

# Prognosticating Echoes: Race, Sound, and Naturalizing Technology

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In his near-classic *The Recording Angel* (2005), Evan Eisenberg points out that the actual legacy of automata in the twentieth century was machines like the phonograph or gramophone. Since so many automata were used as music boxes and existed for entertainment purposes and for refined contemplation in a European context, it is no surprise that they would evolve as they did in America. This emphasizes something more interesting than their pedigree: that in the years between Joice Heth, the black slave woman that P.T. Barnum passed for an automata, and (Karel Capek's) *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, the play that would introduce the term "robot" into the English language, ventriloquism and masquerade become increasingly properties of technology. "Mimetically capacious machines" were beginning to define the difference between centuries and, in the United States, between cultural powers and social groups (Taussig 1992).

Robots are another product of automata:

The phonograph is admirable when accurate and laughable when inaccurate. The robot, which we had imagined as a refined automaton, a statue that returned embraces, has turned out to be no such thing. In fact, the romance was over the minute Karel Capek, smack in the industrial heart of the Habsburg empire, coined the word "robot" from the Russian root for "work." The robot was the image of alienated labour, what men would become after a few years on the assembly line. It was the pipe dream of the master, the nightmare of the slave. Then it began to haunt the master (make your tools too sharp and they may turn on you) and secretly comfort the slave, who might soon have his own slave. (Eisenberg 2005, 188–89)

Eisenberg is generally very aware of the relationships between African Americans and the history of sound recording, yet he maintains the common reading of Capek's robots as merely representing "alienated labor" or as figures of class struggle. But in a country still reeling from racial violence and where, unlike Europe, radical political assertion—of the kind that Capek was also alluding to—was strongly linked to racial politics, the play's vision of an extremely violent robot war depended on much more immediate concerns. Then of course there is Capek himself, consistently deploying race alongside all those other meanings that made the play as rich a work of literature as it would be an influential work of the genre of

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science fiction, which was only a few years from being formally named. Yet in the final two sentences of Eisenberg's passage the racial meanings intrude too far to be ignored. The slave haunting the master, turning on the master, becoming a master, and the master becoming a slave—clearly a great fear of proletarian revolt in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. And these meanings are present in R.U.R. just as they are in Fritz Lang's film, *Metropolis* (1927).

In the nineteenth century such an expectation was so strong in the American South that it became a crucial set of narrative tropes: the black rapist, the brutish automaton that sets fire to the plantation, racial revenge as the first gesture of freedom. Those two sentences prefigure the next chapter of the book, which charts in advance of Capek the notion that machines and humans need be figured in a master/slave dialectic. In this tradition the necessary conclusion to that dialectic is not synthesis—as will be the case in cybertheory or “cyborg feminism,” topics of an even later chapter—but violence and supplantation. Capek was not the first to narrate the relationship between human beings and machines in racial terms, but his vision has proven to be the most influential. Interestingly, for Eisenberg the difference between phonograph and robot is arguably based on “soul” or something very like it:

Why is it worse to be a robot than an automaton, worse to imagine oneself a phonograph than a music box? The eighteenth-century music box, like the eighteenth-century man, was endowed by its creator with a character. The phonograph, like the mass man, has no character to speak of, or sing from. It has no music of its own. It only reacts to the data fed it. (Eisenberg 2005, 189)

It's an odd question. Eisenberg doesn't ask which machine one prefers over the other, but insists one imagine what it would be like to *be* one or the other. The difference here is “character,” something apparently had by automata, whereas robots and phonographs merely react, or possibly just mimic. Phonographs function within a commercial enterprise and are products of popular culture. They are here described the way mass culture was almost always described in the twentieth century—soulless, artificial, reactive. Despite his significant popular culture nous, Eisenberg's argument is essentially split between high culture and low culture, meaning that what gives automata “character” is their role within an elite socioeconomic (almost aristocratic) realm. At least they knew their master. This was only true up until, at least, Johann Maelzel and Barnum, when automata became massified and put on public display. They were accessible to all and could be placed adjacent to Joice Heth, for example, as was the legendary

chess-playing automaton, “The Turk.”

The idea that the slave will have his own slave—its own machine that can be used against the master—is intriguing, as is the idea that the machine secretly comforts the slave. It suggests that it would be valuable to explore early interactions between slaves or ex-slaves and machines, particularly those that suggest the kind of intimacy that generates meanings. These interactions would be comparable to Henry Louis Gates’s “trope of the talking book,” which he famously described in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) as a crucial moment of black literary origins in a context where literature was the primary technology validating the human. In Gates, scenes where slaves discover or witness the seemingly magical power of literacy and its attendant capacity to transform are at the roots of an African American literary and political tradition. For slaves the very act of reading was a mode of resistance to the notion that they could not read; their engagement with the Bible was a mode of resistance to the notion that they had no souls; and the fact that books provided both comfort and modes of rebellion against the master requires little argument.

The supplementary figure offered here, then, is the “trope of the talking machine.” “Talking machine” was what phonographs and gramophones were colloquially called in the early days of their display and eventual commodification. This trope marks a necessary early stage in a history of black technopoetics, where technology emerges as a primary mediator between the inhuman and the human and does so through race and sound. These descriptions of a first black encounter with a new technology stand as important stagings of the interaction of race and technology, as was the display of Joice Heth, whose ability to speak was the primary source of wonderment. They occur before and at the cusp of an early recording industry that would partly establish itself with coon or “Negro” songs by white singers until the first African American hit, “The Whistling Coon,” by ex-slave George W. Johnson in 1891. Johnson was the first African American to make records, and he recorded this song thousands of times before it was possible to mass duplicate master recordings. This trope would be a crucial first step in answering Paul Gilroy’s call for “A comprehensive history of that special period in which phonographic technology first made black music into a planetary force” (Gilroy 1999, 261).

It should be no surprise then to discover this trope of the talking machine in one of the most important and controversial “black” literary works of the nineteenth century. There is a brief discussion of that new, strange, and alien machine “The Phonograph” in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* by Joel Chandler Harris (1880). The machine isn’t present in the conversation and is something closer to rumor; but the conversation

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it generates—indeed, a discourse, or the ground zero of one—is both productive and predictive:

“Unc Remus,” asked a tall, awkward-looking negro, who was one of a crowd surrounding the old man, “wat’s dish ‘ere w’at dey calls de fony-graf—dish yer inst’ument w’at kin holler ‘roun’ like little chillun in de back yard.” (Harris 1986, 198)

The discussion is framed exclusively within an African American plantation context with different types of blacks, ranging from the “tall, awkward-looking negro” to “younger negroes” to “one of the practical negroes” and becomes a reflection on a new technology as it is first made sense of within a vernacular culture (190). One hesitates to say a “black” vernacular culture, however. Harris’s “Uncle Remus” tales remain controversial for their depiction of the docile rural darky whose dialect stories of wisdom and instruction, while charming in their day, became uncomfortable for black moderns desperate to redefine themselves according to their own largely urban and Africa-centered self-images. Like “Rastus,” the Mechanical Negro Slave manufactured by Westinghouse in 1930, and “Bessie,” Harvard’s computing machine from 1944, Uncle Remus became a term of insult, much like Uncle Tom. But where Rastus Robot and Bessie the computer were being deployed as comforting images of the past used to mediate the cold threat of a new technology, Uncle Remus was just that: a romanticized past quickly losing ground to a nation beginning to make absolute claims on technological newness itself.

Chandler Harris’s association with minstrelsy isn’t simply due to his representation of blacks or his exaggeration and celebration of a black dialect common on the minstrel stage and eventually omnipresent in recorded “coon songs.” It is due also to his work featuring a ventriloquizing of blacks. One could say he was a coon singer of a sort: a white man who wrote as a black man who spoke in a dialect that was quickly becoming a significant political problem. Despite this, black moderns highly rated Harris for his archiving of folktales and folk idioms that were disappearing in the face of the rapid urbanization of African American culture. James Weldon Johnson, for example, assessed the Uncle Remus stories as crucial to the creation and emergence of a national poetics. In his introduction to his important *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), he wrote that because it was rooted in African American culture, this national poetics was particular, “due to a remarkable racial gift of adaptability; it is more than adaptability, it is a transfusive quality” (22).

Race as both adaptable and transfusive—protean not essentialist—again brings to mind Sylvia Wynter’s (1979) argument that Sambo was an

important scapegoat for alternative potentialities for all differences and antagonisms at work within a given social, cultural, or philosophical system. Blackface was mutable, mobile, as were its sound and interpretations. It was always able to represent many contexts and types of intentions, including those which were seemingly opposed, like love and theft, or assumed contradictory, like Africa and technology.

It was clear to Johnson that the particularities of African American culture could be traced back to Africa, an argument much more controversial than it would be generations later. Tellingly, Johnson also links Harris and Uncle Remus to the sounds of African American popular music made globally “all conquering” by performances, talent, drive, and racial pride, but technically by phonography (1922, 15). It’s not unusual, then, that the “tall, awkward-looking negro” would personify the machine as something able to “holler,” a living thing or a creature that shouts. The property of phonography to replicate the human voice is central to how and why anthropomorphizing machines became inevitable. These machines spoke, so they were like people, but not quite. In the early days of recording technology, people’s responses to these machines were generally with less wonder than absolute terror. They were encountering the human voice disembodied, the human itself disembodied, and the spectacle—both aural and visual—of speech rendered no longer exclusively human. The Turk, for example, had a voice box that allowed it not only to speak, but in French, a language then associated with such cultural sophistication that it could only have generated greater insecurity. If you recall, Joice Heth’s own voice was argued to be in fact the voice of a white man behind her machine mask.

Uncle Remus admits to not yet having seen a phonograph. He’s certainly heard much talk of them. He “kinder geddered in dat it wuz one er deze ‘ere w’atzisnames w’at you hollers inter one year an’ it comes out er de udder.” He says later:

All you gotter do is ter holler at de box, an’ dar’s yo’ remarks. Dey goes in, an’ dar dey er token and dar dey hangs on twel you shakes de box, an’ den dey draps out des ez fresh ex deze yer fishes wat you git fum Savannah, an’ you ain’t got time fer ter look at dere gills, nudder.

Again, speech is emphasized, sound as doubled, ventriloquial, *dubbed*. But it is also reciprocal, indeed with a note of resistance, which as Capek’s character Helena discovered, is one of the defining qualities of “soul”: “Hit’s one er deze yer kinder w’azisnames w’at sasses back w’en you hollers at it” (Harris 1986, 199). Slight though it is, there is a sense here that the machine “sasses you back,” which suggests volition, individuality, and a quality of refusal. Such a hearing of the phonograph is a key step toward

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personification, then anthropomorphizing, and then *robota*. But because Uncle Remus is generally being represented in this vignette as folksy and simple and rural, this response to technology comes off as naive and backward, quaint.

Good old Uncle Remus does say something fascinating, though, considering the impact the talking machine will have on the United States and on African American and black diaspora cultures. One could consider it prophetic:

Hit's mighty funny unter me how dese folks kin go an' prognosticate der eckoes inter one er deze yer I'on boxes, an' dar hit'll stay on wel de man comes 'long an' tu'ns de handle an' let's de fuss come pilin' out. (Harris 1986, 199)

To prognosticate is to prophesy, and echoes are important sonic qualities and symbolic figurations of space, time, and, of course, replication, doubling (aka dubbing). Echoes are also signs of the past, in that they represent a sound or a signal that has already been deployed and is in decay. There is a creative tension here between that which foretells and that which has been told. A much later discussion on dub music as the most explicit space of black technopoetics in sound will depend on this hearing of black uses of technology and the technique of echo. But echoes here should be read as Jacques Attali would read them, as “premonitory,” when he argues that “the noises of a society are in advance of its material conflicts” (1985, 11). For Attali, recorded sound and music “makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible” (11). Eisenberg also suggests this and echoes the “all conquering” triumphalism of Weldon Johnson when he writes: “On records the black musician was no longer a minstrel with shining eyeballs, but simply a musician. . . . If invisibility betokened the fallen estate of the black man, it was also his main chance to conquer. And that is just how the black sensibility did—to a degree—conquer America” (Eisenberg 2005, 73).

Uncle Remus's sense of the machine as generating or performing reciprocity as well as future possibilities and his prediction that blacks would engage recorded material as their primary interaction with informatics and technologies of reproduction; and Capek's idea that robots will inevitably develop souls since “soul” is something quite other to what we humans might think it is—this is all premonitory. After all, who would have thought at the turn of the century that race, sound, technology, and culture would take the shape they clearly have? Or that soul and sound would be so intimately related?

There is one more minstrel/machine connection of note, one more example of the trope of the talking machine and of echoic prognostication

necessary to complete this chapter. This occurs after Joice Heth, just under a decade after George W. Johnson's "Whistling Coon." Johnson's song would, of course, anticipate a future in which hit songs performed by blacks would no longer be a novelty as his was, and by 1936, when blues legend Robert Johnson recorded his classic "Phonograph Blues," a cornerstone of the blues and rock repertoire, black relationships with the talking machine were common and intimate enough for him to explicitly sexualize.

But this version of the trope of the talking machine anticipates the relationship that the United States established between race and machines for the rest of the twentieth century. In 1901 the minstrel performer Bert Williams began what would be the first significant recording career of a black artist in the United States. George W. Johnson may have had two or three "hits" (vaguely stated, given how many of them were just versions of "The Whistling Coon"), but Bert Williams would be the first that could be described as being as much a recording star as a stage performer. In 1906, five years after his first encounter with the talking machine, Williams signed a lucrative exclusive contract with Columbia Records. Up until the commercial boom of race records in the 1920s, he was one of the only black performers whose voice was readily available as a recording. One source claims that at his peak in the talking-machine business Bert Williams was making \$100,000 a year, an astronomical amount for that period (Sewell 1923, 40).

Williams was apparently very aware of the importance of the new technology and committed himself to the phonograph as a new site of dialect performance:

Williams was more absorbed in the sound of his own performance. It was hard to tell anything from the poor quality of the recording techniques, which could only reproduce a shouted roar, but he had practiced his songs and worked on his dialect so conscientiously that he wanted the records played over and over, comparing how he had always thought he sounded to the strained music coming from the cylinder machine. At that time theatrical stars refused to make records, contemptuous of the poor quality of the sound reproduction and afraid that people who owned their records would tire of their acts. But despite the apparent disadvantages of the new recording process, when Williams was invited to come back to the Victor studio in another month, he agreed. He was to sing into recording mechanisms for the rest of his life. (Charters 1970, 64, 131)

It's a remarkable image to conjure, the great black blackface performer hearing his voice repeated back to him, over and over, studying his voice mask and perfecting it finally from a distance. His care and attention clearly paid off. An (archival) advertisement in New York's *Age* shows just

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how popular he and, more important, his recorded voice were:

Bert Williams, Caruso, Tetrizzini  
and other world famous artists can be heard  
in your own home  
by getting a  
TONE-A-PHONE  
The latest and cheapest high-class phonograph made.  
\$10.00  
Guaranteed to equal any \$25.00 machine  
Will Play All Disc Records. (Charters 1970, 64, 131)

An early Victor catalogue attests to the significance and success of Williams and his partner, George Walker, as early artists of sound and as incentives to a new market for these technological commodities:

The most popular songs of the day are the “Ragtime” or “Coon Songs.” The greatest recommendation a song of this kind can have is that it is sung by Williams and Walker, the “Two Real Coons.” . . . Although Williams and Walker have been engaged to make records exclusively for us at the highest price ever paid in the history of the Talking Machine business, and although their records are the finest thing ever produced, being absolutely the real thing, we add them to our regular record list with no advance in price. (Smith 1992, 47)

Note the stress on the authenticity of the black voice—performed by minstrels no less, or rather black blackface minstrels in a metasignifying of irreducible realness. The power of this machine to introduce many whites to the sound of black voices, to the intimacy of spoken word or songs across social and legal gulfs, cannot be underestimated. Soul is also the sound of a common humanity. But the stress on realness is remarkable because this hyperbolic claim on the black voice is used to naturalize the talking machine in a way that Joel Dinerstein would likely agree with (see Dinerstein 2003).

But naturalizing comes at a cost. As with Rastus Robot, Dinerstein’s idea that this intimacy between blacks and technology is innately celebratory or even conceptually unique is challenged by science fiction, popular culture, and conceptions of labor, where it is far more complex, often sinister. Remember, these machines were terrifying for the early consumer; sound recording had yet to strip itself of associations with the occult and the sheer size and alienness of these technologies took years to domesticate. Race and sound played a significant part in that domestication. After all, if it speaks a black, vernacular voice, how alien can this machine be? If it speaks as a beloved darky minstrel, how cold and threatening could it



be? If it speaks in warm familiar tones of the Negro stereotype as finally perfected by Negroes themselves, how artificial can it be?

The minstrel voice is here exploited as a sign of intimacy with the alien other, a sound used to mask the uncanny. In this case the analog warmth of Sambo is used to domesticate a new technology—one other makes another other familiar—familiar enough to sell. Where Capek used machines to express deeply troubling racial concerns, here blacks are used to placate deep anxieties about technology to market machines and sustain a racist status quo through technology. The minstrel figure here mediates between two of the twentieth century's great others: the machine and the African American in the first century of freedom. The quest to domesticate one requires the evocation of the other. Here is intimacy without compromise, engagement without danger. The listener is guaranteed power over the machine, as it now operates within a stable racial and mimetic hierarchy.

What should always be emphasized and certainly never forgotten is the fact that this particular iteration of the "trope of the talking machine" was prognosticated by the strange case of Joice Heth, a wizened black slave woman passing for or being passed as a machine. Because she was a slave—a mere thirty years before full legal emancipation into the "human"—she was actually being passed as a machinic simulacra of something other than a human being, something already passing for something else and which could therefore be used to pass for anything as long as it existed on the far edges of the human. In her mask an old social and economic system passed as new and a new technological system of culture and power masqueraded as organic. With Joice Heth, dumbstruck audiences merely partook of the glory of a new commodity masquerading as an old one and witnessed an old performance of nature naturalizing and therefore legitimizing one that had already changed.

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