

# Never Heard Such a Thing

## *Lynching and Phonographic Modernity*

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Over the course of the 1890s, recorded sound became increasingly viable as a form of commercial entertainment. Improvements in the quality and durability of the small cylinders used for recording and playback meant that the commodity for sale was no longer simply the quasi-magical fact of sound reproduction, which had been the focus of phonographic exhibitions in the late 1870s and 1880s, but also the subject matter reproduced. While most people's encounters with this sound technology still took place in public settings such as phonograph "parlors" and traveling exhibits, they were able to hear an increasingly wide variety of musical genres and spoken word recordings.

These developments among phenomena that have traditionally been identified with "modernity" intersected directly with the social practices of another, contemporary arena of "the modern," the legal and extralegal enforcement of racial segregation and white supremacy, in a number of forms—notably the dialect sketches and "coon songs" that recording artists and their record companies were borrowing from the minstrel stage. Another, heretofore unexamined area of this convergence was the production and consumption of phonographic recordings of the lynching of African Americans. A handful of texts document the existence of such recordings, at least some of which purported to be, and were taken as, "real," that is, produced on-site, as the events took place. Indeed, some continue to be referred to as authentically "live" documents by present-day historians and other commentators, despite the insurmountable technical problems that would have faced any attempt at recording an event of a lynching's dimensions in the 1890s. The personal memoirs and brief newspaper articles that discuss these aural documents stand in place of

the silence of the recordings themselves, none of which are known to have survived to the present day. Yet these written texts map a national network of public phonographic exhibits offering audio representations of ritualized racial violence during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. All of these texts amply affirm Jacqueline Goldsby's insistence "that we conceive of anti-black mob murders as a networked, systemic phenomenon indicative of trends in national culture" as that culture rapidly modernized.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I try to construct a sense, however partial in the face of absence, of the cultural dimensions of these recordings as artifacts in the nation's growing sense of itself as "modern." The interest in the cylinders, and the apparent desire among many to see them as "real," reflect an unexamined aspect of the importance played by race, and specifically blackness, in the formation of sound recording as a medium and as a sector of the cultural market. The challenge posed by the absence of the recordings is, of course, considerable, though that absence ought to be treated as a palpable feature of the study of early sound recording in a political context. In an effort to meet this challenge, I have divided the essay into two parts. The first presents and examines the recordings through their textual traces, in an attempt to contextualize them within the early history of sound recording; it also suggests factors that may have contributed to the belief in their authenticity. The second part of the essay proposes some conceptual connections between the lynching recordings and a broader early history of blackness, the body, and recorded sound.

In 1893, the prominent African American entrepreneur, veterinarian, civic leader, Civil War veteran, and antilynching activist Samuel Burdett was passing along the streets in the city of Seattle, Washington, "whiling away an idle hour seeing the sights."<sup>2</sup> Eight years later, in a self-published pamphlet titled *A Test of Lynch Law, an Exposé of Mob Violence and the Courts of Hell*, Burdett recounted a gruesome interruption of this expedition. As he strolled through what he called "this thriving little city" he came upon a crowd "attending some sort of entertainment on the street." He pushed his way through the crowd "to where a man was mounted on a stand or platform of some sort." On this scaffold, the man had mounted a "phonographic entertainment" that "consisted of photographic views, coupled with phonographic records of the utterances of a negro who had been burned to death by a mob in Paris, Texas, a short time before."<sup>3</sup> The experience was a curious admixture of private and public space; in general, one would listen through a set of earphones while standing beside four or five other people hooked into the same cylinder at the same time. Recalling his own initial close encounter with sound recording in his antilynching pamphlet eight years later, Burdett wrote: "I had never heard or seen such a thing, and like others who were there, took up the tubes of

the phonographic instrument and placed them to my ears. Oh, horror of horrors! Just to hear that poor human being scream and groan and beg for his life, in the presence and hearing of thousands of people, who had gathered from all parts of the country to see it.” After a brief description of the photographs in the exhibition, Burdett went on to describe more details of what he heard through the earphones: voices of a sheriff, the crowd, and finally of the lynching victim:

The sheriff of a county in stentorian tones that struck terror to the doomed man’s heart, commanded some one to “bring on the hot irons!” Oh, Heaven forgive! The helpless victim almost went mad at the very thought of being tortured as he saw that he was going to be. He hollered out in an agonizing, heart-rending manner, “Oh, Lord, Mr. — —, for God’s sake don’t burn me; don’t burn me—Oh, oh, kill me, kill me! Shoot me, shoot me!” His crying and entreaties fell on deaf ears. Hot irons were brought out, and then his eyes were burned out. The moans and screams which he uttered cannot be described, and perhaps it is as well that they cannot. It were better that it all might be forgotten, and that nothing of the same character should ever transpire again. The things seen and heard there have haunted the writer from that day to this. (17–18)

In Burdett’s text, a preeminent form of technological modernity converges with a preeminently modern form of racial violence. Burdett’s language both describes and acts out this convergence by leaving what he had until now “never heard or seen” ambiguous. It is unclear, that is, whether he is describing the encounter with phonographic technology or the events represented by means of that technology. If the passage has the air of an initiation, or a fall from grace, this uncertainty makes Burdett’s “haunting” an entry into modernity in which racialized power relations and violence not only persist, but are reformulated along lines compatible with technological modernity’s reorganization of the capacities of the senses—a process whose riveting attraction depends upon the representation of the suffering and destruction of an African American. Thus ends, in Burdett’s story, the modernity of urban *flaneurie* in a Seattle he describes as a place “where we pretend that we are educated, enlightened, and on advance ground in everything which tends to advancement” (18).<sup>4</sup> In the haunted modernity he has entered, the vaunted collapse of time and space made possible by telecommunications technology brings the Texas mob and its victim directly into Burdett’s ears as he stands in a crowd presumably made up of awestruck whites.

A similar experience of this neat fit between modernity and white supremacy befell a young white Georgian, Mell Barrett, at a country fair in 1896. In a passage from a memoir quoted in Edward Ayers’s *The Promise of the New South* (and in several other works of contemporary scholarship),

Barrett writes: “With the tubes in my ears, the Pitchman was now adjusting the needle on the machine . . . My excitement increased, my heart was pounding so I could hardly hold the tubes in my ears with my shaking hands . . . ‘All Right Men. Bring Them Out. Let’s Hear What They Have to Say,’ were the first words I understood coming from a talking machine.” Two young men confessed to committing a rape and plead for their lives. Barrett next heard:

The sounds of shuffling feet, swearing men, rattle of chains, falling wood, brush, and fagots, then a voice—shrill, strident, angry, called out “Who will apply the torch?” “I will,” came a chorus of high-pitched, angry voices. [Then came] the crackle of flames as it ate its way into the dry tinder, and the victims asking God to forgive their tormentors. The crowd fell quiet; only the sound of the flames remained. My eyes and mouth were dry. I tried to wet my lips, but my tongue, too, was parched. Perspiration dripped from my hands. I stood immobile, unable to move. Now the voice of the Pitchman saying, “That’s all gentleman—who’s next?” . . . [and] sensing what my trouble was, said, “Too much cake, too much lemonade. You know how boys are at a picnic.”<sup>5</sup>

Both of these accounts dramatize the way that the practice of lynching provided a ready-made narrative, with a chilling climax. At this point in phonographic history, that narrative would have had to last no longer than about three minutes, the recording capacity of the wax cylinder technology that would only begin to be displaced in the late 1890s. Barrett’s account makes clear the vivid aural details that characterized the representation of the lynching—the confession and pleading, the “shrill, strident” calls for showing no mercy, the prayers, and the crackling sounds that conveyed the burning of the men on their wooden poles. It is striking, too, that while the exhibit encountered by Burdett included both visual and audio images, it is the latter that clearly “haunts” him most powerfully: “The moans and screams which he uttered cannot be described, and perhaps it is as well that they cannot.”

Beyond these two vivid accounts, there is very little evidence of the content of purported recordings of lynchings of black men. However, reports of such recordings did surface around the country, in various newspapers, in the late 1890s. For instance:

- In the Decatur, Illinois, *Daily Review* of 22 May 1897, a letter to the editor complains that the “good influences” of the town, who had previously shut down a kinetoscopic exhibition of “the big fight,” were “slumbering” as an exhibitor “comes to town, opens up business on North Water Street, and advertises views and phonograph descriptions of the burning of a negro in the south.” This

letter was signed “JUSTICE,” perhaps as an intentional reference to that word’s having been painted on the scaffold upon which Henry Smith was tortured.<sup>6</sup>

- Later that year, a brief article in the Titusville, Pennsylvania, *Herald* complained about a similar exhibit, condemning the crowd at the lynching for having made the recording; the writer thus reflected what must have been a broader belief that the recording had been made “live.” In an ironic nod to the then-common celebration of the phonograph’s ability to preserve the words of the living beyond death, the article sarcastically congratulated the lynch mob for “thoughtfully ha[ving] a phonograph on hand to perpetuate a dying man’s last words.”<sup>7</sup>
- According to a local newspaper, a phonograph exhibitor was kicked out of Colorado Springs in 1898 for an exhibit featuring “pictures” and “sounds” representing the Smith lynching; the article reported that “the sounds reproduced were said to be the cries of the negro roasting to death.”<sup>8</sup>

Although spare on details describing the recordings, these articles each display moral outrage at the recordings’ existence, but more prominently at their having been “exhibited” in the local area. Indeed, these newspaper pieces tend to displace any anger and/or shame onto such matters of propriety and what would today be called “community standards,” removing the possibility of any reference to the broad problems of racial violence and injustice then permeating the nation: 1896, it should be remembered, was the year of the Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, affirming the constitutionality of the “separate but equal” doctrine. Thus, even outside of the South and many thousands of miles away from Paris, Texas, lynching was treated as equivalent to a popular boxing match and, by implication, as a spectacle of recreational violence that had veered too near the realm of the obscene.<sup>9</sup> The articles suggest that lynching recordings may have provided an effective means to ignore the consolidation of white supremacy that the practice of lynching both resulted from and reaffirmed—not simply because they turned the practice into a form of entertainment and consumption, but because they allowed the discussion of it to become primarily concerned with obscenity in new media.

Two other prominent points are evident from these reports. First, the Smith lynching emerges as the predominant event represented in these recordings. This focus is not surprising. Smith’s grisly murder (he was tortured with hot irons by the father of his alleged victim and then burned alive) must be seen as a signal moment in U.S. media history. The tightly choreographed event, for which the town of Paris closed businesses

and schools, took place in front of an estimated audience of ten thousand spectators and was front-page news in papers across the nation. Grace Hale has called it “the founding event in the history of spectacle lynchings,” a term with which she refers to racially motivated mob murders of African Americans whose detailed violence and scopic dimensions were spread well beyond the site of their occurrence by means of wire services and photography.<sup>10</sup> J. M. Mertins, the local photographer, was commissioned to take a series of images capturing the parade of Smith around the town square and the subsequent mutilation and murder on a large platform, inscribed with the word *Justice*, in a large field just outside the city.<sup>11</sup> The young medium of sound recording, too, played a role in promulgating this particularly modern chapter in the history of racial violence; the historical record suggests that the mob slaughter of Henry Smith carried sufficient currency to circulate throughout the nation in the form of wax cylinders, and perhaps gramophone discs as well, for at least thirteen years.

Second, the articles display a willingness to believe in the recordings’ authenticity—that is, to believe that the grooves etched onto the cylinder’s surface were actually made in the presence of Henry Smith and his killers in Paris, Texas. However, there is essentially no possibility that these recordings were made “live.” It is not clear how many people in the 1890s knew—or considered it important to remember—that phonographic technology was supremely ill-suited to recording outside the sheltered space of a studio or studio-like room. In the premicrophone era, recordings were made through the same phonograph horn through which sound emerged during playback. To make live sound inscribe what in 1893 would have likely been the wax surface of a cylinder required that the sound source be positioned directly in front of the horn. No matter how orderly and preplanned the staging of Henry Smith’s death, it would have been essentially impossible to encapsulate on a phonographic cylinder in any manner approaching the completeness and “fidelity” that the memoirs of Burdett and Barrett describe. Even the Mertins photographs of the lynching, taken from points quite distant from Smith himself, illustrate how the crowds and the event’s design made getting close to the scaffold extremely difficult. And none of the early, detailed accounts of the events in Paris makes any mention of a phonograph or phonograph operator being present. Nor do the photographs provide such evidence.

It is unclear how many people in the 1890s were familiar with the technological capacities of phonography. It also seems possible, though equally unknowable, that the newspapers could have willfully suppressed more serious doubts about the recordings’ authenticity, although one article I have located, which I will discuss shortly, does directly address this issue. Another article, however, offers a particularly loaded account of the recordings’ supposed genuineness. In an article in the Delphos, Ohio,

*Daily Herald*, probably reprinted from a New York paper, a presumably white Texan visiting New York in 1901 claimed to have heard a recording of the Henry Smith torture and murder. The white Texan in the article reported that the recording had been made by a black man who witnessed the murder—a claim that perhaps was understood to boost the viability of the recording’s authenticity: “‘One of these Negroes,’ said the Texan, ‘had a phonograph with him, and into that phonograph went the agonizing cries of the burning man. His agony was terrible, and his moans and cries could be heard for blocks. Do you know what that Negro with that phonograph did the following day? No? Well, he went around all the towns of Texas close to Paris advertising that he had the cries of the dying Negro in that phonograph.’” The “Negro with the phonograph” had made a considerable profit playing Smith’s screams for other local blacks, whose “morbid curiosity” was seen to demonstrate a lack of identification with the victim of the mob’s actions that had surprised the Texan telling the story. “It was like an opera or a fine play or a good prize fight to another class of citizens,” he said.<sup>12</sup> This account of the cylinder’s production, with its absolutely absurd projection of a black man being close enough to the events of a lynching to record it with a phonograph, thus became one of the attractions that would draw people to listen to the recording. Particularly in the context of the other articles we have seen, which focused on the maintenance of moral propriety, as well as the emphasis on civic order at the Smith lynching itself, this piece sensationalizes preexisting disdain for the civic behavior of blacks—even among their own “local community.” The article affirms and racializes the shock and outrage evident in the previous ones, in addition to offering a racialized fantasy of the technological capacities of phonography. Instead of overcoming insurmountable technical obstacles, the challenge of recording an event of this sort, it implies, is to find a black man to make the recording.

A fantasy of such extravagance was perhaps necessary in the face of the specific constraints on the material practice of 1890s studio recording.<sup>13</sup> For it can reasonably be assumed that the cylinders referred to in all of the accounts we have seen were produced in a studio as a forerunner of what we would today call the “reenactment” genre. At least one such recording was definitely an example of this genre. According to ethnomusicologist Patrick Feaster, a recording titled “Burning of Smith at Paris, Texas” was listed in the 1899 catalog of the Talking Machine Company of Chicago.<sup>14</sup> This cylinder was not advertised as an authentic document of the event. Instead, it was pitched as the creation of a prolific recording artist, Chicago alderman Silas Leachman. Leachman was largely known as a singer; his performance of a song called “Daddy Wouldn’t Buy Me a Bow Wow” was one of the most popular recordings of the 1890s. He was especially well known for his renditions of “coon songs,” racist ditties descended from the

minstrel stage that made up a major sector of the market in early recordings of music. Indeed, the listing for the “Burning of Smith” cylinder appears among Leachman’s works in the Chicago company’s catalog just after a selection titled “Big Fat Coon.” That this listing appears in 1899, after the majority of the accounts I have cited, suggests that this was not the only recording of its sort and that Leachman’s cylinder may have been taking advantage of a script that had already proved marketable for other companies, perhaps based in other regions.

The Talking Machine Company of Chicago catalog listing Leachman’s “Burning of Smith” recording suggests that the recordings heard by Burdett, Barrett, and presumably thousands of others were part of a genre in the early commercial recording market known as the “descriptive specialty,” or sometimes simply the “descriptive.” As Jonathan Sterne describes these recordings, “Somewhere between a contrived re-creation of an actual event and a vaudeville sketch, descriptive specialties offered their listeners ‘tone pictures’ of different places and events.”<sup>15</sup> Many such recordings represented major news items: the charge of the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill, for instance, or the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Others represented aurally dynamic everyday events—auctions were a particularly popular subject—in ways that often crossed over into the penchant in early recording for imitations, usually parodic, of “ethnic” voices.<sup>16</sup> Descriptive specialties representing news events often had a narrator, and were recorded from vantage points—often multiple ones—that it would have been impossible to attain in physical time and space, as is evident from an entry in the 1904 Columbia catalog titled “Capture of the Forts at Port Arthur,” a Russo-Japanese War affair described by the catalog copy as “A scene from one of the Russian forts, with cannonading, and shriek of shells. The Russian band is heard playing the National Anthem. The Japanese approach, headed by their band playing their national air, and take possession of the forts, amid loud cries of ‘Banzai.’”<sup>17</sup> Other descriptive titles included “Cumming’s Indian Congress at Coney Island,” “Departure of a Hamburg-America Liner,” “In Cheyenne Joe’s Cowboy Tavern,” “Eruption of Vesuvius,” and “Battle of Manila,” to name only a few.

However, the historical and cultural conventions within which a cylinder like the “Burning of Smith” was produced extend beyond the range of what most scholarly work on early sound recording covers, since those conventions also include the long tradition of the race melodrama, a multigenre tradition dating back at least to the antebellum era and one that Saidiya Hartman has identified with an American cultural fascination with the “spectacular character of black suffering.”<sup>18</sup> The recordings described by Burdett and Barrett, and presumably the one produced by Leachman, drew from scripts that in their broadest outlines recycled and



recast the attractions of a text like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was often treated as less a unified work than an endlessly pliable set of stock scenes and characters, available for revision and addition, and easily adaptable to both stage and cinema.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the record company catalog's juxtaposition of Leachman's "Burning of Smith" recording with a "comic" coon song mirrors the regular mixing of scenes from Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel with minstrel sketches on the music hall stage. Indeed, Silas Leachman's "Burning of Smith" cylinder and others like it may have been forerunners of the soon-to-be-popular cylinder "The Flogging Scene from 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" performed in 1904 for the Edison Company by the leading recording artist of the time, Len Spencer.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, the grisly content of these recordings reflects contemporary preoccupations with documentary realism and its aesthetics, as well as with the representational capacities of new media. These interests were also manifest in early film production, which itself constitutes an important reference point for an example of the "descriptive specialty" genre such as "Burning of Smith." Tom Gunning has influentially portrayed early films by Edwin S. Porter, the Lumières, and others as designed to demonstrate the capacities of the medium to its audiences, a mode of representation he has dubbed the "cinema of attractions."<sup>21</sup> Descriptive specialties might very well be considered a *phonography of attractions*, meant, on the one hand, to demonstrate but, on the other, to inscribe a set of affective and phantastical associations with the medium. As Sterne describes them, "descriptive specialties emphasized for listeners the 'realism' of the medium, even if audiences were aware of the fabrication of the actual performance on record. Like 'primitive' cinema, where the camera's ability to document motion is highlighted, descriptive specialties emphasized the possibility for sound reproduction to present realistic and fanciful accounts alike of events over time."<sup>22</sup>

These cylinders, then, were made in studios, and were most likely produced not as intentionally terroristic enforcers of white supremacy, nor as concerted political antilynching agitprop, nor as an early instance of "snuff" culture—all of these possibilities once seemed viable to me—but as part of a growing culture industry in sound recordings, to be sold as part of an early phonographic genre that re-created major news events in a highly theatricalized form. Given the overall tone of the contemporary responses to them that still exist, they were likely made with little regard for their politics, outside of inspiring the same highly marketable horror and largely apolitical moral outrage solicited by newspaper coverage of lynchings at the time.<sup>23</sup> In other words, these recordings were very much in the mainstream of the emergence of the recording industry as a major form of commercial entertainment. Indeed, although we cannot hear them, I believe these recordings helped to modernize and further capitalize a long-

standing fascination among whites with black voices, as well as fantasies about the relationship of black voices to black bodies.

However, I also suspect that these recordings (and the issue of their origins) represented and racialized a particular uncanny response to phonography itself during a transitional moment in the medium's early history. As numerous authors have shown, the earliest discourse about the phonograph imagined it as a preservative device for voices, including the voices of the dead: what Sterne, with a lack of romance that productively counters the tendencies of some influential theorists, has called its "embalming" functions. But the 1890s saw a substantial expansion of the market in phonographs and a parallel expansion and diversification in the number and types of recordings available for purchase. It was during this decade that it became clear that the phonograph and similar machines like the gramophone would serve the purpose, first and foremost, of entertainment. Indeed, the gramophone's inability to record marked a definite turn of the industry toward consumption rather than production of recordings. The emergence of a market in recordings that featured songs in several genres, comedy sketches, and descriptive specialties helped to empty the phonograph of its earlier associations with spiritualism and the occult. There was little ghostly about listening to "Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow Wow" or an impersonation of an auctioneer with a heavy Yiddish accent.

A transformative sense of the phonographic uncanny is apparent in a fascinating, widely reprinted journalistic investigation into the making of commercial phonograph recordings, titled "The Phonograph Fakir," which raised questions concerning the authenticity of certain notorious cylinders. The author assumed that his audience lacked any significant familiarity with the making of commercial recordings. In order to construct his exposé of the recordings by professionals in a professional setting, he visited a New York recording studio—or, as it was then called, recording laboratory. Observing a singer record a song brought the journalist face to face with the gap between the material process of recording and the imagined capacities of the phonograph as a recording device. "Among many other details of a phonographic nature," he writes, "I learned that in order to load [illegible] a cylinder for reproduction the singer or speaker must stand with his mouth not more than six inches from the receiving horn and shout almost at the top of his voice." The author, then, sought fundamentally to overturn the fantasy of recording as a seamlessly absorptive process by detailing the scene of production (the lab), the multiple persons generally present during the process, and the precise spatial and bodily situations necessary to produce a recording successfully.

The article debunks the claims to authenticity of two cylinders. The first is "The Ravings of McCullough," a widely exhibited cylinder that, it was claimed, had been made inside the insane asylum to which the once-

popular actor John McCullough had been committed in the 1880s.<sup>24</sup> Later in the article, the journalist writes that a cylinder purporting to represent “the burning of John Smith [*sic*] by a southern mob” ought to be considered the “prize ‘fake’” of them all:

The dialogue for this was written from a newspaper report. The negro’s pleadings for mercy, for water and his cursings, mingled with the shouts of the mob, are truly blood curdling when emitted from the phonograph.

“That record,” said the manager [of a New York recording studio], “was ordered by one of our customers in a southern city. A hit? Well, I guess yes. Say, the crowd went against the machine to the tune of \$25 a day, and we’ve sold hundreds of them.”<sup>25</sup>

The journalist is bent not only on uprooting any belief in the Smith recordings’ authenticity, but also on confuting claims that recordings could be made that remained “faithful” to live sound. Having already described the manipulation involved in the production of that “live” sound, he describes observing a vocalist sing into the recording phonograph’s horn and then immediately listening to the recording. Of the playback, he writes, “It was not [the singer’s] voice. It was the phonograph voice—mangled and in pain—accompanied by sounds resembling the crackling of leaping flames and the smashing of brittle wood.”<sup>26</sup> What the author describes is not so much interference with the delivery of the singer’s voice but the creation of a new voice altogether: the “phonograph voice.”

The resemblance between this passage and the descriptions of lynching recordings, particularly those by Samuel Burdett and Mell Barrett, is quite striking—sounds of flames, of cracking wood, and of course of a voice “mangled and in pain” are all details that mirror ones we have already seen noted in the listeners’ accounts. What does it mean that the “phonograph voice” sounds like a lynching recording, the type of cylinder that, it appears, would regularly lead to exhibitors being run out of town? Whereas the uncanniness of phonography had once arisen from the fact that it could “preserve” voices, in these examples, the uncanniness comes from sounds that at once embody extreme states of physical and mental stress and the sound of the machine as it works to produce sound. Interestingly, the focus on the mangled, pained sound of the phonograph voice appears at a time when recordings’ faithfulness to the original performance was improving. But these very improvements likely instigated modes of listening more critically attuned to issues of fidelity than had been the case five or ten years earlier. In the rapidly developing world of phonography of the 1890s, as the sheer awe at the process of sound reproduction began to fade, the lynching recordings may have offered a way to both represent and reembody the new uncanny property of phonography, this “inhuman”

sound. In several other articles of the time, the phonograph is described as particularly effective at representing screams; Thomas Edison, in fact, was said to have loved the McCullough cylinder because of the sonic intensity with which the phonograph rendered the madman's screams.<sup>27</sup> The aural violence of lynchings and the screams of the insane drew directly on the sounds that the phonograph was "best" at producing. The bodies of black men being ritually murdered with increasing frequency in the American South offered an especially ripe topic for this historical moment in sound recording, both because the imagined sounds of slaughter were heard as so well suited to the technology and because they offered a way of giving the more unwieldy aspects of that technology a body and a historical referent—that historical referent being the black body's constitution, in the national imaginary, as the inarticulate subject of violence, and as always available to have violence done to it.

The recordings surely also drew upon an established and growing white fascination with the sound of black voices and, in particular, with imagining black voices as in some senses excessively embodied and insufficiently linguistic—that is, as less or other than human. This fascination dates back to at least the seventeenth century, as Ronald Radano has shown.<sup>28</sup> This preoccupation permeated nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture at multiple levels, from Stowe's description in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Topsy as "producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race" to experiments by the British ethnologist G. D. Gibb and his followers designed to demonstrate that the "Negro larynx" resembled the throats of animals more than those of whites.<sup>29</sup> In the age of the phonograph and recording studio, these fantasies took on new forms. In 1891, a note in the industry journal the *Phonogram* focused on such sounds in articulating an intimate link between blackness and phonographic recording: "Negroes take better than white singers, because their voices have a certain sharpness or harshness about them that a white man's has not. A barking dog, squalling cat, neighing horse, and, in fact, almost any beast's or bird's voice is excellent for the good repetition on the phonograph."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, such assumptions helped to propel the first major black recording artist, George Washington Johnson, to stardom in the 1890s on the basis of his performances on cylinders like "The Whistling Coon" and "The Laughing Song." These numbers—which were built around refrains in which Johnson whistled and laughed, of course—drew on the same fascination with the black voice as corporeal, inarticulate, prelinguistic, and pushed to the extremes of embodiment as was reflected in the lynching cylinders, and they reaffirmed the sense that these sounds were somehow closest to embodying the process of sound reproduction itself.

In imagining these historical connections between black voices and

the “inhuman” voice of the phonograph, I have been assuming a universalized, and hence white, listener and consumer. But as the example of Samuel Burdett demonstrates, not everyone who heard these recordings was white, and some listeners may have been interpellated by the recording in ways that interrupted or complicated the alignment of the inhumanity of the phonograph’s voice with the sound (albeit staged and minstrelized) of black voices being drained of their humanity. Indeed, a strikingly similar anecdote told by another prominent African American, theater and film critic Lester Walton, appeared in the black newspaper the *New York Age* in 1906, thirteen years after Burdett’s incident in Seattle. In an article titled “The Degeneracy of the Moving Picture Theater,” Walton described strolling in Manhattan one afternoon and encountering not one but two signs advertising “JOHN SMITH [*sic*] of PARIS, TEXAS, BURNED at the STAKE. HEAR HIS MOANS AND GROANS. PRICE ONE CENT!” (It is worth simply noting here that, again, while this exhibit presumably contained visual imagery, it is the phonographic aspect that drives the barking advertisement, much as Burdett’s account focused on the sounds of the exhibit rather than on the visual images.) Walton described “a crudely painted picture of a colored man being burned at the stake” as a feature of the signs, and expressed his amazement at the theaters’ invitation to “walk in and enjoy the sight of a human being meeting death by burning, with the moans and groans thrown in for a penny.” Thus Walton’s account, like Burdett’s, displays a degree of empathy (including the very deliberate use of the term *human being*) for the victim of the lynching notably absent from the other newspaper reports, which focused exclusively on the obscenity of representing the event rather than on the historical referent of the recording. Walton continued: “The promoters of moving picture theaters make the assertion that their pictures are of an educational nature. We would like to know where do the elements of education come in so far as the picture in question is concerned.”<sup>31</sup>

For Burdett and Walton, the outrage that these encounters inspired was useful as a rhetorical stepping-off point with which to raise consciousness and call for political action, particularly among other African Americans. One way of understanding the responses of Burdett and Walton is through a familiar kind of disgust that is commonly allied with distrust of new media. And indeed, the sorts of people who were the subjects of the recordings we have been examining—not only people of African descent, but also the insane, and perhaps even white southerners engaged in a mob killing—belong to demographics that are conventionally seen as refugees from, or victims of, modernity (the fact that in some reports of the events leading to his lynching, Henry Smith is described as mildly insane or developmentally disabled becomes particularly notable in this context). A key characteristic of the othering that binds these demographics is an insuf-

ficient degree of individual will, and to the extent that shrieking, screaming, and shouting constituted the sound of the recordings we have been discussing, they might be seen as the vocal acts that indicate most forcefully a lack of self-possession. And it is tempting to imagine Henry Smith's life and death as reaffirming that insufficiency of will by passively being taken up as fodder for the new medium of commercial phonography.

But both Burdett and Walton present themselves as writing from within modernity; neither their blackness nor their possible identification with these representations of Henry Smith causes them to condemn modernity, specifically. Indeed, in *A Test of Lynch Law*, Burdett presents himself as a modern black man in a modern city, and Walton, as a critic who was beginning to explore a serious interest in cinema, was clearly someone who felt himself buoyed by modernity despite his critique of certain aspects of it. These biographical data complement the exhortations of Alexander Weheliye that blackness be “understood as an integral structuring assemblage of the modern human” and that black suffering be considered a constitutive force, rather than an exception, within that notion of the modern human.<sup>32</sup> Revising our understanding of the modern human as a formation of blackness rather than a category that excludes blackness means also revising our notion of the inhuman. Indeed, Weheliye argues that sounds traditionally associated with the prelinguistic, and hence inhuman—sounds such as screams and moans—ought to be instead considered “language that does not rely on linguistic structures, at least not primarily, to convey meaning, sense, or expression.”<sup>33</sup>

Rather than seeing Burdett and Walton as antimodern, I want to cast their responses to the lynching recordings as embedded in a racialized, discursive struggle taking place over notions of modernity and the phonograph's place in it—more specifically, in the location of the boundary between the “human” voice and the inhuman, phonographic voice. The parameters and lines of this battle are by no means clear-cut. In the rhetoric surrounding lynching recordings culminating in “The Phonograph Fakir” article, we see on the one hand an effort to subsume the voice of the lynching victim into the machine—in a sense, to reenact the lynching by squelching its sounds out. But this subsuming was also a reembodyment of the machine's production of sound through the idea that the phonograph did not simply make or conduct sounds, but had a “voice.” The article is at once a fantasy about failed fidelity (phonographs sound like burning wood and not singing) and about perfect fidelity, with the implication that the sounds of a lynching align neatly with the authentic “phonograph voice.” In the first fantasy, the inhuman machine interferes with the human-generated sounds generated by the phonograph's operation; in the second fantasy, the machine itself becomes human.

In elucidating this shifting play between the human and the inhu-

man, it is useful to turn to the work of one of the phonograph's first major theorists, also an acutely engaged critic of modernity — Theodor Adorno. Writing in 1926, Adorno noted something akin to the historical transformation I have identified above in his brief, speculative essay “The Curves of the Needle.” He marked the loss of earlier, imperfect phonographic sound (which he called “artisanal” rather than “industrial”) and condemned the contemporary “emphasis on concrete fidelity” in sound recording.<sup>34</sup> In an elegant summation of Adorno's argument in “The Curves of the Needle,” Barbara Engh remarks: “Adorno was writing that the most hopeful thing about the phonograph was its failures. Its distortions, scratches and skips, its winding down, were an assertion of the inhuman, an interruption of the subject's instrumental relation to the object.”<sup>35</sup> As an aesthetic theorist, Engh glosses, Adorno was supremely invested in critique of the notion of “expression” and in approaching art (in his own words) “not in terms of subjective feelings, but in terms of ordinary things and situations in which historical processes have been sedimented, endowing them with the potential to speak.”<sup>36</sup> His resistance to fidelity in sound recording stemmed from his desire to hear “the latent language of things,” rather than to subsume the thing in the machine, or the machine's thingness; indeed, he saw this as a way of articulating his sense that, as Engh puts it, “the oppression and exploitation of human beings is based on the prehistoric and ongoing distinction between the human and the inhuman.”<sup>37</sup>

In turning back to Burdett and Walton here, I am concerned less with their intentions than with how we ought to frame our approach to what remains of their writings. To construct that frame it is necessary to imagine the attempt to hear things speak—in Adorno's words, “groping for the latent language of things”<sup>38</sup>—as a critical practice. Here it may be useful to turn to the work of Fred Moten, who begins his book *In the Break* with the sentence, “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”<sup>39</sup> It may seem surprising (it is to me) to align a mid-twentieth-century critic who famously condemned African American aural practice with a twenty-first-century critic whose work is grounded in such practices, and I have no interest in erasing the racism present in some of Adorno's writings. It is nevertheless possible to see Moten's work as converging with Adorno's if we recognize aspects of the work of both as meant to rethink the human/inhuman binary by means of a more historically, culturally, and philosophically supple understanding of the constant shifting and interdependence of the categories. Although Adorno, of course, never understood or admitted as much, the interdependence and mutual inflection of these categories in the West has been centrally formed and indelibly marked by the six-centuries-long history of New World slavery.

If the phonograph record is to some ultimately an instance of the



commodification of sound and the sound-maker's labor, we might take Moten's notion of "the shrieking commodity," a category he grounds in the screaming figure of Aunt Hester in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, as a revisionist notion of sound's status as a commodity, one formed through a richer understanding of race, slavery, and history itself. And we might understand the "Burning of Smith" cylinder and others like it as an artifact of the same saleability of the voice of racial violence. A mass-cultural offshoot of white supremacist violence, these recordings may seem culturally and politically antithetical to the genealogy and hermeneutics of radical black cultural production that Moten constructs around aural phenomena like the scream, shout, and moan—a genealogy that includes such canonical figures as Cecil Taylor, Ralph Ellison, and Antonin Artaud, all of whom he approaches through their various engagements with recording. Without creating an equivalence, though, it is possible—and, I think, important—to see such work and the recordings we have been examining as rooted in the same historical "hurt," to use Fredric Jameson's famous term. Certainly these recordings, like the "coon songs" marketed beside them in phonograph company catalogs, bear and reenact, even as they reinfect, an important part of the traumatic history of race as lived in the United States.

The "coon song" genre, like the lynching descriptive specialty, may well have provided an occasion for a black body to be pulled apart, eviscerated, and collapsed into the overall wonder of the technology. Such processes, and the lynching recordings in particular, position death in a manner very different from the theoretical space it has occupied in most treatments of early phonography. Numerous critics have described phonography as a ghostly medium, part of a nineteenth-century fascination with spirits and the possibility of life after death. In such accounts, the phonograph is a preservative device, allowing the dead (such as dead great men, dead relatives, or the dog Nipper's presumably dead master in the famous "His Master's Voice" logo) to live after their bodies have ceased to exist. But these recordings do not preserve life; rather, they document a cultural practice whose ritualized performance is centered around the destruction of a life, and they hence point to the indelible whiteness of not only phonographic listening in the 1890s, but also a great deal of recent work on phonography. This coincidence is not surprising, given the fact that such work often takes up the late-nineteenth-century discourse surrounding phonography with relatively little critical perspective.

The racialized limits of such work operate in tandem with an often impoverished understanding of the materiality of the technology—or perhaps, as I attempted to suggest vis-à-vis the period belief in the lynching recordings' authenticity, with a desire to fantasize beyond the material limits of the technology—thus the tendency of widely cited media theorists



such as Friedrich Kittler and John Durham Peters to take for granted the preservative power of the technology. And yet, as Sterne writes: “If there was a defining figure in early accounts of sound recording, it was the possibility of preserving the voice beyond the death of the speaker. If there was a defining characteristic of those first recording devices and the uses to which they were put, it was the ephemerality of sound recordings.”<sup>40</sup> Too many theorists have drawn their conclusions without acknowledging the tenuousness of the recordings’ existence; the number of recordings produced in the 1890s obviously far surpasses the number available from that time that can be heard today. Moreover, it is quite possible that the existence of certain types of recordings—such as those dealing with particularly charged events such as lynchings—was always particularly tenuous and led to the disposal or destruction of particular cylinders. For in a sense, the subject matter of lynching aligned the cheapness and tenuousness of their medium with the cheapness and tenuousness of black lives as shaped by the white supremacist turn-of-the-century United States.

## Notes

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1. Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

2. Samuel Burdett, *A Test of Lynch Law, an Exposé of Mob Violence and the Courts of Hell* (Seattle, 1901), 17. Further citations will appear parenthetically. Burdett was a prominent member of Seattle’s black bourgeoisie. He was a Kentucky native and a veteran of the Union Army. He moved in 1890 to Seattle, where he opened a veterinary practice. In 1891, he cofounded the Cornerstone Grand Lodge of the York Masons. In 1901, he founded a local chapter of the antilynching group the International Council of the World, and later that year he wrote *A Test of Lynch Law*. That same year the Seattle chapter offered a reward for lynchers of Yung Fook, a Chinese cook in Bakersfield, California. See [www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/burdett-dr-samuel-1849](http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/burdett-dr-samuel-1849) (accessed 18 September 2009).

3. On touring phonographic exhibitions, see Charles Musser in collaboration with Carol Nelson, *High Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of the Travelling Exhibition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

4. Burdett’s claim, it should be noted, erases the history of anti-Asian violence during this period in Seattle.

5. Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 159; see also Adam Gussow, “‘Shoot Myself a Cop’: Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ as Social Text,” *Callaloo* 25 (2002): 31.

6. *Decatur (IL) Daily Review*, 22 May 1897.

7. *Titusville (PA) Herald*, 1 December 1897.

8. Other references to phonographic and photographic exhibitions about the Smith lynching appear in the *Fort Wayne (IN) Weekly Sentinel* of 19 June 1898 and

the *Daily Kennebec (ME) Journal* of 19 November 1895, both of which refer to pictures of the burning of a “negro” in Texas. See also “Shocking Exhibition. Phonograph Operator Promptly Ordered Out of Town,” *Denver Republican*, 2 July 1898, which describes an exhibit featuring “pictures” and “sounds” representing the Smith lynching; the article reports that “the sounds reproduced were said to be the cries of the negro roasting to death.”

9. The censorship of boxing films, particularly after the emergence of Jack Johnson as the nation’s greatest fighter, was itself a topic greatly charged with racial politics around this time. See Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

10. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 207.

11. In *Spectacular Secret*, Goldsby provides a fascinating account of these photographs, which Mertins copyrighted and which are still officially held by the Library of Congress.

12. “A Burning Negro’s Voice,” *Delphos (OH) Daily Herald*, 19 November 1901.

13. For more details concerning studio recording in this era, see Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), and William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

14. Patrick Feaster, personal e-mail correspondence, January 2008.

15. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 243–44.

16. On the other hand, popular recordings of speeches by figures like William Jennings Bryan and Booker T. Washington were not considered part of the descriptive genre. Nonetheless, despite claims to the contrary, these recordings were always made in the studio.

17. Quoted in Sterne, *Audible Past*, 244.

18. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

19. See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), and Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

20. On this recording, see Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 119–21. The recording can be heard at [utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/sound/soundf.html](http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/sound/soundf.html) (accessed 18 September 2009). In 1910, Spencer and an ensemble also recorded a cylinder titled “Uncle Tom’s Cabin/Entrance of Topsy,” which featured a long banjo rendition of “Dixie” and other musical performances. This recording is available at [utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/sound/topsentf.html](http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/sound/topsentf.html) (accessed 18 September 2009).

21. See Tom Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions,” in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 71–84. See also Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), on the close relationship between melodrama and the realism of such films.

22. Sterne, *Audible Past*, 245.

23. On lynching and journalism, see Goldsby's chapter "Writing 'Dynamitically': Ida B. Wells" in *Spectacular Secret*, 43–104.
24. For an article that claims this cylinder is an actual recording of John McCullough, see "Voices of the Dead," *Athens (OH) Messenger*, 6 February 1890.
25. "The Phonograph Fakir," *Fort Wayne (IN) Weekly Sentinel*, 22 September 1897; and *Steubenville (OH) Herald*, 17 September 1897.
26. *Ibid.* The account continues: "There is a lot of nonsense about the capabilities of the phonograph. It cannot preserve for us the exact tones and inflection of our dear and great ones, as we have so often been told. Only singers with powerful and penetrating voices of large volume can make a good impression on the wax cylinders. The ordinary voice comes back in a series of faint squeaks which are lost in a tumult of other sounds."
27. "Truly a Voice from the Tombs," *Charlotte (NC) News*, 14 January 1890, reprinted from the *New York Sun*.
28. Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
29. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 352. On the larynx experiments, see Joseph Deniker, *The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnology* (New York: Scribner, 1900), 96. Deniker writes that there is not enough work done on racial differences in larynx, tongue, and so on, but that they "must certainly be observable." See also John Kerkerling, *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 187.
30. Quoted in Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 30.
31. See the discussion of this essay in Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism 1909–1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 19–21, from which I have drawn these quotations. The original article is Lester Walton, "Degeneracy of the Moving Picture Theater," *New York Age*, 5 August 1906.
32. Alexander Weheliye, "After Man," *American Literary History* 20 (2008): 6.
33. *Ibid.*, 12.
34. Theodor Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 271.
35. Barbara Engh, "After 'His Master's Voice,'" *New Formations* 38 (1999): 54.
36. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 163. One of the most compelling aspects of this essay is its juxtaposition of Adorno's aesthetic theory with his writing on phonography.
37. Barbara Engh, "Adorno and the Sirens," in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 126.
38. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 89.
39. Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
40. Sterne, *Audible Past*, 287.

## Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity

Gustavus Stadler

This essay examines 1890s commercial audio recordings – none of which is known to exist today – that reenacted lynchings of African Americans, in particular, the mass spectacle lynching of Henry Smith of Paris, Texas, in 1893. Despite rumors that the recordings were made live, they were in fact examples of an early, nonmusical genre in commercial phonography known as the “descriptive specialty,” which often involved studio reenactments of current events. Like other descriptive specialties, these recordings were meant to exhibit the phonographic medium to capture audience attention. Using descriptions of the recordings from period documents, the essay argues that there was a specific confluence between lynching reenactments and the notion of a “phonographic voice,” between sounds elicited from persons on the edge of “the human” and the sound imagined to come from the machine itself. It places the recordings in the context of contemporary representations of blackness in phonography and ponders their place in the longer history of recorded sounds of blackness. It also argues against the fixation on disembodiment among some media historians and theorists who work on phonography and contemporaneous technologies.

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