INTRODUCTION

Resonant Reading
Listening to American Literature after the Phonograph

When Gertrude Stein published *Three Lives*, her first book-length work, in 1909, readers were struck by her peculiar, repetitive style. As one dust jacket review put it, Stein's prose was like a "stubborn phonograph." Taken in passing, the comparison might seem unremarkable, but in 1909, when the phonograph was still a relatively new technology, the dust jacket remark penned by Georgiana Goddard King (a Reader in English at Bryn Mawr College) reveals how at least one early reader *heard* Gertrude Stein. According to King, Stein had "pushed the method of realism as far as it would go," and "the patient iteration, the odd style, with all its stops and starts, like a stubborn phonograph, are a part of the incantation. The reader must take it or leave it, – but always, taken or left, it remains astonishing."

The insistence that one not just read but hear Gertrude Stein's writing was one of the ways that her early admirers attempted to explain her unusual approach to language to potential readers. The art patroness Mabel Dodge, Stein's close friend, suggested that one must read Stein aloud; she contended that by "listening one feels that from the combination of repeated sounds, varied ever so little, that there emerges gradually a perception of some meaning quite other than that of the contents of the phrases" (Hoffman 30). Similarly, Carl Van Vechten raved that Stein "has really turned language into music, really made its sound more important than its sense" (Hoffman 34). While each of these directives instructs readers to *listen* to Stein, it is King's comparison of Stein's style to a "stubborn phonograph" that suggests what Stein might have sounded like to her contemporary readers. Indirectly, King offers an analogy for *how* to listen to Stein: not simply to the sound of the voices or to the prose's musical qualities, but to its aural-mechanical aspects. King's analogy implies that Stein's writing has phonographic qualities; but what is more, she suggests that listening to the phonograph prepares one to read Stein. Interestingly, King's analogy links Stein's writing to a mechanical glitch. Sometimes called a "broken record" or a skip, the "stubborn phonograph"

refers to that all-too-common moment when the needle jumps out of the groove and the same few seconds of a record loop and repeat again and again until a person lifts the arm of the phonograph and resets the needle in the groove. It is a suspension of the forward motion of musical time. The error reveals what is mechanical about the machine and exaggerates the very thing that distinguishes phonographic sounds from other kinds of sound production: repeatability. A record repeating in this way is called broken, but language too can break when submitted to repetition – a phenomenon Stein was well aware of and put to use in a number of her works, including "Melanctha" from *Three Lives*. With characters whose repeated professions of "I love you" never quite convey the emotional heft the words imply, relationships quickly break down.[1]

This particular anecdote about an early reader's encounter with Gertrude Stein's prose is a helpful representation of the ways that, even in the early years of the phonograph, sound recording technology was shaping the ways that readers were hearing and making sense of sound, and in particular of how it was shaping the way they read. By making sounds repeatable, the phonograph ripped sound from the strictures of space and time and made sound an object. But while the trope of the broken record was adopted as a commonplace insult in the twentieth century, it actually points to a very specific aspect of the early phonographic technology's limitations. By the end of the twentieth century, recordings were no longer made on wax cylinders, or shellac discs, or even on vinyl – and yet the stubborn phonograph's aural-mechanical qualities such as the skip, the scratch, and the loop have persisted as aesthetic markers. Engineers and DJs use digital processes to add back the nostalgic sounds of recording technology from an earlier era. While Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph certainly had major implications for how people thought about sound and its repeatability, as sound recording technologies developed over the course of the next century, so too did the responses of listeners, readers, and writers. These responses and experiments are the subject of this book.

What is the relationship between listening and literature in the era of recorded sound? How have American writers navigated the intermedial spaces between texts and recordings in order to shape our listening practices? These questions motivate my investigation of the sustained engagement between American literature and sound reproduction technologies during the noisy twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Through an analysis of texts and recordings by writers from John Dos Passos to Kevin

Young, I explore how authors across several genres extended formal techniques in response to the advent of electrical recording, ethnographic recording practices, long-play stereo albums, magnetic tape, and digital remix. I contend that the development of sound recording technology not only shaped many of the stylistic innovations that we now associate with literary modernism, but also compelled writers to theorize sound in ways that continue to inflect our listening practices. For instance, Langston Hughes's "LP Book," *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961), conceptualizes the spatial dimensions of stereophonic sound. Jack Kerouac experimented with an early version of the tape recorder in the 1950s while writing his novels *Visions of Cody* (1972) and *On the Road* (1957) in ways that parallel the compositional works of John Cage.

Numerous scholars have taken up *remix* – a term co-opted from DJs and sound engineers – as the defining aesthetic of twenty-first century art and literature.[2] Others have examined modernist literature's debt to the phonograph.[3] My book explores the gap between these moments, revealing that the reciprocal relationship between the literary arts and sound technologies continued to evolve over the twentieth century. Ultimately, I contend that while literary innovations were certainly shaped by phonographic technologies, writers have often led the way in imagining new uses for sound technologies, and their texts have played a key role in tutoring the ear to listen within a modern multimedia environment.

The historical scope of the book runs from the 1920s to the present, or from the first electrified recordings to the digital era, with an emphasis on mid-century modernist texts. Each of the five chapters pairs literary texts with a key development in sound recording technology. The purpose of this organization is not to make a techno-determinist argument about sound technology's influence on writing, but rather to reveal the reciprocal relationship between texts and recordings, and to acknowledge the ways writers have in fact shaped the uses of sound technology. In the field of sound studies, the tendency has been to arrange the history of sound recording in relationship to the music industry, but this approach has limited the ways that we think about sound's material and cultural contexts. As examples like the one taken from Gertrude Stein's dust jacket illustrate, the culture of readers, writers, and listeners was actively influencing how Americans recorded and listened to themselves.

More than any of Stein's other works, "Melanctha" – the story of a young African American woman from Baltimore – influenced a number of

modernist writers who were inspired by Stein's ability to capture speech rhythms, including Ernest Hemingway, Nella Larsen, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Wright.[4] To be sure, Stein's attempt to represent Black characters is not without problems. However, while admirers like Wright and Larsen noted Stein's ability to represent Black voices, their reflections on Stein instead pointed to their own ability to *hear* the voices. Wright admitted that *Three Lives* helped him to "hear" English as he had never heard it before; he commented in his journals, "I heard English as Negroes spoke it," and "'Melanctha' was written in such a manner that I could actually stand outside of the English language and hear it" (qtd. in Weiss 16). What Wright refers to as "standing outside" language illustrates the paradoxical desire to have one's native language made to sound foreign, that is, for language to be dissociated from itself, and for the voice to be abstracted from language.[5] On some level, what Stein performs for Wright is a phonographic move; by divorcing sound from its speaker and the sounds of language from its sense, Stein enables a listening moment on the page that is analogous to listening to a phonograph. She makes the sensual qualities of speech and language something to be heard. In challenging readers to hear the sounds of language anew, Stein helped readers become aware of their listening as an active process.

The kinds of questions that sound recording raised about the phenomenology of sound – about its relationship to temporality, space, liveness, identity, and voice – illustrate how sound recording became a metaphor for understanding our relationship to modernity. Furthermore, many of the conceptual issues made prominent by recording technology are ones embedded in the technology of writing as well (writing being, in many ways, our earliest sound recording technology). In this sense, the phonograph and the technologies of sound reproduction that came after have continued to reinvigorate the idea of writing as a technology for experimentation. Poetry has always worked along the sonic line between literature and music, but in the twentieth century, these sonic traces were bleeding into literature across genres, including novels, autobiographies, and plays. That line between literature and music became even more blurred when writers like Gertrude Stein started making their own recordings.

During her infamous 1934–35 American tour, Gertrude Stein gave a series of lectures, promoted *Four Saints in Three Acts* (her opera with Virgil Thomson), and made several appearances on the radio. It was the first time American readers heard Stein in her own words. The tour also marked the first time that Stein enjoyed the kind of celebrity that she had felt her writing had always deserved. The recent publication

of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) had given readers a more accessible glimpse of her world; the success of *Four Saints in Three Acts* on Broadway, however, put her playful approach to language in a new, performative context. As one journalist described Stein's lecture series, "To hear Miss Stein read her own work is to understand it – I speak for myself – for the first time. . . . You see why she writes as she does; you see how from sentence to sentence, which seem so much alike, she introduces differences of tone, or perhaps of accent. And then when you think she has been saying the same thing four or five times, you suddenly know that she has carefully, link by link, been leading you to a new thing."[6] The combination of public appearances and lectures, the performances of her work, and radio brought Stein's sound to new ears.[7]

In addition to her radio appearances and lectures, Stein also visited the speech lab of lexicologists George W. Hibbitt and W. Cabell Greet at Columbia University in order to make recordings of her writings, including an excerpt from *The Making of Americans* and several of her "portraits." As Chris Mustazza documents, these recordings were made as part of Hibbitt and Greet's studies of American dialect and became part of the first audio archive of poetry. In 1956, they were edited and released in a popular format by Caedmon Audio – the first record label to specialize in spoken-word recordings and to promote recordings of contemporary poets (Mustazza). These recordings, now available to stream and download on PennSound, have helped Stein continue to reach the ears of students in classrooms, and have also been given new life by contemporary remix artists such as DJ Spooky (the stage name of Paul D. Miller). In DJ Spooky's 2004 remix of "If I told him, a completed portrait of Picasso," the rhythms of her repetitions are accentuated by the ways they idiosyncratically sync (and don't sync) with the samples and beats with which the original recording has been mixed. As Stein raps on the idea of what it might mean to make an "exact resemblance" of Picasso, we hear the exact resemblance of her voice on the remixed recording, bobbing and weaving with and against the DJ's beats:

> Who came first, Napoleon first.
> Presently.
> Exactly do they do.
> First exactly.
> Exactly do they do too.
> First exactly.
> And first exactly.
> Exactly do they do.

And first exactly and exactly.
And do they do
(*Portraits and Prayers* 21)

If DJ Spooky's remix does not exactly make Stein danceable, his resetting of one of her more popular portraits highlights the connections between her dexterous language and that of contemporary rappers. And of course, the remix also draws attention to the ways contemporary digital recording and remix practices resonate with the aesthetics of modernist collage and cubism. Examples like these illustrate the brilliantly recursive ways that recording technologies and American letters have continued to inform and shape one another.[8] In order to sketch how one might listen to American literature *after* the phonograph, the sections that follow offer both historical and critical contexts for the emergence of phonographic technologies as well as several early examples of cross-pollination between literature and the phonograph. By attending to the conceptual links between writing and sound recording, I detail how resonant reading practices can help readers approach the varied sounds of texts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Writing Sound

If writing has always been a technology for recording speech, its primary limitation has been its inability to reproduce speech sounds. Since at least the eighteenth century, tinkerers and inventors had attempted to create automata that could produce human speech, but the majority of these experiments focused on recreating the mechanics of the vocal apparatus.[9] However, as the science related to the physics of sound and the anatomy of the human ear developed in the nineteenth century, attitudes toward sound and its production shifted from mouth to ear. As media scholar and cultural historian Jonathan Sterne has noted, sound reproduction as we know it today was the outgrowth of a number of scientific and technological developments at the end of the nineteenth century, including new discoveries in medicine, and inventions such as the stethoscope and electric telegraph. Hermann Helmholtz's studies of the inner ear and the tympanic membrane in the 1860s, for instance, led him to treat sound as an effect, and he developed a theory of hearing based on sympathetic vibration (Sterne 66). This discovery was critical for how future inventors would conceive of sound reproduction, and as a result, the mechanics of the ear itself became a model. Deafness studies drove the work of nineteenth-century inventors like Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville (who

created the phonautograph in 1857) and later Alexander Graham Bell (the telephone in 1876), who developed machines that would "write" (i.e., visualize) speech with the goal of helping the deaf learn to speak (Kittler 74). Thomas Edison's 1877 phonograph drew upon recent innovations in telephone technology and was modeled on the sympathetic vibrations of the *tympanum membrani* or ear drum. By attaching a stylus to a small diaphragm and pulling it along a piece of wax paper (and later a piece of tinfoil) while speaking into a mouthpiece, Edison could record the vibrations produced by the voice. By pulling that same stylus through the resulting groove, the sounds could be reproduced. Both Scott's phonautograph and Edison's phonograph were inscriptive technologies, but only the phonograph could *read* the scribbles it produced.[10] Although the phonograph itself bore little physical resemblance to the human form, the ear and its tympanic function would forever be embedded inside it.

Of the many legends perpetuated by Thomas Edison about the 1877 invention of the phonograph, one of the most often repeated is that the first words the phonograph ever spoke were "Mary had a little lamb." The story has become so well known that recording historians tend to take the relationship between the phonograph and the nursery rhyme for granted, thinking little about the choice to record those particular words or their origins in an 1830 American poem by Sarah Josepha Hale. Edison may have felt the decision to recite "Mary had a little lamb" to be an unimportant one; within Edison's laboratory, the nursery rhyme had been used as the test phrase to ensure the consistency and clarity of the various tympanic diaphragms that he had been developing for the telegraph and telephone.[11] However, there is something prophetic about the choice to record Hale's poem, anchoring the phonograph's origins to American literature. In the development of tympanic diaphragms, the rhyme was spoken again and again until the phonograph could repeat the phrase with sufficient fidelity. However, speech that was recognizable as such was challenging to reproduce. Edison's assistant, Charles Batchelor, recalled that when they replayed the first test recording, "Out came 'ary ad ell am.' It was not fine talking, but the shape of it was there" (qtd. in Stross 494). As media theorist Friedrich Kittler observed, the phonograph is "a machine that records noises regardless of so-called meaning" (85). Not surprisingly, this lack of distinction meant that the early iterations of sound reproduction technologies produced sounds that were *shaped* like speech, but the words themselves were fragmented and unintelligible. Like the lamb who copies Mary's movements without knowing where she goes, the phonograph

copies the voice without knowing that it speaks; the job of listeners was to learn how to hear it.

While Edison loved to claim in the 1880s that he had "perfected" the phonograph, human ears still strained to hear the machine talk – it "took practice to recognize speech," and the first phonographs were not suitable for use by the average listener (Millard 27). Even in 1889, *The Atlantic Monthly* called the so-called talking machine "a caricature upon the human voice" (Hubert). No doubt aware of the phonograph's limitations, Edison looked for ways to frame the sounds emitted by his device and the Edison Phonograph Company hosted public demonstrations or "tone tests" that helped new listeners hear the phonograph's voice, as seen in Figure 0.1. Here again, the choice of "Mary had a little lamb" (and other familiar phrases and songs) in these performances was not arbitrary. The cadence of the nursery rhyme along with its cultural ubiquity meant that audiences would be able to hear and understand the words transmitted by the phonograph if only because they had heard the words before.

For those who have written the histories of sound recording, perhaps the most confounding aspect is that the name "phonograph" does not conform to teleological expectations about the development of the technology as a machine for musical enjoyment. An etymological study of the term phonograph usually brings one to its Greek roots: *phonē* (sound, voice) and *graphē* (writing). The term phonograph is often dubbed a misnomer by music historians who resist the notion that the machine *writes* sound – but writing has, and continues to be, interrelated with sound technology and its development.[12] As it so happened, the word *phonograph* was not new; it had existed as a verb since at least 1837, not as some obscure passing concept, but as a popular form of shorthand stenography. To phonograph meant to write down speech phonetically – specifically using Benjamin Pitman's method of shorthand, which was the most popular form of shorthand during the nineteenth century.[13] Because English has "sounds that the Latin tongue never possessed," Pitman felt that the Roman alphabet was a limited way to capture English speech and anticipated that his phonography would expand the expressive possibilities for writing (Pitman 11). Edison himself had picked up a copy of Pitman's *Manual of Phonography* while working as a young telegrapher during the Civil War (Gitelman, *Scripts* 62). Phonetic (or "verbatim") stenography had started to become standard practice in courtrooms and congressional proceedings in the 1860s and was popular among newspaper reporters as well (44–49).

Edison himself helped to perpetuate the view of the phonograph as a reading and writing machine, and early encounters with the technology

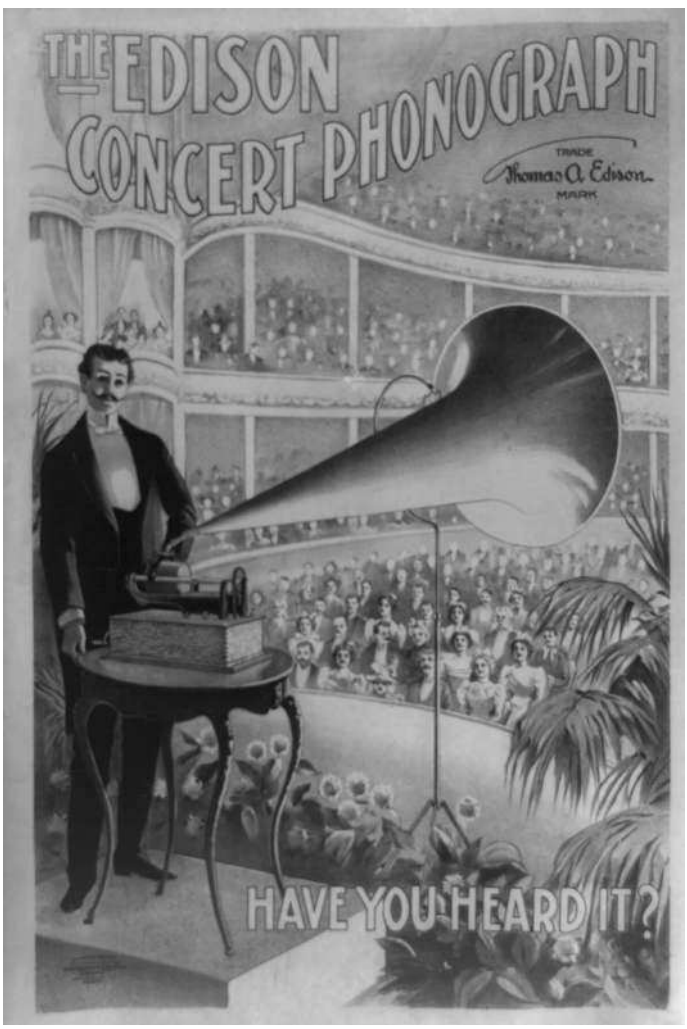

Figure 0.1 "The Edison Concert Phonograph: Have You Heard It?," c. 1899

stressed these functions. In the first article to announce the invention to the public (the December 22, 1877, issue of *Scientific American*), the writers described the machine in terms of its abilities both to write and to "read":

> Now there is no doubt that by practice, and the aid of a magnifier, it would be possible to read phonetically Mr. Edison's record of dots and dashes, but he saves us that trouble by literally making it read itself. The distinction is

> the same as if, instead of perusing a book ourselves, we drop it into a machine, set the latter in motion, and behold! the voice of the author is heard repeating his own composition. (384)

From the tone of the article, one might assume that the phonograph encroached on the terrain of readers and writers. While that threat never came to fruition, the possible uses of the phonograph as a writing and reading machine continued to occupy Edison. In an article Edison penned in *The North American Review* in 1888 announcing his "perfected" phonograph, he stressed the dictation function of the device and spoke of the storage capacity of the new wax cylinders in terms of word count: "Each wax blank will receive from 800 to 1,000 words; and of course several blanks may be used for one document, if needed" (648). Even as late as 1934, Theodor Adorno described the phonograph's curves as "a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing" ("Form of the Phonograph" 56). Recorded music, we find, was just one among many imagined uses for the phonograph (including talking clocks and dolls that could speak). If writers of the period felt that this technology was made for them, it was a result of Edison's own marketing schemes.

In the context of late nineteenth-century American literature, the invention of sound recording technology coincided with a growing interest in capturing the sounds of speech and regional dialect on the page – or one might say, there was an interest in writing phonographically. As I elaborate in my second chapter, early ethnographers, especially those interested in preserving Native American languages and regional American folklore, were some of the first to make use of phonographic technology. Authors of regionalist fiction like Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, and Charles Chesnutt were known for their elaborate use of dialect writing – intentional misspellings (usually phonetic representations), grammatical mistakes, and vernacular language – as one of the key strategies to represent how people from different regions actually spoke. Twain considered his representation of dialect as constitutive to character development (rather than merely decorative) in novels such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). As he remarks in his explanatory note, *Huckleberry Finn* contains several variations of Pike County dialect, and "the shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech." For Twain, who was perhaps just as well known for his oratory as for his published works, the sounds of speech were central to his style as well as his celebrity.

Intrigued by the possibilities of Edison's phonograph as a tool for writing, Twain sent a telegram to Edison in May of 1888 to request