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**“Fellow Townsmen and My Noble Constituents!”:  
Representations of Oratory  
on Early Commercial Recordings  
[\**eCompanion* at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]**

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We live in a time of great preoccupation—in some quarters bordering on obsession—with the transformative effects of new technologies of communication—economic, social, cultural, cognitive, discursive. Oracles of the internet or computer multimedia or hypertext proclaim the revolutionary impact of these new media. Here, for example, is George Landow, one of the most frequently quoted prophets of hypertext (1997:21): “Electronic text processing marks the next major shift in information technology after the development of the printed book. It promises (or threatens) to produce effects on our culture, particularly on our literature, education, criticism, and scholarship, just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg’s movable type.” Landow, like most others who are engaged in constructing the ideology of the computer as a technology of communication in the guise of attempting to anticipate its effects, invokes the advent of print as a frame of reference, in tacit acknowledgment of just how powerful the ideology of the print revolution is in the symbolic construction of modernity.

But a closer analogy, in some ways, might be the invention of sound recording, a communicative technology scarcely a century and a quarter old that has in that brief time extended its reach throughout the globe and that has been accompanied by significant social transformations of its own. Where it took several centuries before intellectuals began to speculate self-consciously on the social and cultural implications of print or on its potential for commercial exploitation, the invention of sound recording technology by Thomas A. Edison in 1877 was accompanied from the moment of its accomplishment by projections about how it might be used and what social transformations might follow in its wake.

The advent of new technologies of communication and inscription will perforce be of interest to those of us concerned with the representation

of performance, and indeed of anything else. In this paper we want to explore how the invention and early commercial development of the phonograph opened a cultural space for imagining how this new technology might be used for the representation of performance—specifically, oratorical performance—and how at least some of those imaginings were realized.

### **Imagining the Uses of the “Speaking Phonograph”**

When Edison hit upon the mechanical means of inscribing sound in a reproducible form, toward the end of 1877, the capacity of the “speaking phonograph,” as he called his invention, that most impressed him was that it allowed its user “to store up and reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly” (Edison 1989a:444). That is, it provided the means to overcome the ephemerality of the human voice; it made the spoken word durable as such, available for future reanimation, unlike writing, which required the transformation of the word into material and visual form for the sake of preserving it. The immediate question, then, was what kinds of speech were worthy of storing up toward future reproduction. For Edison, the quintessential inventor-entrepreneur, the answer had to lie in “practical use” (1989b:7), that is, something that would make money. One of the chief developmental goals that Edison framed for sound recording was “the transmission of such captive sounds through the ordinary channels of commercial intercourse and trade in material form, for the purposes of communication or as merchantable goods” (1878:530).

The first commercial application Edison pursued was targeted toward “business men and lawyers” (1989b:7), for use in letter-writing and other forms of dictation, a venture that proved notably unsuccessful because of the delicacy and complexity of the apparatus and the difficulty of making clearly intelligible recordings. Way down at the end of Edison’s list of possible applications, after talking dolls, other mechanical toys, and alarm clocks, was “*Speech and other Utterances*.—It will henceforth be possible to preserve for future generations the voices as well as the words of our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones, etc., and to have them give us their ‘greatest effort’ in every town and hamlet in the country, upon our holidays” (1878:534). The preservation of great oratory and its reproduction on ceremonial occasions seemed an appropriate and desirable use for the phonograph. This was speech worthy of fixing and storing up, not just as words—which could be accomplished in print—but as performance, in its living voice. Each town and hamlet would have to purchase its own phonograph for such ceremonial occasions, so there was at least a little profit

to be had here. Compared to the fortune Edison expected to make from the phonograph in other fields, however, the reproduction of political speeches did not seem to be much of a money-maker. Edison evidently felt that investors were more likely to be won over by other applications, so he presented phonographic oratory as a perfunctory afterthought.

Journalists were more interested in titillating the popular imagination than in promoting the phonograph as a sound investment, so they tended to emphasize different points than Edison's official press releases. Judging from early journalistic accounts of Edison's "acoustic marvel," the capability of the phonograph that most captivated potential users was that it could preserve the living voice of people long dead. "How startling it will be," exclaimed an early article in *Scribner's Monthly*, "to reproduce and hear at pleasure the voice of the dead!" including prominently "the speeches of celebrated orators" (Prescott 1877:857).

In an article on "The Phonograph" in the November 7, 1877 issue of the *New York Times* (p. 4), the use of the phonograph for the preservation and reproduction of oratory moves to the fore. Playfully developing the conceit that the phonograph "bottles up" speech for future use, the author suggests that while "it may seem improbable that a hundred years hence people will be able to hear the voice of WENDELL PHILLIPS in the act of delivering an oration, [. . .] the phonograph will render it possible to preserve for any length of time the words and tones of any orator."

To this author, "it is evident that this invention will lead to important changes in our social customs." The principal change, however playfully it may be framed, amounts to the recontextualization of public culture to private settings in commodified form: "The lecturer will no longer require his audience to meet him in a public hall, but will sell his lectures in quart bottles, at fifty cents each; and the politician, instead of howling himself hoarse on the platform, will have a pint of his best speech put into the hands of each of his constituents." Whereas George Prescott, the author of the article in *Scribner's Monthly*, like Edison himself, foresees the use of the phonograph as among the "public uses" (Prescott 1877:857) of the technology, in keeping with the public context of oratorical performance, as "upon our holidays," the *Times* article anticipates the movement of public oratory to domestic space, "the home circle." What follows logically, then, is the possibility that a private individual might build up a collection of recorded speeches containing a mixture of oratorical styles, much as one develops a private wine cellar, with all the associated trappings of connoisseurship and consumerism. To speculate thus in terms of the "oratorical cellar" and the "connoisseur of orators" is to anticipate an

affluent audience for sound recordings, those who could afford prestige goods made for the burgeoning consumer market.

### **Representations of Oratory on Early Commercial Sound Recordings**

For reasons well beyond the scope of this essay, the full realization of the vision presented in the *New York Times*, that is, the marketing of ready-made recordings as consumer goods to the general public for domestic use, did not take off until the late 1890s. As the fledgling record companies moved to develop this market, they were faced with the practical problem of discovering—but also shaping—what it was that consumers would buy. As we would expect, however, after music, oratory figured importantly in their early catalogues. The recordings on which we will concentrate for the remainder of this article all stem from the formative period of commercial sound recording between the late 1890s and 1912, and all feature representations of political oratory. They fall into three major categories: recitations of canonical speeches from American history, campaign speeches for the elections of 1908 and 1912, and dramatic representations of ceremonial occasions in which oratory is a principal feature. We will be concerned in our examination of these materials with the transformations attendant upon the process of representation, here including the effects and concomitants of mediation, the effects of semiotic reduction to sonic systems of signification, the recontextualization of oratory from public to domestic space, and the constraints imposed by the technological limitations of the medium. We are especially interested, though, in the rekeying and refiguration of participant structures and roles. How do the recorded performances align themselves to an audience? By audience here, we mean the targeted receivers of the performance (though not necessarily the addressees), invited to hold in close attention the performer's act of communicative display and to evaluate the skill and efficacy with which the performance is accomplished (Bauman 1977). And, because the performances we are dealing with center around political oratory, we will be concerned with how the oratorical performances align themselves to a public (or to publics in the plural), both presupposed, in the sense of already recognized social formations, and emergent, as constituted by the recordings themselves and the marketing efforts that promoted them.

The term “public,” as we all know too well, covers a shifting and often inchoate field of phenomena, so in the interest of explicitness, let us specify also what we mean by the term. We take “public” in the nominal sense—a public—as a social formation constituted by discourse oriented to

the life-in-common of a collectivity, and constructed to foster dissemination, either synchronically, through open accessibility and direction to multiple addressees, or diachronically, through expansive or accelerated circulation, or both (cf. Hénaff and Strong 2001:1; Urban 2001). Different orders of metapragmatic regimentation will constitute different publics, or constitute the same publics on different grounds. The regimenting factors may involve sites of discursive production, generic or textual form, addressivity, and others to be discovered in any empirical instance. All of these, of course, will be closely bound up with the capacities of the communicative technologies employed.

### **Reanimations of Canonical Speeches**

The first category of recorded performances, recitations of famous speeches from the historical canon, consists of reanimations of the words of others, recontextualizations of the memorable utterances of famous orators, lifted out of their originary contexts of production and re-performed in new ones. The speeches continue to be attributed to their absent authors and associated with the occasions on which they were originally delivered, but in the guise in which we now hear them they are decoupled from both. The current reciter is not accountable for the message, only for the delivery.

Let us consider a couple of examples. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was recorded regularly throughout the 1890s and early 1900s by early performance specialists in the new medium of sound recording, most notably by Len Spencer and Russell Hunting.<sup>1</sup> The Gettysburg Address was a natural: not only was it the most widely known piece of American oratory in the repertoire, but it was short enough to fit in its entirety on a single record, which at the turn of the century meant two or three minutes.

From one point of view, we can recognize these recordings as belonging to an endless series of reiterations of this canonical speech. By the time commercial sound recording became a reality, the Gettysburg Address had been memorized and declaimed by generations of schoolchildren and students of elocution, performed in school exhibitions and other performance occasions. It is the quintessential commemorative text (Casey 2000:216-57): as delivered by Lincoln in 1863 it commemorated the death of the battle victims and the birth of the nation four score and seven years earlier, and as re-performed by those generations of reciters it

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<sup>1</sup> To listen to a recording of Leonard G. Spencer performing "Lincoln's Speech at Gettysburg," visit the eCompanion to this article at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

commemorated Abraham Lincoln as well, the martyred hero who gave his life in the service of liberty and national unity. The Gettysburg Address thus represents the perduring ancestral word, recited on ceremonial occasions to commemorate the ancestors and available as well as a means of ceremonializing any occasion through intertextual ties with past ceremonies in which the speech was recited. Moreover, the Gettysburg Address is the authoritative word, as actively manifested in the verbatim replication of the text and the virtuosic crafting of the recitation, subject to evaluation for the relative skill and affecting power of the delivery. Virtuosic performance displays high regard for the authoritative text, represents it as worthy of reproducing artfully, with care (Bauman 2001:109-10). Spencer, Hunting, and other phonographic orators use a declamatory style promulgated by nineteenth-century elocutionists (Johnson 1993), marked by a slow and solemn pace, hyper-precise enunciation, careful marking of word boundaries, lengthened and resonant vowels (with an occasional quaver to signal affect), frequent use of tapped and trilled ‘r’s, measured intonation patterns, and so on. The style serves both as a vehicle for the display of artistry and as an index of solemnity.

How is this recording aligned toward a public? First of all, hearing the phonographic performance evokes those past ceremonial and performance occasions in which one has heard the Gettysburg Address before, as part of an assembled group of co-participants in a public event, public understood here in the sense of taking place in public space, openly accessible, on view, collectively enacted. Let us call this an *assembled* (Agacinski 2001:137) or *gathered public*. Second, the phonograph’s reiteration of the speech, and the recognition that it is a reiteration, invokes a *historically founded public*, made up of those who are heir to the legacy of the memorialized ancestors. And third, it invokes what we might call a *distributive public*, constituted by the dissemination of the text: those who have active or passive knowledge of it as a text and as a sign.

The siting of the recorded performance—that is, the playing of the record—in domestic space is of less transformative significance than one might assume. Many households of the period had print versions of the Gettysburg Address, in schoolbooks and anthologies, and, more importantly for our purposes, domestic declamations of the speech were common; it was an elocutionary display piece and this was an era of elocutionary cultivation in the service of upward social mobility—as a tool for success in business and the professions—aided by teachers of elocution, self-help books, and other means (Johnson 1993). Thus, performances of the Gettysburg Address, Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death,” and other like pieces

were brought into domestic space in mediated form well before the advent of sound recordings.

A comparison of recordings of the Gettysburg Address with another oratorical staple of early record catalogues is revealing: “Portions of the Last Speech of President McKinley” (on Victor), also known as “President McKinley’s Pan American Speech” (on Columbia).<sup>2</sup> The speech was delivered at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, on September 5, 1901, the day before McKinley was shot by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz. (He died on September 14.) Companies marketed recordings of parts of this speech within a few months of the assassination, but they continued to record new versions for at least another year or two and kept these in production for years thereafter. The McKinley selection stayed in the Columbia catalogue until 1914 and in the Victor catalogue until 1911; judging from label types, the specific copies we consulted were pressed around 1908. Why continue to offer a recitation of portions of this speech so long after the fact? McKinley was a noted orator in his day, and it is likely that his reputation remained alive in the decade following his death. The proven long-term appeal of a recorded speech by one slain president—Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address—may have encouraged the record companies to think in similar terms about a speech by a second presidential victim of an assassin’s bullet. In any event, the recitation of McKinley’s speech was, like the recitation of the Gettysburg Address, a commemorative act, exploiting the same authorizing and valorizing devices in performance and reaching back in time to an originary utterance.

It is noteworthy, however, that the recorded performance contains only about one-eighth of McKinley’s original text (Hazeltine 1902:10505-12), which is all that could fit on a single recording. The portions selected for recitation turn out to focus on employment and trade conditions and their policy implications. Labor and tariff issues were central concerns of McKinley’s political career, to be sure, but at the time our examples were pressed, around seven years after McKinley’s death, the country was in a severe state of political instability that came to be known as the Panic of 1907, marked by economic failures, a depressed labor market, and trade anxiety. (Out of financial desperation, Columbia introduced a new line of discs with recordings on *both* sides in 1908, and our copy of their McKinley recording was pressed as one of these new “double discs.”) That is to say that in addition to their links with the ancestral past, the portions of McKinley’s speech replicated on the recording invited recognition of the *current* salience of his message. What we are suggesting is that in addition

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<sup>2</sup> For a version of this speech, visit the eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

to the alignment of this recording to the historically founded public that was heir to the legacy of McKinley's life and death, and to the distributive public constituted by the circulation of his last speech—both founded on the commemorative thrust of Spencer's recitation—this recording is aligned as well to a public constituted around an orientation to issues that bear upon their lives in common, perhaps the *polity as public*.

### **Presidential Campaign Speeches of 1908 and 1912**

Certainly the factor of topical salience comes most fully to the fore in the recordings of campaign speeches made by the candidates in the 1908 and 1912 presidential elections. Between May and September of 1908, all three major companies—Edison, Victor, and Columbia—issued recordings by William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, and William Howard Taft, his Republican opponent. In the campaign of 1912, Edison recorded only Theodore Roosevelt, candidate of the breakaway Progressive Party, whom Edison himself supported, while Victor issued recordings of all three candidates: Roosevelt, Taft, and the Democrat Woodrow Wilson. (No campaign recordings were made for the election of 1916, and the campaign of 1920 marked the advent of radio, which is another story.)

The 1908 presidential campaign was not the first time that campaign speeches were marketed on commercial recordings. An 1896 catalogue from the United States Phonograph Company lists five speeches “as delivered by” the presidential candidates William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, and William McKinley, the Republican nominee:

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S CROWN OF THORNS AND CROSS OF GOLD SPEECH. The Peroration of the famous Address that won him the Presidential Nomination at Chicago. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

MAJOR MCKINLEY'S SPEECH ON THE THREAT TO DEBASE THE NATIONAL CURRENCY. As delivered by the distinguished Republican Nominee at Canton, July 11th. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S SPEECH AT THE NOTIFICATION MEETING IN NEW YORK. A part of his Address at the great Demonstration in Madison Square Garden, New York, on August 12th. Very loud. Applause. No Announcement.



HON. W. J. BRYAN'S REPLY TO THE CHARGE OF ANARCHY. From the Candidate's great Speech in Hornellsville, before 15,000 people in the open air. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S OPINION OF THE WALL STREET GOLD-BUGS AND SYNDICATES. As delivered at the Buffalo Ratification Meeting, where he declared that the Creator did not make Financiers of better mud than he used for other people. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

Unfortunately, we do not have the recordings themselves. Note that these are "as delivered by" the presidential candidates and "as delivered at" particular public occasions during the campaign. These are representations of those gathered occasions, containing recitations of portions of the speeches delivered there. The performer is probably our friend, Len Spencer, who worked for the United States Phonograph Company at that time. The omission of the announcement, conventionally presented at the beginning of early recordings to identify the piece, the performer, and the recording company, renders the representations closer to the originary events by removing one of the principal signs of representation and mediation. The applause, done in the recording studio, enhances the simulation of a large, gathered political event, at which the person listening to the recording is cast as a spectator, present at the event, listening to the speech, but yet not fully a participant, even if some contexts may have invited "live" applause in unison with the recorded applause.

These listings highlight the capacity of sound recording to construct illusions, simulations of events. Recall, by contrast, the rhetoric of representational fidelity and accuracy that accompanied the invention of the phonograph. Taken together, these opposing constructions of the new technology define a field of tension between immediacy and transparency on the one hand, and mediation and illusion on the other. One early observer captured this tension beautifully by suggesting that a phonograph recording could contribute to "the illusion of real presence" (Anon. 1877). We will have more to say on this tension a little later.

Between 1896 and the presidential election of 1908, there were a number of attempts to use recorded speeches as campaign tools, including the presidential campaign of 1900 and William Randolph Hearst's New York gubernatorial campaign in 1906, but neither of these efforts involved recordings for a commercial market (see Bauman and Feaster 2003). The 1908 and 1912 recordings represented an entirely new departure: political speeches of great immediacy, addressed to "burning topics," as one advertisement put it, available for home consumption in mediated,

commodified form, recorded by the candidates themselves (*idem*). Edison, ever attentive to economic payoff, was explicit about the element of commodification and his desire to reach a mass market with his company's recordings of the presidential campaign speeches. A 1908 advertisement reads, "You can buy of any dealer in Edison Records records made by the Republican and Democratic candidates for President." Later promotional material proclaims that these records "may be had at a price within the reach of the poorest" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:33), tacit acknowledgment of the restrictions on length imposed by the medium. Edison ads also make explicit the fact that the recordings offer "selections" from the candidates' speeches, but emphasize their mimetic fidelity: "You can hear not only the exact words, but the exact tone and inflection of each Presidential candidate as he makes his speeches . . . each one a life-like representation" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:11). Together with claims such as this one, however, emphasizing the transparency of the medium—its immediacy, if you will—we find other statements that make a point of the technological mediation of the recording process, noting, for example, that "These records, the first ever made by THEODORE ROOSEVELT, were prepared with great care by our recording experts who have successfully brought out the forceful and convincing logic of his arguments" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:23). In an allied vein, a 1908 Victor ad for the recordings of Taft's speeches states "William H. Taft Speaks to the American Public through the Victor" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:12), neatly summing up the essence of the innovation, focusing on speaking, the communicative medium of co-presence, but here addressing the dispersed American Public, through the mediation of the Victor talking machine recording.

A pair of 1912 Victor ads capture especially effectively the ambiguous and emergent understandings of this new communicative technology vis-à-vis political oratory, poised between a visionary imagining of its unique capacities on the one hand and a conservative framing of its representations on the other:

Would you accept a special invitation to hear Mr. Taft, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Roosevelt speak from the same platform? Then come in and hear them discuss the important topics of the campaign, just as you would hear them if seated in a convention hall with these three great men speaking to you. (CD album notes in Marston 2000:21)

The Republican, Democratic and Progressive candidates have decided to present their views to the people through that greatest of all public mediums, the Victor, which will bring directly into the home the actual voices of the aspirants for Presidential honors.

Heretofore, only a very small proportion of the people were able to listen to the candidates in person. Now, for the first time in the history of our country, the Victor makes it possible for the people to hear the actual voices of the three nominees in a discussion of the principles involved in the campaign. This debate, an intensely interesting one, fills eighteen records, most of which have been combined in double-faced form, thus insuring the widest publicity for the discussion. (CD album notes in Marston 2000:22)

Both advertisements are exercises in virtual reality, setting up for an undifferentiated mass of potential customers imaginative conditions in which those who accept the invitation to buy the records will be transposed from the dispersed settings of their individual homes, listening to the technologically mediated, disembodied, and fragmented voices of the separate candidates, into the selected, gathered audience at a live political debate. As a member of that select audience, you are the directly targeted addressee of the great speaker's words. The force that actualizes this complex virtual reality is "the actual voices" of the candidates, mediated though they are through the Victor talking machine. The power of presence embodied in the voice is the pivot-point around which the new experience of hearing campaign speeches in the privacy of domestic space is assimilated back to the more familiar—if less widely accessible—experience of listening to campaign speeches in convention halls. Note that this reverses the trajectory envisioned in early imaginings of what the phonograph might effect, that is, moving oratory from public to domestic space. Now the reader of the ad is asked to imagine himself or herself back in public space. But interestingly, the ad turns at the end from this imagined restoration of the speeches to the context of a live performance to invoke a dispersed, distributive public, for it is through the diffusion of these recordings that "the widest publicity for the discussion" can be achieved.

The recorded texts themselves likewise signal the ambiguity of a new medium whose capacities have not yet assumed—or been disciplined into—a clear shape. For example, the cylinder and disk formats available in 1908-1912 allowed for recordings from around 2.5 to 4 minutes in duration. This constraint impelled the recorded speeches toward topical and formal closure within the relatively brief and bounded span of a single recording. Pulling in the other direction, however, were the generic expectations of the campaign speech, which tended to be considerably longer and more complex both in argument and form. Moreover, the candidates approached the recording process, by and large, intending to adapt speeches composed for live delivery at public political events to the new medium. Not surprisingly, then, there are instances on the campaign recordings where the disassembly of

longer speeches into short, bounded, and finalized units is imperfectly accomplished, leaving only traces of the cohesion that tied the original text together. For example, a 1912 recording by Theodore Roosevelt entitled “Why the Trusts and Bosses Oppose the Progressive Party” opens with the sentence, “Now this statement of Mr. Archbold represents but part of the truth” (CD-2 in Marston 2000:track 14). “Now this” is a double deictic, but where is it anchored? “Now” actually serves here as a discourse marker signaling a transition in an ideational sequence, and is therefore anomalous at the beginning of an utterance such as this with no antecedent co-text; the demonstrative adjective “this” demands an antecedent as well. As it happens, though, the preceding recording (as determined by the serial numbers) does introduce a statement by Mr. Archbold of Standard Oil, and the “Now this” of the recording at hand expresses a cohesive link that was fully motivated in the original, unified text (CD-2 in Marston 2000:track 13).

Also revealing is the deictic alignment of the recontextualized speeches to situational contexts of utterance as well as to co-text. Consider, for example, the following passage from a 1908 recording by William Howard Taft: “I am not here tonight to speak of foreign missions from a purely religious standpoint. That has been done and will be done. I am here to speak of it from the standpoint of political governmental advancement” (CD-1 in Marston 2000:track 21). What time and place are indexed by “here tonight?” The recorded utterance has carried some of its history with it in the process of recontextualization from the gathering at which it was originally spoken—the referent of “here tonight”—to the recording session, and beyond that to each playing of the record. This marks it as a reiteration of words originally spoken at another time and place, even if the author/speaker is the same individual. Unlike many of the other campaign recordings, free of such deictic baggage, this recording cannot fit as seamlessly into the context of the listening event, and thus cannot take full advantage of the immediacy that the speaking voice can evoke.

The point is that the campaign recordings were unsteadily poised between varying alignments to an audience and other aspects of context; they are unsure of their footing, in Goffman’s sense. Much of the work of contextualization is devoted to negotiating the transition between the gathered, co-present, co-participant public of those events in which political speeches were conventionally delivered, addressed directly to the assembled audience, and the dispersed public of record buyers, sited in private, domestic space, listening to speeches for which the targeted addressee was not clear, by an absent orator, who was nevertheless still somehow present, through his voice.

### **Parodies of Political Oratory from Popular Entertainments**

Among the speeches recorded by William Howard Taft in 1908 was one entitled “The Rise and Progress of the Negro,” in which Taft declares his support of “the Negro in his hard struggle for industrial independence and assured political status” (CD-1 in Marston 2000:track 14). In a curious piece on “Irish Humor,” Taft celebrates “that trait of humor so fully developed in the Irish character” and the important contribution to the American character brought about by “the infusion into the American people of the Irish strain” (CD-1 in Marston 2000:track 18). And of course, not only Taft but all the candidates declare support for the agrarian economy, the American farmer, the “working man,” and so on. Clearly, these speeches point up dimensions of differentiation in the American public (not only these, of course), indexing differences on the part of these various social sectors with regard to their own interests and the interests of others. The rhetoric of these campaign speeches, however, is unifying in its thrust, with the common interest, embodied in the presidency, the dominant concern.

We make this point in order to contextualize the last group of recordings we want to discuss, which implicate some of these same dimensions of social difference in discursively different terms. These are recordings featuring comic representations of oratory drawn from popular entertainments, principally the blackface minstrel show and vaudeville. These entertainment forms were enormously popular at the time that commercial sound recording entered onto the scene (though the minstrel show was declining in popularity, giving ground to vaudeville), and were strongest in the urban areas that provided sufficiently large audiences to sustain their continued operation.

A prominent performance genre in these entertainments was the comic skit, broadly burlesque in character, full of parody and exaggerated ethnic and regional stereotypes. And a common dramatic theme for these skits was political oratory. These were quickly adapted to commercial recordings, and that is what we will consider next. These materials are endlessly fascinating—if appalling as well—but we will focus only on limited aspects of the many that warrant analysis.

First of all, it is useful to establish that these were representations of representations. That is to say, while recording them required certain formal adaptations to the medium, and listening to them in domestic space instead of in a theater required concomitant adjustments of engagement as well,

listeners were preconditioned to engaging with these skits through a kind of theatrical representational frame, as enacted simulations, and that frame, *mutatis mutandis*, could be sustained in listening to the recordings as well. That being said, what did listeners to these recordings hear? Let us consider some examples.

The initial example, “A Meeting of the Limekiln Club” by the American Quartet, a studio recording group, was recorded around 1902 (Lambert cylinder 590). “Limekiln Club” appears as the name of a black fraternal lodge in the titles of several comic songs and minstrel sketches of the late nineteenth century. (A limekiln produces lime, which is the essential ingredient of whitewash—remember that these are white performers imitating black people.). We should acknowledge that although this is not a representation of political oratory per se, our warrant for including it is that it bears directly on the capacity of African Americans for a genre and a mode of discourse that was viewed as central to the exercise of political leadership, to qualification for full membership in the American polity, and to competent participation in the political process.

From A Meeting of the Limekiln Club, American Quartet

Announcer: A meeting of the Limekiln Club, by the American Quartet.

[Sound of gavel—4 raps]

President: De club will come to order. I have de pleasure dis evenin’ of conducin’ to you Brother Jimmy Dan Jones of Arkansas, who will undress you.

Crowd: Hear, hear, hear! Brudder Jones, Brudder Jones.

Brother Jones: Brudders of de Limekil’ Club, on this conspicuous momentum, my efforts am crowned wit’ de apex of my most laudable anticipations.

Crowd: Hear, hear!

Voice: Very good, Brudder, very good.

Brother Jones: On dis glorious mockasion I wants to compress upon you dat de whitewash brush am mightier den de sword.

Crowd: Dat’s right, Brudder Jones, dat’s right, Brudder Jones, dat’s right!

Brother Jones: And in declusion, I am constrained to ejaculate horse de combat, multiply in parvo, and e pluribus onion!

Crowd: Hear, hear, Brudder!

Voice: Dat man certainly can speak Latin.

[Listen to this speech at Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster’s eCompanion, [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).]

The first half of the skit, devoted to the guest speaker, offers a radically condensed, yet abundantly clear, representation of an oratorical performance, with a speech that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, each

one sentence long. The speech is keyed by such generic markers as the MC's formulaic introduction of the featured speaker, the speaker's invocation of multiple addresses in his greeting, his evocation of oratorical commonplaces ("On this glorious occasion," "I want to impress upon you," and so on), his Latinate vocabulary and Latin phrases, the closing formula ("And in conclusion"), the measured prosody and marked intonation, the enthusiastic responses from the audience, and so forth.

But of course, we hear these things as the dialogic voice behind the dialect, the malapropisms, the puns, the garbled syntax, the nonsequiturs, the botched Latin that mark this as parody. What is represented to us is a display of conspicuous communicative incompetence, lampooning the purported African American propensity for the grand style and highlighting the utter incapacity to achieve it. The generic markers are all right, the execution all wrong. And the orator's audience, in its enthusiastic approval of his ridiculous speech, displays its incompetence as well, its incapacity for apt evaluation.

While blackface performances are the most numerous, other ethnic groups come in for their share of stereotyping mockery as well. Irish dialect routines, of the kind represented in the next example, "McGuire's Fourth of July Celebration" (Columbia A585, recorded in 1908), were especially popular. This is a fairly elaborate piece, part of the appeal of which is that all the voices are done by a single individual, Steve Porter, a specialist in Irish dialect humor. Our colleague Lesley Milroy tells us that he has the Cork accent down right.

McGuire's Fourth of July Celebration, Steve Porter

[Laughter and shouts: (childish voice) C'mon Mickey, c'mon Mickey, come on!; sound of firecrackers]

A: By golly, it's a fine day for the Fourth of July.

B: You bet it is. [Band music]

A: Ah! the kids'll be havin' a great time.

B: There! Listen to the band comin'.

C: Here comes the parade! [Music ("Marching Through Georgia"), cheers]

A: Look at Riley with the flag! He holds it like he were carryin' a hod!

[Laughter]. Ah, they're a fine body o' men! Look at the walk on Dugan!

[Laughter] Hello, Mac! [Cheers]. You're all right!

[From the crowd: You're all right! (inaudible)].

A: Here comes McGuire ridin' in a hack! [Cheers, music]. Ah, that's a fine band. Here comes the flag. [Music].

[From the crowd: Get back there, get back; fine fifer!; cheers.]

A: Well, here we are.

D: Now, a . . . a little order, please. Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to intro-duce to you the speaker o' the day, Alderman uh uh McGuire o' th-th-the Third Ward [Cheers]

McGuire: Gentlemen, I'm greatly honored be bein' called upon to make a few remarks on the glorious Fourth o' July. [Cheers]. We have here in these large boxes the fireworks we're goin' to shoot off this evenin'. (O'Brien get away from the boxes with your cigar.) Now, gentlemen, the day is called the Fourth of July because uh, uh, be-because uh uh it comes after the third o' July. [Cheers, laughter]. Now, as Alderman o' the Third Ward . . . (Say, O'Brien, will you get away from them fireworks with your cigar!) As I was about to remark, who was it that wrote the Declaration of Independence?

B: You did, did you not?

McGuire: I did . . . not write it. Gentlemen, I'll give you me solemn word it was not me that done it. [Cheers]. Now . . . (I'm glad O'Brien's cigar's gone out.) . . . in the first place . . . (Don't light it again, O'Brien!) . . . but as I said before . . . ([higher, frightened voice]: Look out, O'Brien!)

[Exploding fireworks] Sure, O'Brien was a good man. The last thing he done in this world was to smoke. I wonder if 'e's smokin' now.

[eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

Note the mimetic devices that the performer employs to establish the festive context of the July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration, the occasion par excellence in the U.S. for ceremonial oratory: the laughter and shouting, the percussive sound of fireworks, the band music, the cheers of the crowd, the effort at crowd control (“Get back”), and so on. Additional constituents of the Fourth of July celebration—the parade, the flag, the dignitary riding in a carriage—are evoked through the observations and evaluations of spectators, established as such by their spectatorial modes of engagement: “Here comes the parade,” “Look at Riley,” “Ah, that’s a fine band,” and the like. All this is done with impressive economy.

The speech has some of the same framing and generic features as in the previous example—the formulaic introduction of the speaker, the vocative greeting of the audience, the measured prosody, the expressions of audience approval—and some additional ones as well, such as the local politician as featured speaker, his ritual acknowledgment of the honor of being invited to speak, the rhetorical question. But here again the performance is riddled with displays of incompetence, beginning with the introduction of the speaker, which is marred by malapropism, hesitation markers, and stuttering. The speaker is a windbag who can’t sustain an appropriate oratorical line, gives a foolish account of the significance of July 4<sup>th</sup>, gets caught in his own rhetorical question, and winds up disclaiming responsibility for writing the Declaration of Independence. Whereas the



competent Fourth of July orator must display at least some conventional knowledge of the history that occasions the celebration, this klutz knows nothing. And throughout the speech there runs the leitmotif of frame-breaking asides to O'Brien, whose lighting of his cigar near the fireworks brings the speech—and his life—to a disastrous but flippantly observed end.

The last example, “Congressman Filkin’s Homecoming” by Byron G. Harlan (United A1036, ca. 1910), shifts from ethnic stereotype to regional stereotype, poking fun at the rural or small-town “rube”—unsophisticated, homespun, and inclined toward bluntness.

Congressman Filkin’s Homecoming, Byron G. Harlan

[Crowd talk, train whistle]

Voice: I tell you, he’s the best Congressman we ever had.

Master of Ceremonies: Here comes the train!

[Band music: “Yankee Doodle”; train slows; steam whistle fades]

There he is! Three cheers for Congressman Filkin! Hip hip . . .

Crowd: Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Speech! Speech! Speech!

M.C.: Right up here, Congressman. Now then, I’ll introduce you. Now, fellow townsmen, Congressman Filkin!

Crowd: Hurray!

Filkin: Fellow townsmen and my noble constituents.

Crowd: Hurray!

Filkin: I see before me today many faces that I haven’t shaken hands with for a long, long time.

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: I come before you as a public servant who has worked for the people, by the people, and the people.

Crowd: [laughter].

Voice: You’re all right, Congressman!

Filkin: When you sent me to represent you in Congress, I promised to give you prosperity, didn’t I?

Crowd: Yes!

Filkin: You got it, didn’t you?

Crowd: Yes!

Voice: You bet your life, we did.

Old man [with quavering voice]: Don’t know ‘bout that.

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: Looky here, Zeke Moseley, I’ve knowed you for nigh onto twenty years, and never knowed no good of you nohow. Now if you got anything to say, you come right up here and say it. Or I’ll answer you.

Voice: Go lay down, Moseley!

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: As I was about to say, I can see more prosperity for the farmer. Every day, any farmer can get an automobile nowadays. He simply has to cross the road to get one. He can’t tell just where he’ll get it, but he’ll get it, all right!

Crowd: [laughter].

Voice: You always was a joker!

Filkin: Now the platform on which I stand . . . [crashing noise] Ohhhh (groan).

M.C.: Hurt you? //hurt you?

Filkin: //No, no, no, //not a bit, not a bit.

M.C.: //Right here, right here.

Filkin: That's all right. That's . . . that's all right. Now the platform on which I . . . ([aside:] Now sit still, would you? [laughter] Well, never mind the platform.) Fellow citizens, the great question before the American people today is the high cost of living. Now, I'll grant you that it costs more to live today than it used to, but by Jiminy Crickets, it's worth it!

Crowd: [laughter].

Voice: Right agin!

Filkin: Now I believe in honesty, especially honesty in politics. Why only a few centuries ago, people thought the world was square. Now they know it's crooked! Why, there's men in politics today so durn crooked they could hide behind a corkscrew.

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: Now in conclusion, fellow citizens, I want to thank you all for your kind attention. And, as the Senator from Idaho would say, "Have I put the right bridle on the right horse?"

Voice: You have!

Crowd: [cheers; band strikes up "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight"].

[eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

Here again, we find many of the same mimetic devices, framing conventions, and generic markers that we have encountered before in the other representations we considered above, though it is worth looking again at how the keying of participant roles is accomplished, especially by reflexive references to his own performative actions on Filkin's part ("I see before me," "I come before you") and invocations of the spectatorial gaze of the audience ("Here comes the train!" "There he is!"). This performance represents a more interactive style of public speaking than the others, with members of the audience, Filkin's constituents, responding more actively to his questions and more critically to his assertions. There is also a somewhat greater reliance on speech-play gags of the kind that characterized minstrel show repartee ("he'll get it, all right," "so durn crooked they could hide behind a corkscrew," and the punning basis of the widely used collapsing platform routine). Filkin's oratorical infelicities, which carry the parodic load, include misaligned figures ("I see before me many faces that I haven't shaken hands with for a long, long time") misquotation ("for the people, by

the people, and the people”—invoking, please note, the same distributional public as the recording of the Gettysburg Address), gratuitous quotation (“And, as the Senator from Idaho would say, ‘Have I put the right bridle on the right horse?’”), and goofy non sequitur (“Now I’ll grant you that it costs more to live today than it used to, but by Jiminy Crickets, it’s worth it!”). Rubes have always been a comic resource for sophisticated folks.

Thus, what we encounter again and again in these recorded representations, in various ethnic or regional inflections, are displays of communicative incompetence. Oratory is a performance form, and performance resides in the display of communicative skill and efficacy, subject to evaluation by an audience (Bauman 1977). At the risk of oversimplification, oratorical skill was ideologized in turn-of-the-century American society as necessary to political leadership, and the knowledge and ability to interpret and evaluate political oratory as essential to participation in the American political process. In these recordings, however, the orators are laughably incompetent and the audience members represented on the record, in applauding their botched oratory, are demonstrably incompetent judges of what good oratory—and thus good leadership—should be.

Some critical observers of these materials, then and now, would argue that this was all in good fun, that members of the very groups represented in the skits enjoyed them too (see, e.g., Gilbert 1967:61). More nuanced assessments suggest that these representations expressed and evoked ambivalent feelings, ranging from sympathetic joking to bitterly hostile ridicule, from nostalgia for vanishing ways of life to embarrassed rejection of one’s parents’ backward ways, from indulgent smiles of recognition to the painful wounds inflicted by others’ contempt. Even the egregiously racist representations of the minstrel show may be read—often quite plausibly—as the carnivalesque troping of the Other as a device for working-class social and political critique (see, e.g., Cockrell 1997, Lott 1995, McLean 1965, Mahar 1999, Nasaw 1993, and Roediger 1991). All these views acknowledged, though, one reading to which these skits are fully open, we believe—that black people, Irish people, and rural people (and there are recordings featuring still other groups as well) are not fully competent to participate in the American political process, that they are not fully qualified for membership in the polity, the political public. In a related vein, one might interpret them as conveying the message that as long as African American or Irish or rural people behave like that, they are not qualified to participate, thus providing a stimulus toward full assimilation to the white mainstream model. This interpretation would be consistent with the

observation that members of these very stereotyped groups laughed at the skits—the uneasy laughter of the assimilated and the up-to-date (those who bought record players) at the crude ways of their less refined fellows. Either way, however, these comic recordings both presuppose and create a divided public, segmented by structures of inequality. Whereas the campaign speeches address social differentiation, and even occasionally acknowledge relations of inequality, they do so to reaffirm unity, to foreground rhetorically the centripetal force of common public interest. These comic representations, however, are centrifugal; their thrust is divisive and the interest they serve is that of the dominant, white, mainstream, modern, urban—and male, of course—sector of the society.

This is especially apparent, we would argue, when one views these comic recordings within the larger context provided by the full range of recordings featuring representations of political oratory. The full corpus, we may recall, offers to the listener three types of representation: (1) recitations of canonical commemorative speeches that index multiple modes of incorporation into various orders of public—gathered, distributive, historically founded, and so on; and (2) presidential campaign speeches that offer still others, such as issue-oriented participation in a unified polity. Each of these modes of incorporation and participation is predicated on the competent production and reception of political oratory. Finally, we have type (3), the burlesque representations of ethnic and rural oratory. Read against the third set, the first two serve as models of how to do it right, as a basis for full inclusion in the polity. Do it badly, as in the comic representations, and the implication is that you do not belong. You are not fully qualified for citizenship.

## Conclusion

“Aaand in declusion . . . .”—political oratory is quintessentially public discourse—everybody knows that. But it is not so clearly public, or not so clearly public in the same ways, when it is represented on a sound recording. What we have endeavored to do here by examining political oratory on early commercial records is to elucidate the ways in which the recorded speeches are aligned to various orders of audiences and publics. Focusing on the formative period in the development of commercial recording, before the producers and consumers of sound recordings had become habituated to the new technology (and the new commodity), brings experimentation and reflexivity to the fore, making the work of alignment more apparent. The text- and form-sensitive analysis of specific, representative recordings, we

believe, offers a critical complement to the characterizations advanced by media scholars and historians, who tend to frame the advent of new communicative technologies in relatively gross before-and-after terms and the transformative effects of the new media on “the public” in equally general terms. We have attempted to show here some of the concrete terms in which the transition from political oratory in live performance to political oratory on records was negotiated, in relation to how political oratory may be aligned to and constitutive of multiple publics—a study of how at least one aspect of the transformation of the public sphere was discursively accomplished.

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