Testament

Francis Villon

flute

mechanically  
P = P always

Introduction  
Brass drum

quasi organ

repet  
ritual  
myster

fixat  
meditative  
olusit  
sotto voce

Voice  
Villon

Et moi-même Paris et He-lène Les conquies murent  
murent à douleur

Saxophone

Cymbal

Drum

Violoncelle

Clarin.

Voice

Celluy qui perd vent et a-lai ne Son fiel se crâne sur son cœur

Sax.

Bagette

Drum

Clarin.

Figure 2.3

The problem, of course, is that the rhythmic conventions of Western music and its visual notation (e.g. regular time signatures, equal subdivisions of note lengths, etc.) are not designed or equipped to accurately record the contours of the human voice with the level of high-fidelity Pound demands. Nor are musicians accustomed to performing the rhythms represented in Antheil's score, which requires musicians to recalibrate their sense of pulse so rapidly and according to such subtle gradations as to render true accuracy virtually impossible. Pound and Antheil are aware of this problem, yet offer comically opposed solutions for would-be performers. "I doubt if the instrumentalist will get much help from 'counting measures,'" concedes Pound. "Let him learn the *words* and make his noises when the singer reaches the *syllable* the instrument is to emphasize." Antheil, meanwhile, begs that singers "not let the least bit of temperament affect in the least the correct singing of this opera, which is written as it sounds! Please do not embarrass us by suddenly developing intelligence."<sup>34</sup> Pitting prosodic intelligence ("learn the *words*") against textual fidelity ("written as it sounds!"), Pound's and Antheil's opposing responses to this problem of musical "time-space" map the terms of the modern groove. What the "pitkin" and "beach-groove" represent in the early *Cantos*—figurative attempts to collapse the groove's prosodic dialectic—become in *Le Testament* an actual attempt to merge voice and media, to "graph" syllables in a way that allows reciprocal transit between audible and visible registers with no loss of temporal fidelity. Yet the groove, as I have been suggesting, is by its nature not something that can be captured in text, and it is in bashful acknowledgment of this fact that Pound, reflecting on the *Le Testament* fiasco, offers what he calls "the confession that will damn me once and for all." Namely: "I did not do the damn thing

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<sup>34</sup> Pound's and Antheil's comments are included on the title page of the score to *Le Testament* held at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

exactly the same every time” (“Dissertation” 11). Pound, having dictated custom-made rhythms to Antheil, is unable to accurately reproduce them.

We should pause to note the irony and implications of this confession. As I observed at the outset of this chapter, Pound feels that the cardinal sin of modern musical practice is its fetishizing of accurate reproduction, what he dismisses in 1917 as “having a memory like a phonograph.” Yet such “memory” is precisely what Antheil demands when he asks singers to avoid “developing intelligence.” He wants them to perform the opera exactly as written. Pound acknowledges the irony of the situation when he notes that the score to *Le Testament* may finally have less “merit as music” than as “psychological experiment,” which tests how people respond to its unconventional form of “sound writing.” In a note scribbled by Pound near the bottom of the *Le Testament* score, he suggests that his larger vision for the opera was never actually to create a score that would collapse “time-space,” despite his and Antheil’s brief attraction toward this goal, but to honor “the idea of the music.” Referring to a smaller arrangement of the opera performed in Paris in 1926, Pound writes, “In the case of the simpler notation used for the Paris concert, the performer is asked to understand that the music was not supposed to be changed. The difference in the *graph* is due merely to [the] question *which* graph was most likely to convey the idea of the music.” This comment should remind us of Pound’s more genuine belief in music as “a structure, certain main forms filled in with certain decorations,” an activity that stimulates “intelligence” and “constructive faculty” instead of simply demanding rote reproduction. The opera’s “graph,” as Pound defines it here, is not an attempt at perfect temporal capture but rather the material, textual half of an equation that depends equally on performative engagement.

In closing I turn back to the *Cantos* to observe how Pound’s opera sheds light on some of



the poet's most ambitious and musically-inflected poetry, the cantos he wrote while incarcerated in Pisa near the end of World War Two. Specifically, I want to consider the implications of Pound's notion of a musical score as a *graph*. Though "graph" in the twentieth century takes on certain flat, mathematical connotations, the word likely appeals to Pound for its associations with writing and inscription, the same associations, we might note, that led Thomas Edison to adopt the Greek termination when naming his own inscriptive device.<sup>35</sup> "Graph," we might note, gives us the modern English word "carve," and when Pound calls the *Le Testament* score its "graph" he is drawing once again on the notion of acoustic forms "cut into TIME," sounds "carved" into a physical medium for the purpose of later reactivation. I mention the connection to carving in particular because it becomes one of the key tropes in the *Pisan Cantos*. Most famously it takes the form of the carved sirens (sometimes "mermaids") in Venice's Santa Maria dei Miracoli, an inscription of such importance to Pound's thought that his early promoter Hugh Kenner claims to have traveled to the Venetian church "at the behest of three words" in canto 83: "mermaids, that carving" (*Pound Era* xi). "Graph" appeals to Pound on an acoustic level, too, allied phonemically and in some cases conceptually to neighboring words such as (*en*)grave, grove, and indeed groove. More than anywhere else in the *Cantos*, it is in Pisa that Pound, stripped of his books, produces a poetry that oscillates between phonetics and semantics, sounds in time and patterns in space.

Often these phonetic-semantic effects are disaggregated and distributed across multiple

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<sup>35</sup> Pound's use of the word "graph" is further contextualized by a piece of bibliographical information in an appendix to Lawrence Rainey's study of the "Malatesta Cantos," which Pound composed in 1922-1923, largely in transit. Observes Rainey, "Since [Pound] could not take his typewriter with him when he was traveling, he was forced to write letters and other works by hand, and for this purpose he preferred to use graph paper, perhaps because the close, fixed pattern of lines helped to anchor his unsteady pen" (231).

pages, sometimes even across the entire *Cantos* corpus. In canto 76 for instance, the phonemic murmur of “olives grey over grey” (473) suggests other resonant possibilities—*live*, *grave*, *grove*—but we have to wait four pages for these sounds to coalesce into “live wind in the beech grove” (477), which itself echoes back twenty years and 450 pages to the “beach-groove” of canto 2. Needless to say, such effects can be hard to trace, and once traced, harder still to assign meaning, since the point of such linkages is that they operate pre-conceptually, in the liminal space between sound and meaning. As such, they offer signature instances of the groove even as, or precisely insofar as, they obscure the groove as an object of contemplation. Yet there is one particular moment in the *Pisan Cantos* where Pound could be said to momentarily localize the groove. Canto 75, aside from a few lines of introductory text, is comprised entirely of a musical score, a *graph*. The score is an arrangement for violin of the choral work “Les Chants des Oiseaux” [“The Songs of the Birds”] by the French composer Clément Janequin (see *Figure 2.4*). In contrast to the score of *Le Testament*, the score in canto 75 is not presented as a document that captures continuous vocal data. In fact, as Pound frames it, the score’s visual language takes its cue not from musical rhythms and pitches, but from actual birds, which perch on barbed wire around the Disciplinary Training Center like quarter notes and half notes perched on the staves of a musical staff.

The implication is that the score offered in canto 75 is, in effect, one of many Pound could have included. For as the birds flit in and out of his visual field, the notes on the barbed wire staff change positions—“8 birds on a wire / or rather on 3 wires” (505); “5 of ’em now on 2; / on 3; 7 on 4” (506)—and the score rewrites itself in front of the poet’s eyes:

f f

d

## LXXV

UT of Phlegethon!  
out of Phlegethon,  
Gerhart

art thou come forth out of Phlegethon?  
with Buxtehude and Klages in your satchel, with the  
Ständebuch of Sachs in yr/ luggage  
—not of one bird but of many



Figure 2.4

write the birds in their treble scale (545)

What precisely are we looking at? Numerous competing answers present themselves, for Pound has rendered the birds as a function of multiple overlapping media. Most obviously, the birds are inked letters, single graphemes taken from the Roman alphabet. In this, they double the woodcuts opening each canto, also single letters, if more ornate, capitalized versions of the humble lowercase letters. Like the woodcuts, Pound's birds—larks, in fact—are also units of sound, not only because of their association with poetic lyricism but because single alphabetic letters customarily correspond to a language's smallest units of spoken sound. As if this were not enough, Pound further implicates his larks in a system of non-linguistic sound writing, that of musical notation. This system borrows letters from the alphabet as shorthand for the pitches of the diatonic scale, or in the case of solfège, borrows syllables (*do, re, mi, fa*, etc.). But the tonal values of letters as phonemes, letters as pitches, and letters as both syllables and pitches, do not perfectly correspond.<sup>36</sup> With such audiovisual discrepancies in view, how should the passage from canto 82 actually be sounded? How should a reader audibly represent the values the birds have "[written]...in their treble scale"?

Pound means for there to be no obvious answer to this question. Instead of straightforwardly cuing a reading or performance, his "graphing" of birds forces readers to

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<sup>36</sup> Pound makes exactly this observation in a humorous passage from his "Dissertation on Rhythm": "My stupidity about the Greek alphabet, and in fact about any alphabet save the Roman, has often amused me. Pitch I might have discovered thirty years since, but for early instruction. That is to say I was as an infant interested in words; and to be presented with DO (pronounced "dough" and spelled like the verb "to do"), RE (ray), MI (me), FA (not quite "far"), SOL, LA, SI (see or sea), DOUGH; instead of with variations in a *sound*; all of which different noises were easily differentiable by their combinations of vowel and consonant; and to have the matter further bungled by a CHART with stripes of COLOUR on it! Plus the dullness of being asked about DOUGH! In a life full of other interest" (5).

reflect on the prosodic protocols they bring to documents that claim to encode sonic and verbal data. As such, the episode, indeed much of the *Cantos*, presents a procedural challenge to both formalist and historicist approaches. If, as Jonathan Culler suggests, lyric poetry entails a heightened attention to a poem's "enunciative apparatus," Pound's auto-poetic Pisan birds push this formal criterion into parodic, anti-lyric territory. Culler is clearly working to accommodate a degree of poststructuralist skepticism toward lyric's "phenomenalization of the poetic voice" (de Man 55) in his turn to the language of "enunciative apparatus," but Pound's displacement of vocal subjectivity into birds-as-graphemes would seem a bridge too far. This may be the reason that Pound appears in Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* largely in terms of his "unsuccessful" (4) attempt to revive troubadour poetry, rather than for his meta-lyrical critique. By the same token, Pound's meta- and anti-lyricism, which exposes the typographical basis of modern poetic voice, is problematic for a historicist critic like Virginia Jackson. For Pound's poetry turns precisely to the affordances of the book form to critique a reading practice—what Jackson calls "lyricization"—in which that form's tacit collusion allows the production of voice. We might say that the *Cantos* problematize the respective positions of Culler and Jackson by showing them to be interdependent. Taken together, these seemingly antithetical positions generate a definition of poetry, Pound's definition, in which poems consist neither in real-time verbalization nor in physical media, but in the dynamic interaction of the two.

Within this definition, "a poem" is also necessarily a product of human physiology and memory. And memory, Pound suggests in some of the most famous lines from the *Pisan Cantos*, is finally more concerned with "affection" than accuracy:

nothing matters but the quality  
of the affection—

in the end—that has carved the trace in the mind

dove sta memoria (477)

After three lines in English, and without any typographical heads up, we may read “dove” as yet another English monosyllable. But the word is Italian (“doh-vay”), part of a phrase borrowed from Cavalcanti meaning something like “where memory liveth.” Memory lives, the passage suggests, in the dynamic interchange of material texts and human minds, both of which are “carved” in relation to the other. And as language shuttles between sound and writing, data are inevitably mistranscribed and misremembered. Our minds simply cannot preserve them with the lexical precision and reproductive fidelity of print. A case in point, those sirens in Venice: carved, in fact, not by father and son “Romano”—as Pound writes in canto 76—but “Lombardo,” that is, from Lombardy. Pound, lacking a library in Pisa, misremembered. The error is felicitous, though, emerging as it does from an encounter with those “fabulous monsters, part woman, part bird, who were supposed to lure sailors to destruction by their enchanting singing” (*OED*). To carve a siren is to transcribe its enchantment, to graph its song, so to speak, knowing full well that the song’s charm lies in its airy evanescence.

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Details are lost when songs and poems are recorded in books, even as new details become luminous in a visual register. The groove, as I have described it here, names this process of generative mistranscription. It names the fact that verbal events are never adequately recorded by material texts, even as those texts remain the material basis from which new verbal events emerge. In an age of modern sound recording, when phonographic texts endure like books but

sound like voices, poets are compelled to reflect on the material basis of the genre. Does a poem consist in its words? In the physical media used to embody those words? In the linguistic and physiological protocols that enable verbalization? Pound's work suggests that none of these options will generate an adequate definition, yet all are essential. *Melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, *logopoeia*: sound, image, intellect. This last term yokes together the previous two even as it productively blurs them. A groove—a carving, a book, a score—encodes cultural memory, but that memory is transformed, however slightly, each time someone decodes it.

Canto 20 makes a parable of one such decoding. In the summer of 1911, Pound journeyed to Freiberg to visit Emil Lévy, a German philologist then working on an eight-volume Provençal dictionary. Pound brought with him “two strips of copy,” transcriptions of musical settings of the troubadour Arnaut Daniel that he had made while at the Ambrosiana library in Milan. Lévy perused the twenty-five-year-old Pound's transcriptions with interest, and then asked, “Now is there anything I can tell you?” (89):

“Yes, Doctor, what do they mean by *noigandres*?”

And he said: Noigandres? NOIgandres!

“You know for seex mon's of my life

“Effery night when I go to bett, I say to myself:

“Noigandres, eh, *noigandres*,

“Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!” (89-90)

The mysterious “noigandres” appears in just one text, an 1883 edition of Daniel's poems edited by U. A. Canello.<sup>37</sup> Unable to cross-reference the word, Pound was lost, as had been Lévy “for seex mon's of my life.” But the canto gives clues as to how the riddle was solved: “Sound: as of

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<sup>37</sup> Kenner meditates at greater length on the “noigandres” incident in *The Pound Era* 113-118.

the nightingale too far off to be heard” (90). This echoes the opening line: “Sound slender, quasi tinnula” (89). Attending to sound, we loosen lexical boundaries normalized by print. Thus Lévy’s searching prosodic contortions (“NOIgandres,” “*noigandres*”), which the canto divulges, helped dissolve the Provençal non-word into multiple words: “*d’enoi ganres*,” meaning something like “wards off boredom.” Pound renders this triumph of phonetics typographically even as his own phonetic transcriptions of Lévy’s audibly accented English (“Effrey,” “bett,” “DEFFIL”) generate words that, like “noigrandes,” will never appear in a dictionary. The distance between sound and writing can be pronounced. When that distance is made the subject of poetry, “the cliff folds in like a curtain...Square groove in the cliff’s face” (95). Cliffs like curtains, square grooves: forms cut in time like the sinuous woodcut S opening canto 20 in its first printing (see *Figure 2.5*). This particular woodcut puts the S in “SOUND,” but as its ink drips suggestively down the text’s left margin it suggests another word, too.





OUND slender,  
quasi tinnula,  
Ligur' aoide :  
Si no'us vei, Domna  
don plus mi cal,  
Negus vezzer mon bel pensar

no val.”  
Between the two almond trees flowering,  
The viel held close to his side;  
And another: s'adora”.  
“Possum ego naturae  
non meminisse tuae!” Qui son Properzio ed Ovidio.

The boughs are not more fresh  
where the almond shoots  
take their March green.  
And that year I went up to Freiburg,  
And Rennert had said: Nobody, no, nobody  
Knows anything about Provençal, or if there is anybody,  
It's old Lévy.”  
And so I went up to Freiburg,  
And the vacation was just beginning,  
The students getting off for the summer,  
Freiburg im Breisgau,  
And everything clean, seeming clean, after Italy.

And I went to old Lévy, and it was by then 6.30  
in the evening, and he trailed half way across Freiburg  
before dinner, to see the two strips of copy,

Figure 2.5

3.

Paper Records:

Langston Hughes by the Book

Langston Hughes's poem "Theme for English B" imagines a classroom scene that pits two theories of poetic composition against each other. The first is offered by a figure identified simply as "[the] instructor," who presents to his class the following assignment:

*Go home and write  
a page tonight.  
And let that page come out of you—  
Then, it will be true. (CW 3: 52)*

From the instructor's perspective, poetry is a spontaneous outpouring of authentic selfhood, what John Stuart Mill famously described as "feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude" (71). This idealized, Romantic understanding of poetry is framed, in the lines above, by another idealized feature of English-language poetry: iambic rhythms. But here the rhythms are exaggerated, singsong, with the effect that they mark themselves as self-consciously, rather than unknowingly, "poetic." As such, they expose an irony at the center of the instructor's theory of composition: namely, that the formal features understood to be paradigmatically poetic are as much a function of interpretive consensus as they are gauges of authentic selfhood.

So Hughes offers in the following lines a more critical theory of poetry, one cognizant of the social and material factors contextualizing the homework assignment at hand. This theory is spoken not by the instructor but by a student in the class, apparently a stand-in for a college-aged

Hughes:

I wonder if it's that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.

I went to school there, then Durham, then here

to this college on the hill above Harlem. (52)

Hughes's speaker responds not in overtly rhythmic language, but in descriptive, colloquial speech. Rather than attempting to express universal sentiments, the student simply provides biographical details about himself. After two lines terminating with end-stopped sentences, the verse grows increasingly informal and enjambed, until autobiographical backstory morphs into a present tense, stream-of-consciousness transcript of the speaker's real-time activities:

then I cross St. Nicholas,

Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,

the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator

up to my room, sit down, and write this page: (52)

In one sense, the student has fulfilled the instructor's assignment to the letter, penning a lyric passage that speaks truthfully to his own experiences rather than attempting to conform to other people's demands or expectations. And yet the student also suggests that his brand of poetry may ironically fail to register as such within the predominantly white social space of the college classroom and, by extension, the English tradition in poetry. Even as the instructor demands authentic individuality, Hughes's poem implies, he represents Anglo-American institutions and traditions that have sought for centuries to curtail black individuality and expression. Organized around this contradiction, "Theme for English B" places in a fruitful tension the desire for uninhibited poetic lyricism and, conversely, the social and material conditions surrounding

specific acts of poetic production.

In this chapter I explore this tension as it shapes Hughes's poetry and, more specifically, his prosody. Compared to a traditional prosodic analysis, however, my approach might be considered something closer to a meta-prosody or even an anti-prosody. I mean to analyze those social and material features that shape—but by the same token encumber—our ability to straightforwardly parse Hughes's language. This approach responds to the fact that prosody has always been a somewhat fraught category for Harlem Renaissance poets, who have often been praised for their turn away from English prosodic convention and toward the sounds and rhythms of African-American speech and music.<sup>38</sup> Thus Ben Glaser suggests that the Harlem Renaissance poet Sterling Brown is forced to navigate “a prosodic balancing act between overdetermined pasts,” between traditional metrical forms seen as the property of a white tradition and notions of “native, vernacular poetics rooted in ideas of black rhythm” (“Folk Iambics” 417). Glaser argues that Brown develops a “heterogeneous prosody” that blends, while critiquing, both cultural inheritances. My study of Hughes operates on similar assumptions but is more concerned with questions of prosodic mediation as such. What are the social and material categories that make prosodic form legible in the first place? Insofar as these categories mediate—literally, “stand between”—a poem's language and its readers, in what ways might they also obscure or distort this language? As “Theme for English B” makes clear, a poem's prosody inevitably gets tangled

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<sup>38</sup> Few studies exist of African-American prosody. Notable exceptions include Charles Hartman's *Jazz Text*, Ben Glaser's “Folk Iambics,” and Meta Jones's *The Muse Is Music*. As Jones observes, “Too often, studies of black poetics reveal a dearth of serious criticism of the craft that exacerbates a divide between craft and politics. Specifically, the need for thicker descriptions of sustained structural, metrical, and non-metrical investigations of poems infused with jazz—the prosodic element—motivates this inquiry” (87).

in the media ecosystems in which that poem is imagined, composed, and transmitted. “So will my page be colored that I write?” (53), quips Hughes’s speaker, exposing the multiple layers of prosodic media—verbal, visual, acoustic—through which a sense of black vocal authenticity comes into being.

The first section of this chapter examines Hughes’s first two collections of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), showing how their scenes of live performance are implicated in the discourses of sound recording and print. The second, longer section considers the last book of poetry Hughes published, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961). The most visually and bibliographically ornate of Hughes’s books, *Ask Your Mama* calls attention to its bookishness in a way that unsettles reading habits that phenomenalize Hughes’s voice into an overly idealized notion of black collectivity. And yet the book’s unique visual elements are also what frame the work as a kind of musical score demanding literal collective performance. Attending to this dual imperative, I suggest, opens up new possibilities for prosodic thinking. Rather than understanding prosody as an after-the-fact measurement of sonic features recorded in a given text, prosody in *Ask Your Mama* becomes a collective, performative, and media-conscious endeavor—a mode of bringing a poem’s sonic structures into being by entering into a transhistorical network of authors, readers, designers, musicians, and media.

## **Lyric Media**

That Hughes’s poetry balances lyricism and socio-material critique reflects, among other things, the balancing act the poet himself maintained across his long and illustrious career. On one hand, Hughes’s cultural authority depended on idealized understandings of poetic form,

particularly insofar as the poet was seen to be speaking in a new way on behalf of a broad segment of middle- and lower-class African Americans. Incorporating black vernacular speech and musical tropes borrowed from blues and jazz, Hughes produced a body of poetry characterized by a sense of sonic immediacy and verbal authenticity. Writing to Countee Cullen in 1923, he described some lines of enclosed verse as “the poetry of sound, pure sound,” claiming that it “[marked] the beginning of a new era, an era of revolt against the trite and outworn language of the understandable” (*Selected Letters* 19). Drawing on a tradition of African-American musical improvisation, Hughes also frequently downplayed the role of craft and revision in his artistic process. In his autobiography *The Big Sea*, for instance, the poet recalls penning “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” on the back of an envelope while traveling by train from St. Louis to Mexico. “No doubt I changed a few words the next day,” Hughes writes, “or maybe crossed out a line or two. But there are seldom many changes in my poems, once they’re down” (*CW* 13: 66). Passages like this position Hughes’s poetry as transcriptive, unmediated, and aural rather than bookish or formally self-aware. Consequently, one of the dominant strains of Hughes criticism has centered on what Herman Beavers calls the poet’s “aural aesthetic” (2). Hughes’s biographer Arnold Rampersad, for instance, locates the poet’s genius in his “willingness to stand back and record, with minimal intervention” (“Fine Clothes” 147). Rampersad considers Hughes’s 1927 collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew* his “greatest collection of verse” (144) because it presents a “barely mediated recording of the sounds and sights of black life” (146).<sup>39</sup>

Yet on the other hand, sound and voice in Hughes’s poetry are highly mediated

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<sup>39</sup> See also Steven Tracy’s 1988 study *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, which focuses on musical immediacy and authenticity in observing that blues “is the very essence of the souls of the black folk who were so important to Hughes’s artistic expression” (2).

categories, principally by virtue of being rendered and disseminated via writing and print. As Lesley Wheeler observes, “From the beginning of his career, Langston Hughes sought ways to deliver voice and music into the visual medium of print. Even his famous musically based ventures—the development of poetic correlatives to blues and jazz—form part of his visual poetics, since in them he attempts to make sound visible” (62). How do Hughes’s spelling, typography, and layout visualize sound? How do paratextual elements of his books, some beyond his control, mediate readers’ experiences of the poet’s voice? The cover artwork of Hughes’s first published collection, for instance, featured a racialized silhouette of an African-American blues musician, which as much as the poems themselves presented to readers a certain interpretation of black musicality. Another media format that contextualized Hughes’s work was the commercial phonograph record, which by the 1920s had begun disseminating and thereby standardizing various tropes and themes of black music. “[In] Chicago in my teens,” Hughes reflected in 1964, “all up and down State Street there were blues, indoors and out, at the Grand and the old Monogram theaters where Ma Rainey sang, in the night clubs, in the dance halls, on phonographs” (“I Remember” 152-3). Notably, as David Chinitz observes, Hughes’s memory is not entirely accurate. In the years he refers to, no commercial blues records yet existed (*Which Sin* 223n28). The seemingly minor mistake illustrates one way that Hughes’s blues are always to some extent phonographic. They are always already remediated, all the more so when they are presented in a printed, visual register as opposed to an aural one.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander Wehelié observes that Hughes tends not to “dwell on the technological aspects” (114) of his listening habits. Yet this should not be taken as Hughes’s entirely rosy view of the music industry. Writing to McKay in 1926, the poet lamented that, “Some of the colored victrola records are unbearably vulgar, too. Not even funny or half-sad any more. Very bad, moronish, and, I’m afraid, largely Jewish business men are exploiting Negro things for all they’re worth” (*Selected Letters* 87).

This push and pull between lyrical performance and media-conscious critique structures the title poem of Hughes's first collection, *The Weary Blues*, which recalls the experience of watching an African-American blues musician perform in Harlem:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
I heard a Negro play. (*CW* 1: 23)

Drawing inspiration from this performance, the poem's speaker incorporates blues elements into his own reflective meditation. His opening line syncopates an iambic pentameter by substituting a trochee in the first foot: "**Droning a drowsy syncopated tune.**" His repetitions and exclamations ("O blues!", "Sweet blues!") affirm his borrowing from oral forms. And on two occasions the speaker includes quoted material that we are to understand as the actual blues lyrics he heard performed in Harlem: "'Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self. / I's gwine to quit ma frownin' / And put ma troubles on the shelf'" (23).

Yet if "The Weary Blues" is inspired and inflected by musical sources, it is in other ways markedly removed from live performance. The oft-remarked grammatical ambiguity of the poem's opening lines, which almost seems to position not "a Negro" but "I" as the performer, yokes together performing musician and reflective poet. The following couplet produces a similar effect: "Down on Lenox Avenue the other night / By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light" (23). The first line's colloquial delivery and first-hand geographical knowledge affirm the social actuality of the depicted event, while the second line's conspicuous poeticisms—the spondaic mouthfuls of "**pale dull pallor**" and "**old gas light**," with all their Symbolist resonance—remind us that this event is in fact produced by the text at hand. The same might be said of the poem's repetitions and exclamations. While the doubling of "He did a lazy sway... /



He did a lazy sway..." (23) could be read as an emulation of the lineal repetitions central to the blues, it could also be read as evidence of the wistful vantage of the poem's lyric present, with all the retrospective belatedness such a vantage entails. As Jahan Ramazani observes, "This blues is already a blues for the blues, the poet mourning his professional distance from the oral, proletarian, vernacular culture that he memorializes" (*Poetry of Mourning* 145). The poem's final lines would seem to support this reading by ending on an image that the speaker could only have imagined: "The singer stopped playing and went to bed / While the Weary Blues echoed through his head. / He slept like a rock or a man that's dead" (24). Recalling Wordsworth's description of the moor-crossing leech gatherer ("a huge stone," "not all alive nor dead"), Hughes's closing lines interbraid the blues singer's performance with the poet's own literary performance.

In a provocative recent reading, Lisa Hollenbach suggests that the poem's blending of real-time performance and literary reflection evokes the kind of listening associated with another contemporary media form: the phonograph record. "[In] the 1920s when Hughes published his first poems," observes Hollenbach, "the distribution of music through recorded sound rather than through sheet music and live performance had only recently taken hold as a mass cultural phenomenon in the US" (302). On one hand, the phonograph record's ability to preserve and reproduce actual sounds appeared to offer listeners a portal into oral, rural, and non-technological cultural forms such as African-American blues. On the other hand, the sense of authentic cultural access the phonograph afforded was dependent on a media technology that was radically displacing vocal and musical sounds from their embodied origins. Hollenbach suggests the tension involved here underwrites the "strange portrait of listening" Hughes presents in "The Weary Blues": "The potentially endless repetition of the song...for example, which continues

playing even beyond the consciousness of the performer, parallels the repetitive possibilities of the recorded song while aligning the blues singer with the phonograph as the medium rather than the clear source of the blues” (310). Hollenbach concludes that, “in foregrounding listening as a socially constructed act mediated through technologies of race as well as sound, Hughes ultimately locates the authenticity of African American popular music not in its origins or authentically ‘folk’ performers but in its reception among the listeners who spin blues and jazz records around the world” (304).

A similar, and less speculative, point could be made about the experience of reading Hughes’s poems in printed form: authenticity becomes less a feature of the text as such, or of the persons represented in the text, and more a concept developed in the reading experience, one intertwined with concomitant readerly assumptions about genre, media, and race. This is what T. Austin Graham means when he argues that Hughes’s allusions to popular songs allowed readers to not only read his printed poems silently but, in effect, to sing along with them. Music-based Harlem Renaissance poems by Hughes and others, Graham suggests, allowed some readers, “in temporary and metaphorical ways, to sing their way into and occupy a different racial identity altogether” (113). A poem such as “Negro Dancers,” for instance, would appear to back up Graham’s claim by enlisting the reader in a performance of song lyrics transcribed into black vernacular. After the first stanza, however, the poem complicates this scene of transracial vocal identification by juxtaposing song lyrics with more ostensibly “literary,” non-musical material:

“Me an’ ma baby’s

Got two mo’ ways,

Two mo’ ways to do de buck!

Da, da,

Da, da, da!

Two mo' ways to do de buck!"

Soft light on the tables,

Music gay,

Brown-skin steppers

In a cabaret. (*CW* 1: 25)

On first blush, the first stanza seems the more musical of the two, its quotation marks, vernacular spellings, repetitions, and exclamations evoking live performance. This dynamism is cast in further relief by the second stanza's abrupt shift to the imagistic stasis of "**Soft light** on the **tables**." As we continue to read, however, the tempo picks up, and the second stanza's larger prosodic form takes shape: a syncopated musical structure in which stressed syllables establish a larger four-beat phrase even as certain of these syllables (*gay*, *-ret*) fall just left of the beat.<sup>41</sup> This musical prosody in turn invites a reconsideration of the musicality of the first stanza. For to someone expecting Standard English, the vernacular spellings and apostrophe-marked elisions, if anything, impede rather than facilitate a musical reading. The most overtly performative aspect of the first stanza—the scat syllables "Da, da, da!"—likewise pose challenges to performance. Syntactically isolated and semantically opaque, these syllables are, prosodically speaking, very much open to interpretation. They call to mind the thrice-repeated "DA" in the conclusion of *The Waste Land*, which had appeared to great fanfare just a few years earlier, and they all but name the Dada movement whose Paris branch Hughes would have been aware of during his 1923 stint

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<sup>41</sup> This accentual stanza finds a parallel in the stanza opening Hughes's 1951 poem "Dream Boogie": "Good **morning**, **daddy**! / **Ain't** you **heard** / The **boogie-woogie** **rumble** / Of a **dream deferred**?" (*CW* 3: 27)

as a dishwasher at Le Grand Duc in Montmartre.

The more Hughes's poems of the 1920s call attention to their desired performative, musical possibilities, then, the more they alert us to their relative silence and non-performativity as visual marks on the page. This dynamic is even more pronounced in "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.)," where Hughes exploits the visual logics of print to weave together musical and non-musical texts:

EVERYBODY

Half-pint,—

Gin?

No, make it

LOVES MY BABY

Corn. You like

Liquor,

don't you, honey?

BUT MY BABY

Sure. Kiss me,

DON'T LOVE NOBODY

daddy.

BUT ME. (*CW* 1: 25-26)

Arranged in this way, the poem asks us not to determine its governing prosodic structure as much as parse out its two separate audio files. The first, in all-caps, is the 1924 ragtime standard "Everybody Loves My Baby" by Jack Palmer and Spencer William. The second, in sentence-case, is a flirtatious conversation between a man and woman at a bar. The hugely popular Palmer

and Williams tune might be seen, following Graham, to invite readerly sing-along. But to do justice to the poem as a visual text this sing-along would itself need to be accompanied by a performance of the speakerly conversation. At which point it may prove more rewarding to put down the book and head to the nearest jazz club.

Such effects present a series of questions concerning the relation of prosodic form to poetic media. For instance, to what extent are assumptions about the rhythmic and sonic possibilities for poetry governed by the affordances of writing and print? How might a poem like “The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A. M.)” be translated into an audio recording? Conversely, how are notions of orality and live performance processed and transformed in both printed and recorded registers? Are all blues lyrics automatically poems or just the ones in Hughes’s book? Does a blues poem need to be performed out loud, and to music, in order for it to have its full effect? Such questions have been a frequent point of debate among Hughes scholars. As David Chinitz observes, “Blues is an oral poem, and even the most powerful blues lyric in performance is not necessarily effective when transferred to the printed page...When the reader becomes conscious of the blues poem qua *poem*, the sense of authenticity vaporizes instantly, and the poem is likely to be rejected as a failed imitation of a superior popular form” (*Which Sin* 67). Conversely, Lesley Wheeler contends that, “if Hughes’s blues poems yearn always after an aural medium, their print existence must always be secondary” (66). She concludes that “Hughes’s blues poems are complete in textual form, as visual evocations of sound that can be, but need not be, performed” (67). Wheeler means to affirm that Hughes’s poems can offer rich aesthetic experiences to readers who engage them in the silent, solitary mode more typical of academic reading. But it seems more accurate to say that Hughes’s blues poems, rather than offering readers a choice between performing them and not performing them, productively unsettle

assumptions about what poetic performance might include. Put differently, to read Hughes's blues poems is to be immediately alerted to the ways in which a poem's "voice" is constantly impinged upon by para-linguistic and non-linguistic media: typography, musical form, generic convention. Though such media are not the traditional objects of prosodic analysis, they nonetheless augment our sense of what prosodic form might include by affecting the temporal unfolding of Hughes's poetry.

### ***Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz***

I turn now to the last book of poetry Hughes would publish in his lifetime, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, a work which offers still greater challenges and rewards to the prosodically inclined reader. One of the most striking features of Hughes's 1961 work is that it presents itself as a vinyl record: the squarish book comes with a set of "Liner Notes" that gloss its twelve sections. In this, *Ask Your Mama* seems to offer an almost literal endorsement of the strain of Hughes criticism that has praised the poet's work for offering "a barely mediated recording of the sounds...of black life." Just put it on a turntable, the book implies, and its jazz "moods" will play themselves. And yet, for the would-be reader of *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes's book is far from a continuous recording. While many of its visual, bibliographical features support the conceit that the book is a performative, musical text, many of these same features work to interrupt and denaturalize the reading process. Multicolored paper and ink, abstract artwork, odd typographical elements, musical scoring and marginal performance cues: such features, in attracting attention to themselves, also attract attention to how a reader deals with them.

We see this dynamic already in the opening lines of the poem, where generally trochaic rhythms propel the reading voice forward even as fragmented phrases and all-caps text serve to slow and estrange the scene of reading:

IN THE  
IN THE QUARTER  
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES  
WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER  
DUST OF DINGY ATOMS  
BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND. (3)

The phrase “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” recurs in various permutations across each of the poem’s twelve sections. Scott Saul sees this and other fragmented phrases as emulating “a central improvisational practice in jazz—the art of jammed quotation, where melodies were plagiarized shrewdly into a new rhythmic structure” (135). We might also note in the lines above the juxtaposition of “DOORS OF PAPER” with “SCRATCHY SOUND,” a pairing that recalls *Ask Your Mama*’s broadest figuration as both printed book and vinyl record.

This generic indeterminacy caused consternation among reviewers when *Ask Your Mama* first appeared. One particularly harsh response came from Dudley Fitts, who wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that “Langston Hughes’ twelve jazz pieces cannot be evaluated by any canon dealing with literary right or wrong. They are non-literary—oral, vocal, compositions to be spoken, or shouted, to the accompaniment of drum and flute and bass...stunt poetry; a nightclub turn” (“A Trio of Singers”). The last decade has witnessed a general rehabilitation of *Ask Your Mama*. Yet little attention has been paid to its prosodic form, more specifically to the way Hughes plays the book’s bibliographical elements against what might be called its

phonographical ambition, its demand for continuous playback and performance. This is despite the fact that Hughes, as his Knopf editor Judith Jones recalls, had “planned something different for the book, something with more color and variety than our usual sort of poetry book...He saw the book as different, and he wanted it to look different” (Rampersad *Life* 2: 329). Hughes felt the book achieved this. Writing in 1961 to Arna Bontemps the poet bragged: “MAMA is stunning, in fact, should win a Graphic Arts prize for format and unique design” (*Selected Letters* 375). And even after the book was panned by critics Hughes stood by its appearance, writing to Jones in 1966 that it would be “wonderful” if their current book project, *The Panther and the Lash*, turned out “anywhere near as handsome as ASK YOUR MAMA” (412).

In the remainder of this chapter, I suggest that the media comprising *Ask Your Mama* point readers in two seemingly contradictory directions: on one hand, the work’s bibliographical, paratextual features make readers aware of *Ask Your Mama*’s bookishness, its status as a static physical object; on the other hand, these same features are what invite dynamic collective performance above and beyond what is typically associated with a poetry reading.<sup>42</sup> Attending to this dual operation, I argue, helps avoid approaching Hughes’s work through an overly idealized notion of black lyricism, but it also helps mitigate against the historicist tendency to view his poems chiefly as indices of relatively narrow historical moments. Prosody, from this vantage, comes to name not only the study of a poem’s linguistic and metrical rhythms, but also of the broader array of media that jointly bring its sonic contours into palpable being. The following sub-sections therefore seek to analyze those features of *Ask Your Mama* that alternately unsettle and enhance our ability to verbalize its language. Though examined as discrete components, an

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<sup>42</sup> The Hughes scholar R. Baxter Miller observes something like this dual operation when he writes, “These days I would hope to evince a greater precision of inquiring into the interconnectedness through which space and time function in [*Ask Your Mama*]” (xv).



important aspect of Hughes's work is the way these components overlap and intersect at the scene of readerly performance, sometimes complementing one another, sometimes competing in their modes of reproducing sounds and voices.

### *Paper*

*Ask Your Mama*'s paper is pinkish-beige. This feature is both eye-catching and somewhat off-putting, given how normative white paper is for books in general and for books of "serious" literature especially. This feature, moreover, adds yet another layer of irony to Hughes's sarcastic question in "Theme for English B": "So will my page be colored that I write?" Paper color clearly plays an unusually important signifying function within *Ask Your Mama*. But what function? Lacking the semiotic complexity of, say, musical notation or phonetic script, the paper provides virtually no positive data with which one might reconstruct a specific sounded event. In another sense, however, the page's monochromatic hue, precisely in its semiotic sparseness, works to slow or pause the reading event. Like a Mark Rothko painting, it commands attention but only minimally directs it. In this negative, oblique sense, the book's paper serves as one of the initial warnings to the reader that *Ask Your Mama* is a poem about—and a poem that induces—foiled temporal expectations, or "hesitation," to use one of the poem's own keywords.

There are, to be sure, social and political connotations to these foiled expectations. Composed amidst an intensifying Civil Rights movement and on the heels of the Year of Africa, *Ask Your Mama* is concerned throughout with both the means of and the impediments to a broad pan-African liberation. Section 4, for instance, presents a darkly parodic juxtaposition of technological indulgence with social stagnation and terror:

ON THE BIG SCREEN OF THE WELFARE CHECK  
A LYNCHED TOMORROW SWAYS....  
WITH ALL DELIBERATE SPEED A  
LYNCHED TOMORROW SWAYS. (30)

Parodying the language of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that public schools must be desegregated “with all deliberate speed,” these lines strike a fraught balance of progress and regression, movement and stasis. Here and throughout *Ask Your Mama*, the poem insists on blending questions of political hesitation with questions of poetic form, genre, and media. Is the poem’s medium language, in an abstract, ideal sense? Or is it rather the physical media—voice, paper, ink, vinyl—used to record and convey this language? What of the paralinguistic features of such media? Paper color, for instance. Is this part of “the poem itself”? Is a person’s skin color part of their personhood?

### *Ink*

I ask this last question in part because, if *Ask Your Mama* contains no white paper, nor does it contain any black ink. Instead, the book uses brown and blue ink, alternating between them every two pages. Ink color, like paper color, is a feature of Hughes’s book not preserved in anthologies or scholarly editions of his poetry. Yet it is an important signifying element of his poem, gaining particular resonance in relation to one of its most quoted passages:

AND THEY ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS  
IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF?  
I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA. (8)

This is the first instance of the “ask your mama” riff that will recur throughout the poem, typically as a rejoinder to white obtuseness and racism. These lines mock the notion that blackness can rub off on an unsuspecting white victim, not least because this text is printed in brown. Yet the crass sexual innuendo of the “your mama” joke suggests just the opposite: blackness *is* in certain ways malleable, something produced in social discourse. Hughes had learned as much during his first visit to Africa as a young man: “The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro... You see, unfortunately, I am not black... I am brown” (*CW* 13: 11). Indeed, on a second reading we might conclude that *Ask Your Mama*’s brown ink and pinkish-beige paper more accurately capture the skin tones we refer to colloquially as “black” and “white.” The book’s ink and paper, in other words, develop a dialectical relation with its verbal text, which in turn enlists the reader in the production of race as a discursive, rather than a merely visual or physical, category. Like playing the Dozens, reading *Ask Your Mama* means entering into dialogic space with Hughes’s book.

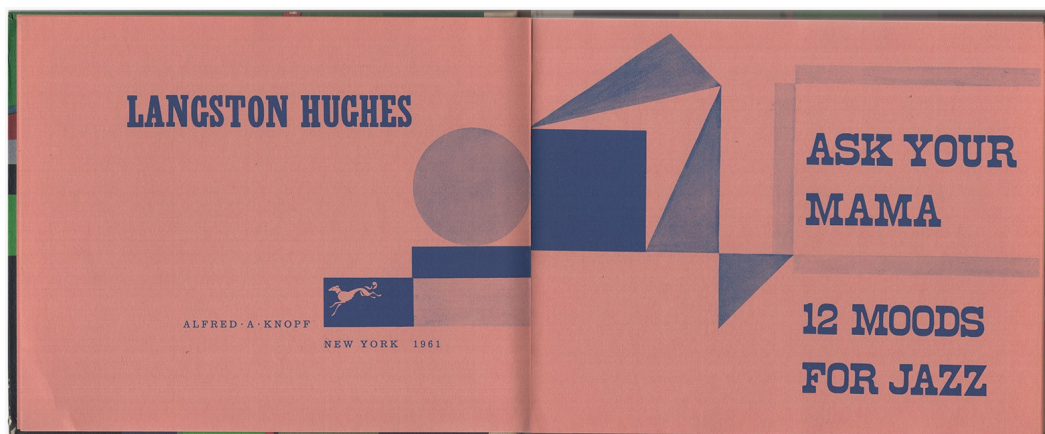
### *Artwork*

Original artwork extends Hughes’s interest in color and its uses. The artwork featured on *Ask Your Mama*’s dust jacket is an expressive but somewhat random-seeming collage of red, black, blue, and green (see *Figure 3.1*). Like the book’s paper, the dust jacket art attracts a reader’s eye while stopping short of pictorial representation. By contrast, the artwork on the title page and before each of the poem’s twelve sections develops a somewhat more legible geometrical logic. Square and other angular shapes juxtapose with circular shapes, recalling the work’s broadest self-conceit as both a (square) book and a (circular) record. On the title page,



*Figure 3.1*

this juxtaposition seems to evoke even more clearly the base and horn of a gramophone (see *Figure 3.2*). Yet even as this gramophone comes into view, the starkness of the block shapes



*Figure 3.2*

comprising it keeps us aware of the gap between representation and suggestion and, conversely, between description and interpretation.

This dynamic blurs lines of agency and intention as they exist between Hughes, his book, and his readers. Appropriate to this dynamic, *Ask Your Mama*'s original artwork was designed neither by Hughes nor by his editor Judith Jones, but by Knopf's in-house designer Vincent Torre. As Torre explains:

You may perhaps think that the cover design is a painting. It is not. It is done by a printing method that is almost impossible to describe to someone who is not a printer.

The method is called "blue Bristols," which allows the designer to fill in color areas on a grid-like drawing for the printer to follow. Thus there is no piece of artwork involved that can be viewed as a complete work of art, except in the designer's imagination. This goes as well for the part titles throughout the book itself.<sup>43</sup>

Questions concerning the boundaries of Hughes's authority in relation to *Ask Your Mama* are central preoccupations of the work as a whole. In Section 6, a voice we might take as Hughes's own reflects on the fact that his rise to literary fame has turned "ME WHO USED TO BE NOBODY" into "A NAME! MY NAME—A NAME!" (43). And in Section 1 we indeed find Hughes reduced to just that: one name among many that the poem so insistently rattles off:

LEONTYNE SAMMY HARRY POITIER

LOVELY LENA MARIAN LOUIS PEARLIE MAE

GEORGE S. SCHUYLER MOLTO BENE

COME WHAT MAY LANGSTON HUGHES (4-5)

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<sup>43</sup> Email correspondence with the author. 19 August 2017.

Hughes is of course the author of this text, but this text, the passage implies, is also the author of the poet known as Langston Hughes. The poet produces a body of work that in turn produces him. Because this work enters the public sphere in particular material forms, we might observe that, though Hughes bore the brunt of the negative initial reviews of *Ask Your Mama*, those reviews that were displeased with the book's "novelty of presentation" (Rampersad *Life* 2: 343) could reasonably be understood as directed as well at the other agents involved in the book's visual design.

I make this observation not to absolve Hughes of the early reviews, nor to diminish his share of the acclaim *Ask Your Mama* would later garner, but rather to argue for a more capacious understanding of collaboration than is typically applied to Hughes's poetry. Speaking to the jazz critic Nat Hentoff in 1957, Hughes described collaborating with jazz musicians as follows: "The music should not only be a background to the poetry, but should comment on it. I tell the musicians—and I've worked with several different modern and traditional groups—to improvise as much as they care around what I read. Whatever they bring of themselves to the poetry is welcome to me. I merely suggest the mood of each piece as a general orientation. Then I listen to what they say in their playing, and that affects my own rhythms when I read. We listen to each other" (qtd. in Trotman ed. 56-57). Here and elsewhere, Hughes and his critics discuss collaboration in musical terms. But we might also extend these insights into the context of writing and publishing poetry as such. Just as Hughes's poetry is seen to be enhanced when read alongside the music of Charles Mingus and Leonard Feather, so too is Hughes's poetry enhanced as it enters into a longer format collaborative relationship with publishers, editors, book designers, and the like.

## Scoring

Following the book's dedication (to Louis Armstrong), Hughes presents on a single page two instances of staffed music (see *Figure 3.3*), between which he includes a paragraph of explanatory text:

*The traditional folk melody of the "Hesitation Blues"*  
*is the leitmotif for this poem. In and around it,*  
*along with the other recognizable melodies employed,*  
*there is room for spontaneous jazz improvisation,*  
*particularly between verses,*  
*where the voice pauses.*  
  
*The musical figurine indicated after each "Ask your mama" line*  
*may incorporate the impudent little melody of the old break,*  
  
*"Shave and a haircut, fifteen cents." (n.p.)*

If other visual aspects of *Ask Your Mama*—paper, ink, artwork—bear an ambiguous relation to the work's performative demands, its musical scoring offers a set of clear and temporally precise instructions for audible performance. Yet this very precision raises questions about the provenance of "Hesitation Blues" and its status as intellectual property. By presenting the supposedly "recognizable" melody as sheet music rather than simply naming the tune, Hughes evokes not only this particular blues melody but also the broader cultural processes whereby blues were collected, edited, published, and thereby commercialized in the early twentieth century. Though the earliest origins of "Hesitation Blues" are contested, the song achieved broad popularity after it was published as sheet music in 1915 by Harry H. Pace and W. C. Handy

HESITATION BLUES  
(Traditional)

*The traditional folk melody of the “Hesitation Blues” is the leitmotif for this poem. In and around it, along with the other recognizable melodies employed, there is room for spontaneous jazz improvisation, particularly between verses, where the voice pauses.*

*The musical figurine indicated after each “Ask your mama” line may incorporate the impudent little melody of the old break, “Shave and a haircut, fifteen cents.”*

SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT  
(Figurine)

Figure 3.3

under their “Home of the Blues” label. When it appears in *Ask Your Mama*, however, “Hesitation Blues” is attributed not to a single musician or publisher but to “Traditional” sources, leading A. J. Carruthers to conclude that it is difficult to say whether Hughes’s inclusion of the song signifies “a conscious attempt...to raise the question of the commercialization of the blues” (9). Yet prepublication manuscript materials suggest Hughes was indeed aware of the questions of ownership attending this song.<sup>44</sup> In a set of four hand-sketched scores of “Hesitation Blues,” one

<sup>44</sup> These materials are held in the Langston Hughes Papers at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.



names Handy, one names “Traditional,” and two have no attribution. Earlier in his career, as a rising star of the New Negro movement, Hughes may have oversimplified the blues’ media history in the hope that “musical connections still existed to a vanishing culture, one that predated phonograph records, sheet music, and white involvement with the form” (Graham 157). By 1961, however, appearing in as audiovisually complex a work as *Ask Your Mama*, the “Hesitation Blues” speaks to the multiracial and multimedial character of the blues from the moment they became a recognizable form in America.

The second musical score Hughes includes in *Ask Your Mama*, the two-bar motif titled “Shave and a Haircut,” serves to further complicate and ironize desires for authentic folk origins. Virtually everyone recognizes it when they hear it aloud, yet virtually nobody has encountered it on the page, so brief and essentially performative is the riff. “Shave and a Haircut” therefore raises the question of whether this “*impudent little melody*” is itself more collective, non-authorial, and ephemeral—more “oral”—than any blues song Hughes might cite. It may well be, but there is a curious feature of Hughes’s visual transcription that seems to suggest the difference between music as a sounded event and music as a textual object. In place of the customary rest on the downbeat of bar 2—



—we find in Hughes’s version a sounded quarter note. This change may seem trivial. We can explain it by noting that the quarter note has been added to accommodate a textual change: Hughes writes “fifteen cents” instead of the traditional “two bits” (an archaism for twenty-five cents, a quarter), and the extra syllable requires an extra note. On the page, as an aspect of print, the difference may indeed be considered trivial. When performed aloud, however, the difference

is striking, for Hughes turns what is traditionally a dialogic call-and-response pattern (one person sings “Shave and a Haircut,” the other responds, after the rest, “two bits!”) into a single-voiced musical phrase. Prepublication material again suggests that this change was deliberate. One of the hand-sketched scores circles the offending quarter-note in red pencil and writes below it “rest.” In another version, the customary downbeat rest has been erased and penciled over with a quarter note.

We might, following Virginia Jackson, read this as an instance of “lyricization,” of Hughes translating a dialogic cultural form into a monologic poetic one. But contra Jackson’s understanding of the concept, this instance of lyricization seems to be one that Hughes enters into deliberately and that he wants readers to be alert to as well. The transformation “Shave and a Haircut” undergoes as it is recorded in Hughes’s book, in other words, places monologic and dialogic understandings of poetic form in a generative tension. It insists on the importance of the sustained verbal line in generating poetic effects, but also reveals this line’s implication in other voices and other media: musical scoring, oral custom, manuscript and print materials. This dynamic is aptly captured in Hughes’s gloss of “Shave and a Haircut,” whose prosaic tone all but masks the fact that, through a sly visual pun, the word “line” appears above the word “break” as the result of a couple strategic line breaks. The impudent little melody inspires, in this instance, some impudent typography. Notably, the editors of the *Collected Works* relineate Hughes’s gloss and, as a result, bury the “line break” pun. In all likelihood they simply missed the joke and the relineation was unintentional, an understandable mistake since the descriptive tone of Hughes’s gloss suggests it is not part of the poem proper. Ironically, of course, the editorial change obscures a visual pun whose subject is one of the cardinal features of poetic form—lineation and enjambment—and in doing so reminds us that different performances of the “same” text are

always also remediations of that text.<sup>45</sup>

### *Cues*

Of all the paratexts that alternately enhance and subvert *Ask Your Mama*'s main text, the most conspicuous is the series of musical cues Hughes includes in the right-hand margin. I have so far omitted these cues for the sake of clarity, but strictly speaking they should be included in any textually complete quotation of the poem. Here are the poem's opening lines with cues included:

IN THE	<i>The</i>
IN THE QUARTER	<i>rhythmically</i>
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES	<i>rough</i>
WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER	<i>scraping</i>
DUST OF DINGY ATOMS	<i>of a guira</i>
BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.	<i>continues</i>
AMORPHOUS JACK-O'-LANTERNS CAPER	<i>monotonously</i>
AND THE WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT	<i>until a lonely</i>
FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN.	<i>flute call,</i>

(3)

Describing the musical effects one might perform behind a reading of the poem, the cues might

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<sup>45</sup> It is a fair question whether the editors created a new line break or simply required a runover, but the book's format is wide enough to suggest the former. The project of deducing authorial intent grows still thornier, however, when in consulting prepublication materials we find that the "line / break" pun was not Hughes's but the typesetter's.

be seen as supplemental to the poem as such. Yet as numerous critics have noted, the cues impinge in various ways on the verbal autonomy of the main text, most obviously in that they too are comprised of words and not, say, musical notation, as is the score for the “Hesitation Blues.” R. Baxter Miller, in one of the earliest restorative readings of *Ask Your Mama*, stakes his “claim for its excellence...upon the dialectic between the verbal and musical languages” (88). Indeed, far from offering dryly technical instructions to performers, the cues are often more syntactically legible and lyrically expressive than the material in the left-hand column, sometimes breaking into explicitly figurative and poetic language. One cue in Section 4 reads, “*Drums alone softly merging into the ever-questioning ‘Hesitation Blues’ beginning slowly but gradually building to up-tempo as the metronome of fate begins to tick faster and faster then slowly retarding as the music dies*” (30-31). Another, in Section 11, reads, “*Bop blues into very modern jazz burning the air eerie like a neon swamp-fire cooled by dry ice until suddenly there is a single ear-piercing flute call....*” (77-78). Juxtaposed with the stuttering, mechanical language of the main text (“IN THE / IN THE QUARTER”), the cues distinguish themselves for being more rather than less “poetic.”

If the cues wax lyrical at times, they can also be slyly self-aware of their status as printed text. As Meta Jones notes, the syntax of the words in the left-hand column seems at times to be modified by words in the right-hand column, thereby troubling the distinction between poetry and music and between “margin and mainstream” (63). Jones concedes that this “oppositional reading practice” may contradict Hughes’s own intentions for the work, yet a repeated bibliographical pun suggests otherwise: on three separate occasions, the poet takes care to arrange left-hand and right-hand text so that the words “between verses” fall, precisely, between verses:

NOT OF HER OWN DOING—	<i>12-bar</i>
IN A POT OF COLLARD GREENS	<i>blues</i>
IS GENTLY STEWING.	<i>up strong</i>
	<i>between verses</i>
THERE, FORBID US TO REMEMBER	<i>until</i>
COMES AN AFRICAN IN MID-DECEMBER	<i>African</i>
SENT BY THE STATE DEPARTMENT	<i>drums</i>

(4)

More than any other formal feature of *Ask Your Mama*, the two-column format works to undermine readerly expectations for unmediated lyric voice by framing this voice as the product of print. By the same token, the two-column format undermines idealist definitions of music that would position it as the natural goal of poetic expression or, more specifically, the natural backing track for an authentically black poetics. Despite *Ask Your Mama*'s presentation as a vinyl record, then, the book is far from a continuous recording. Hughes's work, we might say, plays its phonographical promise of analog high-fidelity against a complex bibliographical field that admits multiple performative engagements.

To observe this is to shift the burden of authenticity from Hughes to his readers, to approach *Ask Your Mama* as less a recording than a musical score. By doing so we choose not to attempt to isolate some originary version of the work that we can safely ascribe exclusively to Hughes, but rather to see his work as a work in progress, a product of continual collaborative remediation. Here we might consider Sonya Posmentier's recent observation that "[while] many critics have studied Hughes's poems...as influenced by folk musical forms...the path of influence is far more circular than we often account for" (75). Posmentier grounds this claim in

the early reception history of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, whereas *Ask Your Mama*, by insistently placing its central text in dialogic relation to other visual and musical texts, could be said to incorporate this sense of transgeneric circularity into its very form. Indeed, the blurb on the dust jacket of the first edition seems to acknowledge as much: “These are poems that demand to be read aloud, and whether or not the proper instruments are handy, the description, line by line, of the musical accompaniment which appears beside the verse is so vivid that the music can be imagined. The language derives its inspiration from the jazz, taking off at moments like a solo instrument, pounding at you like bongo drums, moving in free association” (n. p.). This is poetry ex nihilo: verse inspired by jazz imagined from text printed alongside the verse. With this Möbius strip of literary agency, Hughes weaves his own authorial voice into a multimediated tapestry of collaborating voices, sounds, and textures, none of which can be readily isolated from the whole.

### *Liner Notes*

The last paratext I want to consider is the set of “Liner Notes” following *Ask Your Mama*. Numerous critics have suggested that the tongue-in-cheek notes, offered for the benefit of “the poetically unhep,” parody the self-consciously learned notes of T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*.<sup>46</sup> The liner note glossing Section 2, for instance, begins: “In the restless Caribbean there are the same

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<sup>46</sup> *Ask Your Mama* also alludes to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” whose fixation on time, delay, and social paralysis Hughes recasts under his master trope of “hesitation.” Prufrock’s lament over “a bald spot in the middle of my hair— / (They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’)” (*Poems* 1: 6) and Eliot’s poem’s culminating image of “the white hair of the waves blown back” (9) become in Hughes’s poem “HAIR / BLOWING BACK IN THE WIND / (AND I NEVER HAD THAT MUCH HAIR)” (21).

shadows as in Mississippi, where, according to *Time*, Leontyne comes in the back door” (86-87). As we read on to the end of this note, we likely will not dwell on the reference to *Time* magazine, since the note’s language, far from being straightforwardly explanatory, operates according to the same associative, propulsive logic as much of the poem itself. In this, the passage seems to confirm what Arnold Rampersad says of *Ask Your Mama* generally, that while the work is, “freighted with allusions,” these “[arise] for the most part not from European literary sources but instinctively, naturally, out of the heart of lived black American culture” (*Life* 2: 317-8). This assessment is on the whole sound, but in this case Rampersad’s emphasis on the naturalness and spontaneity of Hughes’s method risks obscuring the fact that the *Time* reference is not to the magazine in general, but to a specific issue—March 10, 1961—whose cover story was devoted to Leontyne Price, the first African American to sing a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera and the “Leontyne” named in Hughes’s note (see *Figure 3.4*). The story explains that Price, born and raised in Mississippi, had received monetary support for her musical pursuits from a wealthy local white family named Chisolm. Writes the *Time* author, “Leontyne entered the Chisolm mansion by the back door, as she does to this day. She is free to use the front door, Mrs. Chisholm explains, but it would make the help uncomfortable” (“A Voice” 60).<sup>47</sup>

Price was already on Hughes’s mind when he came across her in the *Time* article. She is, in fact, the first of the many historical figures named in *Ask Your Mama*, appearing in the opening section surrounded by images of transit and stasis, freedom and boundedness:

BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD	<i>far away,</i>
WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING	<i>merges</i>

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<sup>47</sup> Hughes would have been a particularly attentive reader of *Time* following the magazine’s 3 October 1960 issue, which reported, erroneously, a meeting between the poet and Fidel Castro.



*Figure 3.4*



BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING

*into piano*

A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING

*variations*

NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING—

*on German*

YET LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING.

*lieder*

(4)

Hughes likely found in Price someone whose career trajectory paralleled his own: both artists achieved national and indeed international success as young adults and came to be seen as representative figures. As John Lowney observes, “No one could possibly evoke the paradox of ‘BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING’ more complexly than Price, whose own life exemplified the contradictions and misperceptions of black musical celebrities” (572). Price had recently opened the Met’s season and the *Time* story Hughes’s liner note cites offered an eager national readership a glimpse into her backstory and rise to fame. We can imagine Hughes appreciating the consonance between *Ask Your Mama*’s global array of musical forms and the scene that opens the *Time* article: “Big Auntie sits in the parlor listening to French art songs on the phonograph. They sound, she says, ‘a little like the cha cha cha.’... The voice in Big Auntie’s phonograph belongs to one of the world’s great singers: her niece, Leontyne Price” (58).

Yet if Price is allied to Hughes in some senses, her chosen art form—grand opera—was around 1961 leaving a rather sour taste in the poet’s mouth. Hughes had recently been immersed in “the high-toned, overwhelmingly white, elitist world of American opera” (Rampersad *Life* 2: 321) by virtue of collaborating with Jan Meyerowitz on a one-act opera version of “Port Town,” and while reading the *Time* article Hughes surely would have noted how Price and her voice were, to a certain degree, products of white-controlled media: phonograph records, opera houses, printed magazines. When Price appears in *Ask Your Mama*, then, she is an ambivalent, even a

tragic, figure. In this context we might recall Hughes's early essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," where the poet had expressed frustration with middle-class black intellectuals who looked down on popular black musical forms while endorsing popular Anglo-European ones. "A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller sing Andalusian popular songs," Hughes had observed. "But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear 'that woman,' Clara Smith, a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs" (*CW* 9: 33). Something of the inverse logic attends Hughes's fraught relationship to the success the African-American Price had achieved among white audiences in the elitist realm of opera.

Later in the *Time* article Hughes would have come across a passage with a still more direct parallel to *Ask Your Mama*: "Often when [Price] talks about her race, it is in joking fashion. The dusky Aïda she refers to as her 'makeup-saver role.' Once a wardrobe mistress forgot and warned her about soiling her light costume with the dark Aïda makeup. Leontyne pointed to her skin and said, 'Honey, you'd be surprised; that won't come off'" (63). Reading this passage, we might initially assume that Hughes borrowed from the magazine one of *Ask Your Mama*'s most iconic lines: "AND THEY ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS / IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF?" Yet manuscripts and typescripts show that he had penned his line before March 10, 1961. But this chronology is interesting too. It suggests that Hughes, in the final stages of revising *Ask Your Mama*, read the *Time* article and felt compelled to cite it, but to cite it covertly, to hide it, as it were, beneath the musical, improvisatory style more commonly associated with the poet.

Hughes made one substantial addition to the poem after March 10. Section 1, "Cultural Exchange," had initially concluded with the line "I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA." In a late

revision Hughes added material that satirically inverts the narrative of a deferential black underclass serving a Southern white aristocracy, a narrative focalized in the image of the star Price “[entering] the Chisolm mansion by the back door” so as not to “make the help uncomfortable.” Hughes’s ironic inversion imagines a scene of

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES... *ending in high*

NIGHTMARES...DREAMS! OH! *shrill flute call.*

DREAMING THAT THE NEGROES *TACIT*

OF THE SOUTH HAVE TAKEN OVER—

VOTED ALL THE DIXIECRATS

RIGHT OUT OF POWER—

...

IN WHITE PILLARED MANSIONS

SITTING ON THEIR WIDE VERANDAS,

WEALTHY NEGROES HAVE WHITE SERVANTS,

WHITE SHARECROPPERS WORK THE BLACK PLANTATIONS,

AND COLORED CHILDREN HAVE WHITE MAMMIES:

...

HAND ME MY MINT JULEP, MAMMY.

MAKE HASTE!

*“When the Saints*

*Go Marching In”*

(8-9)

It is impossible to say with certainty, but it seems likely that Hughes, having let the *Ask Your Mama* typescripts sit unchanged for over a month, added this new material sometime after March

10 in response to the Price article. Taking what he considers to be the more bitter ironies of her success story, Hughes transforms them into this radical, carnivalesque version of American race relations. This added material offers one instance in which the text of *Ask Your Mama* arose not “instinctively, naturally, out of the heart of lived black American culture,” but through a longer term, intertextual, and media-conscious mode of poetic composition. To uncover this textual history is to sketch a somewhat different picture of Hughes from the one we are used to seeing. This Hughes is not the rising star of the Harlem Renaissance jotting “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” on the back of an envelope, but an older, cannier poet drafting and revising a work whose ironies and contradictions might match those of America in 1961.

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When engaged as a durable printed text—a book—*Ask Your Mama* allows us to slowly and methodically contemplate the social, political, and literary histories from which it emerges. What connections does Hughes forge between the American Civil Rights movement and various African liberation struggles of the early 1960s? How exactly was the first edition produced? Who is Leontyne Price? Answering such questions has become one of the dominant operations within literary studies over the past few decades. Within poetry studies, answering these questions—grounding a poetic object in a socio-material space—has increasingly been seen as a productive check on the process Virginia Jackson has termed lyricization. Drawing from such work, one thrust of this chapter has been to focus on features of *Ask Your Mama* that complicate a straightforward reading of the poem’s central text, that interrupt its prosody and, in doing so, demonstrate its prosody’s embeddedness in media.

Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that these features are also precisely what support and enrich the poem's language in the context of an actual performance. That is, if the book's unusual ink and paper color, its musical scoring and marginal cues trouble the kind of silent, solitary reading often associated with modern literary interpretation, they nonetheless provide positive—if not always precise—instructions for how to produce a collective performance of Hughes's work. And while the printed version of *Ask Your Mama* retains a certain durability and stature, it is not the only version. Prior to print publication, Hughes performed portions of the poem at UCLA to a blues and jazz backing. Later, Hughes revised the work into a staged dialogue for the actors Ozzie Davis and Ruby Dee. He asked the young choreographer Alvin Ailey to turn the work into a ballet. And he and asked the jazz artist Randy Weston to produce for *Ask Your Mama* a lavishly orchestrated musical score, presumably one that would fulfill the eclectic tastes captured in the book's marginal cues. Neither of these last two requests came to fruition, but they nonetheless speak to the strenuously multigeneric and transmedial terms in which Hughes understood his work.<sup>48</sup> This multiplicity of versions suggests that, if the printed first edition of *Ask Your Mama* resists lyricization in the sense that Jackson has defined, the work nonetheless invites another, older form of lyricization: it asks that its words be put to music and performed. This sense of lyric should remind us of the invitation Hughes's poetry extends to re-performance, its orientation not only toward a discernible past but also an unspecified future. As Hughes states in a 1956 lecture "Jazz as Communication," jazz and poetry alike are emblems of

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<sup>48</sup> *Ask Your Mama*'s earliest instantiation was as an impromptu public performance at the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival. Controversially, the festival had been cut short by the local city council after a crowd of young white men, denied entry to the sold-out event, began rioting in the streets of Newport. Hughes, an official for the festival, whipped up a "Goodbye Newport Blues" that he performed to mark the bitter finale of the festival. A couple days later Hughes begin reworking this material into the earliest drafts of *Ask Your Mama*.

“a dream deferred. A great big dream—yet to come—and always *yet*—to become ultimately and finally true...” (*CW* 9: 370). Hughes’s work asks not only to be historicized, contextualized, and interpreted, but also revised, repurposed, and reperformed.

In conclusion, then, let us consider a more recent repurposing of *Ask Your Mama*, a 2009 production of the work at Carnegie Hall. Featured as part of soprano Jesse Norman’s Honor! series, the work was presented as a multimedia performance backed by original music composed by Laura Karpman. As Karpman explains, she was browsing through a used bookstore when she came across a copy of Hughes’s book. “What attracted me to the piece,” recalls Karpman, “was not only that it was written by Langston Hughes, who I think is one of the most brilliant poets who ever lived, but in the right-hand margins of the poem, Langston says exactly how the music should sound” (“‘Ask Your Mama’: A Music and Poetry Premiere”). Karpman’s setting hewed fairly closely to Hughes’s marginal instructions. Nevertheless, the instructions, as we have seen, contain ambiguities and, more to the point, invite creative liberties. In the end, Karpman’s performance featured four vocalists, a symphony orchestra, drumming and rapping by The Roots, video collage, and more. “The barrage of sensations,” concluded a reviewer for the *New York Times*, “could be overwhelming, and not everything worked; a combination of musical and visual clichés in ‘Gospel Cha-Cha’ lapsed into kitsch...Still, it was hard not to be impressed by the audacity of Ms. Karpman’s undertaking, and there were genuinely striking passages throughout” (Smith).

Though beginning with her discovery of Hughes’s book, Karpman’s final product produced an immersive, social, multisensory experience quite different from that of reading the book itself. We might say that Karpman’s version resolved, of necessity, the prosodic ambiguities foregrounded in the printed version of *Ask Your Mama*—of necessity because, as a

live performance, decisions had to be made and agreed upon regarding the sonic, rhythmic, and otherwise temporal structures of the piece. In Karpman's version, moreover, we see Hughes's work as a work of "media" in the fully modern sense of that word, by which I mean a work that self-consciously foregrounds and counterposes the communicative capacities of its constituent parts.<sup>49</sup> It can be tempting to see some of these parts, in Karpman's pyrotechnic rendering, as supplemental to the poem proper: Hughes did not authorize such a version, indeed could perhaps not even have imagined it. And yet, by pursuing this line of thinking—by shearing off paratextual elements until we're left only with Hughes's words—we produce a pared down version of the work that just as clearly falls short of the poet's multimedial ambitions. The medium of *Ask Your Mama*, then, is neither its language in an abstract sense, nor its printed first edition, nor its later remediations by artists like Karpman, but a kind of historical palimpsest of these and other versions. To bring one such version into being is to enter the poem's prosody, to engage its media and, from the vantage of the present, join Hughes in performance.

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<sup>49</sup> On the modern sense of "media" see Guillory's essay "Genesis of the Media Concept," which argues that "the concept of a medium of communication was absent but *wanted* for the several centuries prior to its appearance [around 1900], a lacuna in the philosophical tradition that exerted a distinctive pressure, as if from the future, on early efforts to theorize communication" (321). In the context of this study, we might say that prosody always operated as a sound medium, but that this designation was not fully legible until the twentieth century, when poets like Hughes and Pound began foregrounding poetic media as such.

## Epilogue:

### *Caribbean Voices* in London

This dissertation has argued that we should understand prosody as a sound reproduction technology or, more accurately, as a cluster of sound media. I have focused on a period of transition, 1845 to 1961, during which advances in sound technology unsettled the normative print ground of poetic voice and in doing so challenged poets to reimagine the basis of prosodic form. Examining three figures who privileged sound and music while remaining invested in the world of print—Edgar Allan Poe, Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes—I have shown how their work develops an understanding of prosody as collective, performative, and transmedial. Thinking about prosody in these terms makes clearer the cultural and technical commitments of a literary tool that is often seen as neutral and more than a little bit pedantic. Instead, I have argued, prosody should be conceived as the very mode of bringing a poem's sonic structures into palpable being. Far from being a neutral measuring, the prosodic act enlists the reader in a dynamic transhistorical network of authors, publishers, craftspeople, and media—all of which are summoned during the voicing of a poem. This understanding of prosody is not meant to deny the chief importance of meter within the long history of anglophone poetry, but rather to position meter as one medium among many that rightly bear on the temporal unfolding of verse. Approached this way, the supposed disappearance of prosody and meter under modernism might instead be seen as a renewal and diversification of prosody's base under changing media conditions.

Each of my three central poets, though American by birth, saw his work in transcultural



and transnational terms, and in this epilogue I would like to consider the matter of prosody within a more explicitly global anglophone context. More specifically, I want to talk briefly about a BBC radio program called *Caribbean Voices*, which aired between 1943 and 1958 and which the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite has called “the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English” (87). Featuring work by Brathwaite, Louise Bennett, V. S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, and others, *Caribbean Voices* was recorded in London and broadcast on Sunday evenings to listeners in the West Indies. The program let expatriate West Indian writers connect with their home communities over the air, and also served as a gateway to the London literary scene. Behind the scenes at *Caribbean Voices* a collaborative ethos prevailed, with writers, producers, and technicians of different races, ethnicities, and political persuasions working together on a project that was by definition transnational.

In many ways, *Caribbean Voices* operated in opposition to the principles of modernism. If modernism privileged visuality, intertextuality, and aesthetic autonomy, the BBC program privileged sound, orality, and collectivity. Brathwaite himself describes West Indian poetry in just these terms in his 1979 lecture “History of the Voice.” “Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression,” he observes. “The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him” (273). Brathwaite singles out the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett as an early exemplar of a distinctly West Indian poetics, praising her reliance on “the language of the people” as opposed to the “urban, respectable, and standard English” (283) conventions of the middle class. Throughout his lecture Brathwaite plays audio clips from a tape recorder he has brought with him. “I want you to get the

sound of it,” he explains, “rather than the sight of it” (271).

Yet this opposition of West Indian orality and Anglo-modernist literacy is reductive on a number of fronts, as Brathwaite himself well knows. Many writers featured on *Caribbean Voices* saw their work in highly literary terms. If they drew on West Indian oral traditions, they also hoped their involvement with the BBC program might lead to London publishing contracts. Conversely, many of the senior literary figures supporting *Caribbean Voices* writers were representatives of Anglo-European modernism. As Peter Kalliney observes, “Surviving members of London’s interwar modernist scene—T. S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, Roy Fuller, Louis MacNeice, and John Lehmann—took an active interest in Caribbean literature in the 1950s” (118). Brathwaite’s exemplary figure of Bennett, meanwhile, may perhaps seem less cosmopolitan, less modern, less conspicuously difficult than such modernist-inspired Caribbean writers as Walcott or Naipaul. Yet these perceived qualities should be weighed alongside Bennett’s first-hand involvements in radio and television programming, ethnographic fieldwork, corporate advertising, and international diplomacy—pursuits that placed her in decisively modern, transnational, and indeed global contexts. In the case of Brathwaite himself, though one part of his agenda in “History of the Voice” is to articulate a theory of “nation language” rooted in West Indian oral tradition, another part is to position this tradition within a broader anglophone and indeed world context. Though he avoids mentioning Ezra Pound by name, Brathwaite surely has the modernist in mind when he cites “break[ing] down the pentameter” (271) as the chief ambition of a West Indian poetics. The conspicuously Poundian cohort of precursors Brathwaite does name—Dante and the *Seafarer* poet, Walt Whitman and Marianne Moore, Robbie Burns and Marshall McLuhan—serves to further underscore the always already transhistorical, transnational, and transmedial character of Caribbean poetry.

In conclusion, then, let me offer brief readings of Bennett and Brathwaite that position their work against the longer histories of anglophone poetry and modern sound media. My aim here is not to trace a particular historical connection between these two figures and earlier figures such as Poe, Pound, and Hughes, but rather to show how Bennett and Brathwaite explore prosody's relation to media by reflecting on the arrival of radio technology in the Caribbean. Let's look first at a poem by Bennett titled "Pon de Air." Bennett's poem employs her signature mode—a self-ironizing dramatic monologue, in ballad stanzas—which, in this case, she uses to question the assumption that new technologies are an inherent cultural good. The poem's speaker is an upwardly mobile Jamaican whose eagerness to be featured on the radio Bennett gently mocks:

Haul dung yuh coat John, tie yuh tie

Jane fix yuh face me dear,

Spruce up and feel exportant

For we gwine pon de air!<sup>50</sup>

Many layers of irony structure Bennett's poem, but one of the more obvious concerns the speaker's desire to get visibly "Spruce[d] up" for the aural medium of radio: no amount of formalwear will be detected by a microphone. This irony is compounded by the wonderful macaronic pun on "dung," which brings the speaker's demand for coat, tie, and makeup very much down to earth. Bennett's witty neologism "exportant," meanwhile, reminds us that radio technology can be used toward commercial and imperial ends, and so seems to further align the poem with local Jamaican tradition over and against the homogenizing forces of global

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<sup>50</sup> "Pon de Air" has not, as far as I can tell, been published. The poem exists in typescript in the Louise Bennett ("Miss Lou") Archives at the National Library of Jamaica.

modernity. And the ballad form itself, whose accentual prosody we are meant to hear rather than see, seems a fitting venue for this critique.

Nevertheless, we oversimplify the poem's ironies if we read it simply as an evocation of a time before radio or colonialism came to Jamaica. Like William Wordsworth's "lyrical" ballads or Langston Hughes's blues poems, "Pon de Air" is finally interested less in reclaiming a premodern past than in dramatizing how concepts such as modernity and primitivism, literacy and orality, globalism and localism, at once blur and coproduce each another. As Jahan Ramazani observes, Bennett's "deployment of modern print, audio, and visual media should remind us of her energetic participation in the space-reshaping realities of a globalizing modernity" ("Louise Bennett" 53). Indeed, the audiovisual joke that kicks off "Pon de Air"—which satirizes the image of dressing up to welcome Western gadgetry—has by the end of the poem been weighted with unexpected pathos. For the speaker, it would appear, is living in London, while her family is "a yard / Clear over Carib sea"—that is, back home in Jamaica. Radio programming, then, is for them not simply an instrument of imperial control or corporate profit, but a means of communion:

We can jus picture Auntie Sue,  
An Uncle Joe an Fan,  
Dah strain dem aise fe pick fe me  
Clap drom dem tarra one.<sup>51</sup>

The audiovisual joke is still there—the speaker's aunt and uncle "strain dem aise" trying to pinpoint the sound of their niece's clapping—but the poem's ironies now point in two directions:

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<sup>51</sup> A Standard English rendition of the last two lines might read "They strain their eyes to pick out my / Claps from the other ones."

toward those who would uncritically welcome Western cultural and technological forms because of their perceived modernity, and toward those who would glamorize folk and oral forms while overlooking their imbrication in modern media networks.

Bennett's inheritor Brathwaite has sharpened the critical edge of her project. I noted above that Brathwaite in "History of the Voice" opposes West Indian orality to Anglo-modernist literacy. Yet in an unexpected move midway through his lecture, Brathwaite suggests that the West Indian "poets who were moving from standard English to nation language were influenced basically...by T. S. Eliot. What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone" (286). There is surely no more representative figure of the modernist establishment than Eliot, yet here Brathwaite claims him, along with Bennett, as the wellspring of an authentically West Indian poetics. Notably, Brathwaite justifies this striking appropriation through an act of transmedial prosodic distortion. "[It] was Eliot's actual voice," Brathwaite explains, "or rather his recorded voice, property of the British Council (Barbados)—reading 'Preludes,' 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' *The Waste Land*, and later the *Four Quartets*—not the texts—which turned us on. In that dry deadpan delivery, the 'riddims' of St. Louis...were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy, and Klook" (286). Citing Eliot's BBC recordings as opposed to his printed texts, Brathwaite remixes modernist ideologies of aesthetic autonomy and visual form, tracing the "riddims" of Eliot's adult voice to his Midwestern childhood while assigning a modernist aesthetic of "dislocation" to the African-American jazz musicians Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Kenny Clarke. Such a move is not what we think of when we think about prosodic analysis, yet that is the function it serves here. Expanding prosody's purview to radio broadcasts, jazz aesthetics, regional accents, and other non-traditional

media, Brathwaite reveals new facets of Eliot's cultural embeddedness while at the same time remediating his work toward radically new purposes.

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To write sound is to score it, in the twinned senses of inscription and orchestration. The scripted and printed records we retain of poems composed over the past few centuries offer us windows onto an otherwise opaque literary past. Yet these inherited poems—these scored objects—live as well in a vital present moment, obeying the present's conventions and media systems. To read a poem, to activate its language, is to play these two senses off one another. In the case of *Caribbean Voices*, this dual charge arrives with a particular plangency, for the simple fact that no audio recordings of the radio program remain. It was standard practice in the 1940s and 50s that the previous week's program was recorded over to make space for new ones. The material remains of *Caribbean Voices* today consist of hundreds of typewritten radio scripts held in BBC archives outside of London, along with other documentary materials that reflect the behind-the-scenes operation of the program.

The lack of recordings of *Caribbean Voices* is lamentable, even tragic. But this lack helps make evident an important fact about all literary production that too often gets overlooked. Namely, that no work of literature is equivalent to the material forms used to embody that work. Nor is it equivalent to the words that comprise its linguistic text. Rather, these material and linguistic forms combine to *mediate* an aesthetic event for the reader or listener. As the textual critic D. F. McKenzie observes, "The ostensible unity of any one 'contained' text—be it in the shape of a manuscript, book, map, film, or computer-stored file—is an illusion. As a language,

its forms and meaning derive from other texts; and as we listen to, look at, or read it, at the very same time we re-write it” (60). In another passage, McKenzie speaks about theatre performance in a way that bears on how we might think about *Caribbean Voices*: “a theatrical event includes almost all the features of oral performance skills, from repetition to extemporization and audience inter-play. It is in a context like this that texts are perhaps best seen, not as fixed, determined artefacts in a specific medium, but as potential” (51). The original broadcasts of *Caribbean Voices* have been lost and can therefore never be accurately preserved or reconstructed. But the felt absence of these sonic texts can encourage us to think of poems neither as stable documents nor as series of words, but as sites of verbal action. Prosody offers us one of the most flexible and powerful tools for accomplishing this, a means of renewing while transfiguring the sounds and voices of our poetic inheritance.

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