

VOX AMERICANA:  
VOICE, RACE, AND NATION IN U.S. MUSIC, 1890-1924

by  
Scott A. Carter

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This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee

Ronald M. Radano, Professor, School of Music

Jerome Camal, Assistant Professor, Anthropology

Susan C. Cook, Professor, School of Music

R. Anderson Sutton, Professor, School of Pacific and Asian Studies, University of Hawaii  
at Manoa

Amanda Weidman, Associate Professor, Anthropology, Bryn Mawr College

*For Katie*

The more I hear, the less I know.

— "Music is a Better Noise," Essential Logic

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## **A Note on Transcriptions and Direct Quotations**

The politics of representing speech are complex, particularly when it comes to issues of dialect such as those found in blackface minstrelsy performance. I have chosen in this dissertation to transcribe song lyrics and spoken text in standard so-called English, except when quoting directly from a published source (sheet music, secondary sources, etc.), for two reasons. First, any attempt to reproduce dialect speech will ultimately fail to capture the rich nuances of vocal performance engaged in by performers. How could one, for instance, capture the subtle use of diphthongs by a performer such as Bert Williams in written text? Second, I have found this approach to be more conducive to reading. Anyone who has read sources that attempt to reproduce the sound of idiosyncratic speech knows all too well the difficulties of understanding what the speaker is actually saying.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Writing in 1920, *New York Times* cartoonist and author Denys Wortman captured the aural and visual signifiers of urban life in a fictional narrative entitled, "Last of the Organ Grinders" (See Figure 1.1).<sup>1</sup> An ever-present figure on New York City streets since the middle of the nineteenth century, the figure of the organ grinder and the repetitive sounds of his barrel organ captured for middle- and upper-class residents the aural nuisance of modern urban life.<sup>2</sup> Commentators in New York City had for years targeted street musicians with derision, legislation, and even incitements of violence. An earlier *New York Times* article printed in 1893 titled, "This Music without Charm," quoted a Brooklyn policeman's advice dealing with these musicians: "I tells 'm to take two or three able-bodied bricks up stairs with them. When the organ-grinders come along they can drop 'em by accident." As Wortman's tale illustrates, however, it was not simply the decibel level nor the seemingly ceaseless drone of the organ's song that so infuriated residents; instead, the grinder's aural presence signaled the intrusion into public space of lower-class, racialized Others. By the time Wortman published his eulogy-*cum*-condemnation of the organ grinder, street musicians comprised only part of an increasingly polyphonic, and polyvocal, urban citizenry. In Wortman's portrayal of this urban mass, an organ

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<sup>1</sup> Denys Wortman, "Last of the Organ Grinders," *New York Times*, 1 August 1920. For a brief biography of Wortman, see Carol Kino, "Gotham Chronicle: Sharp Eye, and Pencil," *New York Times*, 17 November 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of organ grinders in New York City, see Michael David Accinno, "'Organ Grinder's Swing': Representations of Street Music in New York City, 1850-1937" (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 2010).

grinder stands soberly amidst a crowd of caricatured African American adults — one slouched, one whose arms are held slightly akimbo — and children, two of whom are dressed in overalls signifying, perhaps, their status as rural migrants. To the grinder's right stands a "wildly animated" Italian. In the background, a white policeman surveys the scene, his rigid stance and stern gaze, just barely visible in the cartoon, marking his authoritative distance from this common rabble. The crowd and the policeman are further segregated by their voices, as both the Italian's and the African Americans' speech are depicted in stereotyped dialect: the Italian man, pointing to the organ grinder's pet mouse, asks "How mooch is DESE?," while an African American "with wide-opened and suspicious eyes" exposes the musician/fortune teller's cartomantic deception, exclaiming "He done put it thar hissself" as the grinder slips a hidden fortune telling card into place.



**Figure 1.1. Last of the Organ Grinders<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Wortman, "Last of the Organ Grinders."

Such depictions of foreign speech and song exposed what U.S. literature historian Gavin Jones has called with regard to black dialect literature "a popular means of encoding racist beliefs," ultimately distancing these sounds from Western practices (here literally embodied by the patrolman whose speech is portrayed in standard English) even as urban living brought unfamiliar cultures into growing proximity.<sup>4</sup> The play of dialects and accents here exposed a great deal about how the "sonic color-line," to borrow Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman's phrase, was mobilized in the ideological formations of the voice at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> It was not simply that racialized voices were deemed nuisances or that voices of authority were assumed to speak in a standardized way. Rather, voices sounded the racialized bodies of urban citizens and as such provided sonic evidence of racial Otherness that filled public spaces with a polyvocal menagerie of dialects, accents, and songs. As racialized sounds stemming from material bodies, voices accrued meaning from the stereotypes attached to notions of social and cultural difference. Thus in the cartoon discussed above, the word "DESE" was amplified by speaker's "wide-open suspicious eyes," while the policeman's stern gaze lent depth to his authoritative voice.

\* \* \*

This dissertation investigates how a variety of performers, audiences, citizens, and immigrant communities laid claim to the vocal sound of the nation in the United States at the

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<sup>4</sup> Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "Splicing the Sonic Color-line: Tony Schwartz remixes *Nueva York*," *Social Text* 102, no. 1 (2010): 59-86.

turn of the twentieth century. I focus here on how singers at the turn of the twentieth century expressed their relationship to the nation through vocal performance; specifically, I address how singers working in popular, folk, and classical traditions employed a variety of timbres, accents, dialects, vibrato, and other vocal characteristics as a way to lay claim to national belonging. In other words, which strategic vocal choices did singers make in order to voice, literally, specific subject positions within the framework of the U.S. nation-state? Which voices were authorized to sing for the nation, or, as Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak provocatively asked, "who sings for nation-state?"<sup>6</sup> How is the nation shaped and brought to life through its vocal sounds? Which vocal sounds were privileged and why? How did the nation's history, socio-economic policies, limitations on citizenship, and so forth affect the sound of its inhabitants' voices? And how were these sounds produced, disseminated, and embodied by individuals and communities?

This dissertation consists of four chapters that focus primarily on singers and the discourse regarding vocal practices in the years immediately preceding and following the turn of the twentieth century. I draw on a range of primary resources — from medical texts on vocal physiology to recordings to popular criticism on singing style — to show how ideologies of race, nation, ethnicity, class, and gender informed contemporary auditions and performances of vocal sound. These four chapters, which I discuss in more detail below, trace the formation of a particular relationship between vocal performance and the nation that arose from the circulation of goods and people accompanying the U.S.'s emergence as a modern, imperial nation-state. While the dissertation as a whole concentrates on vocal performance in the U.S., I begin in mid-nineteenth century Western Europe, where increasing awareness of and interest in vocal practices drove scientific research into the physiological mechanics of singing. Physicians,

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (London: Seagull Books, 2007).

musicians, scientists, and anthropologists employed these studies towards the development of theories regarding racial difference that, in turn, formed the basis for the institutionalization of anthropology throughout Western Europe and the United States. Next, I examine how singing instructors working in the elite musical traditions of Western Europe employed these scientific studies of vocal mechanics as a means to teach singers how to embody white, racial superiority through vocal pedagogy. Turning to early twentieth-century popular music, I listen closely to the singing of Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams, the West Indian-born entertainer who spent the majority of his professional career performing as the blackface-minstrelsy stereotyped southern African American. Here, I discuss how Williams's vocal choices both reproduced the belief in black musical naturalness while also opening a space for imagining a new, modern black orality. I conclude with an analysis of Vernon Dalhart (née Marion Try Slaughter), a classically-trained operatic singer who navigated an increasingly racially-segregated popular music marketplace by positing himself as an authentic purveyor of classical, black, and rural, white folk music.

The years between 1890 and 1924 bore witness to impassioned debates regarding which musics best represented the burgeoning economic, imperial, and cultural power of the United States. This history has been extensively covered, so I offer here only a brief overview of the discussions surrounding this drive to establish a national music.<sup>7</sup> Central to these debates was the belief that there existed no original voice rising from the folk inhabiting those quickly-closing frontiers. For many elite critics, what songs did exist in the U.S. were simply imitations and

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Michael Beckerman, "Henry Krehbiel, Antonín Dvořák, and the Symphony 'From the New World,'" *Notes* 49, no. 2 (December 1992): 447-473, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), Joseph Horowitz, *Moral Fire: Musical Portraits from America's Fin de Siecle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

borrowings from Europe and were more often than not mere commodities of urban publishing houses. As music historian and critic Frédéric Louis Ritter asked in 1884,

How are we to account for this utter absence of national people's music and poetry in America? I do not consider the fashionable ballad of the 'city-folks' as representing the people's emotional life, or an outgrowth of its natural poetical and musical nature. Most of these ballads are simply superficial musical illustrations of some passing social whim. Most of them are reprints of foreign (English) efforts.<sup>8</sup>

What Ritter expressed here was the anxiety felt by many of the nation's cultural elites that there did not exist in the United States a homogeneous folk as found throughout the nations of Europe; instead, the "popular masses" inhabiting the U.S. represented a racially and sonically heterogeneous nation out of which no singular national song could arise.<sup>9</sup>

Others, following the suggestions of Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, listened for a national voice in the songs of African Americans and Native Americans. Henry Krehbiel, perhaps Dvořák's most devoted follower, insisted that the songs of the black folk — specifically the slave spirituals — provided the nation with its musical essence. Working with the African American composer Harry T. Burleigh, a student of Dvořák who introduced the Czech composer to black folk music, Krehbiel published his seminal work, *Afro-American Folksong: A Study in Racial and National Music*, to argue for black folk music's status as the nation's only true, original music.<sup>10</sup> Grounding his claims in a Herderian philosophy of the folk as geographically, culturally, and linguistically pure, Krehbiel wrote, "These people all speak the language of America. They are native born. Their songs, a matter of real moment in the controversy, are sung in the language of America (albeit in a corrupt dialect), and as much entitled to be called

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<sup>8</sup> Frédéric Louis Ritter, *Music in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884), 388.

<sup>9</sup> I'm grateful to Katie Graber for suggesting this particular reading of the U.S.'s diverse immigrant population and its inability to represent a singular folk tradition.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1914).

American songs as would be the songs, were there any such, created here by any other element of our population."<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Krehbiel would draw upon Du Bois's reading of the spirituals in *The Souls of Black Folk*, emphasizing the spirituals' emergence from the labor of the slaves, just as the music of the German folk issued forth from "the German apprentices, soldiers, huntsmen, clerks, journeymen."<sup>12</sup> African American folk song, for Krehbiel, thus met the requirements for a national music by being 1) sung by a people born within the geographic boundaries of the nation-state, 2) expressed through the language of the people, and 3) by being the product and expression of the toiling masses.

Yet, as Krehbiel himself acknowledged, the slave songs "may not give voice to the feelings of the entire population of the country, but for a song which shall do that we shall have to wait until the amalgamation of the inhabitants of the United States is complete. Will such a time ever come? Perhaps so; but it will be after the people of the world cease swarming as they have swarmed from the birth of history till now."<sup>13</sup> And indeed, people were increasingly "swarming" to the shores of the nation, bringing with them myriad forms of vocal and musical expression competing for viability in an increasingly loud public sphere. By 1900, the nation's urban soundscape was simply noisy: the sounds of capitalism — from rail travel to factories to new technologies of communication — sounded the nation's emergence as a modern, industrial society, while an influx of poor and working-class immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and African American migrants from the southern U.S. amplified the cacophony of the nation's rapidly changing political and racial geography.<sup>14</sup> These social transformations complicated the debate about how, as Josh Kun has written, "political and cultural citizenship

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<sup>11</sup> Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001).

[was] configured through the performance of...music," by situating any discussion of a national sound within contentions debates regarding immigration laws, imperial expansion, and technologies of managing and disseminating sound, music, and noise within the public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

Voices figured prominently in these debates, serving most often as an audible, ubiquitous marker of racial difference that delineated the boundaries between native and Other, music and noise, as well as elite and mass culture. As historian Davarian Baldwin has argued, while immigrant and migrant laborers claimed popular culture and public spaces such as movie theaters and vaudeville houses as an opportunity for remodeling themselves as modern citizens, elites heard these "newcomers to the city" as a "boisterous" threat to notions of proper social decorum and to established racial and class hierarchies.<sup>16</sup> Such tensions all too commonly led to race riots throughout the nation, primarily targeting African Americans, many involving public spaces of amusements.<sup>17</sup> Music critics, meanwhile, deplored the "horrible facial contortions" displayed by amateur vocalists and vaudeville performers, preferring those singers who

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<sup>15</sup> Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 30. For other discussions of the debate over defining a national music at the turn of the century that take into account a wide range of actors who have claimed the right to call their music 'American,' see Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation*, and Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For discussions of the national soundscape and the technologies of sonic mediation, see Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, "Our Newcomers to the City: The Great Migration and the Making of Modern Mass Culture," in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, ed. by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, 159-180 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> On race riots at the turn of the century, see Ann V. Collins, *All Hell Broke Loose: American Race Riots from the Progressive Era through World War II* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), and Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

performed in a more modest fashion.<sup>18</sup> As Jann Pasler has shown in her work on voice, singing, and national identity in France at the *fin de siècle*, critics of art music sought a sound that was racially and aesthetically "pure," i.e., a singing style "devoid of the distinctions of an individual voice" that best expressed the essence of the nation.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, commentators on non-Western music heard in Others' singing a racial menace that threatened the very health of the body politic. One need only consider the allusions to the so-called 'infectious' rhythms of African American and non-Western singing to understand the anxieties elicited by this vocal mass.<sup>20</sup>

In this study, I want to focus on performers and their attempts to craft new styles of vocal expression. Specifically, I will examine the ways in which U.S.-based performers at the turn of the twentieth century employed and transformed learned, practiced vocal styles towards economic, political, and aesthetic goals. Singing is a unique way of inhabiting the body, one that involves knowing intimately — and consciously — the physiological processes that make up the act of vocal emission: breathing, laryngeal expansion, diaphragm movement, and so on. To sing, accordingly, is to necessarily adopt a different voice. How did singing resonate within this particular moment of U.S. modernity? How did it shape, and how was it shaped by, the claims to national belonging being made by those who continued to be excluded from the rights and privileges of full citizenship? How did the massive waves of immigrants from Europe's eastern

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<sup>18</sup> "Tone as the End of Technique," *New York Times*, 14 Apr 1900. For an example of this critique with regard to vaudeville performers, see "May Edouin at Keith's," *New York Times*, 8 Apr 1902.

<sup>19</sup> Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 267; also see Jann Pasler, "Race and Nation: Musical Acclimatisation and the *cansons populaires* in Third Republic France," in *Western Music and Race*, ed. by Julie Brown, 147-167 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Radano, "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm," in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. by Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, 459-480 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

and southern frontiers affect how the nation was heard? And how did the circulation of these competing voices through the popular marketplace and via new modes of audio technology make available new modes of performance, new ways of singing?

My work takes as its starting point a simple proposition: our voices are malleable. We are able to control of our vocal materiality — timbre, pitch, accent, volume — in countless ways in order to affect our situations in the world. This statement perhaps seems self-evident: as we are all well aware, stage and screen actors must learn unfamiliar dialects in order to portray characters on screen. We may think, for example, of a voice actor such as Mel Blanc (née Melvin Blank) who was famous for his ability to conceive of and produce such cartoon characters as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Yosemite Sam, among literally hundreds of others.<sup>21</sup> When speaking before a large audience, such as when we present our work before our academic colleagues or when teaching in a cavernous lecture hall, we must learn to project our voices so that we may be heard. Speaking before large audiences generally entails a slight dropping of our usual register, the use of a slower pace in order to enunciate clearly, and the production of a more open tone that carries better to the back of the room. Such public displays of speech, especially when prolonged, may cause discomfort or even injury, thus causing our voices to sound hoarse and soft. We may also think of the simple changes that our voices undertake throughout our lives: the rasping sound caused by illness, the way our voices may crack when startled, or the deepening of our voices as we age.

Our voices are thus never stable but are instead dependent on various internal (bodily) and external (social, environmental) factors. Yet by deliberately altering our voices, we can align ourselves with specific subject positions for the purposes of political solidarity, class distinction,

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<sup>21</sup> Video of Blanc's vocal folds in action while performing some of his more famous characters can be seen here: <http://youtu.be/xxaKUyiqZEw> [accessed 11 February 2014].

racial superiority, economic gain, or, perhaps, to simply blend in with a crowd. We also purposefully alter our voices in order to imitate the characteristic speech of others. Think, for example, of times when you've used indirect, or reported, speech when telling a story to a friend. How often do we attempt to mimic the sound of the person who we are quoting by altering our pitch or feigning an accent? If we are prone to doing so, moreover, we can make these adjustments to mock or ridicule the vocal sounds of another person. What is at stake when someone attempts to mimic the sound of someone from another race, nation, gender, sexuality, or the sound of physical or mental disability? Are such attempts always unethical? Or can we imagine a vocal mimicry, like that of Bert Williams, that creates space for solidarity or communal expression? For Williams, who spent his career working within the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, assuming the stereotyped vocal practices of southern African American speech allowed him to draw upon black cultural practices while simultaneously showing how those practices were anything but uncivilized, much less the natural expression of innate inferiority.

The technological advances of audio recording in the first decades of the twentieth century allowed for the increased circulation and private consumption of singing voices. This is not to argue that early sound recordings reproduced precisely the subtle characteristics of singing performances; shifts in the recording or playback speed, for example, could drastically alter the sound by changing the tone, adding vibrato to notes, and introducing other mechanical artifacts to the listening experience. Rather, in developing new styles of singing based on the supposed authentic expression of racial and national differences, singers tapped into the seemingly paradoxical ideologies of turn-of-the-century consumer culture: the desire for authentic expressions of emotional and cultural experience, and what William Leach has called the "cult of

the new" that pervaded the U.S. marketplace.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the melding of these competing ideologies helped produce what I refer to as the vocal economy of the early twentieth century. The singing styles imagined and produced by singers at the turn of the century sought to provide for audiences a vocal realness grounded in the assumption of essential links between race/ethnicity and vocal performance. Beyond the singers discussed in this dissertation, we can hear evidence of the yearning for vocal realness in the recordings and circulation of "ethnic" and "foreign" musics at this time. These recordings, while providing a particular kind of aural evidence of cultural and vocal difference, also permitted newly-arrived immigrants the opportunity "both to become Americanized and to cling to their heritage," to quote Charles McGovern, as recording companies began during the 1910s to seek and construct markets specifically tailored to immigrant communities.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the singing styles discussed in the following chapters provided new models for how the elites and masses might imagine themselves vocally as U.S. citizens: where Bert Williams's reshaping of vocal blackness sought new ways of inhabiting the black body in the twentieth-century, elite singers sought a distinctly white vocal sound based on the most recent findings of scientific inquiry.

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<sup>22</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993). For more on consumer culture and the search for newness, see Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) and James Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Charles McGovern, "Consumption," in *A Companion to 20th-Century America*, ed. by Stephen J. Whitfield (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 339. On the ethnic and foreign markets for recorded music, see Karl Hagstrom Miller, "Talking Machine World: Selling the Local in the Global Music Industry, 1900-20," in *Global History: Interactions Between the Universal and the Local*, ed. by A.G. Hopkins, 160-190 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

## Vocal Anthropology

I situate my work within the growing body of scholarship on issues of singing and the voice emerging from ethnomusicology, cultural musicology, and anthropology that has productively attuned us to the ways in which musicians and other social actors use their voices to align themselves with identities of race, region, and nation. Nina Sun Eidsheim and Grant Olwage have demonstrated effectively the historical and cultural forces that shape our audition of vocal performance as expressive of innate racial difference.<sup>24</sup> Eidsheim's work has been of great value to my thinking, particularly for her focus on the embodiment of racialized vocal practices. As she writes, "vocal timbre is the sound of habitual performance that has shaped the physical body. Vocal timbre is not the unmediated sound of an essential body. Instead, both body and timbre are *shaped* by unconscious and conscious training practices that function as repositories for cultural attitudes toward gender, class, race, and sexuality."<sup>25</sup> This notion that vocal practices shape and mold the body is critical to my understanding of Western elite vocal training in the United States, which I discuss in Chapter Three.

Aaron Fox and Alexander Dent, meanwhile, explore how issues of region, class, and race are brought to life through musical and vocal performance. For Fox, country music does not simply permeate working-class Texas culture; country music provides a vehicle for the production of community. For the patrons of what Fox affectionately calls "rural beer joints," country music may instruct its audiences how to live while simultaneously gaining its affective

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<sup>24</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race," and "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2011): 641-71; Grant Olwage, "The Class and Colour of Tone: An Essay on the Social History of Vocal Timbre," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 203-26. See also Laurie Stras, "White Face, Black Voice: Race, Gender, and Region in the Music of the Boswell Sisters," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 2 (2009): 207-55; John Burdick, "The Singing Voice and Racial Politics on the Brazilian Evangelical Music Scene," *Latin American Music Review* 30, no. 1 (2009): 25-55.

<sup>25</sup> Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race." Emphasis in original.

powers from the audience's relationship with the sounds of the music and the biographies of the musicians.<sup>26</sup> Vocal performances are crucial to such community-building projects as the timbres, accents, and colloquialisms of county music allow audiences to hear themselves in the performances. Similarly, Dent argues in his ethnography of Brazilian country music that musicians "sing the countryside into existence" by employing particular timbres and blendings of voices.<sup>27</sup> Fox's and Dent's work help us to understand better the relationships between performers and audiences that are generated through musical production and audition while attuning us to how communities themselves are constituted through those relationships.

Of particular interest are those studies that consider how vocal gestures may be used by singers to signify specific subject positions. Katherine Meizel explores how the use of melisma by *American Idol* singers serves as a "race-conscious, religion-conscious social practice."<sup>28</sup> As Meizel shows, singers must negotiate a sometimes carefully-policed array of competing ideologies when it comes to employing vocal techniques; while the use of melisma by *American Idol* contestants, for example, may suggest an individual, authentic performance of a song (by which I mean a performance that ostensibly sings from one's lived experience), excessive use can suggest instead artificiality. Laurie Stras's work on the issues of vocal materiality and race, region, gender, and disability has been particularly helpful for my work.<sup>29</sup> Stras's close listening to the singing of the Boswell Sisters — a jazz vocal trio working in the 1920s and 1930s —

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<sup>26</sup> Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 229.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Sebastian Dent, *River of Tears: Country Music, Memory, and Modernity in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 40.

<sup>28</sup> Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 64.

<sup>29</sup> Laurie Stras, "The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage and Affect," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing on Disability in Music*, ed. by Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus, 173-84 (New York: Routledge, 2006); "White Face, Black Voice;" and "Sing a Song of Difference: Connie Boswell and a Discourse of Disability in Jazz," *Popular Music* 28, no. 3 (2009): 297-322.

offers a thorough accounting for how individual singers' voices emerge from a constellation of subject positions. Stras illustrates how specific vocal characteristics — timbre, portamento, vibrato, etc. — are deeply embedded in historical, social practices as well as how those practices may be transformed by individual creativity. The Boswell sisters claimed access to the sounds of blackness by way of their Southern roots, yet the sisters muted their racial-vocal masquerade through "the mask of the southern belle [which] allowed them to restore equilibrium with gracious decorum."<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, musicologists including Naomi André and John Potter have focused on the changing aesthetics of the voice, noting how performers altered their singing styles in order to reflect transitioning ideologies of class, nation, and gender.<sup>31</sup> André, for example, shows how the register of female voices rose in the mid- to late-nineteenth century as *travesti* roles (women performing as male characters) were slowly replaced by the heroic tenor.<sup>32</sup> Studies such as these provide a rich framework for thinking through the ways in which musicians shape and are shaped by the materiality of their voices, and of how those sounds resonate throughout the body politic.

Ethnomusicologists in particular have long been interested in what Alan Merriam identified as "the possible correlation of vocal quality with other aspects of human behavior."<sup>33</sup> While we should dismiss the idea of a strict correlation existing between vocal quality and human activity (a correlation explored later by Alan Lomax in his cantometrics project), I would argue that Merriam's broader point regarding singing styles and meaning should be taken

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<sup>30</sup> Stras "White Face, Black Voice," 248.

<sup>31</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Naomi Adele André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> André, *Voicing Gender*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 107.

seriously.<sup>34</sup> Merriam continues, "As there are specific kinds of physical behavior concerned with the manipulation of voice and instruments, there also seem to be characteristic bodily attitudes, postures, and tensions, and it is possible that such bodily characteristics can be correlated with other behavioral elements to reveal significant facts about music making."<sup>35</sup> Merriam's use of the language of behavioral science notwithstanding, my work here seeks to understand more fully the ways that singing practices shape and are shaped by bodies and human activity. What conclusions, for example, can we draw between vocal quality and bodily comportment when read through ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality?

What I am after is an understanding of singing as a technique of the body, what the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss referred to in the 1934 as "physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions" grounded thoroughly in local histories and practices.<sup>36</sup> In their call for a vocal anthropology, Feld, Fox, Samuels, Porcello have helped to shed light on the performative aspects of vocal utterance, noting the voice's role in mediating between, as Fox argues, selfhood and personhood, identity and subjectivity; or, as Feld, et al, argue, how the "body social...is enunciated in and through the voice."<sup>37</sup> Singing is, in the words of Anthony Seeger, "a creative activity" that allows for critical evaluations of the Self through individual and

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<sup>34</sup> See Alan Lomax, "Folk Song Style," *American Anthropologist* 61 (December 1959): 927-954, and Alan Lomax, *Cantometrics: An Approach to the Anthropology of Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). As Richard Middleton has noted, cantometrics' reliance on strict homologies between vocal practices and social structure assumes a certain level of homogeneity within societies, which simply doesn't exist. See Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 147-150.

<sup>35</sup> Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*, 108. John Blacking would take such an approach with his notion of "soundly organized humanity" in *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973).

<sup>36</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," in *Incorporations*, ed. by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, 455-477 (New York: Zone, 1992), 85.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Feld, et al, "Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. by Alessandro Duranti, 321-345 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Fox, *Real Country*.

communal performance and for establishing, maintaining, and challenging social relationships.<sup>38</sup> In *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*, Seeger posits singing as a site of liminality for members of the Suyá community to explore and "experiment" with not only new performance practices but also with ways for inhabiting new social roles within the community.

Harris Berger and Giovanna Del Negro, drawing on the work of folklorist Richard Bauman, foreground the relationship between performances and audiences, noting that "the aesthetics of performance are tightly bound up with the issue of reflexivity — the performer's awareness of him- or herself as a participant in an interaction, his or her signaling of this awareness, and the reciprocal phenomena experienced by the audience."<sup>39</sup> Berger's and Del Negro's framework rightfully takes into consideration the importance of the fact that musicians generally perform for audiences and that audiences' reactions to the performance necessarily affect how the performer approaches his or her art. Likewise, Alexander Dent's work on country music in rural Brazil urges us to consider how "participants must make use of structures of voicing grounded in locally instantiated horizons of communicative practice."<sup>40</sup> These local practices, as Dent makes clear, are in continuous states of negotiation as broader social forces (migration and immigration, industrialization, global capitalism, and so on) pervade and shape local musicians' and performers' understanding of how, precisely, constitutes their audience.

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<sup>38</sup> Anthony Seeger, *Why Suyá Sing: a Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro. "Bauman's Verbal Art and the Social Organization of Attention: The Role of Reflexivity in the Aesthetics of Performance," *The Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 455 (2002): 63. See also Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," *American Anthropologist* 77, no. 2 (1975): 290-311.

<sup>40</sup> Dent, *River of Tears*, 13.

But what of the actual vocal practices that people make use of in situating themselves within soundly-organized worlds? What can a thorough examination of the practice of singing teach us about how subjects come into being through song? What can listening to the learning process of singers — the ways in which their voices change over time — teach us about the ways in which subject positions transform in response to shifting ideological formations? My work builds upon that of Matthew Rahaim, who has recently explored the connections between singing and gesture in Hindustani music. Rahaim's work makes us aware not only of how "the disciplined disposition of a particular singer's musicking body" — what he calls the paramparic body of Hindustani music — but also of how the relationship between voice and corporeal discipline changes over time.<sup>41</sup> Rahaim's work has much to offer those seeking to understand better how singing and bodily movements correspond within particular social ideologies, but I worry that his focus on the "musicking body" leaves little room for understanding how the practices we learn and embody through song affect our physical dispositions on an everyday level. Do we not, for example, use the techniques absorbed through singing and musical performance in other modes of living? Kelly Askew extends Bauman's audience-centered approach to the realm of the everyday to consider how *taarab* musicians in Tanzania created a "politics of performance" that served as the basis for grassroots political movement during the nation's transition from a socialist to democratic state.<sup>42</sup> Jane Sugarman meanwhile, drawing on Bourdieu's practice-based approach to the connections between performance and social structure, urges ethnomusicologists to consider "the ways that the actions of individuals implicate them in continual renegotiations, not only of their musical practices, but also of the relations of power

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew Rahaim, *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

that organize their society."<sup>43</sup> For Sugarman, as for Seeger and Askew, singing is not merely an aestheticized means of representing one's relationship to social worlds but is, instead, an integral form of "constituting those worlds."<sup>44</sup>

Vocal materiality shapes, in other words, not just our understanding of musical meaning but actively participates in the corporeal construction of sociopolitical ideologies. As Nina Sun Eidsheim has argued with respect to the embodiment of vocal timbre, "both body and timbre are shaped by unconscious and conscious training practices that function as repositories for cultural attitudes toward gender, class, race, and sexuality."<sup>45</sup> Or, as Amanda Weidman puts it, "how [do] people come to let certain sounds speak and sing *for* them."<sup>46</sup> It is in this way that a study of vocal anthropology has perhaps the strongest resonance, for the social's ability to speak through our bodies relies on our being deeply enmeshed in a sounded world; timbres, accents, tempos, pitch, and all of the constitutive aspects of speaking and singing shape not just our understanding of the world around us, but shape the very fibers of our being, both physically and cognitively. We mimic and mirror the vocal sounds around us. Some, if not most, of this occurs without our thinking about it. But we should not dismiss our ability to mold our own voices to suit our needs.

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<sup>43</sup> Jane C. Sugarman, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>44</sup> Sugarman, *Engendering Song*, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race," 11-12. For a discussion of how male voices, and masculinity, are typically heard as nonperformative and natural, see Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction: Oh Boy! Making Masculinity in Popular Music," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. by Freya Jarman-Ivens, 1-17, (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 57. Emphasis in original.

## Chapter Summaries

This dissertation serves as an intervention in scholarship on the voice and singing by focusing on the voice's malleability and its employment by singers for the purpose of social critique; that is, I seek an understanding of how and why singers adopt particular vocal styles to "sing for them" through careful listening to and analysis of their performances. Whereas Eidsheim, Weidman, and others have brilliantly challenged the commonly-held belief that the voice reveals the "truth" of the body, I ask how U.S. singers at the turn of the twentieth century both embraced and challenged such a view through the manipulation of their vocal material for the purposes of social change, economic gain, and individual expression. Such an approach addresses the tensions at work between an understanding of the voice as revealing individual or cultural truths versus the vocal masquerades performed by singers, and between notions of anatomical determinism versus vocal play.

I begin by exploring the development of theories that posited a direct correlation between racial physiology and vocal performance. Chapter Two examines the role of scientific research on vocal mechanics in the founding of anthropology in the late nineteenth century that led to understandings of the voice as expressing aurally physiological, racial difference. After the invention of the laryngoscope by Manuel Garcia II in 1854, a modern field of vocal science emerged that attempted to explain the vocal mechanics of singing through physical and auditory observation. Physical anthropologists working in the new institutions of anthropology in France and Great Britain conducted the majority of this research, thus binding vocal expression to notions of physical and cultural racial difference that continue to inform how we hear and understand the connections between voices and racialized bodies. Through their research, nineteenth-century scientists and anthropologists claimed that one could literally map the

evolution of humankind by listening carefully to the speech and singing of the world's peoples. This chapter traces the circulation of ideas on racialized voices in nineteenth-century medical and anthropological literature in order to gain a better understanding of the assumed connections between race and voice that would dominate vocal discourse in the early twentieth century.

Chapter Three discusses how singing instructors, music critics, and others interested in the physiological mechanics of singing employed the evidence and theories of vocal science to develop pedagogical methods for attaining a beautiful vocal singing tone. Known as the voice culture movement, singing instructors, physiologists, elocutionists, music instructors, and critics sought to inaugurate a national vocal school that would surpass the traditions of Germany, France, and Great Britain by basing pedagogical practices on scientific empiricism. Here, I focus on how a beautiful tone, one based in Western classical singing practices, was embodied through vocal pedagogy and how, in turn, the performance of that aesthetic was meant to mold students into idealized national subjects. This national voice, however, was restricted to those who were biologically and culturally capable of embodying these vocal principles; thus, I show how the vocal tone promoted in these texts was meant to sound a racially white body by discussing the ways in which voice culture authors differentiated their practices from those of the non-Western European immigrants whose voices were becoming increasingly audible throughout the national soundscape. For this chapter, I draw upon the more than 150 voice culture texts published between 1880 and 1920 to show how a representative voice was imagined and embodied by professional, amateur, and student singers.

Chapter Four focuses on the vocal performances of Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams, a black vaudeville performer born in the Bahamas who spent the majority of his career performing as a caricatured African American from the blackface minstrelsy tradition. Though Williams

often referred to how foreign African America was to him, noting the amount of observation and practice involved in creating his stage persona, his voice was heard by white and black audiences alike as, in one contemporary critic's words, "the racial type itself."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Williams and the rest of the black vaudeville community claimed black musicality (vocal soulfulness, rhythmic physicality, etc.) as natural extensions of black bodies in order to market their musical products to a nation fascinated with the sounds of black music-making even as their performances (which continued to draw on the traditions of blackface minstrelsy) reinforced white stereotypes of black social inferiority. To that end, I place Williams's performance against the backdrop of a burgeoning African American urban modernity that was attempting to create new ways of inhabiting blackness via musical performance while confronting the legacies and memories of chattel slavery, racial violence, and social inequality. Through deep listenings to Williams's recorded output and close readings of his writings as well as those by the community of black performers with whom he worked, I argue that Williams's vocal performances provided new avenues for black subjectivity in the United States that both challenged and confirmed the nation's racial fantasies of black musical bodies.

Chapter Five focuses on the singer Vernon Dalhart, a classically trained performer from Texas who, after moderate success performing light operatic works in New York, re-adopted his Southern accent in order to capitalize on the burgeoning market for so-called 'old-time music.' Dalhart used many voices throughout his career, altering his accent at times not just mid-performance, but mid-sentence, and it is partly for this reason why he has been disparaged within country music writings. Drawing on his southern heritage and classical training, Dalhart positioned himself as possessing the natural ability to sing opera, black music, and the songs of

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<sup>47</sup> Jessie Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," *The Crisis* 24, no. 1 (1922): 15.

the rural, white folk. As a long-time entertainer performing within the music industry, Dalhart was able to exploit the opportunities made available through the expansion of the popular music marketplace and the growing music recording industry. Here, I listen carefully to Dalhart's performances and the vocal tactics he employed in order to understand how he was able to market himself as an authentic purveyor of these seemingly-disparate styles.

Certainly there are many other singers besides Vernon Dalhart and Bert Williams whose voices are worthy of close listening and whose performances provide an entryway into understanding the rich history of singing and social critique in the United States. I have selected these two voices for further analysis for several reasons. First, both singers recorded extensively in their respective genres over a number of years, and thus both provide the opportunity to listen for how a singer develops over a long career his or her performance style. Second, Dalhart and Williams represent the two forms of commercial music that were most explicitly tied to notions of racial difference: country and black music. Though Williams's recorded output occurred prior to the naming of "race records" as a commercial category, he performed in a number of genres defined by their racial origins, including blues, jazz, ragtime, and coon songs. Finally, both Dalhart and Williams were extremely popular singers whose careers were well-documented in the popular press. In interviews and articles, both Williams and Dalhart spoke extensively about their vocal development and training and addressed directly their reasons for why they adopted their particular singing styles.

By adapting their vocal practices to the changing soundscape of modern U.S. life, the singers discussed throughout this dissertation revealed the artificiality of vocal naturalness even as they claimed vocal practices as the inherent expression of their lived experiences. Singers in the Western elite tradition altered their voices as a means to embody national artistic and racial

superiority while claiming that these practices were empirically grounded in the natural laws of science. Bert Williams, meanwhile, assumed the vocal styles of blackface minstrelsy in order to critique the racial stereotypes of black folk practices even as he asserted the artistic importance of these vocal styles. For Vernon Dalhart, the vocal malleability afforded him by his race and southern background provided an economic advantage at a time when the marketability of racialized voices was of critical importance. By listening carefully to these singers discussed in this dissertation, we can gain a better understanding of the voice's socio-cultural formation and for how singers alter their voices to sing their position from within this ideological matrix.

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I come to these matters quite naturally, or at least, as naturally as the artifice of the voice allows. That is, my personal experiences have guided my thinking on the social repercussions of vocal malleability, and these experiences have shaped fundamentally my approach to issues of voice and subjectivity.

I decided to lose my accent at age seventeen. I grew up in a rural, unincorporated area of central North Carolina called Ossipee, which became an official township of roughly 290 people in 2002. Ossipee lies in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, bounded by the foothills of Blue Ridge Mountains to the west and the coastal region to the east. Vocally, it resides somewhere between the drawl of the coastal region (think Andy Griffith) and the twang of the mountains (here, think Dolly Parton). The Piedmont accent, as such, is relatively neutral when compared to these neighboring regions, while still retaining much of what one would generally characterize as "Southern" speech. Yet because of its central location and the presence of several larger cities (Greensboro, Chapel Hill, Durham, etc.), you'll frequently encounter a wide variety of accents among its inhabitants.

The first time I became fully aware of my voice was during a trip to Chicago at age 11. I'd vacationed outside of my home state before, but never paid much attention to how those cities sounded vocally. It was during this trip that I first learned how our voices can betray our outsider status — as visitor, tourist. No one particular event stands out, but I heard how the words I spoke sounded different than the accents I heard around me. Certainly I was aware before this trip of the characteristics of Southern speech: dropping Gs, the diphthongization of vowels, etc., but I had never truly equated such speech patterns with ideologies of class and region. By the time I was nearing completion of high school, I knew I had no plans to remain in my hometown, nor was I particularly enamored with the idea of living the rest of my life in North Carolina. So during my junior year of high school I began, systematically, to rid myself of my Southern accent. For my undergraduate years I remained in the South, first attending North Carolina State University and then the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I completed my B.A. in music. I then moved to Newark, New Jersey, where I began my graduate studies in Jazz History and Research at Rutgers University in 2001. I was 22, and this was my first experience living outside of my home state. And, perhaps because of the regional diversity of my fellow students, accents quickly became a topic of discussion amongst my cohort, especially between myself, Christopher from Annapolis, Maryland, and Kevin from West Orange, New Jersey.

It was while living in New Jersey that I first experienced the dreaded request to repeat my pronunciations of words, especially those such as "law" that greatly exposed my accent. At first, such requests were simply annoying, and I would do my best to shrug them off; later, they begin to feel more like harassment and would generally prompt a series of expletives in response.

Southern voices in their various guises, and there are many,<sup>48</sup> often fall into two stereotypes: that of the genteel Southerner nostalgically mired in traditions or that of the backwards redneck. And at times, particularly when representing the antebellum Southern slave owner, these characterizations become mutually constitutive. Rarely are Southern voices heard or represented as simply different, certainly never as neutral, official, or authoritative.<sup>49</sup> While mockery and derision are certainly not unique when discussing Southern accents, few accents in the U.S. are as equated with a lack of education and supposed backwardness as those of the South. It was this connection, the way my voice indexed a seemingly uneducated background, that prompted my decision to fully divest myself of my Southern orality. By the end of my time living in New Jersey and New York, my accent had developed into a rather hodgepodge amalgamation of regional vocal styles. Occasionally, my discordant accent caused for some remarkable confusion: several times, I was asked where overseas I had been raised (most people who asked this first thought somewhere in Great Britain, which is particularly odd considering I can't fake a British accent). My family in North Carolina, meanwhile, has basically disowned me as a Southerner — at least vocally. I am constantly confronted with remarks about my Northernness, with the majority of the comments directed solely towards my accent.

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<sup>48</sup> As Barbara Johnstone rightly argues, "not all Southerners talk alike...Like people everywhere, each Southerner has a repertoire of available ways of being, acting, and sounding, styles which he or she can adapt (more or less consciously and more or less freely) to the situation and the communicative purpose at hand." See Barbara Johnstone, "Features and Uses of Southern Style," in *English in the Southern United States*, ed. Stephen J. Nagle and Sara L. Sanders, 189 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Rosina Lippi-Green, for example, notes that praise for public figures from the South is often accompanied by surprise: "For 37 years, Charles Kuralt has shown us what network news can be — calm, thoughtful, and perceptive. *Beneath that deceptive North Carolina drawl, there's a crisp intelligence.*" Quoted in Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (London: Routledge, 1997), 210 [emphasis mine].

Each of the subjects I consider in this dissertation (operatic vocal training, Bert Williams's blackvoice, and Vernon Dalhart's country/hillbilly voice) engaged in vocal tactics for different reasons: to rid oneself of supposedly uncultivated vocal habits, to stage a new type of black singing that challenged the stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy, and to bring into national awareness the voices of the downtrodden Southern working class. This is not to say that a person is always successful at changing his accent, at least not entirely nor consistently. Certainly my Southerness reveals itself at times: listen to me when I'm fatigued, after a couple of beers, or when I'm speaking to my parents, and you'll hear vestiges of my native accent. Thus, while we can certainly make concentrated efforts to control and to shape our voices, such mastery is never complete. By listening closely to the voice's materiality, as I do throughout this dissertation, we can begin to hear more clearly how our lived experiences issues forth through our vocal performances.

## Chapter Two

### Vocal Science, Anthropology, and the Ordering of World Song

Several years ago I examined the larynx of a negro, known in this city as Charcoal Charley, who had a wonderful compass of voice, which he displayed in his mode of singing 'charcoal' through the streets. The length of his glottis was fully an inch and a half, and the pearly white vocal bands fully one-quarter of an inch wide. About the same time I examined a man's larynx, whose vocal cords were but a little over one-half an inch in length. The man's height was nearly six feet. His voice was similar to that of an eight-year old girl.<sup>1</sup>

In 1888, a U.S. physician named Thomas Rumbold included in an otherwise dry and unremarkable medical treatise concerning the treatment of diseases of the ear, nose, and throat the rather curious passage quoted above. Included as part of a general description of the laryngeal cavity, Rumbold's reference to the glotti of Charcoal Charley and a "man" read almost as an afterthought. The passage was even set in a smaller typeface than otherwise used for the majority of the treatise, suggesting perhaps its relative unimportance. As an assistant surgeon for the Union Army during the Civil War and later as an established surgeon in St. Louis, Missouri, Rumbold was hailed for his expertise on issues of the ears, nose, and throat, what is now referred

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Fraizer Rumbold, M.D., *Practical Treatise on the Medical, Surgical and Hygienic Treatment of Catarrhal Diseases of the Nose, Throat, and Ears* (St. Louis: Medical Journal Publishing Company, 1888), 62.

to as otolaryngology.<sup>2</sup> His specialty in vocal hygiene made him a favorite of local singers, and he ultimately summarized his knowledge of vocal care gained over the years through his practice in the monograph, *The Hygiene of the Voice, with Twenty Seven Illustrations*, published in 1898.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his writings, Rumbold utilized a simple calculus that directly correlated vocal performance with anatomical determinism: laryngeal size and vocal cord length governed the voice's fundamental tone and register. Rumbold's logic relied on a nineteenth-century sciencing of the voice — and of musical affect, more generally — that increasingly sought physiological explanations for human musicality.<sup>4</sup> Such homologies between physiology and voice were

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<sup>2</sup> John W. Leonard, *Who's Who in America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Men and Women of the United States; 1899-1900* (Chicago: Marquis), s. vv. "Rumbold, Thomas Frazier." Rumbold's son, Frank Meeker, followed a similar trajectory in his career as his father. Frank first established himself as a voice specialist in St. Louis and founded the influential medical journal, *The Laryngoscope*, in 1896. He then suspended his practice in order to serve in the Spanish-American War, where he reached the rank of Captain. The two biographical statements I have found for Frank offer conflicting information regarding whether he served in Puerto Rico or in the Philippines during the war. See John W. Leonard, *Who's Who in America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Men and Women of the United States; 1899-1900* (Chicago: Marquis), who states that Frank served in the Phillipines; and M.L. Van Nada, ed., *The Book of Missourians: The Achievements and Personnel of Notable Living Men and Women of Missouri in the Opening Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: T.J. Steele, 1906), 277-278, who claims that Frank served in Puerto Rico.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Frazier Rumbold, *The Hygiene of the Voice, with Twenty Seven Illustrations* (St. Louis: Witt Publishing Company, 1898). Here, Rumbold provides numerous examples of vocal anthropometry to prove his theory that childhood inflammation of the throat prevented the vocal folds and larynx from fully developing. In a passage describing a physical examination remarkably similar to the one quoted above, Rumbold relates his observation of a twenty-seven year-old man who stands five feet ten inches in height and who has a tenor voice in speaking and singing, a "higher pitch of the voice than usual for a man of his stature," which he equates with an illness suffered by the patient when he was two years old (55-56). While Rumbold does not correlate vocal anatomy and performance to race in this text, he continues to rely on the assumption that a person's physical stature determines pitch.

<sup>4</sup> This was particularly true for the study of music psychology by Carl Stumpf and Richard Wallaschek in Germany and Austria during the late nineteenth century, a tradition which relied heavily upon the work of Hermann von Helmholtz. See Amy Graziano and Julene K. Johnson, "The Influence of Scientific Research on Nineteenth-Century Musical Thought: The Work of Richard Wallaschek," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 37, no.1 (2006): 17-32.

common in an era when evolutionary sciences relied on anthropometrical measurements such as cranial dimensions to classify and to order the supposed levels of morality, intelligence, and civilization that the races of world were deemed to have achieved.

Today, this passage suggests a fascinating investment on the physician's part with the relationship between vocal sound, race, and bodily anatomy, and it is precisely this investment that I want to analyze. While Rumbold's text is an admittedly obscure reference, his conclusion regarding the strict correlation between laryngeal size and vocal register is not. It effectively captures how scientific theories of human development shaped understandings of the voice as expressive of racial difference towards the end of the nineteenth century. I do not mean to dismiss the gender and sexual implications of such thinking by focusing on race; both gender and sexuality bore heavily on nineteenth-century vocal audition (as they continue to do), and these social frameworks inform the analysis that I pursue in this chapter. The voices presented here capture their auditor's imagination because of the supposed physiological irregularities revealed through the act of vocal emission. Rumbold does not speculate here but instead writes with a tone of learned authority of the direct correlation between physiology and vocal production. Charley is identified by Rumbold as black due to the sobriquet "Charcoal," an occupational moniker, perhaps, that doubles as a racist, phenotypical designation. His "wonderful compass of voice" (surely an economic advantage given his occupation) stems from the size and health of his vocal folds, the two small membranes located at the top of the larynx colloquially referred to as the vocal cords.<sup>5</sup> The "man," meanwhile, is presumably white, as Rumbold leaves his race undefined. His voice sounds not just feminine but girlish due to his underdeveloped vocal anatomy.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will use the term "vocal folds" except when quoting from historical texts that variously refer to these membranes as "vocal cords" or "vocal bands."

Ultimately, however, Rumbold's conclusions prove disturbing, as he reduces both men, and their voices, to their physiological difference. In the first case, Charley's voice reinforced the mythologized images and sounds of the African American busker so commonplace in nineteenth-century writings on urban black life.<sup>6</sup> In the second case, the man's voice defied nature as it failed to correlate to his six-foot frame. Charcoal Charley and the "man" described in this account sounded, in other words, extra-ordinary: their voices astonished due to their failure to sound nineteenth-century normative theories of human development. In this light, Charcoal Charley's voice sounded the stereotypes of the sub-human black body according to contemporary theories of racial evolution and superficial evidence of comparative physiology.<sup>7</sup> Charley's vocal organs revealed a physio-anthropological foundation for the nineteenth-century audio-visual logic of African American singers; in other words, anatomical excess produced vocal excess. For the white man, meanwhile, the voice presented itself as a physiological anomaly; it was a sound materialized in the flesh that seemingly did not belong to the body from which it derived. The implications of such scientific analysis is the subject that I will pursue in this chapter.

Correlations between evolutionary science and musical performance at this time were nothing new. As Philip Bohlman, Bennett Zon, Timothy Taylor and others have noted, music historians and critics beginning in the mid-1880s made frequent use of evolutionary theories to

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<sup>6</sup> The most famous of these stories is the likely apocryphal tale told by Thomas D. "Daddy" Rice regarding his introduction to black singing and dancing styles that he made famous on the minstrel stage. See Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> One need only consider here the egregious conclusions drawn from the body of Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman to get a sense of how this logic operated in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Gates, 223-261 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815-1817," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, 66-95 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).

explain the origins and developments of the world's musics.<sup>8</sup> Such theories generally relied on a teleological account of human musical development that heard contemporary forms of non-Western musical practices as the evolutionary antecedents to Western European art music. Zon has noted that this belief relied on the theory, promoted by Darwin in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* and by Herbert Spencer in his essay "On the Origin and Function of Music," that humanity's first music was song, a proposition supposedly proven by the fact that most "savages" performed only vocal music.<sup>9</sup> For both Spencer and Darwin, it was early humans' physiological response to emotional stimuli that begot music's origin. Bohlman, meanwhile, has discussed how these theories influenced the ontological separation within Western music scholarship of European and Other musics. For Bohlman, Western thinking conceived of European art music as an abstract, self-referential symbolic order, while they hard non-Western traditions as the expression of ritual and bodily movement.<sup>10</sup> For contemporary non-Western peoples, assumed to be closer to nature and thus more susceptible to psychological incitement, this placed their music at an earlier stage of evolutionary development and bound their vocalizations to corporeal expression.

Singing, a musical practice thoroughly embedded in bodily kineasthetics, thus auralized contemporary theories of biological evolution. It is no surprise, then, that physicians and music scholars would seek answers for the power and mystery of singing through close examination of human physiology. Scholarship on non-Western musics at the turn of the century was rife with

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<sup>8</sup> Philip V. Bohlman, "Erasure: displacing and misplacing race in twentieth-century music historiography," in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown, 3-23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Bennett Zon, *Representing Non-Western Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007); and Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Zon, *Representing Non-Western Music*.

<sup>10</sup> Bohlman, "Erasure: Displacing and Misplacing Race."

allusions to song's bodily provenance. Eric Ames, for example, has shown how early comparative musicologists made frequent appeals to anatomical metaphors in their study of Western and non-Western musics through recording technology.<sup>11</sup> Ames has suggested, rightly, that "phonography could be imagined and employed as a discursive technique for rendering evolution audible — a technique, that is, for dissecting 'primitive' songs and rebuilding them into evolutionary narratives."<sup>12</sup> My interest here, however, focuses not on the dissection of songs via technologies of reproduction but rather on the dismembering and physical observation of bodies and on what those bodies could reveal about vocal development, performance, and human meaning-making practices. In this way, my argument builds on Jonathan Sterne's discussion of auscultation and the history of the medical listening in the early nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> As Sterne notes of early modern medicine, listening became "a privileged technique of empirical examination" as the body's sounds revealed the physical condition of the patient. The voice, in particular, could reveal a patient's "interior physical condition" by listening attentively to voice's "acoustic states."<sup>14</sup>

Comparative vocal science, like phonography and auscultation, provided scholars with a static form of ephemeral evidence that afforded the opportunity for deeper and supposedly more accurate analysis. In other words, the singing voice became a sonic artifact — a scientific object of study the function and analysis of which could be measured precisely so as to ascertain its

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<sup>11</sup> See Eric Ames, "The Sound of Evolution," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 2 (2003): 297-325. For a reading of how early sound recording technology disrupted historical understandings of a real (i.e., performed) and ideal (i.e., abstracted) musical works, understandings which were often mapped directly onto non-Western and Western musics, respectively, see Alexander Rehding, "Wax Cylinder Revolutions," *The Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2005): 123-160.

<sup>12</sup> Ames, "Sound of Evolution," 299.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 99-136.

<sup>14</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 124

racial and artistic value. Observations by physicians such as Rumbold made use of recent anthropological and racial theories concerning human biological development that had in recent history fundamentally restructured the relationship between the body and the voice. Borrowing the methodologies of comparative physiology, the creation of an empirical science of music confirmed notions of Western musical supremacy by grounding beliefs in aesthetic difference and artistic progress in scientific materialism.<sup>15</sup> For a nascent vocal science, the new forms of knowledge produced by comparative physiology and anthropological theory revolutionized scholarship on voice and singing by aligning these objects of study with contemporary beliefs in science as the gateway to universal truth. At the same time, vocal expression provided a ubiquitous, material example of this new theory of human knowledge.

Why does such an intense interest in the voice, and especially in the voices of non-Western peoples, occur at this moment? This fascination with Others' singing at the turn of the twentieth century accompanied the reorganization of populations, technology, and capital into a global network of trade and migration driven by a renewed desire for imperial expansion by Western nations.<sup>16</sup> The increasing contact between Europe and its colonial subjects that accompanied this expansion rendered the sounds of Others a more ubiquitous presence in Western cities and imperial metropolises that in turn fueled a palpable anxiety over vocal practices. Discussions of non-Western singing practices became increasingly available in European writings and were brought slowly into the regime of European musical analysis. Such discussions appeared in travel journals, newspaper accounts, and in more academic forums:

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<sup>15</sup> Pamela Potter had discussed the connections between anthropometry and *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft's* focus on measurable qualities such as intervals and scales. See Potter, "The concept of race in German musical discourse," in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown, 49-62 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, Second Edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 91-98.

scientific journals, anthropological treatises and monographs, and music magazines.<sup>17</sup> While scholars such as Stumpf, Hornbostel, and Alexander Ellis pointed to rhythm or scale organization as the primary objects of study in this new musical science, vocal quality emerged again and again throughout the same texts as the fundamental marker of difference. Adhering to an evolutionary matrix that placed non-Western and Western musics at opposite ends of a spatiotemporal axis, Western scholars heard non-Western singing as evidence of an ancient soundscape that could be studied in order to trace musical origins and development.

For some writers (including Rumbold), vocal quality revealed and proved simultaneously the physiologically-arrested development of non-Western peoples. In other words, for vocal scientists the vocal apparatus must differ physically among the races with Western Europeans supposedly possessing lungs, larynges, and nasal cavities of the highest physical form. These assumed evolutionary advantages allowed Europeans to speak and to sing with clear, ringing voices. The study of voice and song thus took on a specifically anthropological dimension over the course of the nineteenth century as scientists, philosophers, and music critics attempted to objectify the study of music's origins, development, and societal function through a focus on the physical body of a singer. Such theories it should be noted, though popular for a time, were dismissed by later scientists as the empirical evidence gathered through comparative physiology failed to support such claims.<sup>18</sup> Instead, vocal quality became increasingly defined simply as a sonic index of a singer's, a society's, and, ultimately, a race's cultural progress. But from roughly the 1850s through the 1870s, the period under consideration in this chapter, physical

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<sup>17</sup> Zon, *Representing Non-Western Music*, 78.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lennox Browne and Emil Behnke, *Voice, Song, and Speech: A Practical Guide for Singers and Speakers; from the Combined View of Vocal Surgeon and Voice Trainer* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1887).

anthropology's theories of normative physiological evolution held sway when it came to vocal audition.

To fully comprehend the implications of this vocal science, we need to pursue a thorough vetting of the ideologies that have shaped our understandings of voice production and of the values that have been embodied through vocal performance. How were bodies "recruited to testify against themselves," to borrow race and gender historian Sarah Chinn's phrase, through their vocal sound?<sup>19</sup> How, for instance, did the knowledge produced through vocal dissection and vivisection (on deceased and live bodies, respectively) affect nineteenth-century scholars' perception of vocal production and practice? What did the often violent unveiling of larynxes and vocal folds reveal about the voice as an evolutionary phenomenon? In this chapter, I examine the role played by scientific investigations of vocal physiology in anthropological literature in order to uncover the centrality of this research in developing theories of racial difference. Scientists working within this nascent vocal science sought to discover the supposedly universal truths of vocal emission, which they could then employ as evidence for theories of human evolution. In exploring this history of vocal science, I intend for this chapter to set up the underlying tension explored throughout this dissertation between theories of anatomical determinism and the voice's malleability as performed by individual artists.

I focus on the writings of three key theorists of vocal science whose ideas helped shaped scientific and popular understandings of the relationship between the body, race, and vocal performance. First, I examine the teachings of Manuel García II and his invention of the

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah Chinn, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence* (London: Continuum, 2007), 7. For Chinn, nineteenth-century bodies were broken down through racial science into their constituent parts, a process that "de- and hypercorporealized" subjects, i.e., physicians fetishized individual features at the expense of seeing the body as an "integrated whole" (18-19).

laryngoscope in 1854. As a performer, instructor, and member of the *Académie des sciences* in Paris, García inaugurated modern vocal science and training, thus placing vocal instruction under the scope, so to speak, of the medical professional. Next, I consider the writings of the French physician and singer Louis-Auguste Segond. A student of García, Segond extended his mentor's vocal philosophies from a concentration on the individual performer to the nation as a whole. I read Segond's work alongside the reports on vocal physiology produced by members of the *Académie*. In the last section, I focus on Sir George Duncan Gibb, a British anthropologist affiliated with the Anthropological Society of London, whose writings on the physical evolution of vocal anatomy most directly tied racial science to vocal emission. Gibb's work was widely circulated in scientific and popular presses, eventually making its way into some of the most foundational texts of evolutionary and anthropological theory of the late nineteenth century.

### **The Beginnings of Modern Vocal Science**

The operatic voice, as Gary Tomlinson has argued, "has supplied for the elite societies of early modern and modern Europe a potent experience of a metaphysics as well as of a physics, of an immaterial as well as of a material world."<sup>20</sup> Operatic singing, and song more generally, is conceived of here by Tomlinson as a bridge between the quotidian and the imagined, between our everyday enunciations and a sense of what lies beyond the scope of human knowledge and understanding. In other words, voices raised in song render audible a sense of Self and of the Self's place in the world. For Tomlinson song has, since the early modern era, been one of the most central markers of difference between Self and Other in terms of demarcating racial and

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

cultural difference between the Western and non-Western worlds.<sup>21</sup> While this "metaphysical song," to borrow Tomlinson's apt phrase, provided new ways of thinking about modern Europe's place in the world, it also gave rise to a new fascination with the voice as a bodily manifestation. For physicians, philosophers, and music scholars pursuing work on the voice in the mid- to late-nineteenth centuries, the voice bridged the material and the immaterial, the physical and the metaphysical. The new vocalizations resonating throughout European urban centers and colonial outposts raised the critical question of just how these powerful sounds were being produced. How was it that an ordinary, physical phenomenon such as singing could suggest pathways to "supersensible realities," as Tomlinson puts it?

That a scientific interest in vocal production would accompany the large-scale, global transformations of the late nineteenth century should come as little surprise. Indeed, throughout modernity aesthetic shifts in singing have prompted intense scientific scrutiny on the physiological processes of vocality. With the development of each new vocal style, scholars sought to explain the 'mystery' of how the voice produced these new sounds — a mystery, because the voice's mechanisms were concealed behind skin, cartilage, and muscle. While the history of physiological examinations of vocal production dates back at least to the Greek philosopher Galen's dissections of the larynx in the second century CE, it was not until the turn of the seventeenth century that extensive studies of the vocal tract were published. In a confluence of events that can be no coincidence, four Italian physicians conducted anatomical studies of the voice around 1600, just as opera was coalescing into a formal genre. Two of these physicians, Hieronymus Fabricius (1537-1619) and Julius Casserius (1545-1616) conducted

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<sup>21</sup> Tomlinson has explored these themes more thoroughly in *The Singing of the New World: Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

extensive studies of the larynx in order to understand more fully where the voice originated within the body and the general process of vocalization.<sup>22</sup> Just at the moment when the voice began to escape rationalization through operatic performance, physicians and others interested in vocal physiology attempted to wrestle the voice back into its fleshy origins.

We can think of this modern interest in the voice's corporeal origins as a medical form of what Michel Chion calls disacousmatization — the act of (re)tying the voice to its source, here taken as the physical body.<sup>23</sup> In Mladen Dolar's reading of Chion from *A Voice and Nothing More*, disacousmatization always fails to reveal the voice's true origin, not because the source remains unknown but, quoting Dolar, "rather, [the voice] appears in the void from which it is supposed to stem but which it does not fit, an effect without a proper cause."<sup>24</sup> Physiologically speaking, the voice long presented an enigma for scientists: while the voice's physiology was known, the function of each anatomical component (the larynx, glottis, pharynx, and so forth) during emission remained a mystery. Somehow the voice was produced within a "void" (here, literally figured as the glottis), but the mechanics remained concealed. The medicalization of the voice that took place beginning in the seventeenth century and continuing through the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, the period under consideration here, attempted to account for the voice's excess, its "surplus of the body" (to quote Dolar, again), by binding the metaphysical miraculousness of the voice to the biological body.<sup>25</sup> Science, it was hoped, would provide rational, material explanations for the voice's "effects," i.e., its metaphysical abilities and powers. At this same moment, bodies themselves were being reconfigured around new theories

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<sup>22</sup> Philip A. Duey, *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age: A Study of Its Teaching Concepts* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980 [1951]), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 70.

<sup>25</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 71.

of racial science that sought rational explanations for human variation. This confluence of vocal and racial science would produce normative theories of racial and vocal evolution that would connect the vocal excesses heard throughout modern Europe — the exotic timbres and vigorous displays of range and volume commonly associated with the proletariat and the colonized — to the supposed corporeal excesses explained by evolutionary theory.

These questions of vocal physiology continued to be addressed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with increasing attention given to the minute details involved in producing a superior tone with the Western art tradition. In 1741, Antoine Ferrein (a contemporary of the castrati Senesino and Farinelli) published the first comprehensive treatise on vocal anatomy, providing a more complete picture of the vocal tract.<sup>26</sup> Like his predecessors, Ferrein worked exclusively with the cadavers of humans and animals, and as such could only hypothesize about the actual physiological process of singing during the act of vocal emission. Ferrein christened the lips of the glottis the *cordes vocals* and theorized correctly that these membranes vibrated like strings during phonation. In his work, Ferrein posited that the folds alone were crucial for producing beautiful singing, defined at the time as a light, flexible tone inspired by the golden age of castrato singing. Of what he deemed untrained voices, meanwhile, he wrote, “street singers in Paris and choral singers in the provinces produce their tone not only by means of the invisible cords, but — as can be observed externally by their necks — also by

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<sup>26</sup> Ferrein’s life (1693-1769) and writings were contemporaneous with the golden age of castrato singing. As Bonnie Gordon notes, seventeenth-century auditors “experienced the castrato as a kind of human machine, a variation among other wondrous objects created by technological attempts to manipulate and supplement natural materials.” See Bonnie Gordon, “The Castrato Meets the Cyborg,” *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2011): 95. Here, again, we see how physiological interest parallels developments in singing styles.

use of the other parts of the larynx."<sup>27</sup> While limited to external observation, an issue that would be solved roughly one hundred years later, Ferrein's analysis is striking for how he links beautiful singing to specific physiological movements. Here, the careful manipulation of the vocal folds are responsible for beautiful tones, while movement by any other part of the larynx explains the uncultivated sound of street singers and other untrained vocalists.

The case of Gilbert-Louis Duprez in the early nineteenth century provides the best example of how the material power of singing prompted intense scrutiny of vocal production. Duprez is most commonly (though probably inaccurately) remembered today as the first tenor to perform a chest-voice high C, which he accomplished while performing as Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* at the Paris Opéra in 1837. Two French physiologists, Charles-Paul Diday and Joseph Pétrequin, determined to solve the mystery of this new expression of male vocal prowess, attended several performances in order to explain how Duprez was producing this sound. In his study of Duprez's reception and the physiological explanations given for the singers' vocal abilities, Gregory Bloch has called this new sound a "pathological voice": Duprez's commanding vocality challenged prevailing understandings of vocal production for scientists and that was, for the elite music audience, "a practice deleterious to art and dangerous for singers [that] must be contained, managed, kept under control."<sup>28</sup> This powerful, unruly voice threatened traditional singing practices on several levels. First, Duprez's inauguration of the *tenore di forza* disrupted, seemingly overnight, the preference for the light, flexible tenor singers of the *bel canto* tradition that had dominated opera since its inception. Second, while composers continued to write for and

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Michael Chanan, *Musica Practica: the Social practice of Western music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism*, (New York: Verso, 1994), 191; his translation.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory W. Bloch, "The Pathological Voice of Gilbert-Louis Duprez," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 15. As Bloch notes, Duprez was most likely not the first tenor to perform this feat, yet it was his performance that caught the attention of scientists and instigated the call for increased attention to the physiology of voice production.

to prefer this sound, audiences were enthralled by Duprez's performance and their demand for this new sound eventually led to its regular inclusion on the operatic stage. Finally this new, robust sound challenged the notion of a natural link between voice and body; in other words, the voice's range, power, and timbre were not dependent exclusively on vocal physiology but were instead aesthetic decisions and the result of a particular synchronization of the vocal tract. Yet Diday and Petrequin's exploration of this new sound attempted to reconcile this reordering of body and voice by arguing for its basis in scientific rationale, thereby naturalizing this seemingly abnormal sound.

It was into this debate that Manuel Patricio Rodríguez García entered upon taking up his physiological study of the voice. Perhaps better known today as the inventor of the laryngoscope (1854), García was one of the foremost vocal instructors of his time, and he was the first vocal pedagogue to utilize physiological study in his pedagogical methods. García was born 17 March 1805 in Zafra, Spain, to a highly musical family.<sup>29</sup> His father, Manuel Vicente del Popolo García, was a vocal instructor, composer, and tenor best known for his performances as Otello and Don Giovanni.<sup>30</sup> García's sisters were the celebrated vocalists Maria Malibran (*nee* Felicita and García II's first student) and Pauline Viardot (*nee* Michelle Ferdinande Pauline). The younger García, a baritone, debuted as Figaro in *The Barber of Seville* in 1825 as part of a family tour to the United States. After suffering damage to his voice while attempting to perform his father's tenor roles, García returned to France to continue his vocal studies. His short career culminated in an unsuccessful debut in Paris as Figaro, and he retired from singing in 1829 in order to

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<sup>29</sup> M. Sterling Mackinlay, *García: The Centenarian and His Times* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 13.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the elder García's life, see James Radomski, *Manuel García (1775-1832): Chronicle of the Life of a bel canto Tenor at the Dawn of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

concentrate on teaching.<sup>31</sup> The following year, García joined the French army and took part in the expedition against Algiers in North Africa. At this time, most French military physicians received their training at the *Ecole de Médecine*, which was closely connected in membership and ideology with the *Société d'anthropologie de Paris* and the *Société Ethnologique de Paris*.<sup>32</sup> After training at the *Ecole*, physicians were expected to administer to the health of French troops as well as to conduct research and examinations on the local populace of Egypt and Algiers.<sup>33</sup> Upon his return to Paris, García began his in-depth studies of vocal physiology at military hospitals.<sup>34</sup>

García presented his initial findings on vocal production in a paper titled *Mémoire sur la voix humaine* to the *Académie des sciences* in November 1840, which was reported on in the academy's journal the following year.<sup>35</sup> In this initial study, García introduced his theory regarding the use of the *timbre clair* (or *voix blanche*, the traditional, light operatic timbre) and the *timbre sombre* (Duprez's darker, more powerful timbre) in the chest voice and the falsetto. García's findings departed drastically from the paper presented several months earlier by Diday and Petrequin, who believed that the *timbre sombre* could only be used with the chest voice. García focused primarily on the position of the larynx, noting how little it moved when utilizing

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<sup>31</sup> Mackinlay, *García*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> John P. Jackson, Jr., and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> See Patricia M. E. Lorcin, "Imperialism, Colonial Identity, and Race in Algeria, 1830-1870," in *Science, race, and ethnicity: readings from Isis and Osiris*, ed. John P. Jackson, 379-405 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Mackinlay, *García*, 98-99.

<sup>35</sup> "Physiologie. — Description des produits du phonateur humain; par M. M. García," *Compte Rendu des Séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 11, no. 20 (1840): 815-816; "Physiologie. — Rapport sur le Mémoire sur la voix humaine, présenté à l'Académie des Sciences; par M. Manuel García," *Compte Rendu des Séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 12, no. 15 (1841): 638-644 (hereafter, *Rapport*). A translation of the report on García's presentation is included in Manuel García, *A Complete Treatise on the Art of Singing: Part One*, edited and translated by Donald V. Paschke (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984). Hereafter, García, *Treatise*.

the *timbre sombre* as opposed to the *timbre clair*.<sup>36</sup> Where Diday and Petrequin relied exclusively on observing Duprez from a distance, García proved his findings by having vocalists perform the same note using both timbral methods and observing the relative position of the larynx by following its movement with a finger placed against the singer's throat.

García's brief overview of vocal physiology became the foundation for the first volume of his *Traité complet sur l'Art du Chant* (hereafter, *Traité*) published in 1841. In his treatise, García provided a general overview of vocal physiology and explained the function of each anatomical component. He also warned against excessive loudness and screaming, as the human voice was the “most delicate and the most fragile” of the organs.<sup>37</sup> Most important to developing a beautiful voice, however, was a musical *élan* and a firm physical disposition. As García wrote, “[w]ith respect to the physical condition, we place in the first rank the voice, which should be fresh, attractive, extensive, and strong; in the second rank the vigor of the constitution, usually matched to the qualities of the organ which we have just indicated.”<sup>38</sup> Beautiful singing was, then, not a result that could be accomplished by just anyone; it was an ideal attainable only to those with the proper physical attributes.

García's instructions for the training of this idealized voice were precise, indicating the exact movement and coordination of each anatomical structure (see Figure 1 for a basic overview of vocal anatomy). For example, García stated that

[t]he purest tone is obtained: (1) by flattening the tongue along its entire length, (2) by slightly raising the velum, (3) by separating the pillars at their base. Then, the opening of the larynx is uncovered, and the pharynx reflects the sonorous

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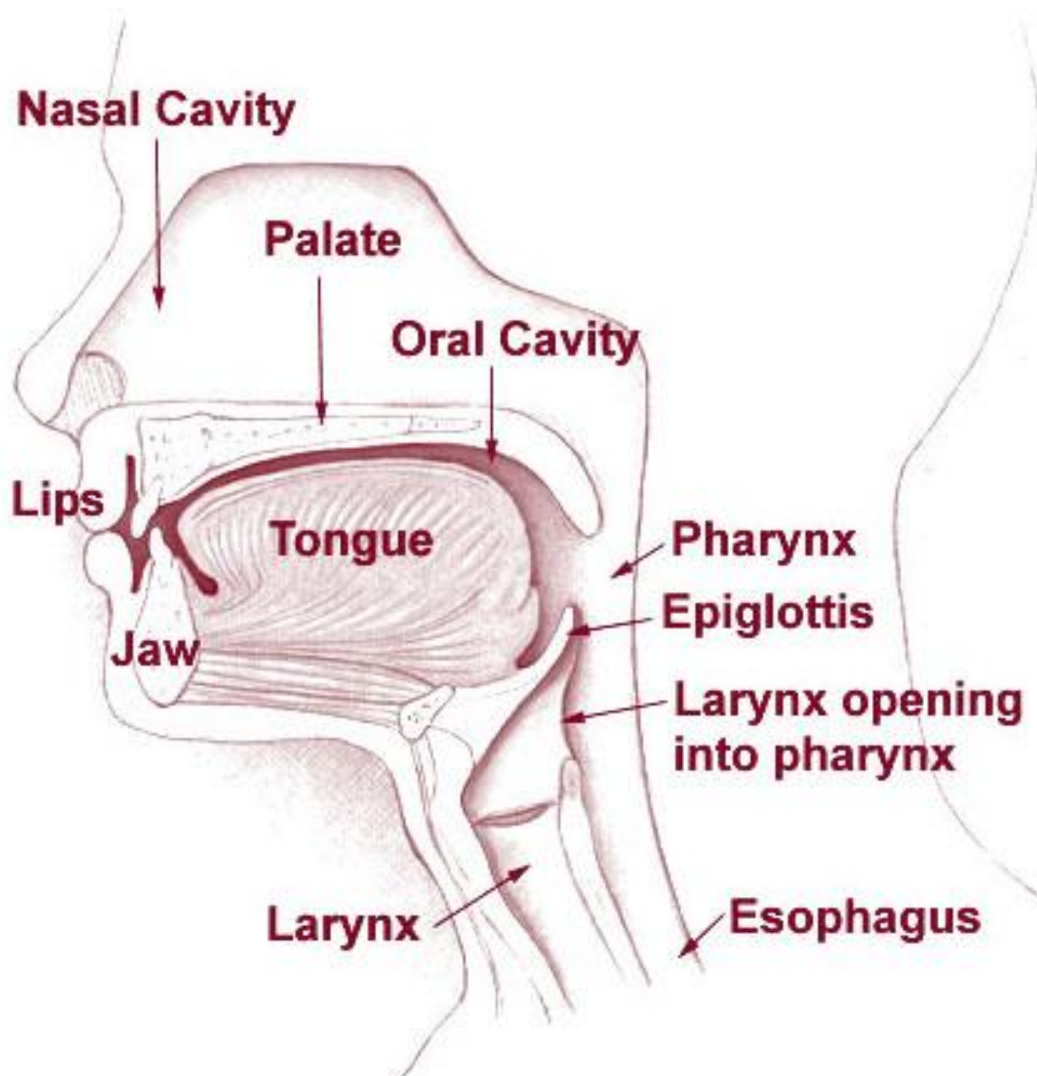
<sup>36</sup> *Rapport*, 642. Generally when singing, as your voice rises in pitch, your larynx rises in your throat. This is the *timbre clair*. It is possible, however, to keep your larynx in a lower position; this is the *timbre sombre* and is what Duprez introduced. The latter allows you to sing in a higher range while utilizing the power of the chest voice.

<sup>37</sup> García, *Treatise*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> García, *Treatise*, 1.

column from the beginning in such a manner as to direct it toward the forward part of the palate. The voice, being reflected again by that part, which is firm and near the opening of the mouth, is emitted with ring [*éclat*] and roundness.<sup>39</sup>

Note the anatomical detail and the physiological and acoustic understanding used to explain voice production in this passage and the coordination necessary on the part of the singer to



**Figure 2.1. Basic vocal anatomy.**<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> García, *Treatise*, 37. James Stark notes that García's belief that the pharynx reflects sound was later proven false; in fact, it dampens low frequencies during vocal emission. See James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>40</sup> From [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d4/Illu01\\_head\\_neck.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d4/Illu01_head_neck.jpg). Last accessed 18 March 2014.

produce a tone "with ring and roundness." García provided similar instructions his edited score of Assur's aria from Morlacchi's *Teobaldo ed Isolina* (See Figures 2.2 and 2.3). For example, on the word *canto*, García instructed the student to sing with "the pharynx contracted" (indicating

Figure 2.2. Assur's aria from *Teobaldo ed Esolina*.

Figure 2.3. Assur's aria from *Teobaldo ed Esolina*.

a mellow timbre), then to switch to an "open timbre" on "*ma allore ra felice*," and ending on a "rapid *appoggiature*" performed with "slightly covered notes" (here, indicating that the pharynx should be slightly closed, directing air away from the nasal cavity).<sup>41</sup> The ability to control carefully one's anatomy, together with maintaining the other "signs by which man indicates

<sup>41</sup> García, *Traité*, Vol. II, 238-239.

emotion" (facial movement, breathing, emotion in the voice, timbre, delivery, intensity, and vocal alterations), was what García referred to as "the most intimate resources of the skill [of singing]," all of which were brought within the fold of vocal science through careful observation and analysis.<sup>42</sup>

García's invention of the laryngoscope in 1854 fundamentally changed vocal science and pedagogy. Finally, observers could actually see the mechanism by which the voice was physiologically produced. His initial device was decidedly simple: it consisted of a long handle upon which were affixed two small mirrors at either end. One end was curved to fit the shape of the oral cavity; the mirror on the other directed light into the throat and onto the larynx. In García's telling words, "This one must turn towards the sun, so that the luminous rays, falling on the small mirror, can be reflected onto the larynx."<sup>43</sup> The straight end of the handle was then placed against a person's pharynx, with the second mirror reflecting back the image of the laryngeal cavity. The "luminous rays" presented García with the first views of the human voice's physiological apparatus in action. I find it particularly fascinating, however, that this first view was not the product of laryngoscopy, but rather of *auto-laryngoscopy*: that the inauguration of vocal science came as the result of self-discovery and self-reflection foreshadowed the ways in which vocal science would be employed later in the century as a means for self-improvement, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

By developing a vocal pedagogy based on new physiological knowledge of voice production, García restructured the relationship between the voice and the body as one based on new truths revealed through the founding of laryngoscopy as a scientific field of study. While

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<sup>42</sup> García, *Traité*, Vol. II, 143.

<sup>43</sup> "Celui-ci doit se tourner vers le soleil, de façon à ce que les rayons lumineux, tombant sur le petit mirror, puissant être reflétés sur le larynx." García, "Observations Physiologiques sur la Voix Humaine," *Proceedings of the Royal Society* 8, no. 13 (1855), 3.

vocal instructors later in the century disagreed over the depth of physiological knowledge with which singers should be acquainted, nearly all voice training texts included a brief overview of vocal anatomy (see chapter 2). García created no less than a typology of vocal production in the *Traité*, providing detailed instructions for articulation, phrasing, singing styles (recitative, florid, declamatory, etc.), blending the registers, breathing, and the coordination of physiognomy with vocal timbre. In establishing this modern vocal science, García conceptualized singing as a professional endeavor that could be directed through vigorous training towards the production of a *bel canto* aesthetic rather than leaving vocal production to the whims of untrained voice instructors. His methodology for training each component of the vocal tract (from breathing, to the emission of the tone in the larynx, to the formation of the timbre in the mouth cavity) required at least a passing knowledge, though preferably more, of vocal physiology for students and teachers alike. While such knowledge of and attention to vocal physiology was not a new development in vocal pedagogy, it was García's use of this knowledge in his teachings and writings that revolutionized the science of voice production.

García's teachings and careful physiological observations laid the foundation for vocal texts and treatises published throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. As the foremost expert in vocal science, García's pedagogies were widely influential, and his advice on technique and hygiene were in constant demand. He was credited, for instance, with saving the voice of Jenny Lind when the soprano began to suffer hoarseness in 1841 from her heavy performance schedule.<sup>44</sup> His list of students is a veritable who's who of mid-century vocalists, several of whom went on to train prominent U.S. singers, including Mathilde Marchesi (mentor to Emma Eames and Suzanne Adams) and Julius Stockhausen (mentor to Robert Blass and Putnam

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<sup>44</sup> Mackinlay, *García*, 139.

Griswold).<sup>45</sup> In keeping with the Italian school preference for agility and lightness of tone, García's methods emphasized the slow development of the voice in order to properly cultivate an agile vocal physiology. He argued, for example, that the beginning voice student should practice for only five minutes at a time, four or five times a day.<sup>46</sup> This focus on flexibility was an obvious component of voice pedagogy, particularly for singers who were called upon to perform in a variety of styles and settings. But when read against grain of contemporary theories of human biological and cultural evolution, the importance of a flexible, properly trained voice begins to mirror the idea of a dynamic Western society that has developed far beyond the vocally static non-Western world. This dichotomy would become more pronounced over the next two decades as new theories of vocal production were presented alongside an increased interest in the sciencing of Western and non-Western musics in scholarly and popular media.

### **Vocal Hygiene and the Health of the State**

Scientific inquiry into vocal mechanics attempted to unravel the uncanny relationship between animated flesh and songful metaphysics by attempting to rationalize this mysterious process while simultaneously modernizing the ability to control and to manage this practice as well as the meanings produced. The control and management of voices became critically important throughout the nineteenth century as awareness of non-Western singing increased throughout Western society. Indeed, the rise of colonial modernity fueled the interest in song and singing mechanics as the voice became increasingly heard as a distinguishing trait of national subjectivity. Non-Western vocalities posed a serious threat to Western vocal ideologies: they

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<sup>45</sup> Macinlay, *García*, 156; Peter G. Davis, *The American Opera Singer: The Lives and Adventures of America's Great Singers in Opera and Concert, from 1825 to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> García, *Treatise*, 9.

suggested a different metaphysics of cantological meaning as well as a different way of inhabiting the body. It is no surprise, then, that the same technologies of vocal science mimicked the intimate surveillance and inspection of non-Western bodies throughout the globe. In this next section, I trace the rise of vocal hygiene and the health of the nation through the writings of scientists associated with the *Académie des sciences* in Paris.

Scientific interest in vocal anatomy and production had long been of interest to the scientific community in France. Albert Cohen in his history of musical research performed by the *Académie des sciences* notes that from its founding in 1666 the *Académie's* members regarded research on music as vital to the institution's mission.<sup>47</sup> While much of the musical research undertaken by scientists at the *Académie*, including the first paper to reference music presented in 1676, focused on the mathematical properties of harmony, a surprising number of investigations attended to issues of auditory perception and vocal production. Indeed, some of the fundamental documents on vocal physiology originated as *Académie*-sponsored research, including the physiologist Denis Dodart's "Mémoire sur les causes de la voix de l'homme, et de ses différens tons" (1700) on the physical qualities of the human voice and their function in the voice's expressive qualities; Ferrein's "De la formation de la voix de l'homme" (1741), which focused on the larynx and vocal cords; and anatomist François-David Hérisant's comparative study of animal, bird, and human vocal physiology, "Recherches sur les organes de la voix des quadrupèdes, et de celles des oiseaux" (1753).

By the nineteenth century, vocal physiology became a common and contested topic in the *Académie*, so much so that a special commission was created in 1837 to oversee research on

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<sup>47</sup> The entirety of this paragraph relies on the work of Cohen. See Albert Cohen, *Music in the French Royal Academy of Sciences: A Study in the Evolution of Musical Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

issues of the voice. Competitions were a common means for accelerating research on topics of general interest at the *Académie*, with committees setting strict time limits and methodological guidelines to be followed by participants.<sup>48</sup> The commission on vocal physiology announced a competition "des expériences acoustiques et physiologiques sur le mécanisme de la production de la voix humaine" ("for acoustic and physiological experiments on the mechanism for the production of the human voice").<sup>49</sup> In 1845, after three unsuccessful attempts at answering the questions regarding voice production, the commission ended the contest, noting that none of the competitors had sufficiently explained the mechanics behind vocal expression. This competition was accompanied by another contest, announced in 1842, requesting research on the comparative physiology of human and mammals.<sup>50</sup> In all, more than ninety reports on the voice were submitted to the academy between 1835 and 1895, including research on artificial means of voice production, vocal maladies, acoustics, and the speech of the hearing impaired.

Louis-Auguste Segond's (1810-1885) research on vocal physiology and voice production was typical of the work being conducted on the voice at the *Académie*. Segond came to renown through his association with Auguste Comte as both a student of the French positivist as well as being his personal physician. Segond also served as librarian for the *Ecole de Médecine de Paris*, secretary of the *Société de Biologie*, and was a member of Comte's informal *Ecole Positive*.<sup>51</sup>

Segond, an accomplished musician, studied singing with Manuel García in order to understand

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<sup>48</sup> Maurice Crosland, *Science Under Control: The French Academy of Sciences, 1795-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>49</sup> Babinet, "Rapport sur le prix relatif au mécanisme de la production de la voix humaine," *Compte Rendu des Séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 20, no. 10 (1845): 603-605.

<sup>50</sup> Duméril, "Rapport sur le prix relatif a la structure comparée des organes de la voix," *Compte Rendu des Séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 20, no. 10 (1845): 605-607.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography, Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 304.

better vocal production from the viewpoint of a performer.<sup>52</sup> He published one monograph on vocal hygiene, titled *Hygiène du chanteur, Influence du chant sur l'économie animale, Causes principales de l'affaiblissement de la voix et du développement de certaines maladies chez les chanteurs; moyens de prévenir ces maladies* (Hygiene for Singers, Influence of Song on the Animal Economy, Principle Causes of the Attenuation of the Voice and of the Development of Certain Diseases in Singers; Means to Prevent these Diseases) in 1846, and his works for the *Académie* were later published as *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire anatomique et physiologique de la phonation* (Memoirs on the Anatomical and Physiological History of Phonation) in 1849. While primarily interested in vocal anatomy and production, Segond also held an interest in cranial science, publishing in 1857 a paper on a more effective method for measuring skulls.<sup>53</sup>

Segond's *Hygiène du Chanteur* covered much of the same territory as García's work, but provided a more detailed analysis of vocal physiology and production.<sup>54</sup> Though ostensibly written for general readership — or, as Segond put it, "men foreign to medicine"— he provided what was surely an overwhelming amount of information for a non-scientific audience, from detailed measurements of the trachea (commonly referred to as the windpipe, i.e., the tube that connects the back of the mouth to the lungs), to the cubic inches of air required to produce a good tone (precisely 167 cubic inches).<sup>55</sup> Segond's comprehensive account of vocal physiology and production granted his theories an air of authority for both vocal pedagogues and members of the scientific community. Throughout the work, Segond utilized historic and contemporary treatises on vocal physiology, including the work of García to whom the book was dedicated, as

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<sup>52</sup> F.J. Fétis, *Biographie universelle des Musiciens et Bibliographie générale de la musique*, Deuxième Édition, Tome Huitième (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot Freres, 1875), 6.

<sup>53</sup> Frank Spencer, ed., *Ecce Homo: An Annotated Bibliographic History of Physical Anthropology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 203.

<sup>54</sup> Louis-Auguste Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur* (Paris: Labé, 1846).

<sup>55</sup> Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur*, 34, 144-145.

well as the literature published by Diday and Petriquin; indeed, entire sections of the text focus on physiological minutiae such as whether the vocal tract functions more like a reed instrument or a flute.

As with García, Segond endeavored to bring vocal practice and care under the purview of the medical professional, but he extended the physician's role from caring for the individual singer to the national body. Segond wrote:

In the grand human family, each member contributes, for his part, to the overall well-being. Health care is the culmination of all individual tendencies. The physician, by the nature of his work, through the extent of his knowledge, contributes the most to the preservation of the people; as such he occupies a premier place in this immense society. Studying the general conditions among which men are placed, he formulates hygienic rules for the masses; and then, examining each person, each state, each place, he protects the individual against the particular influences that may inhibit his preservation. It is he who does the most to maintain well-being; *it is he, therefore, who contributes the most to the progress of nations and to the lofty destiny of governments.*<sup>56</sup>

In order to satisfy such immense responsibilities, Segond believed that physicians should study culture, art, and history in addition to their medical training.<sup>57</sup> Following the positivistic philosophy of his mentor Comte, Segond ascribed to the notion that science, not theology nor philosophy, would explain the natural laws governing humanity's biological and social progress

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<sup>56</sup> "Dans la grande famille humaine, chaque membre concourt, pour sa part, au bien-être général. La santé est le point culminant de toutes les tendances individuelles. Le médecin, par la nature de ses travaux, par l'étendue de ses connaissances, apporte le plus d'éléments à cette conservation des peuples; aussi occupe-il une des premières places dans cette immense société. Etudiant les conditions générales au milieu desquelles les hommes sont placés, il formule des règles d'hygiène pour les masses; examinant ensuite chaque personne, chaque état, chaque lieu, il protège l'individu contre les influences particulières qui peuvent attenter à sa conservation. *C'est lui qui fait le plus pour le maintien du bien-être; c'est lui, par conséquent, qui contribue le plus au progrès des nations et à la haute destinée des gouvernements.*" Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur*, x-xi. Emphasis mine.

<sup>57</sup> Pickering, *Auguste Comte*, 316.

and ultimately provide the means to control humanity's place within the natural world.<sup>58</sup> It was only through careful observation of the masses in their local environments that physicians could become stalwart protectors of modern society and could thus maintain both individual and social health.

It is for this reason that Segond invested considerable time in his text praising the benefits of exercise and hygiene in his vocal treatise. Segond noted that singers were particularly susceptible to injury and that, because of the exertion necessary to produce a beautiful tone capable of filling a large opera house, singers were absolved from any strenuous activity: "Le chanteur, à cause de la grande activité qu'il donne à cet organe, pourrait presque se dispenser de mouvement" ("Singers, because of the great activity that [singing] gives the body, could almost dispense with movement").<sup>59</sup> Singers were to avoid any activity that might cause stress to the lungs, including walking, running, noisy and lively conversations, and reading aloud.<sup>60</sup> They were also to be wary of any sudden changes in temperature; Segond recommended, for instance, that singers wear flannel in order to maintain a consistently warm temperature in the chest.<sup>61</sup> He also advised against the use of astringents for minor ailments ("petites maladies"), though he did prescribe hot water, rum, tea, or coffee for slight coughs.<sup>62</sup>

This emphasis on vocal health and protection against the "particular influences" on singers' well-being resonated, on the one hand, with growing concerns over the harmful consequences of modern, industrial life and, on the other, with French anthropology's heavy reliance on the theory of acclimatization. Michael Osborne defined acclimatization as "a method

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<sup>58</sup> Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 100.

<sup>59</sup> Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur*, 161.

<sup>60</sup> Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur*, 161-162.

<sup>61</sup> Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur*, 168.

<sup>62</sup> Segond, *Hygiène du Chanteur*, 196-197.

and a process whereby humans exploited the forces of nature, under the guidance of the principles of science, to assist plants and animals to adapt to new circumstances."<sup>63</sup> For evolutionary theorists, acclimatization helped explain the physiological differences observed in the world's population, from skin tone to stature to, as we will see, vocal quality. Monique Allewaert, meanwhile, has discussed how the "disaggregation" of the body during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was linked to the movement of Anglo-Europeans into what she terms "plantation zones," those spaces where the "economy and political structures [were] shaped by the plantation form." For Allewaert, "the tropics produced a different materialist tradition in which the body [was] invaded, rendered in parts, and otherwise deranged." Believing the tropical and subtropical regions of the Americas and Africa to be detrimental to Anglo-European health, Western intellectuals became increasingly concerned with how the environment "compromised bodily and metaphysical integrity."<sup>64</sup> If the environment could cause such drastic and sudden effects on the body, then certainly vocal emission (as a product of the body) would likewise be affected by issues of climate.

French scientific theory had a long interest in such ideas; as William B. Cohen has noted, French scientists had long believed in a correspondence between social structure, environment, and human biology.<sup>65</sup> Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, the concept of race and biological studies of racial difference overtook environmental accounts for Africa's differences. With the founding of the *Société d'anthropologie de Paris* in 1859, the focus on physical traits was institutionalized in French racial thinking, with physical difference being equated with moral

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<sup>63</sup> Michael A. Osborne, *Nature, the Exotic, and the Science of French Colonialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 71.

<sup>64</sup> Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 30, 3, 33.

<sup>65</sup> William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), xvii.

and intellectual difference. For both French settlers and military personnel living in the colonies as well as those subjects brought back to France, their new environments, it was assumed, would have immediate physical effects on their mental and physical well-being. Osborne, for example, notes that the mortality rate of French settlers in Algeria was substantially higher than the mortality rate in France, a consequence that French physicians attributed to the warm, humid environment in Algeria that allowed the transmission of viruses and disease to which the French colonists had no resistance.<sup>66</sup> Segond prescribed a regimen of vocal hygiene and carefully monitored exercise in order to protect not just the vocal tract but the entire body from the decaying, degenerative effects of poor training and any "great activity" that might cause an imbalance in physiological function. Vocal care thus provided the body with the means to adapt to this new, modern environment.

Much of the research on vocal physiology undertaken by scientists at the *Académie* was highly experimental, if not outright grotesque. François-Achille Longet, a physiologist known for his research on physiology and nerve function, published in 1841 his findings on the nerves and muscles of the larynx in *Recherches expérimentales sur les Fonctions des Nerfs, des Muscles du Larynx et sur l'Influence du Nerf accessoire de Willis dans la Phonation* (Experimental research on the functions of the nerves, the muscles of the larynx, and the influence of the accessory nerves of Willis on phonation).<sup>67</sup> Longet's experiment involved performing a tracheotomy on animal cadavers (dogs, horses and cattle), and then galvanizing (stimulating with electricity) their laryngeal nerves in order to stimulate the muscles of the vocal apparatus. Longet discovered that by applying electricity to the laryngeal nerve before they separated into their internal and

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<sup>66</sup> Osborne, *The French Encounter with Africans*, 93.

<sup>67</sup> François-Achille Longet, *Recherches expérimentales sur les Fonctions des Nerfs, des Muscles du Larynx et sur l'Influence du Nerf accessoire de Willis dans la Phonation* (Paris: Béchét, 1841) <http://books.google.fr/books?id=59NEAAAACAAJ&hl=fr&pg=PA3#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

external branches, that the voice became hoarse. A similar experiment was undertaken by M. Blandet where, rather than galvanizing the laryngeal muscles, he drew a violin bow over the vocal cords in order to determine their pitch, producing "screaming sounds": "When we walk the bow of a violin on the vocal cords exposed by the removal of the top of the larynx, we produce screaming sounds".<sup>68</sup> Blandet then found that a person could still speak with only one vocal cord, but that severing both resulted in a snoring-like sound (*ronchus*); he discovered this by simply blowing air through an excised larynx.

Though diverse in methodologies and focus, the physicians and physical anthropologists working on issues of voice through the auspices of the *Académie* shared a common belief that vocal qualities and afflictions could be ascribed to specific anatomical features, thus rendering simple the complex mechanics of vocal production. Scientists attempted, again and again, to find simple, direct explanations for vocal timbre, pitch, and volume. For Longet, hoarseness of the voice could be explained by the function of the upper laryngeal nerves; Blandet, meanwhile, sought confirmation of his thesis that the vocal cords and larynx were the central factors in determining vocal pitch. These researchers were not entirely wrong in their claims, and their writings advanced what was essentially a nascent field of specialization. It was, rather, the underlying philosophy that strict correspondences between vocal physiology and voice quality that would prove most crucial for later anthropologists seeking to explain the connections between voice and race. We can see in these experiments the first hints for how the voice would become an essential characteristic of racial difference.

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<sup>68</sup> "Quand on promène l'archet d'un violon sur les cordes vocales mises à nu par l'ablation du haut du larynx, on a des sons criards." Blandet, "Du rétablissement de la voix sur les cadavres humains," *Compte Rendu des Séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 23 (1846): 502-503.

## Vocal Evolution

With the institutionalization of anthropology in France (where the *Société d'Anthropologie* was founded in 1859) and Great Britain (home to the Anthropological Society of London beginning in 1863), evolutionary theory and physical anthropology solidified their influence over vocal science and music scholarship, more generally.<sup>69</sup> In France, scholars subjected musical forms to a strict interpretation of the debates within evolutionary theory between polygenists, who believed that races represented separate human species, and monogenists, who regarded all races as having one common ancestor. As Jann Pasler has noted in her study of race, music, and nation in France during the Third Republic, music scholars regularly drew upon evolutionary theory in order to find an essential Frenchness within the diverse communities bounded together within the borders of the nation-state.<sup>70</sup> While all French song collectors assumed a direct connection between region and musical sound, monogenists insisted that the variations captured in transcription provided evidence of the republic's cultural evolution from a single origin into musically diverse communities. Polygenists, on the other hand, sought the "purest" version of a song in order to discover the essential Frenchness of the nation's sound.

While never occupying as central a role in physical anthropology as other comparative anatomical studies, it is remarkable how often authors reference vocal physiology in some of the most foundational documents of this period. The voice resonated throughout this literature as an

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<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth A. Williams, "Anthropological Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Science, race, and ethnicity: readings from Isis and Osiris*, ed. John P. Jackson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 283, and Joy Dorothy Harvey, "Races specified, evolution transformed: the social context of scientific debates originating in the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris, 1859-1902," (PhD diss, Harvard University, 1983), 12-16.

<sup>70</sup> Jann Pasler, "Race and Nation: Musical Acclimatisation and the *cansons populaires* in Third Republic France," in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown, 147-167 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


ever-present, and seemingly self-evident, marker of difference that could testify against the body when other evidence failed to substantiate claims of racial distinction. One of the more remarkable examples appears in the inaugural address to the Anthropological Society of London in 1863, "The Negro's Place in Nature," by the society's co-founder and first President James Hunt.<sup>71</sup> Before forming the Society, Hunt practiced what we would now call speech pathology and authored several books on public speaker and stuttering. His major work, *Manual of the Philosophy of Voice and Speech, Especially in Relation to the English Language and the Art of Public Speaking*, attended to the same ontological concerns over the voice as those pursued by Segond and García but tied these questions regarding the voice's production and meaning more directly to issues of physical anthropology. His text provided an overview of vocal physiology and, as indicated by the work's title, attempted to construct an overarching philosophy of vocal emission based on empirical observation. His theory of language development, for example, rested on the belief that even a child's cry contained semantic meaning, which could be gleaned from interpreting the cries of adults in pain. Here, Hunt referred to the taxonomy of human cries developed by Colombat, who attempted to connect the specific tones of vocal exclamations to

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<sup>71</sup> James Hunt, *The Negro's Place in Nature: A Paper Read Before the London Anthropological Society* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1864), 10. Although the Society was only in existence for eight years before being subsumed by the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1871, its drive to combine racial science with politics greatly impacted public discourse surrounding Great Britain's missionary goals in their colonial holdings. Hunt formed the Society after disagreements with members of the Ethnological Society of London over how to visually represent Africans in that society's publications. Hunt, ever committed to notions of essential racial difference, felt that the engravings published by the Ethnological Society displayed Africans as too similar in features to Europeans. See Ronald Rainger, "Race, Politics, and Science: The Anthropological Society of London in the 1860s," *Victorian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1978): 51-70 for Hunt's biography and a history of the Anthropological Society.

emotional or affective states including, oddly, "the cry caused by the application of the actual cautery, or from burning" (Fig. 2.4).<sup>72</sup>

*Colombat's Notation of Various Cries.*



No. 1. Expresses the cry caused by the application of the actual cautery, or from burning.  
 No. 2. The cry from the application of the knife in surgical operations.  
 No. 3. The cry proceeding from violent emotion.  
 No. 4. The cry caused by sudden danger.  
 No. 5. The cry in parturition.  
 No. 6. The cry of joy.

**Figure 2.4.** From Hunt's *Manual of the Philosophy of Voice and Speech* (1859)

Throughout the *Manual*, Hunt relied on such strict applications of physical anthropology's methodologies and insights in order to argue for "natural" vocal performances.<sup>73</sup> For example, Hunt provided data regarding the average weight of the lungs and average length of

<sup>72</sup> James Hunt, *Manual of the Philosophy of Voice and Speech, Especially in Relation to the English Language and the Art of Public Speaking* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, Paternoster Row, 1859), 127.

<sup>73</sup> Hunt also included in this text a chapter titled, "Ventriloquism and Speaking Machines," which covered such vocal contraptions as *die Sprech-Maschine* (the Speaking-Machine), constructed by Wolfgang von Kempelen. As Mladen Dolar notes, the machine's "main attraction was the enigma of how something so utterly non-human could produce human effects." See Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*, 9. We might read Hunt's inclusion of Kempelen's Speaking-Machine as a nod to science's ability to construct a scientifically-pure voice, one devoid of human imperfections that could be studied repeatedly, whereas extensive physical examinations of living human subjects proved difficult considering the invasiveness of laryngoscopy.

the vocal folds for women, men, and children. He noted a direct correlation between height and lung capacity in men, and went so far as to suggest that lung capacity could be estimated by simply measuring a person's height.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, men's vocal folds were found to be generally one-and-a-half times larger than women's. Average-sized vocal folds, Hunt concluded, provided the most elasticity, as folds that were too short or too long were unable to produce properly low and high tones, respectively. For this reason, Hunt considered the baritone voice the "normal male voice" and for women, the mezzo-soprano, as these voices were "generally distinguished by greater compass, metal, and flexibility." With regard to resonance, a clear, rotund sound was produced by "the state and size of the ventricles of the larynx, the fauces, the oral and nasal cavities, and the development of the frontal sinuses." Such voices, in Hunt's estimation, were the sole province of evolutionary law. In a passage similar to that produced by Rumbold nearly two decades later, Hunt reported that, "Professor Owen is of opinion that the want of resonance, for which the voice of the Australians is remarkable, is probably owing to the fact that the frontal sinus is not fully developed in that race."<sup>75</sup>

Hunt, a committed polygenist, announced the Society's formation with an overview of the supposed anatomical and physiological differences found between Negroes and Europeans in "The Negro's Place in Nature." Here, Hunt proceeded through the usual litany of anthropometric evidence: skull size, shape of the pelvis, bone structure, length and composition of hair, and so forth. Throughout, Hunt dismissed evidence of anatomical similarities except to argue that "the brain of the Negro bears a great resemblance to a European woman or child's brain."<sup>76</sup> His remarks on the voice appeared last in the section on anatomical differences and followed much

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<sup>74</sup> Hunt, *Manual of the Philosophy of Voice and Speech*, 24-25.

<sup>75</sup> Hunt, *Manual of the Philosophy of Voice and Speech*, 108-110.

<sup>76</sup> Hunt, *The Negro's Place in Nature*, 10.

the same pattern as his earlier comparisons: "The larynx in the Negro is not much developed, and the voice resembles sometimes the alto of an eunuch. In the male the voice is low and hoarse, and in the female it is acute and shrieking."

Yet the voice, more so than any other physiological feature, exposed the supposed differences between European and African races. Hunt continued:

There is a peculiarity in the Negro voice by which he can always be distinguished. This peculiarity is so great that we can frequently discover traces of Negro blood when the eye is unable to detect it. No amount of education or time is likely ever to enable the Negro to speak the English language without this twang. Even his great faculty of imitation will not enable him to do this.<sup>77</sup>

Blood in modern European societies, according to anthropologist Uli Linke, formed the basis for the racialization of the body through its significance "as bodily discharge and as internal flow."<sup>78</sup>

It was the internal flow and hereditary passing on of blood (and hence, physical characteristics) that tied together race and nation. Yet blood also carried and transmitted disease, thus rendering the body vulnerable to external sources of contagion. The mixing of blood, especially through miscegenation in Hunt's view, obscured visual and mental evidence of racial difference; elsewhere in his address, Hunt remarked that the "advances" seen in African populations was not caused by education but rather by the "European blood in their veins" (28). Visual evidence thus proved unreliable as physical differences could be softened through racial intermarriage. The voice, however, could not lie: upending modernity's supposed ocularcentrism, Hunt suggested

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<sup>77</sup> Hunt, *The Negro's Place in Nature*, 10-11.

<sup>78</sup> Uli Linke, *Blood and Nation: The European Aesthetics of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), vii. See also George W. Stocking, Jr., "The Turn-of-the-Century Concept of Race," *Modernism/Modernity* 1, no. 1 (1994): 4-16.

that the auditory evidence heard in the voice testified accurately of the "internal flow" of blood's racial truths.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps even more remarkable than Hunt's report was how a single paper on the comparative anatomy of the voice authored by a relatively unknown Canadian-born anthropologist managed to circulate so widely and to become an accepted part of the racial science literature. Sir George Duncan Gibb (1821-1876), in a series of papers delivered to the Anthropological Society of London between 1863 and 1870, built on the work of García, Segond, and others and offered the most detailed analysis of non-Western vocal anatomy.<sup>80</sup> A member of the Royal College of Physicians of London, Gibb specialized in diseases of the throat and was responsible for translating Czermak's (the famous Austrian-German physiologist) work on the laryngoscope into English. Towards the end of his life, Gibb became increasingly involved in matters of anthropology and an outspoken proponent of evolutionary theory.<sup>81</sup> Gibb was no stranger to vocal science, having authored multiple books including practical treatises on the use of the laryngoscope and texts on diseases of the throat. Later in his life, Gibb pursued

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<sup>79</sup> I am not attempting to propose here a "countermonology" of listening against modernity's long focus on visibility, as Veit Erlmann warned us against nearly a decade ago. See Veit Erlmann, "But What of the Ethnographic Ear? Anthropology, Sound, and the Senses," in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann, 1-20 (Oxford: Berg, 2004). However, there is something about the cultural construction of the voice — its perceived naturalness, its supposed articulation of the corporeal body — that has historically rendered as given its ability to auralize racial difference.

<sup>80</sup> Gibb directly acknowledged his debt to García II in a paper given to the Musical Society of London in 1863. See Charles John Plumptre, *King's College Lectures on Elocution; or, The Physiology and Culture of Voice and Speech, and the Expression of the Emotions by Language, Countenance, and Gesture*, Fifth edition, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., Ltd., 1895), 49.

<sup>81</sup> "Obituary: Sir George Duncan Gibb, Bart., M.A., M.D., M.R.C.P., L.R.C.S.I., F.G.S., Hon. LL.D.," *The Medical Times and Gazette: A Journal of Medical Science, Literature, Criticism, and News* 1 (1876): 295.

research on such varied topics as pottery among the indigenous peoples of Canada and the physiology of centenarians.

In 1869, Gibb read his report, "On the Character of the Voice in the Nations of Asia and Africa, Contrasted with That in the Nations of Europe," before the Society.<sup>82</sup> Combining his own examinations of vocal physiology performed in London with travelers' accounts on the speech and song of non-Western peoples, Gibb argued that one could gauge both the physical and mental evolution of the races by listening to the sound of their voices, a project, he noted, that had "never been attempted."<sup>83</sup> Gibb's research covered a broad geographic area: China, Japan, Central Asia ("Tartary" in Gibb's report), Tibet, Mongolia, India, Myanmar ("Burma"), central and western Africa, Italy, France, Germany, and Great Britain. He focused especially on two anatomical features: laryngeal length and the drooping, what he terms the "pendency," of the epiglottis (the epiglottis is a flap of tissue located at the base of the tongue and protects food from entering the trachea, or windpipe, when swallowing). Pendency caused, in Gibb's findings, "in some females, inability to produce the higher notes, and in others the power and compass of the voice were weakened."<sup>84</sup> This paper built upon earlier research on the epiglottis reported on by Gibb the previous year, where he found that pendency of the epiglottis occurred much more frequently in peoples of African and "Asiatic" descent.<sup>85</sup>

Gibb constructed a strict homology between laryngeal size, epiglottic pendency, and vocal quality, where a shorter larynx and more pronounced bending of the epiglottis produced a

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<sup>82</sup> Sir George Duncan Gibb, "The Character of the Voice in Nations of Asia and Africa, Contrasted with that of the Nations of Europe," *Memoirs Read Before the Anthropological Society of London* (London: T. Richards, 1870), 244-259. Hereafter, "Character of the Voice."

<sup>83</sup> Gibb, "Character of the Voice," 244.

<sup>84</sup> Gibb, "[Comments on]: Vocal and Other Influences upon Mankind from Pendency of the Epiglottis," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 6 (1868): c-cv. Hereafter, "Pendency."

<sup>85</sup> Gibb, "Pendency."

quieter, weaker tone. Gibb's work thus participated in what Alexander Butchart terms the "deep gaze" of scientific approaches to the body in the nineteenth century that "analysed internal structure and its relationship to function."<sup>86</sup> It is worth quoting Gibb's discussion of Japanese and Chinese voices at length in order to appreciate fully his scientific method and the way in which theories of racial evolution were brought to bear on vocal audition:

Their soft and quiet manner of speaking, which at times possesses a sort of metallic twang, not unlike that of their Mongol progenitors, may be due to the peculiar guttural character of their language, in which vowel sounds appear so largely to predominate. Or, again, it may depend upon a shallow formation of the larynx, approaching to that in the female sex, wherein its depth, or profundity — starting from the point of the pomum Adami [Adam's apple], backwards to the thick portion of the ring of the cricoid cartilage — is less than is met with in the Tartar tribes or in Europeans. Or, thirdly, it may depend upon habitual pendency of the epiglottis or cartilage, that forms the protector of the larynx in the act of swallowing. Upon a very careful consideration of the subject, together with personal observation, it seems to me that in both the Chinese and Japanese, but especially in the former, all three causes exert a more or less modifying effect, but that producing the greatest influence is the last, — pendency of the epiglottis.<sup>87</sup>

Gibb continued this line of analysis, noting that while one may hear "good and powerful" voices among the Chinese and Japanese, their voices tended towards the tenor range due to their "vocal cords [which] are necessarily short"; yet their vocal compass could not compare to the powerful voices possessed by the "Tartars and Mongols," due to the "physical weakness pervading nearly the entire race."<sup>88</sup>

There is much to unpack here. First, Gibb drew on the theory of hereditary evolution to argue that the Japanese and Chinese "metallic twang" originated with their "Mongol progenitors" and thus provided sonic evidence of their evolutionary pass; their twang was, to use Hunt's language, in the "blood." Yet the "peculiar guttural character of their language" shaped as it was

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<sup>86</sup> Alexander Butchart, *The Anatomy of Power: European Constructions of the African Body* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 16.

<sup>87</sup> Gibb, "Character of the Voice," 245-246.

<sup>88</sup> Gibb, "Character of the Voice," 246.

by the prevalence of vowels had rendered their voices more subdued when compared to their evolutionary forbearers. His theory was consistent with a resurgence of interest in the Lamarckian theory of acquired characteristics: such physiological comparison had been utilized since the eighteenth century to show how "lesser" peoples had degenerated from more evolved races due to environmental factors.<sup>89</sup> Next, Gibb suggested that this vocal characteristic may relate to a lower positioning of the larynx, "approaching to that in the female sex;" in other words, the Japanese and Chinese male larynx (indicated by the presence of the pomum Adami) was more similar to an European woman's larynx, which, in Gibb's estimation, would explain their weak tone. Finally, while admitting the impact of the first two features, he singled out pendency of the epiglottis, an anatomical peculiarity that he could easily attribute to evolutionary theory. At least, that is, in non-European races. Gibb, in his earlier article on pendency of the glottis, found that 513 out of 4,600 (or 11 percent) Europeans suffered from this deformity. He explained his findings by noting that "[i]n many persons this pendency was found to be hereditary, and in others it was acquired," the latter reasoning he refused for his non-European subjects.<sup>90</sup>

Drawing on the theory of acclimatization, Gibb argued that the "deafening tones" exhibited by the peoples of central Asia was "common to a race of people who almost habitually live in the saddle, and whose incessant activity and constant travelling contribute to render them very vigorous." Their voices did not suffer from epiglottic pendency, according to Gibb, due to the "extreme cold and rigour of the climate," a claim he left unexplained. Indeed, both their

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<sup>89</sup> Bowler, *Evolution*, 87-88. For a discussion of neo-Lamarckianism in the United States, see John S. Haller, Jr., *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 153-202. Also see George W. Stocking, Jr., "Bones, Bodies, Behavior," in *Bones, Bodies, Behavior: Essays on Biological Anthropology*, ed. George W. Stocking, 3-17 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

<sup>90</sup> Gibb, "Pendency," c.

environment and heredity had produced "commanding voices" befitting a mighty people; Gibb wrote, "the Tartars are a strong, vigorous, active, energetic, and powerful race, the worthy descendants of the great Genghis Khan, whose conquests in the thirteenth century struck terror into the surrounding nations."<sup>91</sup>

Though relying primarily on reports by military colleagues for descriptions of the voices heard in India, Burma, and central Asia, Gibb noted his personal observations when discussing the voices of Africans. He wrote that, "Of slaves and free blacks in North America I have had many, indeed I may say abundant opportunities...of studying their peculiarities in regard to voice and speech...My inspection of the interior of the living larynx, however, in the Negro, has been made in this country." This passage is difficult to decipher, and it is unclear if Gibb is saying that he examined the larynges of deceased African peoples while in North America or if he is stating that his only observations of the larynx of African peoples was in Great Britain. Nevertheless, Gibb concluded that the larynx of African peoples was "fairly developed" and that the length of the vocal cords fell somewhere between those of the Chinese and those of Europeans. Yet, he stated that the positioning of the cords was unique to the race: "the plane of the superior surfaces of the vocal cords, instead of being horizontal, slopes from within downwards [and] the epiglottis is, for the most part, pendant and curled under laterally." Such supposed deformities "point to the want of great vocal power, such, for example, as a loud and commanding voice." He admitted later, in a possible allusion to Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (the famous African American soprano who toured Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century), that he had "recently heard of a Negro prima donna, whose voice is said to be a fine soprano."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Gibb, "Character of the Voice," 251-252.

<sup>92</sup> Gibb, "Character of the Voice," 254-256.

For nineteenth-century anthropologists and vocal scientists such as Gibb, European vocal physiology represented the pinnacle of human vocal development. Though the power of voices differed between the nations of Europe (Germans having the loudest, in Gibb's estimation), the European larynx was perfectly sized for producing "strong, powerful, sonorous, and clear voices."<sup>93</sup> Such distinctions were particularly important for producing fine singers as other races, in this estimation, were incapable of producing anything that could be considered music. At the same time, Gibb's description of non-European physiology and vocal expression made clear the connection between body and voice in Western vocal philosophies. Non-European peoples literally sound their bodies ("nasal" here being equally an aesthetic judgment as well as a physiological consequence), while the "clear" voices of Europeans are uninhibited by corporeal matters.

While Gibb's work was ultimately, his theory of a strict homology between laryngeal size and vocal quality had a surprisingly long life in scientific literature. His theories were widely publicized, appearing in medical journals, evolutionary treatises, and music periodicals.<sup>94</sup> The most famous use of his work, however, was by Charles Darwin in *Descent of Man* (1874), where the biologist linked Gibb's theory that male and female voices were more similar in non-Western societies than in European societies to sexual selection, arguing that male animals use the voice under instances of "love, rage, and jealousy" to propagate the species.<sup>95</sup> This use of the voice led Darwin to conclude that heightened uses of voice, specifically singing, were the origins of music in humans, thus linking sexual selection, species propagation, pleasure, and song as necessary

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<sup>93</sup> Gibb, "Character of the Voice," 257.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, "Nationality in Voices," *The Musical World* 46, no. 52 (1868): 877; "Nationality in Voices," *American Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated* 49, no. 6 (1868): 220.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1974 [1874]), 522, 561.

components of evolutionary science. For Paul Topinard, Gibb's analysis of vocal timbre supported his comparative studies of lung capacity and respiration, which formed part of his *L'Anthropologie*, published in 1876.<sup>96</sup> Even as late as 1926, British physician Henry Havelock Ellis relied on Gibb's work for his *Man & Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters* (at the time, the sixth edition of this text), arguing that "the tendency of evolution is in the direction of the enlargement of the larynx and of the deepening of the voice."<sup>97</sup> For Ellis, the vocal differences found between the sexes was a natural consequence of evolution, and "[t]hat the deeper voice of a man, and the gentler but higher-pitched voice in woman, have their effect in heightening the pleasure of the sexes in each other's person is a well recognisable fact."<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

What, then, are the legacies of this vocal science? The attempt by French and British anthropologists to locate specific vocal qualities in the body -- timbre, pitch, hoarseness, etc. -- emerged from an understanding of the corporeal body as having essential qualities, often expressed as essential racial differences. For scientists such as Segond, Gibb, Topinard, and others, the vocal qualities they heard in their subjects were not the consequence of disease or simple human variation but were instead proof of racial difference. Through such research, anthropologists and physicians did not simply implicate speech and song in Western evolutionary thought; singing brought to life evolutionary theory, auralizing a process hitherto studied through the silent objects of scientific inquiry (such as skulls, cadavers, and cultural

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<sup>96</sup> Paul Topinard, *L'Anthropologie* (Paris: C. Reinwald et C, Libraires-Editeurs, 1876), 426-247.

<sup>97</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Man & Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters*. Sixth edition (London: A. & C. Black, 1926), 321.

<sup>98</sup> Ellis, *Man & Woman*, 324.

artifacts) and providing both aural and material evidence for European evolutionary superiority. Non-Western singing, as understood by these scientists, was not simply contemporary evidence of an imagined musical origin; instead, song became heard as the physical expression of a primordial body. The voice thus provided aural evidence for the supposed universal laws of evolutionary progress.

In the United States, researchers rarely sought physiological causes for the voice's racial differences, Rumbold's work notwithstanding. As Krystyn R. Moon has shown, U.S. scholars including Frances Densmore, Alice Fletcher, and John Comfort Fillmore listened primarily for proof of musical evolution in the music and singing of non-Western peoples.<sup>99</sup> There were exceptions, of course. Natalie Curtis, in her introduction to *The Indian's Book*, drew upon neo-Lamarckian theory to argue that "[t]he Indians of the Lakes and Plains whose lives in the old days were exposed to all the severities of weather, and who still sing constantly in the open air and against the wind, have voices more striking for their stirring ring than for actual beauty, as we deem it."<sup>100</sup> Music scholar Louis C. Elson, meanwhile, included a chapter titled "Race Peculiarities in Singing" in his music history text, *The Realm of Music*, where he called for a "musico-medical...study of the effects of character or race upon the human voice."<sup>101</sup> Why, Elson wondered, did the United States tend to produce sopranos, Russia basses, and Spain high tenors? While acknowledging the possible effects of climate and diet on vocal expression, Elson suggested that the ultimate factor in determining timbre and range was "hereditary, rather than of

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<sup>99</sup> Krystyn R. Moon, "The Quest for Music's Origin at the St. Louis World's Fair: Frances Densmore and the Racialization of Music," *American Music* 28, no. 2 (2010): 191-210.

<sup>100</sup> Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book: An offering by the American Indians of Indian Lore, Musical and Narrative, to form a record of the songs and legends of their race* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1968 [1907]), xxvii.

<sup>101</sup> Louis C. Elson, *The Realm of Music: A Series of Musical Essays, Chiefly Historical and Educational*, 10th Edition (Boston: The New England Conservatory of Music, 1910), 272.

climate.”<sup>102</sup> Fascinated by the prospects of what a scientific analysis of singing could reveal regarding the connections between voice and racial heritage, Elson explained the benefits of such investigation as follows:

A classification of the different species of voices, together with the countries and races where they are most generally found, would undoubtedly be a help to the operatic manager, who would then know exactly where to steer his bark to find a *Soprano sfogato*, or a *Basso Profundo*, but it would also be something more serious and valuable than that, and might throw some interesting light on the origin of vocal music.<sup>103</sup>

Elson apparently spent some time pursuing this research agenda. As reported in *The Popular Science Monthly*, Elson wrote an article in which he developed these thoughts, noting the correlations between vocal types and national origin (sopranos from the U.S., basses from Russia, and so forth).<sup>104</sup> Elson dismissed physiological explanations for most “[p]eculiar types of voice,” such as Tyrolean jodling, which could be found in other parts of the world and for which local custom provided a reasonable account. He allowed, however, that anatomical differences could account for African American voices:

The voice of the American negro is distinguishable from that of the white singer, and here, perhaps, anatomy may afford a particular clew, for thick lips and a flat nose must influence the tone production in a certain degree. When these traits are absent, the tone of the colored singer is more akin to the ordinary standard of the singing of other races; and the author speaks of having heard some finely formed male Caffres sing, whose voices were not distinguishable from those of white singers.<sup>105</sup>

By employing evolutionary nomenclature, Elson's call for a physiological study of vocal performance that could reveal evidence of vocal music's origins suggested that only a scientifically-oriented vocal discipline was capable of refashioning vocal practice and performance as a modern endeavor.

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<sup>102</sup> Elson, *The Realm of Music*, 274.

<sup>103</sup> Elson, *The Realm of Music*, 276. Emphasis in original.

<sup>104</sup> "Character and the Voice," *The Popular Science Monthly* 40, no. 49 (1892): 859.

<sup>105</sup> "Character and the Voice," *The Popular Science Monthly*.

More often, Western scientists and vocal instructors heard the vocal differences amongst non-Western peoples as evidence of poor vocal practices and a lack of training or understanding as to what constituted beautiful singing. In the next chapter, I turn to an analysis of vocal pedagogy in the United States at the turn of the century to show how theories of racial difference influenced vocal training the Western art tradition. While few voice instructors based their teachings on the conclusions drawn by scientists such as Gibb of inherent anatomical, they did not abandon an interest in vocal physiology all together. Instead, voice instructors expanded on the work of Garca, Segond, and others to argue that vocal science proved the natural coordination of vocal anatomy. In other words, for vocal pedagogues non-Western peoples did not suffer from differences in laryngeal formation; rather, non-Western singers used their bodies in ways that were counterproductive to forming a clear, sonorous singing voice. Vocal pedagogues utilized the knowledge produced by physical anthropology to devise pedagogical methods that would bring Western singing practices in line with theories of scientific truth regarding vocal production.

## Chapter Three

### Forging a Sound Citizenry: Voice Culture and the Embodiment of the Nation

In nothing do the Americans more generally offend the cultivated ear than in the use of the voice. The high, shrill, nasal tones of American girls or American women; the careless, slovenly enunciation which one hears from a group of American men, would indicate to a foreigner, accustomed to vocal culture, entire absence of any sort of refinement; *for, as a rule, the voice is, more than anything else, the revealer of the presence or absence of culture.*<sup>1</sup>

Writing in 1908, the self-proclaimed "voice master" Richard Cone bemoaned what he heard as the dismal state of his fellow citizens' voices. A voice instructor at the Leland Powers School of the Spoken Word in Boston (one of the nation's leading elocutionary institutions), Cone had labored for years on slowly perfecting a pedagogical method for elocution based on, as he put it, "the fundamental principles of vocal science."<sup>2</sup> This method, Cone believed, would reform the nation's oratorical deficiency through a careful adherence to established vocal conventions confirmed by empirical evidence. In other words, only a modern pedagogy based on scientific principles of vocal mechanics could address the "shrill, nasal tones...of American girls [and] American women" and the "slovenly enunciation of American men." Yet, Cone detested these harsh tones not simply for their inelegance but for what he thought they revealed about the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Richard Wood Cone, *The Speaking Voice: Its Scientific Basis in Music* (Boston: Evans Music Company, 1908), 114 [emphasis mine]. The quote originated in an anonymously written article in *The Outlook* 56(12): 677.

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Cone, "Music of the Speaking Voice," *Proceedings of the National Association of Elocutionists, Fourteenth Annual Meeting* (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1906), 43.

nation's well-being. For Cone, as for many commentators on the voice at the turn of the century, vocal quality disclosed an individual's or a nation's character and provided a metric by which social progress might be judged. Culture was thus more than the Arnoldian notion of socioeconomic supremacy for writers such as Cone; culture was audible and relied just as importantly on how a society's achievements were expressed vocally. In this way, the "shrill" and "slovenly" tones of the nation's citizens rendered aural what Cone and others understood as a symptom emerging from within the national body politic; namely, a lack of refinement and social progress that undermined the nation's emergence as an economic and political world power.

Cone's monograph was part of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century social and artistic movement known as voice culture — an attempt to refine elocutionary and singing practices in order to produce standard vocal expressions representative of the nation's cultural, economic, and political achievements.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I focus on singing instruction and the attempts by voice culture practitioners working in the elite music tradition to establish an ideal singing aesthetic capable of representing the U.S. nation-state. The years between 1880 and 1920 bore witness to a surge of interest in singing mechanics, with over 150 singing treatises published by the nation's leading vocalists, instructors, music critics, and physicians. Voice culture practitioners, while ostensibly concerned with the vocal sound of the body politic as a whole, catered primarily to a burgeoning labor-class of amateur and professional singers seeking success in concert and opera performance. This ambition on the part of would-be professional singers supported an entire industry of private instruction: advertisements for singing instruction, whether by individuals or by musical institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera and the National Conservatory of Music,

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<sup>3</sup> Most often referred to as "voice culture," a few texts used the phrase "vocal culture," instead. For consistency, I will use the former throughout this chapter.

were commonplace in newspapers and periodicals throughout the nation, with teachers promoting their expertise in voice culture, musical expression, and artistic singing.<sup>4</sup> While the majority of the voice culture practitioners I cover in this chapter worked in New York City and were associated with the city's major cultural institutions, it is important to note that voice training manuals and essays on voice culture were published throughout the nation, suggesting that the movement was not simply a local phenomenon but rather a nation-wide endeavor. In addition to the singing manuals that form the primary sources for my analysis, the archival material I employ throughout this chapter includes writings on singing and vocal mechanics from newspapers, music journals, and other periodicals published throughout the nation.

Like Cone, singing instructors worried over the unrefined voices heard on the nation's operatic and concert stage, a situation they blamed on the absence of an indigenous vocal tradition as found in the nations of Italy, France, and Germany. Though they based their preferred vocal aesthetic on the traditions of Western Europe, voice culture practitioners sought a pedagogical foundation unique to the national psyche — one based on empirical fact and scientific observation worthy of this industrializing nation. As one author emphatically noted, "The American mind is not naturally an obedient mind, but an enquiring mind. It is not ready to accept as proof of a fact the mere assertion of that fact. The American pupil is certain to ask 'WHY?' at every turn of the road, and the teacher must be ready with the reason, or fail!"<sup>5</sup> What set apart U.S. methods from those of Western Europe was a common belief shared by instructors that the entire body, not just the vocal apparatus, required training in order to produce a

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<sup>4</sup> For a history of the National Conservatory of Music, see Emanuel Rubin, "Jeannette Meyers Thurber and the National Conservatory of Music," *American Music* 8, no. 3 (1990): 294-325.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Witherspoon, *Singing: A Treatise for Teachers and Students* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1925), 3.

cultivated sound. Vocal physiology fascinated voice culture practitioners and manuals often included anatomical descriptions of the vocal tract, complete with detailed explanations of vocal mechanics, as a supplement to singing exercises. Physicians and doctors regularly participated in voice culture discussions, sometimes authoring texts themselves, and provided the movement with a sense of scientific legitimacy. Drawing on the work of physicians and physical anthropologists, voice culture advocates applied the latest research on vocal physiology in their practices, from experiments purporting to show empirically how to produce the best tone to advice on maintaining a healthy vocal tract.

The use of such knowledge for students was highly debated within the voice culture movement. What was not contested, however, was the idea that only certain singers were capable of producing a beautiful vocal sound, namely, singers of Western European descent who were fully capable of molding their vocal apparatus towards a supposedly superior artistic standard. Yet, the belief that singers could alter the mechanics of their voices exposed the contradiction that lay at the heart of theories regarding vocal production and racial difference. If race was a static characteristic of the body, and voices emerged from such bodies, how, then, could the voice transcend its corporeal origins through practice and performance? The logic of racial theories of vocal production would thus seem to deny the voice a dynamic status, insisting instead upon a direct correlation between vocal physiology and emission. Voice culturists, however, circumvented this logic by drawing upon the notion that whites were fully capable of cultivation and possessed the ability to adapt, change, and evolve, while Others' songs expressed supposedly base emotions. For voice instructors, a beautiful singing voice (as defined by Western musical practices) thus evidenced a singer's ability to control her body and her emotions, while Others' singing sounded the raw passions of their uncivilized state.

Voice culture emerged concomitant with the circulation of bodies, and of knowledge about those bodies, that made possible the U.S.'s transition to a global economic and imperial power. Though unrefined voices could be heard throughout the national populace, authors regularly singled out the voices of African Americans and of the recently-arrived European and Asian immigrant populations as particularly vexing. These Other voices posed for the cultured elite an aural and physical threat to what was perceived as a fragile national culture by transforming urban soundscapes into polyvocal communities beset with racial and cultural tensions. Vocal performance thus became one manifestation of what Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman has called the "sonic color-line," which she defines as the way in which "race is mediated through aural signifiers as well as visual ones."<sup>6</sup> The birth of the popular music industry (driven increasingly by black musical expressions) added to this polyphony and tension through the mechanization and democratization of musical commodities.<sup>7</sup> The voice culture movement responded to such change by delimiting which vocal expressions, and in turn, which bodies, could (and should) sing for the nation.

By focusing on the physical mechanics of vocal production, voice culture provided students with a kinesthetic knowledge of how Western European vocal practices and the embodiment of national subjectivity ought to feel. While promoting a healthy lifestyle and the importance of diligent adherence to their training regimen, instructors emphasized restraint above all else: tightly controlled vibrato, proper decorum, stately bodily comportment, and other genteel bodily practices, all of which were diametrically opposed to the new forms of racial

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "The Word and the Sound: Listening to the Sonic Colour-Line in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*," *SoundEffects: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 1, no. 1 (2011): 21, <http://www.soundeffects.dk/article/view/4169>.

<sup>7</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

embodiment suggested by African American music and the various dance crazes sweeping the nation.<sup>8</sup> Voice culture practices suggested not simply a specific type of vocal performance; instead, vocal training coached students in the embodiment and performance of a specific type of whiteness. Drawing on the work of historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, we can think of the ideal voice imagined by this movement as a racial object born out of the struggles for power to define racial and national belonging.<sup>9</sup> Voice culture, in this sense, served as a means to exercise the power of race in order to forge a sound citizenry.

Beyond a few cursory references in musicological scholarship, the voice culture movement remains an unexplored phenomenon, particularly for the role it played in defining a standard vocal sound in the United States. Several scholars have examined the history of elite vocal training, including Brent Jeffrey Monahan, James Stark, John Potter, and David Mason, and their work has added to our understanding of historical singing practices and how those methods reflected social and aesthetic changes.<sup>10</sup> With regard to music's public utility, Jann Pasler and Derek Vaillant have explored the ways in which governments and civic organizations

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<sup>8</sup> For discussions of early-twentieth century dance and racial embodiment, see Susan C. Cook, "Passionless Dance and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle," in *The Passion of Music and Dance*, ed. William Washabaugh (New York: Berg, 1998), 133-150, and "Watching Our Step: Embodying Research, Telling Stories," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, ed. Elain Barkin and Lydia Hammessley (Zurich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), 177-212.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Brent Jeffrey Monahan, *The Art of Singing: A Compendium of Thoughts on Singing Published Between 1777 and 1927* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), David Mason, "The Teaching (and learning) of Singing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, ed. John Potter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204-220.

have mobilized music in the production and maintenance of the common good, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Pasler's work, in particular, has been crucial for understanding the role of vocal timbre in defining who may become authorized to speak, or sing, for the nation. Most notably, Grant Olwage's essay on British vocal pedagogy in South Africa has helped scholars of the voice understand more thoroughly the connections between vocal timbre, singing pedagogy, and racialized bodies.<sup>12</sup>

The focus on sound's importance to issues of subject formation has become a central issue in musical scholarship over the last decade as scholars of voice and singing in ethnomusicology and anthropology have urged us to listen critically to how the social categories of race, class, sexuality, and gender are performative expressions of human meaning-making rather than essential characteristics of bodies and cultures. To date, most of these studies have focused on how social categories are musically represented, and they have provided us with a richer understanding of how notions of race, gender, sexuality, class, region, and nation become articulated through musical expression. This is important work, and my work is heavily indebted to this scholarship. My argument here, however, seeks to move beyond issues of musical representation and begins, instead, to ask how singing molds and shapes our bodies into subjects that inhabit these ideological categories. How, for instance, does the act of vocal production govern subjectivity, both for the vocalizers and their listeners? By situating the material production of singing in the critical categories of race and nation, we can better understand how seemingly innocuous language such as 'clear,' 'open,' and 'sonorous' describes not merely an

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<sup>11</sup> Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), and Derek Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Grant Olwage, "The Class and Colour of Tone: An Essay on the Social History of Vocal Timbre," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 203-226.

aesthetic ideal, but also charts a particular physiological coordination that embodies notions of racial and national supremacy. Recent scholarship by Nina Sun Eidsheim, Amanda Weidman, and Aaron Fox has begun to consider the ways in which ideology is brought into physical form through vocal performance.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on their work, I focus on how vocal pedagogues formulated a national, idealized singing voice and the intimate ways in which vocal training shaped singers' bodies into model citizens.

### A Vocal Crisis

By the turn of the century, critics of elite music bemoaned the nation's lack of an indigenous vocal school that could consistently produce talented singers and inaugurate a national vocal legacy worthy of its burgeoning global stature. Echoing the epigraph which began this essay, an anonymous writer in the *Milwaukee Journal* noted in 1898 that "It is often said that the American voice is the least musical known to civilization."<sup>14</sup> Frank Miller, the physician for Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House, stated in his voice culture treatise, "The abuse of the vocal organs by the great majority of Americans makes the establishment of a correct method of voice-production in this country all the more desirable."<sup>15</sup> Such vocal abuse was considered true even for those of the higher classes, as the opera-singer-turned-pedagogue Clara Kathleen Rogers (who performed under the stage name Clara Doria) noted in her book on English diction:

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<sup>13</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre," *TRANS-Transcultural Music Review* 13, Article 10 (2009), <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/a57/synthesizing-race-towards-an-analysis-of-the-performativity-of-vocal-timbre>; Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), and Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> "American Voice Needs Training," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 28 May 1898: 4

<sup>15</sup> Frank Miller, *The Voice, Its Production, Care and Preservation* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1910), 10.

"In America, however, we are constantly brought into contact with people who have had advantages of education and whose social status should call for all the outward and visible signs of culture and good breeding, but who nevertheless maltreat the English language in a most painful and deplorable way."<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Rogers described the speech of her fellow citizens as "weak, colorless, and monotonous."<sup>17</sup>

Henry James provided perhaps the most famous critical assessment of the U.S. voice in his work, *The Question of Our Speech*, in 1905. Upon his return to the United States after twenty years living in Europe, James claimed to find a society transformed by the rapid expansion of wealth throughout the nation. Speaking to the 1905 graduating class of Bryn Mawr College, James cautioned the new alumnae, however, that while their formal education may be complete, many had yet to learn how to properly act the part of a learned, cultured elite class. Of utmost concern was the rapid mobility of the nation's elite: though pleased by the expansion of wealth and opportunity to the average citizen, he was troubled by their materialism and their general lack of public decorum. In his commencement speech and elsewhere, James laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of elocutionary training — a seemingly minor subject, but an observation that James would return to frequently in his writings after traveling the country. He wrote,

Of the degree in which a society is civilized the vocal form, the vocal tone, the personal, social accent and sound of its intercourse, have always been held to give a direct reflection. That sound, that vocal form, the touchstone of manners, is the note, the representative note — representative of its having (in our poor, imperfect human degree) achieved civilization. Judged in this light, it must frankly be said, our civilization remains strikingly *unachieved*: the last of American idiosyncrasies, the last by which we can be

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<sup>16</sup> Clara Kathleen Rogers, *English Diction in song and speech: a text book for singers and speakers* (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1912), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Clara Kathleen Rogers, *English Diction. Part I: The Voice in Speech* (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1925), 24.

conceived as 'represented' in the international concert of culture, would be the pretension to a tone-standard, to our wooing comparison with that of other nations.<sup>18</sup>

While he commended recent graduates of Bryn Mawr on their scholarly achievements, James heard in their discourse a troubling symptom of American's cultural shortcomings, namely, an inability to express vocally their social advancement. James focused his critiques on the lack of a national 'tone-standard,' a cultivated vocal quality that could represent the nation's progress and be worthy of European respect. For James, vocal quality sounded a 'direct reflection' of a society's progress, and the harsh, discordant sounds of American speech revealed a nation unprepared for its newly acquired wealth and its attendant global status — this was the speech of the *proletariat* transferred without refinement to *bourgeois* society.

European commentators were especially contemptuous in their assessment of the nation's singing. The German soprano Mathilde Marchesi, for instance, offered in 1901 what was at the time a standard critique of U.S. vocal timbre in her monograph, *Ten Singing Lessons*: "And now I must address to my young readers, and especially those of American birth, a question... Why, oh why, do almost all of them speak through their noses?"<sup>19</sup> At issue was a seeming lack of talented, U.S.-born instructors who could provide guidance to the rising number of singers attempting to break into the professional ranks. While the nation could boast of numerous, world-renown vocalists, the majority of U.S.-born singers sought European instruction, from Lillian Nordica's tutelage under François Delsarte in 1878 to Anna Olivia and Geraldine Farrar,

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<sup>18</sup> Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech/The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905), 11-12. Emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> Mathilde Marchesi, *Ten Singing Lessons* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1901), 36. See also Edith Lynwood Winn, "Voice Culture and the Speaking Voice," *The Musician* 9, no. 6 (1904): 227.

both of whom studied with the German soprano Lilli Lehmann in the 1890s.<sup>20</sup> Even as late as 1910, vocalist Millie Ryan continued to advise her students that while their study may begin in the U.S., they should complete their training in Europe "in order to get the broadening and the finishing touches that are necessary in order to become an artist."<sup>21</sup>

But singing instructors in the U.S. faced a critical issue when it came to defining a national vocal aesthetic: if the nation lacked a distinct singing style, as so many argued, then singers and instructors needed to look elsewhere for aesthetic guidance. African American and Native American song offered indigenous options, and these musics were celebrated by a few (most notably Henry Krehbiel, Charles Ives, and Arthur Farwell) for both their energy and pathos.<sup>22</sup> But elite practitioners dismissed these styles due to their racial Otherness and supposed lack of formal complexity. Writing in his *History of American Music* (1908), William Hubbard's dismissal of Native American music was typical: "Strictly speaking, the music of the American Indian has played little or no part in the development of our art music...Crude and primitive it was and crude and primitive it remains."<sup>23</sup> Voice culture practitioners, instead, relied on the Western tradition, from nostalgic appeals for a re-emergence of the *bel canto* tradition to the promotion of the more dramatic styles of Enrico Caruso. Yet these practices were themselves foreign, and their adoption exposed the absence that lay at the heart of discussions regarding the

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<sup>20</sup> Peter G. Davis, *The American Opera Singer: The Lives and Adventures of America's Great Singers in Opera and Concert, from 1825 to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Millie Ryan, *What Every Singer Should Know* (Omaha: Franklin Publishing Co., 1910), 28-29.

<sup>22</sup> See Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), and Michael Beckerman, "Henry Krehbiel, Antonín Dvořák, and the Symphony 'From the New World,'" *Notes* 49, no. 2 (1992): 447-473.

<sup>23</sup> William Lines Hubbard, *The American History and Encyclopedia of Music*, vol. 8, *History of American Music* (New York: Irving Squire, 1908), 39

nation's vocal legacy. Thus the challenge for the voice culture movement became to inaugurate a vocal aesthetic that embodied the nation's achievements without sounding racially Other.

### **The Search for a Natural Voice**

The response to the nation's increasing polyphony and lack of a vocal standard was a decades-long movement focused on the development and reform of vocal instruction, from grade school education to the professional ranks. Voice culture emerged out of the elocutionary movement, which itself had experienced a methodological realignment around physiological study earlier in the century.<sup>24</sup> The earliest use of the phrase "voice culture" that I have found appeared in a report by the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Iowa, published in 1850, detailing the need for schoolchildren to learn the art of public speaking.<sup>25</sup> While the specific pedagogical practices and aesthetic philosophies of singing varied widely among the movement's adherents, the majority were straightforward instructional texts that included advice on a range of

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<sup>24</sup> As Nan Johnson and others have noted, instruction in elocution and rhetoric in the United States had long been influenced by British methods, which emphasized collective authority over "liberal individualism." This shift in emphasis from communal to individual voice instruction occurred concomitant with the rise of the elocutionary expert who relied on scientific methodologies and theories for his (and these were almost always men at this time) pedagogical foundations. Beginning in 1827 with the publication of *Philosophy of the Human Voice* by James Rush, elocutionists sought instructional methods for vocal training based on their belief in a "natural correspondence among mind, voice, and body." Rush, through careful observation of vocal quality, attempted to establish scientific theories for the correspondence of voice and emotions which could then be used for teaching purposes. The goal here was to provide students with an understanding of the natural (i.e., scientifically-based) methods for expressing vocally their emotional states. See Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, "Introduction: Transformations of Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric*, ed. Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 1993), 9; Nan Johnson, "The Popularization of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric," in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric*, ed. Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 1993), 139-157.

<sup>25</sup> *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, for the State of Iowa* (Iowa City: Palmer & Paul State Printers, 1850).

topics, many of which could be found in any manual published today: chapters on vocal hygiene, breathing exercises, diction, resonance, the vocal registers, stage deportment, and singing exercises ranging from spoken dialogue to sung passages. These texts also proscribed restrictive methods for avoiding the health problems associated with modern, industrial life. Irving Wilson Voorhees, a sought after laryngologist in New York City and author of *Hygiene of the Voice*, argued, for example, against the imbibing of alcohol, prescribed vacations in clean air environments in order to cleanse the vocal tract from urban exposure, and forbade his students to travel by train due to the pollutants produced by locomotives.<sup>26</sup> To partake in any sort of excess (be it in the form of overexertion or due to environmental factors) was to risk phonasthenia, a physiological weakening of the voice, at which point surgery might be required.<sup>27</sup> Texts also regularly included quotes by famous vocalists, singing instructors, and musical treatises in addition to anecdotes about famous singers and the power of cultivated song. William James Henderson, for example, related how "Farinelli cured Philip of Spain of an attack of melancholia which threatened his reason. He did it by singing beautifully."<sup>28</sup>

Authors' use of scientific evidence in this methods varied widely. Manuals utilizing scientific voice studies or texts focused entirely on vocal physiology were published regularly throughout the voice culture movement. Medical journals, such as *The Laryngoscope*, featured articles on singing by prominent voice physicians including Frank Miller, the head physician for the Manhattan Opera House, and H. Holbrook Curtis, who served as a personal physician to

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<sup>26</sup> Irving Wilson Voorhees, *Hygiene of the Voice* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 84-85.

<sup>27</sup> Voorhees, *Hygiene*, 58, 105.

<sup>28</sup> William James Henderson, *The Art of the Singer: Practical Hints about Vocal Technics and Style* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 17.

Enrico Caruso, Jean de Reszke, Lillian Russell, and then-Colonel Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>29</sup> Other texts, however, supplemented scientific evidence with mysticism. Frank Miller, though a respected physiologist, built his methods on the premise that the organs of the vocal tract were pyramidal in structure. The physiological form of the vocal tract formed the basis for his "Triangle of Efficiency," which corresponded to physiological, anatomical, and synthetic laws. Miller explained his theory thusly:

The tissues of the vocal instrument are all pyramidal in form and the expression of their force occurs by way of an aperture at the hypotenuse of the triangular base.

Even the brain-cell has bipolar properties; that is, it has two poles on each side which operate in sympathy, bilaterally and symmetrically. They are superimposed in graduated duplicate form, diverge definitely from their apices and are so controlled that all parts act synchronously and in equilibrium. By means of this governing control or polarization the path and direction of the tone have been given, the resonance perfectly adjusted, and all parts are kept in balance, and ready for articulation.

The pyramids of voice, or the hollow chambers of sound, may be many-sided, with sides and bases triangular in conformation...These pyramids must be so arranged that the mass of air, when brought in contact with them, develops voice.<sup>30</sup>

And so on. Miller's work, I would argue, appealed to a modern sensibility that coveted scientific empiricism while wanting to retain a spiritual connection to all things natural.<sup>31</sup>

One of the first U.S.-based voice instructors to utilize a scientific approach to vocal pedagogy was the Bavarian-born pedagogue and scientist Emma Seiler. Born in 1821, Seiler began formal music training at the age of 30 and soon became fascinated with the physiological mechanics of voice production, studying dissected larynxes in order to identify precisely how

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<sup>29</sup> Herman Klein, "Jean de Reszke and Marie Brema: Some Reminiscences," *The Musical Times* 66, no. 987 (1925): 405-408; "Lillian Russell Has a Bad Cold," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 May 1895; "Commutes T.R.'s Rest to 6 Weeks: New Doctor Thinks Then He Can Tell About Colonel's Campaigning," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 July 1914.

<sup>30</sup> Frank E. Miller, *Vocal Art-Science and Its Application* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1917), 160.

<sup>31</sup> See Robin G. Schulze, *The Degenerate Muse: American Nature, Modernist Poetry, and the Problem of Cultural Hygiene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

vocal anatomy functioned.<sup>32</sup> In 1856, Seiler began working with Hermann von Helmholtz, who encouraged her to continue her studies of vocal anatomy. She moved to Philadelphia in 1866 where she quickly established herself as a voice instructor and noted authority on the scientific training of vocal expression.

Seiler's first book, published in English translation in the U.S. as *The Voice in Singing* (1868; in German as *Altes und Neues über die Ausbildung des Gesangorganes mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frauenstimme*, 1861), established the form that singing manuals at the turn of the century would take. *The Voice in Singing* begins with an introduction by Helmholtz praising Seiler's "scientific knowledge" and helping to establish her credentials as an expert in vocal training.<sup>33</sup> Seiler then chronicles the history of Western singing, beginning her narrative with the rise of church singing in the 4th century and culminating with Italian opera of the 18th century. Like many critics of Western elite singing, she attributed the deterioration of "vocal art" with the decline of the castrato and the *bel canto* style, echoing the now-familiar criticisms of Rossini and others.<sup>34</sup> While praising the traditional methods of instruction which relied on imitation and observation, Seiler argued for a more empirically-based pedagogy based on Helmholtz's research into acoustic perception, one that would explain "the eternal and impregnable laws of Nature upon which the mutual influences of melody, harmony and rhythm depend."<sup>35</sup> Combining Helmholtz's research with her own observations of vocal physiology, Seiler promoted careful study of vocal anatomy in order to cultivate a singing aesthetic that sounded in accordance with

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<sup>32</sup> Kathy Kessler Price, "Emma Seiler: A Pioneering Woman in the Art and Science of Teaching Voice," *Journal of Singing* 68, no. 1 (2011): 9-22.

<sup>33</sup> Emma Seiler, *The Voice in Singing*, trans. W.H. Furness (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 7-8.

<sup>34</sup> Seiler, *The Voice in Singing*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Seiler, *The Voice in Singing*, 30-31.

universal, natural law. Her theories would later form the basis for a number of other voice culture texts and influenced singing pedagogy well into the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

For late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century vocal pedagogues, singing in accordance with nature referred to two seemingly contradictory concepts that are crucial for understand the racial foundations for this movement. On the one hand, singing naturally implied that singers should perform organically; in other words, they should perform in a manner that simply felt comfortable. Singing naturally, in this sense, meant singing with less labor, where mind and body were synchronized in such a way that a beautiful tone seemed to issue forth effortlessly from the vocal tract so that audiences could neither see nor hear the body laboring. On the other hand, singing naturally implied a singer whose voice was attuned to an understanding of Nature as progressing according to universal laws that governed both music's formal development as well as its anthropological evolution. In this way, vocal scientists believed that nature was something ordained, either by divine decree or by physical, discoverable principles.

Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, the idea that music (or, at least, Western music), developed according to an internal, formal logic that progressed like an organic system evolving into ever more complex forms gained currency through the writings of Eduard Hanslick and others.<sup>37</sup> This latter sense of natural relied on the nineteenth-century teleological understanding of musical progress, of a musical Truth, based on the idea of Western musical supremacy. For voice culture authors, there was no contradiction between these two concepts of natural singing. As David Clark Taylor, a musician and author known for several

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<sup>36</sup> See Stark, *Bel Canto*, 78-79 and Price "Emma Seiler," for a more extensive discussion of Seiler's influence.

<sup>37</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, ed. Morris Weitz, trans. by Gustav Cohen (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957). Also see Bojan Bujic, "General Introduction" and "Music as Autonomous Being: Introduction" in *Music in European Thought, 1851-1912*, ed. by Bojan Bujic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-5, 7-10.

voice culture texts, wrote in 1922, singing "though ordained by Nature, is not in the usual sense natural or instinctive [rather] handling the voice must be acquired by every student of singing, in the course of carefully directed study."<sup>38</sup> Vocal training provided access to one's innate Self and served as a technological project that brought forth one's true being in order to stave off the degenerative effects of modern life — the feminizing effects of popular culture, racial miscegenation, and so on.

One explicit example of how "natural" vocal mechanics relied on theories of racial difference involved breath production, a widely debated topic throughout the voice culture literature. Authors frequently attempted to prove their method for developing proper breath support by referencing scientific literature on the subject. Take, for example, Dr. Thomas Fillebrown's assertion that the chest-abdominal breathing method was the best method for voice production, a claim he based on a study of "85 persons, most of them Indians, [which] found that 79 out of the 85 used abdominal breathing. The chest breathers were from classes 'civilized' and more or less 'cultured.'"<sup>39</sup> Henry Harper Hulbert, a professor of voice at the Central School for Speech and Drama in London, meanwhile, advocated lateral costal breathing (expanding the lungs sideways as opposed to breathing downwards towards the diaphragm), claiming this method as the one used by *bel canto* artists in the eighteenth century. According to Hulbert, lateral costal breathing was especially beneficial to female singers, as breathing from the diaphragm involved pushing air against the sexual organs and thus subverting Nature's will: "nature has ordained that she should make use of her intercostal muscles in breathing, so that she

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<sup>38</sup> David Clark Taylor, *The Psychology of Singing: A Rational Method of Voice Culture Based on a Scientific Analysis of All Systems, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Macmillan, 1922): 4.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Fillebrown, M.D., D.M.D. *Resonance in Singing and Speaking* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1911), 25-26. Fillebrown was a dentist and oral surgeon; this text is his only known book on vocal pedagogy. See "Fillebrown, Thomas," in *Universities and Their Sons*, ed. General Joshua L. Chamberlain (Boston: R. Herndon Co., 1898), 161-162.

may not be embarrassed by the changes that take place in the organs peculiar to her sex; and for her to violate this law by cultivating abdominal breathing is to defy nature.”<sup>40</sup>

As Wayne Koestenbaum has noted, scientific interest in vocal care and management arose simultaneously with the study of homosexuality as degenerative in the 1860s and that the discourse surrounding both vocal training and homosexuality “came wrapped in languages of control and cure.”<sup>41</sup> Like homosexuality, racial degeneracy was something to be cured through an intense focus on corporeal training in order to bring the body into Western norms, and we can understand voice culture as partaking in such a project. Once voice cultivation was achieved, then singers could perform in the first sense of ‘natural’: by freeing the inner Self, singers would perform effortlessly, without hindrance from their unruly flesh. Through scientific observation, the proper coordination and function of the vocal tract (the correct breathing method, proper laryngeal position, and so on) could be discovered, and students could be trained in the proper (as defined by Western vocal aesthetics) way of managing and positioning these anatomical features to produce a beautiful tone. Racial degeneracy, in this view, was — like homosexuality — something to be cured through an intense focus on corporeal training that could bring the body into Western norms, and we can understand voice culture as partaking in such a project. Once voice cultivation was achieved, singers could then perform in the first sense of natural: by freeing the inner Self, singers would perform effortlessly, without hindrance from their unruly flesh.

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Harper Hulbert, *Breathing for Voice Production* (New York: Novello, Ewer, and Co., 1903), 16.

<sup>41</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993).

## Voice Culture and Neurasthenia

One way to understand the relationship between voice culture and the racial undertones of modern, urban life is to examine the use of vocal training as a cure for neurasthenia.

Physicians attributed voice fatigue to overexertion, poor diet, and improper training, in addition to environmental factors, all of which stemmed from the stresses of performing and daily urban life. For J. Harry Wheeler, editor of the "Vocal Department" in *The Etude*,

Excessive smoking causes inflammation of the pharynx, the bronchi and larynx, hence the muscles controlling the vocal cords are weakened, the result being a hoarse, weak voice. If the nerves controlling the muscles of respiration are weakened, as they may be by lifting too much or by too much bodily exercise, singing is impossible. Any excess that tends to weaken the motor nerves weakens the whole body, hence a weak voice.<sup>42</sup>

George Beard, a U.S. neurologist, first proposed the term in 1869 as a diagnosis for a range of physical maladies stemming from overexertion and stress: headaches, insomnia, hysteria, epilepsy, insanity, and aphonia (loss of voice), what he termed the "neurasthenic voice."<sup>43</sup>

References to neurasthenia climbed steadily through the end of the nineteenth-century, peaking in the first decade of the twentieth century before declining precipitously around 1920.<sup>44</sup> Using Google Book's NGram Viewer, we find a fascinating correlation between references to neurasthenia and voice culture, with both terms showing an initial rise just after 1870 that continues steadily through the 1910s before dropping off around 1920 (see figures 3.1-3.2).

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<sup>42</sup> J. Harry Wheeler, "Voice Department," *The Etude* 27, no. 4 (1909): 269.

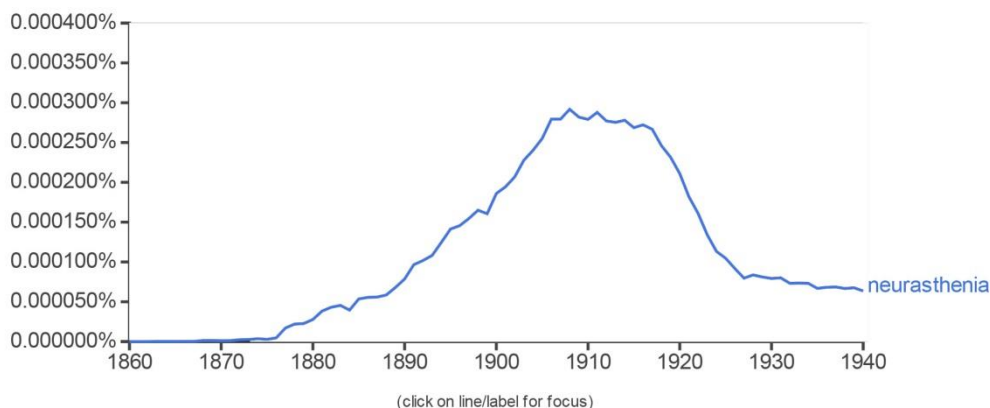
<sup>43</sup> Francis G. Gosling, *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870-1910* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 80.

<sup>44</sup> Gosling, *Before Freud*, 78.

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between  and  from the corpus  with smoothing of  [Search lots of books](#)

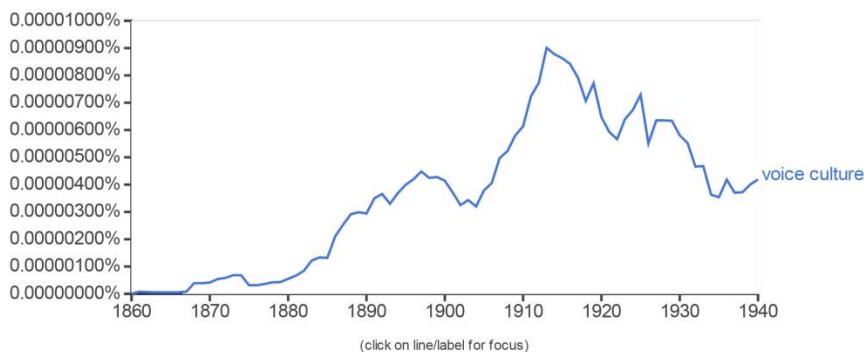


**Figure 3.1. NGram of Neurasthenia from 1860 until 1940.**

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between  and  from the corpus  with smoothing of  [Search lots of books](#)



**Figure 3.2. NGram of Voice Culture from 1860 until 1940.**

As Tom Lutz has noted, neurasthenia arose concomitant with an emerging middle class and was considered by Beard to be a positive (though debilitating) sign of modern life; as Beard wrote of what he called "this distinguished malady," neurasthenia was "*the product of American*

*civilization*."<sup>45</sup> Though often defined as a middle- and upper-class condition, Francis Gosling has argued that diagnoses for neurasthenia were more widespread than commonly thought, crossing all social classes, occupations, and geographies.<sup>46</sup> Yet both Gosling and Lutz agree that neurasthenia affected only whites and ultimately "reinforced existing gender and class attitudes" — and racial, I would add — due to the belief that the cause of neurasthenic symptoms among the lower- and working-classes could be attributed to their immoral lifestyles.<sup>47</sup>

Neurasthenia, it was believed, affected only those suffering from over-civilization, and thus did not affect the recent immigrants to the U.S. coming from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin and South America. People from these areas were assumed to be more physically fit than their Anglo-European counterparts, and it was their presumed strength that threatened to overwhelm a population suffering the enfeebling pangs of civilized life. Physicians diagnosing neurasthenia believed that people were born with a set amount of nervous energy and that through physical and mental exertion people could eventually deplete their reserves. While rest was the most commonly prescribed cure for neurasthenia, physicians argued that the condition could be prevented through physical exercise. Carefully managed exercise routines would prevent individual and national degeneration by allowing citizens to recuperate their body's vital forces. Such physical training was necessary to prevent what Theodore Roosevelt (himself a sufferer of neurasthenia) "race suicide" — the belief that the recent immigrant populations were reproducing at a substantially higher rate than "white" citizens.

Voice culture authors regularly promoted vocal training as a regenerative cure for diminishing nervous energy. Millie Ryan attributed the "'illness' and 'nerves' of our present day

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Gosling, *Before Freud*, xii-xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Gosling *Before Freud*, x-xi.

young women" to idleness and noted "[t]here is no tonic for the nerves equal to voice culture."<sup>48</sup> Properly exercising the nerves was especially important for young people, so much so that the Virginia State Board of Education included in its biennial report of 1893 a proposal for including voice culture in public schools that would examine the "[r]elation of the voice to the nervous system; our original system of voice culture; effect of the emotions upon the nervous system; automatic action of the nerve centres in gesture; evolution in art."<sup>49</sup> Improperly balancing one's nervous energy, or simply possessing an abundance, could ultimately cause aphonia if she did not learn to control her movements and voice. Dr. Abraham Myerson, a Boston physician, noted in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* that such individuals were especially susceptible to loss of voice due to the rise in vocal pitch that accompanied excessive nervousness:

excessive use of the voice will bring about aphonia in any individual...But the person who is intense in all that he or she does, who is exceedingly earnest, brings about an excessive innervation of the part he is to use. This excess brings about muscle spasticity; this spasticity brings on quick fatigue, which in its turn, when long continued, brings about loss of function. Thus ordinary people, not 'neuropathic,' when engaged in heated arguments, speak in high-pitched voices, and examination will show that the upper chest is engaged in squeezing out the sounds, while the shoulders are raised and the abdomen is hard and tense.<sup>50</sup>

Louis Arthur Russell, meanwhile, argued that voice training provided artistic and bodily freedom of expression by training the body to act in accordance with proven physiological and musical facts. His article for *The Etude*, appropriately titled "Vital Things in Voice Culture,"

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<sup>48</sup> Ryan, *What Every Singer Should Know*, 23-24; the first quote can also be found in Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 169.

<sup>49</sup> Virginia State Board of Education, *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Virginia, with Accompany Documents* (Richmond: J.H. O'Bannon, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1893), 346-347.

<sup>50</sup> Abraham Myerson, M.D., "Two Cases of Common Speech and Voice Defect and Their Treatment," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 163, no. 15 (1910): 579.

imparted eleven principles proven by "rational demonstration."<sup>51</sup> Russell couched these principles in terms of their ability to govern the economy of students' nervous energy: "we now *know* that the greatest task of the student is the elimination of restraining, interfering influences, induced by undue (surplus) tension and misdirected energy."<sup>52</sup> While including among the eleven principles such "known" quantities as the correct way to attack notes and the importance of experience, Russell began with breathing: "**We know**, positively and beyond dispute, how to control the respiratory energies, so that the breath impact at the vocal cords may be of the right force and character for the establishing of tone (air waves)."<sup>53</sup> Russell continued by arguing for a thorough embodiment of these vocal principles as the only means for achieving the proper balance of one's vocal energies: the singer "has only to will the result and the spirit of his art will reveal itself through a properly developed automatism or sub-conscious habit, gained through the mastery of the laws governing the human voice."<sup>54</sup>

Medical treatment for nervous conditions, on the other hand, generally included electrotherapy. As Carolyn Thomas De la Peña has noted, electrotherapy was used to treat neurasthenia by Beard (drawing on the second law of thermodynamics which governs the transfer and entropy of energy) as a means to revitalize the body if a person was found lacking in nervous energy and to redistribute energy if the person possessed an energy surplus.<sup>55</sup> While vocalists and singing instructors drew upon the science of neurasthenia (David Clark Taylor

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<sup>51</sup> Louis Arthur Russell, "Vital Things in Voice Culture," *The Etude* 35, no. 7 (1917): 480. Russell was the editor for the Department for Singers section of *The Etude* at the time. An organist, writer, and conductor, and composer, Russell is best known for organizing the Newark Symphony Orchestra. See "Russell, Louis Arthur," in *The American History and Encyclopedia of Music, Volume II*, ed. W.L. Hubbard (New York: Irving Square, 1908), 248.

<sup>52</sup> Russell, "Vital Things," 480. Emphasis in original.

<sup>53</sup> Russell, "Vital Things." Emphasis in original.

<sup>54</sup> Russell, "Vital Things."

<sup>55</sup> Carolyn Thomas De la Peña, *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Build the Modern American* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 103.

referred to "the law of transformation and conservation of energy" in his *The Psychology of Singing*), the use of electrotherapy as a cure for phonasthenia appears to have been employed only by physicians.<sup>56</sup> Dr. D. Braden Kyle, writing in the journal *Progressive Medicine* in 1910, included an entire section dealing with "Phonasthenia in Singers," in his article on laryngology. Kyle's description of phonasthenia's cause and cure were typical of physicians' understandings of phonasthenia:

Any waste of power may lead to phonasthenia, and therefore any incorrect method of voice production, which is indeed the most common cause, may produce the condition, although it frequently occurs in anemia... Certain evidence that the condition is present is obtained by testing the voice, for the trained ear can detect errors in the production of the sound usually in one register; that is most marked with soft notes, least marked when singing forte... Treatment consists in the application of the faradic current.

Faradization, according to Francis Gosling, involved having a patient sit with his or her feet planted on a copper plate attached to the negative pole of an electric current. The physician would then place the positive pole on the patient's body, generally on the head and spine.<sup>57</sup> Doing so would administer electricity to the patient, rejuvenating his or her energy deficiency.

### **The Vocal Science of National Character**

The voice culture movement at the turn of the century built upon these scientific foundations as a way to instill morality and national, racial character through the creation of a vocal aesthetic. Singing instruction in the United States, as noted by education history Ruth Gustafson, had long been used to "fortif[y] the qualities of citizenship, duty, patriotism, and manliness as aspects of whiteness" through the performance of patriotic songs and its emphasis

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *Psychology of Singing*, 124.

<sup>57</sup> Gosling, *Before Freud*, 123.

on physical health and bearing.<sup>58</sup> While the earliest formal schools of singing, commonly associated with churches, were founded in the Northeast in the 1780s, professional singing instruction in public education, however, did not arise until the 1830s when Lowell Mason introduced his education reforms.<sup>59</sup> Mason, along with Horace Mann and Elam Ives, Jr., emphasized the supposed character-building qualities of vocal instruction and pushed for its inclusion in public schools. Their early texts, including the *American Elementary Singing Book* (1830) and *The Juvenile Lyre* (1831), relied heavily on the teachings of the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi, who promoted public education as a means of cultivating social values.<sup>60</sup> Mason, in particular, argued that holistic vocal instruction — breathing exercises, proper bodily comportment, and the performance of patriotic songs — would best instill civic virtue by showing students the proper way to embody these ideals.

What separated the voice culture movement at the turn of the century from these earlier endeavors and defined it as a modern discipline were authors' reliance on scientific observation to explain proper vocal technique. Vocal mechanics had long been a source of curiosity in Western literature, dating back at least to the Greek philosopher Galen's dissections of the larynx in the second century CE. What changed with the voice culture movement was the direct use of

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<sup>58</sup> Ruth Iana Gustafson, *Race and Curriculum: Music in Childhood Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 16. For a history of public music instruction in the U.S., see Edward Bailey Birge, *History of Public School Music in the United States* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1928) and Michael L. Mark and Charles L. Gary, eds., *A History of American Music Education*, 2nd ed. (Reston, VA: Schirmer Books, 1999). One of the earliest texts I have found to make extensive use of physiology and bodily exercise in vocal pedagogy is Oksar Guttman's *Gymnastik der Stimee: Anweisung zum Selbstunterricht in der Uebung und dem richtigen Gebrauch der Sprach- und Gesangsordnungen* (Leipzig: J.J. Weber, 1861). Guttman's manual was first published in the German in 1875 and later in English as *Gymnastics of the Voice: A System of Correct Breathing in Singing and Speaking, based upon Physiological Laws* (Albany: Werner, 1882).

<sup>59</sup> Birge, *History of Public School Music*, 9-11, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Mark and Gary, eds., *History of American Music Education*, 112-120.

such knowledge in pedagogical methods. Compare, for example, two statements arguing against singing through the nose written nearly one hundred fifty years apart. The first excerpt was written by Pier. Francesco Tosi in his *Observations on the Florid Song; or, Sentiments of the Ancient and Modern Singers*, first published in Bologna in 1723 and later made available in English translation in 1743. Here, Tosi stated, "Let the Master attend with great Care to the Voice of the Scholar, which, whether it be *di Petto*, or *di Testa*, should always come forth neat and clear, without passing thro' the Nose, or being choaked [sic] in the Throat; which are two the most horrible Defects in a Singer, and past all Remedy if once grown into a Habit."<sup>61</sup> While the idea was apparent (singing through the nose should be strictly avoided), Tosi provided no information for how a student should avoid this "most horrible Defect." Writing in 1889, however, Edmund Shaftesbury provided a detailed account on how to avoid singing with a nasal timbre: "Close the lips, as the mouth cavity and throat cavity are kept fully open (the soft palate being raised and the larynx lowered) and project a full resonant tone into the nasal cavity without any attempt to make it forcible."<sup>62</sup> The instructions here were much more detailed and required the student to have at least a passing knowledge of vocal anatomy.

By grounding their pedagogies in scientific materialism, voice culture authors hoped to establish a vocal tradition that would not simply rival but ultimately surpass the vocal artistry of Western Europe. As Edmund Myer, a member of the Music Teachers' National Association and vocal instructor at Carnegie Hall, stated scientific voice culture would produce a "renaissance of

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<sup>61</sup> Pier. Francesco Tosi, *Observations on the Florid Song; or, Sentiments on the Ancient and Modern Singers*, translated by John Ernest Galliard (London: J. Wilcox, 1926 [1743]), 22.

<sup>62</sup> Edmund Shaftesbury, *Lessons in Voice Culture* (Washington, DC: The Martyn College Press, 1889), 42-43. At first glance, this passage seems to promote a nasal timbre. However, by the raising soft palate, the singer would effectively close of the nasal cavity. What Shaftesbury seems to be suggesting here is for the student to push the air upwards from the laryngeal cavity against the soft palate in order to make full use of the resonance of the mouth cavity.

the vocal art," and that a new school of training, based entirely on scientific expertise, could only arise in the U.S. as Europe was too mired in tradition.<sup>63</sup> This tradition, Myer believed, relied too heavily on haptic feedback, or one's own physical perception of beautiful singing. Myer couched his teachings in Transcendental language; in the Exordium to his manual, he wrote

Man, to see far and clearly, must rise above his surroundings. To win great possessions, to master great truths, we must climb all hills, all the mountains, which confront us. Unfortunately the vocal profession dwells too much upon the lowlands of tradition, or is buried too deep in the valleys of prejudice. Better things, however, will come. They must come. The current of the advanced thought, the higher thought, of this, the opening year of the twentieth century, will slowly but surely increase in power and influence, will slowly but surely broaden and deepen, until the light of reason breaks upon the vocal world. We may confidently look, in the near future, for the Renaissance of the Vocal Art.<sup>64</sup>

As Mickie McGree, John Cawelti, and others have noted, the idea of the "self-made man" had been reconfigured as the pursuit of individual wealth and success by the turn of the twentieth century, a pursuit limited predominately to white, middle- and upper-class male citizens.<sup>65</sup> Myer's work, along with the voice culture movement as a whole, was greatly indebted to the notion of individual mobility through industry, thrift, and temperance so ingrained in the U.S. psyche and identified by Max Weber as the Protestant Ethic.

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<sup>63</sup> Edmund J. Myer, *The Renaissance of the Vocal Art: A Practical Study of Vitality, Vitalized Energy, of the Physical, Mental, and Emotional Powers of the Singer, through Flexible, Elastic Bodily Movements* (Boston: The Boston Music Company, 1902), 27.

<sup>64</sup> Myer, *The Renaissance of the Vocal Art*, 7.

<sup>65</sup> For readings on self-help and the myth of the "self-made man" at the turn of the century, see Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," in David B. Clarke, et al, eds., *The Consumption Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 163-167; Warren I. Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 212-226; Ellen Ruth Feldman, "Self-Culturing America, 1838-1917," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1995).

Most voice culture practitioners, however, utilized physiological studies and scientific theories of voice production as a way to differentiate their work from other instructors. Each instructor espoused a different method (i.e., course of vocal study) that was guaranteed to produce results. Eugene Feuchtinger, founder of the Perfect Voice Institute in Chicago (which still exists, though now located in Johannesburg, South Africa), exemplified the ambitious claims made by some voice culture practitioners. His monograph, *A Manual for the Study of the Human Voice*, assured success to students who carefully followed his methods. This "new method," he insisted, was the perfect remedy for an industrial nation known for its technological prowess yet suffering in vocal artistry, as only "a method of voice training that is based upon actual facts only, will appeal to the American people."<sup>66</sup> Feuchtinger's text read grandiose from the start: accompanied by photos of Caruso and Theodore Roosevelt as well images depicting Moses and a scene from *Tannhäuser*, the opening pages appealed to "[e]ducated people everywhere [who] have come to realize that vicious speech habits are a serious handicap to efficiency."<sup>67</sup> His manual consisted of eighteen lessons covering vocal physiology, vocal hygiene, a teleological history of singing beginning with St. Paul and culminating with famous U.S. speakers such as Patrick Henry and Abraham Lincoln, and philosophical musing on the voice including the chapter entitled, "Voice is the Manifestation of Strength and Energy."

Feuchtinger's text, unlike most voice culture manuals, was intended as a correspondence course, with each chapter accompanied by a list of questions to be answered by the student and then mailed to Feuchtinger for critique. While promising faster results than other instructors,

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<sup>66</sup> Eugene Feuchtinger, "A New Method of Training the Voice," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech Education* 4, no. 1 (1918): 94

<sup>67</sup> Eugene Feuchtinger, *A Manual for the Study of the Human Voice*, fourth edition (Chicago: Perfect Voice Institute, 1922), Lesson 1: 2.

Feuchtinger suggested students complete no more than two lessons per month.<sup>68</sup> Upon completion, students would receive a Certificate of Competency from the Institute. The questions for Lesson I, twenty-five in all, were intended to assess the student's current skill level as well as to illustrate any mechanical defects that required correcting:

- 1 Is your voice high or low?
- 2 Is your voice heavy or light?
- ...
- 5 Is your voice weak or husky?
- 6 Do you tire easily?
- ...
- 8 Have you any speech defects, such as stammering, stuttering, lispings, etc.?
- ...
- 16 With a mirror examine your tongue, sing or speak and observe whether the tongue draws back from the teeth, whether it becomes thick or rises in the back.
- ...
- 19 Is your voice nasal?
- 20 Is your voice throaty?
- 21 Are you subject to catarrh?
- ...
- 24 Have you difficulty in pronouncing any special consonants, and which?
- 25 Can you trill or roll the "r"?

Feuchtinger would then use the responses to develop an individualized course of study that would address the specific needs of each student.

As with many authors, Feuchtinger promised that his technique was the only true method for producing guaranteed results; he devoted several pages promoting his methods, claiming for instance that "**never until now has there been a reliable, unfailing method of developing [the voice]**" and that "[y]ou can place **absolute** confidence in my system — it is not an experiment."<sup>69</sup> This system hinged, quite literally, on the hyoid bone — a small, horseshoe-shaped bone in the mid-neck that provides greater manipulation of the tongue. While most voice culture authors lauded their interpretation style or perhaps their methods for building breath support, Feuchtinger

<sup>68</sup> Feuchtinger, *Manual for the Study of the Human Voice*, Lesson I, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Feuchtinger, *Manual for the Study of the Human Voice*, Lesson I, 6, 10. Emphasis in original

highlighted a particular anatomical feature that he (supposedly) discovered, claiming its unique role in producing a beautiful sound. Feuchtinger wrote,

The most important discovery in my method has to do with this bone and the muscles which connect with it. The hyoid bone occupies a pivotal point between the breast bone below and the hard palate above. It is shaped like a horseshoe; it is the balance wheel of the vocal organ, and the muscle which connects this horseshoe with the tongue is the mainspring or keystone of the voice. When this muscle acts just as it should, your voice will be splendidly beautiful, because out of this sound which is made in the right way arise many overtones, which are the direct cause of tonal beauty.<sup>70</sup>

By claiming proprietary knowledge of the mysteries of vocal mechanics, Feuchtinger could advertise his teachings as the one true method for gaining vocal superiority. Feuchtinger's focus on this one anatomical feature also suggested that possessing a beautiful voice was quickly attainable by any student willing to follow his carefully-devised instructions.

### **Singing National Purity**

Of all the descriptions used to portray the ideal national voice, none resonated more with the anxieties over immigrant bodies than the idea of singing with a pure tone. A pure tone represented for voice culture advocates a sound unencumbered by vocal physiology, i.e., a natural sound produced through a rigid adherence to corporeal management: tightly controlled vibrato, clear enunciation, and unlabored breathing. For example, Frederic Root, describing an experiment in which a voice instructor was attempting to prove the supremacy of his breathing technique, wrote: "during the emission of pure tone the flame of a candle held before the mouth will not flicker...this pure tone is obtained by a certain control of the breath."<sup>71</sup> As Jann Pasler has argued in her analysis of timbral preferences in French singing during this period, the idea of

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<sup>70</sup> Feuchtinger, *Manual for the Study of the Human Voice*, Lesson IV, 5.

<sup>71</sup> "Vocal Culture Abroad: Interview with Mr. Frederic W. Root," *Werner's Magazine* 16, no. 10 (1894): 347.

a pure tone suggested more than a vocal ideal and signified, instead, a notion of racial purity embodied by Western European definitions of whiteness.<sup>72</sup> Exaggerated gestures and the vulgar sounds of non-Western and popular singing revealed not just poor training but hinted towards racial degeneracy. In the words of one voice culture author, "all expression must emphasize the highest functions of the voice in the expression of the fullest experience of the race."<sup>73</sup>

Given the anxieties over national vocal "purity," it is surprising that most authors did not call for more operatic and classical performances in English. There were exceptions, of course: composer and pedagogue Louis Arthur Russell's *English Diction for Singers and Speakers* began with a call for the study of proper English diction so that "a new era of vocal art [could] be established here."<sup>74</sup> Edmund Myer of Carnegie Hall blamed years of singing in Italian for U.S. singers' inability to pronounce properly their native tongue, as the physical transformations necessary to produce Italian became ingrained in vocalists' bodies: "all singers should first master their own mother tongue... The constant study and practice of the broad open sounds only, forms the mouth and throat to fixed positions, and when the closer sounds are attempted, as they must be in the use of words, either the pronunciation of the word is broadened and distorted, or it is contracted, pinched and ugly."<sup>75</sup> As Katherine Preston has noted, English opera and Italian and German opera translated into English remained popular at the turn of the century even as the elite audiences in New York, Boston, and other cultural centers supported performances in

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<sup>72</sup> Pasler, *Composing the Citizen*, 255, 266-267.

<sup>73</sup> Samuel Silas Curry, *Mind and Voice: Principles and Methods in Vocal Training* (Boston: Expression Company, 1910), 76.

<sup>74</sup> Louis Arthur Russell, *English Diction for Singers and Speakers* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1905), iii. Emphasis in original.

<sup>75</sup> Edmund John Myer, *Vocal Reinforcement* (Boston: The Boston Music Company 1891), 193.

their original language.<sup>76</sup> While many voice culture practitioners included English diction as part of their pedagogy, they typically emphasized learning the proper pronunciation of Italian, German, and French over English.

The performance of song within such a highly codified set of aesthetic limitations fostered a national ideal while suggesting that this vocal model was available only to a select few. These limitations were especially stark for African Americans seeking acceptance in the elite Western tradition. For African American opera and concert stage singers, vocal pedagogy provided the tools, however constrained, for social mobility. While admittedly modest in size, the black middle class made important inroads into the public sphere during the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, particularly in the musical realm. Numerous periodicals covered black musical endeavors, including the Washington, D.C.-based *Negro Music Journal*, a monthly-published magazine that focused almost exclusively on African Americans performing within the Western elite repertoire. The *Journal's* underlying philosophy was that of racial uplift, with articles devoted to teaching basic musical skills such as harmony to advice on performance practice for piano, violin, and singing. The *Journal's* editor J. Hillary Taylor, a pianist and music instructor affiliated with the Washington Conservatory of Music, regularly celebrated black classical voices, from the nineteenth-century contralto Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield to the contemporary operatic baritone, Theodore Drury.<sup>77</sup> Drury, who edited a text on voice culture by the physician John Howard, was prominently featured in the *Journal's* pages, primarily for his

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<sup>76</sup> Katherine K. Preston, "Between the Cracks: The Performance of English-Language Opera in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Music* 21, no. 3 (2003): 349-374.

<sup>77</sup> *RIMP Journal Information*, "The Negro Music Journal," [http://www.ripm.org/journal\\_info.php5?ABB=NMJ](http://www.ripm.org/journal_info.php5?ABB=NMJ) (accessed November 19, 2012).

founding of the Drury Opera Company and his attempts to build a theater in New York City dedicated to African American operatic performances.<sup>78</sup>

Yet black classical singing remained an anomaly for white observers, who continued to hear African American voices in strictly racial terms regardless of the performance style. While performers such as Drury were well-trained in the performance practices of the Western repertoire, critics focused instead on the physicality of the black bodies and voices onstage. In an unsigned *New York Times* review of the Drury Opera Company's production of *Aida* in 1906, the reviewer entirely neglects addressing the vocal performances, focusing instead on their stature and complexion: Estelle Clough, who performed as Aida, was described as "short and stout," while those performing in the role of Ethiopians were reportedly "very light in color."<sup>79</sup> Drury's performance as Amonasro was understandably singled out but reads more like a description of a vaudeville comedy routine, with the reviewer emphasizing Drury's "skillful rolling of the whites of his eyes." Such comments failed to distinguish black operatic performance from its racialized counterpart in popular entertainment.

Critics of popular singing styles deplored the "horrible facial contortions" displayed by amateur vocalists and vaudeville performers, preferring those singers who performed in a more modest fashion.<sup>80</sup> Voice culture provided its middle- and upper-class participants with new, albeit highly restricted, ways of inhabiting the body that freed them from the traditional mores of bodily comportment and public display even as the practices of this movement reinforced the

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<sup>78</sup> John Howard, *Expression in singing including thirty-one exercises for voice culture* (New York: Erhard Kromer, 1904).

<sup>79</sup> See *New York Times*, "Colored Opera Stars Produce Verdi's 'Aida'," 29 May 1906, 11. For a comparison of the coverage Drury received by the African American press, see *The Freeman*, "Faust in New York," 24 May 1902.

<sup>80</sup> "Tone as the End of Technique," *New York Times*, 14 Apr 1900. For an example of this critique with regard to vaudeville performers, see "May Edouin at Keith's," *New York Times*, 8 Apr 1902.

ideal national body as white, heterosexual, and capable of being a productive member of society. The voice culture movement was closely aligned with the physical culture movement made popular by the French singer and actor François Delsarte and disseminated in the United States by his students, including Genevieve Stebbins, who authored one of the earliest texts on Delsartian techniques of vocal training.<sup>81</sup> As several scholars have noted, these corporeal projects were reactions to the nation's emerging status as a global economic and military power that provided a bulwark against the feminizing effects of modern culture's reliance on technology and consumerism while also separating civilized bodies from the primitive both at home and abroad.<sup>82</sup> For women in particular, voice and physical culture helped establish a "constitution of themselves as creators in addition to executants," highlighting women's creative agency in the formation of Western art music even as composers attempted to tighten their grip on performance practice.<sup>83</sup>

Herbert Witherspoon argued for the importance of individual creativity in his manual, *Singing: A Treatise for Teachers and Students*. Witherspoon was intimately familiar with Western European singing: he began his professional voice studies in Europe, studying with Auguste-Jean Dubulle at the Paris Conservatory and with Francisco Lamperti in Milan.<sup>84</sup> After

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<sup>81</sup> Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression* (New York: Edgar S. Werner Publishing & Supply Co., 1886).

<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of physical culture as a reaction to modern life in the United States, see Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 1997). For a discussion of physical culture as a colonial project, see Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870-1940* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Linda J. Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>84</sup> For Witherspoon's biography, see "Witherspoon, Herbert," in *The National Cyclopædia of American Biography, being the History of the United States* Vol. 29 (New York: James T. White

returning to the U.S., Witherspoon began a successful career as a bass with the Metropolitan Opera, where he performed from 1908 until his retirement in 1916, Witherspoon became an outspoken advocate for music's public utility and one of the most prominent public figures in U.S musical life, first as the director of the Chicago Civic Opera Company (1930-1931) and later as the director of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music (1932-1933). While clearly a proponent of the Western elite tradition's public good, Witherspoon warned U.S. students against singers imitating another's vocal style, writing in his monograph *Singing: A Treatise for Teachers and Students*:

imitation of another's voice is death to a singer. He may imitate the *method* of singing, but not the *quality*. He may even imitate the color or expression, but never the actual voice...Why? Because he is imitating the whole effect of the other voice, he is losing his own quality and tone...The result is ruin, both physically and artistically.<sup>85</sup>

Witherspoon's vocal eschatology suggests here that while the methods of vocal training may be appropriated for self-improvement, a direct imitation of another's voice — be it an individual's or a nation's — fails to provide fertile ground for the cultivation of a unique vocal aesthetic.

Vocal instructors regularly incorporated physical exercises, such as those employed by Delsarte's followers, into voice culture texts as a means to teach proper posture. Edgar Werner, a voice teacher a major publisher of music and voice culture texts based in New York City, was one of the foremost proponents of Delsartian exercise.<sup>86</sup> Werner's press was responsible for publishing some of the earliest works devoted to Delsartian methods, including Genevieve

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& Company, 1941), 181, and "Witherspoon, Herbert," in *Who Was Who in America* Vol. 1 (Chicago: Marquis, 1942), 1370.

<sup>85</sup> Herbert Witherspoon, *Singing: A Treatise for Teachers and Students* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1925), 36. See also "An American Opera School of the Future - Herbert Witherspoon Declares the Time is Ripe for Founding One," *The Canadian Journal of Music* 2, no. 4 (1915): 57. Witherspoon's second singing manual was *Thirty six Lessons in Singing for Teacher and Student* (Chicago: Miesner Institute of Music, 1930).

<sup>86</sup> Stephen F. Austin, "Provenance: Buried Treasure," *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 63, no. 3 (2007): 335-340.

Stebbins's monograph in 1902, and his monthly periodical, *Werner's Magazine*, included regular features on physical culture, emphasizing the physical and psychological benefits — especially for women — of practicing Classical poses, dance, pantomime, and other forms of movement that emphasized grace and gentility.<sup>87</sup> As with singing styles, standards of bodily comportment were being challenged by the new forms of leisure available in American society at the turn of the century, prompting a backlash by elite commentators who decried the more casual demeanors displayed by that nation's youth.<sup>88</sup> Bodily comportment thus became a crucial site for middle- and upper-class self-definition, and the rigid poses promoted by voice culture authors revealed growing concerns over the public display of the body.

Henry Hulbert's *Breathing for Voice Production* is a prime example of how concerns over posture were incorporated into vocal pedagogy texts. Hulbert emphasized the benefits of proper breathing, depicting the human body in technological terms and thus establishing respiration while singing as a thoroughly scientific affair: "The air being the motor power of the voice, common sense teaches us that the more thoroughly the lungs are filled with air, and the more easily that air is controlled, the more effective and perfect will be the machine through which the artistic impulses of the singer are to find vent."<sup>89</sup> To facilitate his method, Hulbert provided detailed instructions for each of the thirty-seven breathing exercises he offered in his text, with photographs depicting nearly half of the exercises. For each exercise, the student was to begin in an upright position (either sitting or standing), with legs and back straight and arms

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<sup>87</sup> For an overview of physical culture and the role of women in pursuing new forms of movement in the United States, see Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) and Tomko, *Dancing Class*.

<sup>88</sup> David Yosifon and Peter N. Stearns, "The Rise and Fall of American Posture," *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 4 (1998), 1059.

<sup>89</sup> Hulbert, *Breathing for Voice Production*, 15.

placed against her side. Figure 3.3 shows Hulbert demonstrating exercise seventeen, where he strikes a classic Vitruvian pose: dressed in a double-breasted frock coat and an ascot, Hulbert stands rigid, staring intently into the camera with back straight and arms outstretched perpendicular to his torso. The instructions provided for this exercise underneath the heading "The Control of the Breath" leave little room for interpretation, detailing the strictly regulated motions necessary for singing properly:

Assume the correct pose.

1. Raise the arms straight out sideways from the body until the hands and arms are on a level with the top of the shoulders, and inhale deeply through the nose.
  2. Hold the breath for five seconds, then slowly count aloud up to six.
  3. Return to the original position and exhale vigorously through the mouth.
- Repeat from six to twelve times.<sup>90</sup>

This preoccupation with air and lungs was not simply an interest in breath support. As postcolonial theorist Ali Behdad has noted, this era bore witness to a new form of xenophobia based, in part, on a fear of contagion perceived to accompany immigrants entering the United States; Behdad writes, “[m]edicine and hygiene constitute the essence of this newer form of patriotism, the differential markers that separate the citizen from the ‘alien,’ the native self from the immigrant other.”<sup>91</sup> As the health of the immigrant body became a crucial site for the surveillance of national subjectivity, the vocal tract became an opening through which the state could assert its control and its power. For writers on the voice, auscultation, or listening to the sounds of the body, revealed what an external observation of the body could not: voices that

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<sup>90</sup> Hulbert, *Breathing for Voice Production*, 30, 59.

<sup>91</sup> Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 135.

sounded unhealthy – too throaty or guttural – were a clear indication of a diseased body, one that was unfit for service to the nation.<sup>92</sup>

While abdominal strength provided the force with which to expel air from the lungs, laryngeal flexibility was critical to producing a well-rounded tone and for controlling vibrato. Often, these authors pointed to famous vocalists, including Jenny Lind and Enrico Caruso (both of whom were subjects of physiological study), as exemplary models of vocal mastery over laryngeal management. David Clark Taylor, referring to the larynx as "[t]he special organ of voice," noted the long-standing debates over laryngeal position, whether it should remain high or low in the throat, or move in relation to the pitches sung.<sup>93</sup> Edmund Myer, meanwhile, argued that singers ought not to bother themselves with knowledge of laryngeal position, and that they should rely, instead, on "'the singer's sensation,' the sensation of pure, free, artistic, [sic] tone" to guide their efforts.<sup>94</sup> Often, authors pointed to famous vocalists, including Jenny Lind and Enrico Caruso (both of whom were subjects of physiological study), as exemplary models of vocal mastery over laryngeal management.<sup>95</sup> In one of the more curious voice culture texts, Edmund Shaftesbury (pseudonym of Webster Edgerly), provided an exercise for the larynx that consisted of raising and lowering the larynx by swallowing until the student could accomplish this movement by utilizing the laryngeal muscles alone.<sup>96</sup> Such control was necessary, these authors

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<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of auscultation, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 99-136.

<sup>93</sup> Taylor, *The Psychology of Singing*, 212, 49.

<sup>94</sup> Edmund John Myer, *Position and Action in Singing: A Study of the True Conditions of Tone* (Boston: The Boston Music Co., G. Schirmer Inc., 1897), 22.

<sup>95</sup> See W.S. Rockstro, *Jenny Lind; a Record and Analysis of the "Method" of the Late Madame Jenny Lind-Goldschmidt* (London: Novello, Ewer and Co., 1894) and Pasqual Mario Marafioti, *Caruso's Method of Voice Production: the Scientific Culture of the Voice* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928).

<sup>96</sup> Shaftesbury, *Lessons in Voice Culture*, 20. Edgerly is best known for his text *Instantaneous Personal Magnetism* and the Ralston (Regime, Activity, Light, Strength, Temperament, Oxygen,



SEVENTEENTH EXERCISE.—FIG. II.

Figure 1. "[T]he more easily that air is controlled, the more effective and perfect will be the machine through which the artistic impulses of the singer are to find vent." From Henry Harper Hulbert, *Breathing for Voice Production*

**Figure 3.3. "[T]he more easily that air is controlled, the more effective and perfect will be the machine through which the artistic impulses of the singer are to find vent." From Hulbert, *Breathing for Voice Production*, 59.**

argued, in order to avoid an overabundance of vibrato or an exaggerated *portemento* caused by a too rigid throat. Excessive vibrato, in particular, was singled out as a clear indication of uncontrolled emotion and equated with uncultivated singing.

Likewise, palatal flexibility was crucial to producing a variety of timbres, but was most often singled out as the anatomical component that regulated the flow of air through the pharynx

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Nature) movement, which he founded. See Marc Abrahams, "Strange Attraction," *The Guardian* 6 June 2005 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2005/jun/07/highereducation.research1>), accessed 18 April 2013.

and into the mouth. The improper positioning of the soft palate, or velum, would either allow the voice to sound through the nose or catch in the bottom of the pharyngeal cavity. Clara Rogers singled out the "pliability of the speech organs" as crucial for the defects of the "American voice" and included two chapters in her *English Diction, Part 1* to address the issue. Rogers argued that "[m]uch of the slovenly speaking that we hear is caused by an inability to make quickly enough all of the various movements required" for proper speech.<sup>97</sup> She thus provided a series of exercises to train pharyngeal flexibility, starting with pronunciations of individual consonants and moving to full sentences that tested a student's ability to enunciate clearly and quickly sentences of complex articulation. Genevieve Stebbins, meanwhile, noted three points of reverberation in the vocal apparatus, each of which corresponded to a different aspect of the psyche: the mental with the back of the upper teeth; the moral with the palatial arch; and the physical with the pharynx. Pharyngeal reverberation, or singing from the back of the throat, was best expressed by the singing of "the common street-vendor, as he calls his wares."<sup>98</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss such racialized and sexualized theories as mere pseudo-science — fanciful notions of vocal production based on flimsy evidence that traded in class, racial, and ethnic stereotypes. But for authors of voice culture texts, racialized voices represented an increasingly diverse population that posed a tangible threat to the project of creating a sound body politic. The voices of this mass populace, it was feared, would soon overwhelm civic discourse and undermine the attempt to forge an ideal vocal aesthetic. Vocal training offered an inoculation against such degeneracy. By focusing on the body as a transformative site for cultural and social progress, vocal pedagogues argued that proper training would lead to the improvement of national voice and the formation of an ideal national subject. The British

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<sup>97</sup> Rogers, *English Diction, Part 1*, 30.

<sup>98</sup> Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression*, 291.

physiologist and musician Golan Hoole stated this idea most succinctly: "Supreme greatness in the art of singing is only possible to the well-proportioned, finely built, perfectly organised man."<sup>99</sup> By correlating self-discipline with vocal expression, voice-culture authors suggested that by scientifically training the body and, in turn, vocal expression, one could literally sing the progress of American civilization.

### **Oscar Saenger and the Dissemination of an U.S. Imperial Voice**

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to focus on the work of Oscar Saenger, one of the most prolific vocal instructors of the early twentieth-century and the first instructor to make use of recording technology in his pedagogy. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Saenger began formal music instruction at age eighteen at the National Conservatory of Music at Irving Plaza, where he studied voice with the head of the vocal department M. Jacques Bouhy, the French baritone who created the role of Escamillo in *Carmen*.<sup>100</sup> Saenger thrived at the Conservatory, studying acting with the British actor Frederick Robinson and music theory with Bruno Oscar Klein. After leaving the conservatory, Saenger began his professional career as a baritone in 1891 with Gustav Hinrichs's American Opera Company. By 1892, however, Saenger had retired from the stage, joining the vocal faculty at the National Conservatory. In 1895, Saenger launched a six-week course on opera, which he first taught in New York during the winter before adding a

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<sup>99</sup> Golan E. Hoole, *Physiology of the Vocal Registers* (Glasgow: Paterson, Sons & Co., 1902), lviii.

<sup>100</sup> "Oscar Saenger," in *American Biography: A New Cyclopaedia* (New York: The American Historical Society, 1931), 136-138.

summer program in Chicago. Among his more famous students were the Queena Mario, Paul Althouse, and Marion Anderson.<sup>101</sup>

Saenger devoted the remainder of his life to teaching and to shaping the national discourse on vocal pedagogy. Saenger was a charter member, and later president in 1925, of the New York Singing Teachers' Association. The Association, founded as the National Association of Teachers of Singing in 1908, promoted itself as an organization geared towards promoting principles of vocal training and regulating the artistic and business practices of instructors. Their mission, adopted at the First Annual Meeting, held in Steinway Hall on January 7, 1908, read as follows:

To establish a standard of vocal instruction for building and developing the voice upon natural principles, such as were employed by the old Italian masters and such as are recognized today by the medical profession as beneficial to the preservation of the vocal apparatus; to encourage and effect coöperation among teachers of singing for the protection of their interests and for the establishing and maintaining of such standards; to grant Certificates of Proficiency to teachers of singing according to such standards; to procure Legislation fixing the qualifications and requiring registration of teachers of singing, and to effect the foundation of a National Normal School for the Training of Teachers of Singing, and the foundation of a National School of American Singers, scientific and artistic.<sup>102</sup>

To fulfill their mission, the Association regularly invited medical professionals, including Floyd Muckey, Herbert Witherspoon, and Irving Voorhees, to deliver talks on the latest scientific theories of proper voice production. Saenger was also a founding member of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (established in 1924), and he helped shape the professional practices of vocal pedagogy by, according to Academy's Code of Ethics and Practice, "promot[ing] the teaching of singing, not primarily as a commercial product, but as a means of

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<sup>101</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert That Awakened America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 25.

<sup>102</sup> *Twenty Years of the New York Singing Teachers' Association Incorporated* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser Co., 1928), 8-9.

culture."<sup>103</sup> Saenger, along with the other professional instructors, sought to regulate vocal training in order to provide standard expectations for both students and teachers. The Academy emphasized, above all else, the need for slow, steady development, and required its members to teach a student continuously for "a minimum of one year" before they could claim the student as a pupil. Such restrictions sought to address the propensity of instructors promising their students immediate results and guaranteed success; to do was, according to the Code, "a breach of ethics and integrity."<sup>104</sup>

In 1916, Saenger published his *Course in Vocal Training* through the Victor Talking Machine Company, and with his student Paul Althouse, recorded a series of ten double-sided recordings demonstrating Saenger's conception of how an ideal singing voice ought to sound.<sup>105</sup> Saenger and Victrola touted the *Course's* contributions to "the musical art of the Nation" by promoting the use of recordings in vocal training as a technological innovation that would allow students living "far from...the great musical centers" to study with a world-renown instructor. Indeed, this text was meant to showcase U.S. talent on the global stage, disseminating the nation's imperial voice and declaring the importance of vocal training as part of "What the Victor Company Presents to the World." Like most vocal pedagogy texts, Saenger's monograph included sections on the philosophy of art song ("song is intended to stir us into action and into a condition where we become conscious of the presence of higher, holier things than 'are dreamed of in our philosophies'"), bodily comportment, breath control, placement of the voice, formation of vowel sounds, attack, registers of the voice, and phrasing. Throughout the text, Saenger relies

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<sup>103</sup> "Code of Ethics and Practice," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 11, no. 2 (1924), 16.

<sup>104</sup> "Code of Ethics," 16.

<sup>105</sup> Oscar Saenger, *The Oscar Saenger Course in Vocal Training: A Complete Course of Vocal Study for the Tenor Voice on Victor Records* (Camden, NJ: The Victor Talking Machine Company, 1916). Hereafter, I will refer to this manual as Saenger, *Course*.

on notions of unsound bodies to illustrate poor singing; thus, “[t]he scooping up [to a note] so frequently indulged in by poor singers may be the result of a rigid throat, defective sense of pitch, slovenliness, or lack of breath control. The written instructions for each recorded lesson are almost militaristic in tone:

Attention! Stand erect; take a quiet, deep breath; open your mouth and throat naturally, relaxing the tongue and jaw. Listen carefully to the pitch, and, with the intention of singing your most beautiful tone on the vowel *ah*, attach the tone clearly, never pushing or forcing the voice, and focusing it forward in the face.<sup>106</sup>

Saenger’s manual also included a chapter on the general use and maintenance of the Victrola that integrated vocal cultivation with what Thorstein Veblen famously referred to as "conspicuous consumption." The first chapter, “How to Use the Victrola” is a somewhat technical explanation on the best method for playing records that includes advice on the proper amount to wind the motor, advice on cleaning the records using velvet, and instructions for adjusting the speed of the motor so that the turntable revolves at precisely seventy-eight revolutions per minutes.<sup>107</sup> Students were also instructed to use a new needle every time a record was played, suggesting both careful attention to preserving the discs as well as providing Victor with a steady source of income after the initial purchase of the records. The recordings served two primary functions, according to Saenger: first, they ensured that "the girl from a small town" could study with a renowned instructor regularly at a relatively low cost (Saenger’s manual,

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<sup>106</sup> Saenger, *Course*, 9, 10-11, 16, 23, 34.

<sup>107</sup> Saenger, *Course*, 25. These instructions include the rather mundane task of placing a piece of paper between the record and the turntable, and then counting the number of revolutions made by the paper. The instructions take up an entire paragraph of text, repeating the dictum regarding proper turntable speed with increasing urgency: “The turntable should revolve at seventy-eight revolutions per minute... The turntable *must* turn at seventy-eight revolutions per minute... It is of the utmost importance that in playing the singing records the turntable of the Victrola should revolve exactly at the rate of 78 revolutions per minute.”

including the recordings, cost twenty-five dollars).<sup>108</sup> Second, they helped instructors avoid the fatigue of unending daily lessons.<sup>109</sup>

Saenger's manual is a fascinating text that explicitly correlates social development and civic virtue with refined singing, a progression made explicit in a series of images accompanying the section "How to Practice with the Records." In this section, Saenger emphasizes the student's need for "[s]elf-analysis and self-criticism" as well as adherence to a strict, daily regimen of vocal practice to be conducted "in a special room...devoted exclusively to the daily practice" in the event that the student finds him- or herself suffering from a lack of "mental concentration."<sup>110</sup> The accompany images clearly demonstrate the student's vocal and corporeal evolution (see Fig. 3.4). In the first two images, the student (Althouse) is seated immediately before the Victrola, listening intently to the recordings while studying the exercises in the text. In the third image, the student is standing next to the Victrola, feet together, holding the open manual, while performing the exercises along with the recordings. In the final image, the student has come fully into his own: the manual missing from view, the student now performs without assistance, standing with one foot slightly in front of the other in a manner suggesting poise and confidence.

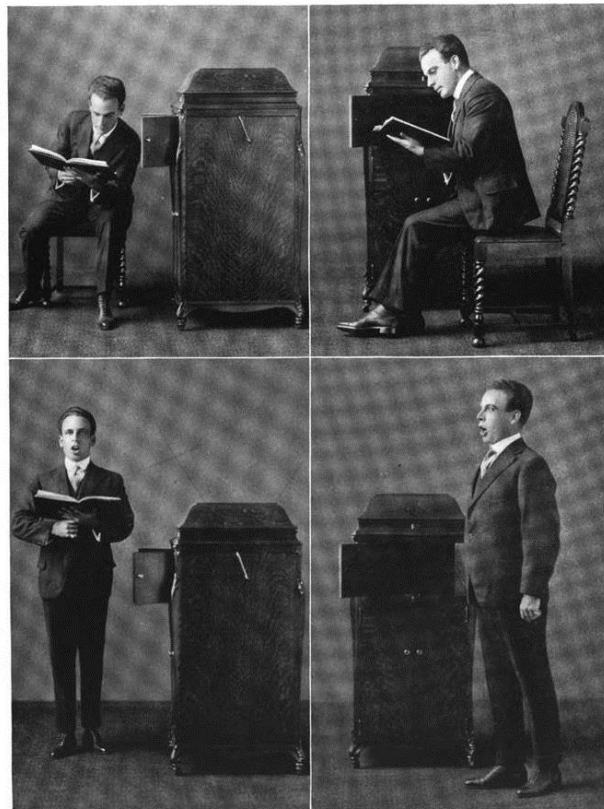
The recordings, performed by Althouse with Saenger as the accompanist, provide material evidence of the sound that voice culture authors sought to define the nation. More significantly, the *Course* placed a model for singing into homes throughout the nation, pre-dating by just a few years the dissemination of a seemingly nonaccented English on radio broadcasts that radio historian Michele Hilmes has identified as "a ticket into the middle class for the sons

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<sup>108</sup> Harriette Brower, "Oscar Saenger: Use of Records in Vocal Study," in *Vocal Mastery: Talks with Master Singers and Teachers* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917), 227. In 2013 U.S. dollars, the *Course* would cost roughly \$532. See Inflation Calculator: Bureau of Labor Statistics, [http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (accessed 2 April 2013).

<sup>109</sup> Brower, "Oscar Saenger," 227.

<sup>110</sup> Saenger, *Course*, 26.



In studying the lessons the student should sit and stand close to the Victrola, as shown above

Figure 2. Paul Althouse demonstrates a student's vocal and corporeal evolution through singing.

**Figure 3.4. Paul Althouse demonstrates a student's vocal and corporeal evolution through singing. From Saenger's *Course*.**

and daughters...of immigrants," to which we could certainly add those wishing to rid themselves of a regional U.S. dialect.<sup>111</sup> Each recording begins with a spoken introduction by Saenger describing, carefully and with exaggerated enunciation, the objective for the exercise. Lesson twenty for tenors on vocalize is typical (the italicized words mark those words spoken with added emphasis): "The purpose of vocalizes is to place and fix the voice *ac-cur-ate-ly* and to develop taste while singing *rhyth-mi-cal-ly* and *el-e-gant-ly*."<sup>112</sup> The exercise that follows, a simple melody sung by Althouse using the Italian vowel *ah*, leaves space between phrases, allowing the student to immediately repeat the phrase just performed. The tone is admittedly generic: Althouse employs a round, full timbre and uses the slightest hint of *portamento* between notes. What is striking about this text and the included exercises is the lack of attention paid to developing individual approaches to performance; instead, conformity to standard technique is stressed throughout the manual, with students urged to obey Saenger's "authoritative voice."<sup>113</sup>

## Conclusion

Saenger hoped that his text would offered an inoculation against the supposed degeneracy of modern life, popular culture, and racial interaction by providing a model not simply of successful performance practices but for embodying through song an ideal form of national subjectivity. The circulation of people brought about by global capitalism and imperial expansion, in particular, shaped a sonic epistemology based on racial Otherness that heard music, and singing more specifically, as an index of the corporeal and social body. By 1900, U.S.

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<sup>111</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>112</sup> Saenger, *Course*, 74. A recording of this lesson is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRpYjE9mbqM> (accessed 12 October 2012).

<sup>113</sup> Saenger, *Course*, 10.

audiences were increasingly familiar with the sounds of foreign and indigenous musics through everyday interactions as well as a variety of media: from travel journals, to essays in the popular press, to the highly racialized depictions of blacks and immigrants in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville, and, later, on commercial music recordings. While such depictions often relied on a simple dichotomy of Western music and non-Western noise, commentators employed a rich lexicon for documenting foreign sounds, from the use of dialect in depicting foreign speakers' use of English to descriptions of non-Western and indigenous musics. Most striking was the reliance on corporeal language to describe foreign music making, either through non-verbal, psychological descriptions (screams, cries, and moans) or physiological terminology (nasal, throaty, guttural). Such cacophony propagated the need for a national voice, formulated and authorized by experts such as Saenger and others, that would mollify an increasingly vociferous public.

By focusing on the body as a transformative site for cultural and social progress, vocal pedagogues argued that proper training would lead to the improvement of national vocality and the formation of an ideal national subject. For these authors, beautiful singing resulted from a body organized along contemporary ideals of proper bodily comportment: good posture, restrained movement, and carefully composed emotions. Such adherence to a strict vocal regimen allowed singers to distance themselves from the din and noise of mass culture while helping to inaugurate an ideal national sound. Voice culture represented a physical manifestation of the attempt by the nation's elites to secure their continuing monopoly over the conditions of national, racial, and class belonging. The national voice sought by the nation's pedagogues embodied the supposed virtues of national character: patriotism, discipline, and capitalist industriousness. The systems of vocal care and management devised by the nation's singing

instructors instilled these virtues, combining the belief in 'beautiful music' as a tool for social progress with a corporeal regimen that molded bodies into specimens of an idealized, and racialized, national subject.

There is a real intimacy at the heart of vocal pedagogy, both in what vocal training (broadly construed) tells us about ourselves as well as what it reveals about our relationship to others. Singing involves a new way of knowing ourselves — we become more aware of our physiological workings as we familiarize ourselves with the intricate details of our anatomy. Learning to breathe in order to sustain a tone makes us (sometimes uncomfortably) aware of our posture (or lack thereof), while mastering the subtleties of timbre manipulation teaches us about the intricate coordination of mouth, tongue, pharynx, and larynx. We also become more acutely aware of others' bodies, hearing the strain and stress of another singer's body as she performs. Our voices mark us as historically-situated actors, and they reveal the subtle ways in which we come to embody and express a range of subject positions: race, gender, class, sexuality, region, and nation. Training the voice trains the body, and as such, we need to map carefully how the contours of power wind through singing pedagogy in order to reveal how racial and national ideologies are embodied through vocal practice and performance. By attending carefully to how such ideologies are intimately absorbed — down to one's very cartilage, muscles, and bones — we can begin to understand more clearly how our songful performance shapes us and our relationship to the body politic.

## Chapter Four

### Bert Williams's Vocal Challenge

According to Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams, he had a terrible voice. His voice had not always been so fragile, but the years of toiling in music halls and vaudeville theatres had by the late-1910s taken their toll. As a performer and recording artist, Williams paid special attention to how he sounded; he once described how, upon entering an unfamiliar performance space, he would pace the stage while speaking, seeking the acoustically-best location from which to deliver his songs and comic monologues.<sup>1</sup> Writing towards the end of his career in *American Magazine* in 1918, Williams waxed eloquently about his vocal limitations, noting how carefully he had crafted his stage presence in order to preserve his failing voice. In this essay, "The Comic Side of Trouble," Williams also discussed how he developed his sense of humor, gave a brief overview of his early years traveling the nation with his former partner George Walker (who had passed away in 1911), noted his apprenticeship with the Italian performer Pietro, and spoke of the preparations required to succeed in contemporary theater. On the importance and limitations of his voice Williams wrote,

When I was a lad I thought I had a voice, but I learned differently in later years. I did not take proper care of it, and now I have to talk all my numbers. And even what little voice I have left has to be nursed and petted like a prize cat...People have sometimes observed that I practice unusual economy of motion and do not move about as much as other singers do. It is to spare my voice and not my legs that I stand still while delivering a song. If my voice were stronger I would be as active as anybody, because it is much easier to put a song over if you can move about.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bert Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," *American Magazine* 85, no. 1 (1918): 34.

<sup>2</sup> Bert Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," 34.

Williams's reference to his "unusual economy of motion" revealed the subtlety with which he approached his stagecraft. Indeed, when compared to his peers, Williams often seemed reserved as his carefully rehearsed stage persona presented the antithesis to Walker's barely-contained exuberance and Aida Overton Walker's bodily kinaesthetics.<sup>3</sup> It is, in part, Williams's subtlety, as I will argue, that made his performances so effective at critiquing racial ideologies yet so easy to overlook.

Because of its wide-ranging nature, "The Comic Side of Trouble" has become one of Williams's better known and oft-analyzed statements. Numerous scholars — including Daphne Brooks, Louis Chude-Sokei, David Krasner, and William Lhamon, Jr. — have drawn on the insights found in this essay to reassess Williams's legacy as a black popular entertainer at the turn of the twentieth century who spent the majority of his career performing in blackface.<sup>4</sup> These scholars have productively repositioned Bert Williams as more than simply "the last

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<sup>3</sup> My use of the term persona here is taken from theater scholar Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 100-119, which he defines as "a person's representation of self within a discursive domain" (102). Auslander's article serves as a critique of musicologist Nicholas Cook's earlier article, "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance." *Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (2001), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>, in which Cook understands music performance as the realization of the score as a "script," that is, "as choreographing a series of real-time, social interactions between players." Auslander rightly criticizes Cook's formulation by pointing out how his theory retains its attachment to the musical work by making the work the object of performance. Instead, Auslander asks us to posit that it is the "representation of self [that] is the direct object of the verb *to perform*" (102, emphasis in original). Auslander's insights are crucial for understanding the representations realized by a performer such as Williams, as his performances realized and critiqued a notion of a newly-emerging notion of a modern, urban black subjectivity.

<sup>4</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), and W.T. Lhamon, Jr., "Whittling on Dynamite: The Difference Bert Williams Makes," in *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music*, ed. Eric Weisbard, 1-25 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

darky," to borrow Chude-Sokei's phrase; they have shown how Williams consistently and innovatively undermined the minstrel mask he wore onstage for more than twenty years. Yet, with the exception of Chude-Sokei, this same group of historians has left unexamined one of the primary performance characteristics that made Williams one of the most successful performers at the turn of the twentieth century: his voice. This, to say the least, is a critical oversight. Williams spent years listening carefully to the sounds of black America and incorporating the diaspora's various dialects, accents, and colloquialisms into his stage persona. While he may have been better known then as now for his comedic genius, it was his vocal stylings — his tone, pitch, the various accents and dialects he employed, and the melodies he sang — that materialized his humorous tales.

Though I part ways from Chude-Sokei in his belief that Williams's "native" accent was that of a West Indian (about which I will have more to say later in the chapter), I agree with his assertion that Williams's voice auralized the "transnationally displaced sound of...black modernism."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Chude-Sokei's discussion of Williams's voice as part of a cross-cultural masquerade compels future scholars dealing with Williams's musical legacy to consider the many-layered complexities of a West Indian immigrant performing, in Chude-Sokei's words, "as the white racist representations of an *African American* [that] was culturally other to him."<sup>6</sup> Williams felt strongly about both the discrimination and violence faced by blacks in the U.S. and believed that his status as a West Indian immigrant lent him a critical distance from the racial politics of the United States. Speaking to reporter Percy Hammond in 1913, Williams noted the hypocrisy of the nation's racial structures:

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<sup>5</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky"*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 5. Emphasis in original.

This may sound snobbish, though it isn't; I'm not a native of the United States, but a West Indian, and I must take solace from my philosophy so long as I earn my livelihood in this country. The rebellion is all out of me; for I know that it is up to me, and that this is the only civilization in all the world where a man's color makes a difference, other matters being regarded as equal. And you must admit that there's food for thought, not necessarily bitter, in the fact that in London I may sit in open lodge with a premier of Great Britain, and be entertained in the home of a distinguished novelist, while here in the United States, which fought four years for a certain principle, I am often treated with an air of personal and social condescension by the gentleman who sweeps out my dressing room or the gentleman whose duty it is to turn the spotlight on me if the stage directions call upon him so to do.<sup>7</sup>

As a black performer working within the modern U.S. entertainment industries, Williams attempted with various degrees of success to break from the minstrel stereotypes prevalent in popular entertainment by drawing upon the sensibilities expressed by a burgeoning professional class of musicians performing music based on the energetic strains of ragtime syncopation. This break, however, was not complete: after all, Williams performed in blackface with few exceptions for the majority of his professional career. Nor did Williams completely leave behind the sounds of antebellum African America; as I will discuss below, he regularly invoked the slave spirituals that had for years come to define the highest form black musical expression in the U.S. Instead, Williams reshaped and re-produced these visual and aural signifiers as a way to preserve and to assess critically their continued resonance within the black community and U.S. society. By listening carefully to and re-sounding the legacies of black music and orality, Williams embedded his performance in the praxis of black social life, to paraphrase E. Patrick

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<sup>7</sup> "Bert Williams Talks on An American Phase," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 30 March 1913: B4. Hammond is not listed as the author here, but this quote appears verbatim in Percy Hammond, "Mr. Williams and His Thwarted Stage Career," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 20 Dec 1914: G1, where Hammond indicates that Williams made this statement to him.

Johnson, as a way to address both the discursive and material formations of the nation's racial legacies.<sup>8</sup>

Williams's voice, his visual as well as his corporeal performances of the down-and-out "Negro darky," thus provides an early-twentieth century example of what Alexander Weheliye has called black culture's "phonographic" practices.<sup>9</sup> For Weheliye, the phonograph (the mass production of which accompanied Williams's rise to fame) reveals the "iterability of speech," i.e., the ability of sound, especially within black culture, to reproduce itself in abstracted and systematic formulations. Yet the phonograph, because of the way in which it disrupts the relationship between sound and source, origin and copy, produces not simply a reproduction of an authentic, original performance but instead "activat[es] difference."<sup>10</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying, we might read Weheliye's activation of difference as an ability to listen repeatedly to sonic performances that shifts the discussion of sonic representation from production to reception. By focusing on reception, we reorient the discussion towards a consideration of how listeners approach musical performances in individual ways that will necessarily depend on the contexts in which those auditory actions take place. Such an understanding of sound reproduction, for Weheliye, provided "an opening, not for overturning

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<sup>8</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). For more on the performative nature of blackness through ragtime and coons songs, see Patricia R. Schroeder, "Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race," *The Journal of American Culture* 33, no. 2 (2010): 139-153.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). For an exploration of how phonography was used by black authors to inscribe historical memory into their texts, see Katherine Biers, "Syncope Fever: James Weldon Johnson and the Black Phonographic Voice," *Representations* 96, no. 1 (2006), 99-125, and Brian Hochman, "Hearing Lost, Hearing Found: George Washington Cable and the Phono-Ethnographic Ear," *American Literature* 82, no. 3 (2010): 519-551.

<sup>10</sup> Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 32.

racism *per se*, but for providing new modalities of racial formation."<sup>11</sup> We can hear the use of phonographic practices throughout Williams's career, such as the use of reported speech employed by Williams on several recordings that continuously gave new life to tales of the black folk or in his use of antebellum black musical forms.<sup>12</sup> Williams's performances, following Weheliye, did not overturn or fully undermine the racist stereotypes upon which he drew, a fact made evident by how quickly Williams's fame was forgotten by the next generation of African American critics. However, we must ask how did Williams's voice, as part of his crafted stage persona, afford new ways of inhabiting racial bodies and for understanding the "new modalities of racial formation" taking place in the early twentieth century?

For both white and black audiences, Williams represented in the words of fellow West Indian ex-patriot Jessie Fauset the "the racial type itself," even as he acknowledged throughout his career how *foreign* African America was to him.<sup>13</sup> As a West Indian immigrant performing the racialized sound of African America, Bert Williams exposed the lie behind theories that tied vocal performance to anatomical determinism even as he laid claim to notions of racial difference in arguing for his superior ability to perform black music. Williams's vocal play forces us not only to consider the politics of singing with black U.S. society but also to ask questions regarding the efficacy of claiming ownership over notions of essential racial difference. To listen to Bert Williams's voice, then, was to hear the racial ambiguities of early twentieth-century

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<sup>11</sup> Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 44-45.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that Williams's recordings were consumed in great quantities. As Tim Brooks notes, Williams was one of Columbia Records best-selling artists, and the sales figures that exist show that his most popular recordings from 1919 until 1922 sold roughly 200,000 copies (this at a time when total sales for the industry had reached roughly 100 million recordings sold per year). See Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 143. Yet, through his extensive touring and performance schedule, Williams's voice certainly reached large audiences across the nation.

<sup>13</sup> Jessie Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," *The Crisis* 24, no. 1 (1922): 15.

American popular culture. Through its indebtedness to traditional black music practices, it was an elusive, yet familiar sound, at once embodying what Ralph Ellison would later call a "near-tragic, near-comic lyricism," while simultaneously eliding such easy categorization by emanating from behind the blackface mask.<sup>14</sup> Sung through this mask, his voice resonated nineteenth-century stereotypes of black singing and dialect that were, in turn, amplified by the new, mass-produced technologies of sound reproduction. Yet by foregrounding the performative nature of the minstrel black voice through tactics of parody, mimicry, and appropriation, Williams attempted to refuse such racist caricatures and exposed to close scrutiny the centrality of black singing within American racial formations.

I want to concentrate in this chapter on how Williams consciously cultivated his vocal persona in order to signal a dynamic shift in what it meant to sound black in U.S. popular music. I do not mean to suggest here that Williams's voice was widely copied by other singers; rather, as the most famous and most frequently recorded black artist in the early twentieth century, Williams's voice resonated throughout American popular music, fundamentally transforming the soundscape of American racial formation. Nor do I wish to suggest that I hear Williams's singing performances as always already resistant. While scholars including Daphne Brooks, Camille Forbes, David Krasner, and Karen Sotiropoulos have productively shown how Williams, Walker, and the other members of black performance community in New York City worked tirelessly to undermine and transform the stereotypes of black life seen and heard on stage throughout the United States, far too often these scholars do so by simply inverting the hierarchy of racial difference.<sup>15</sup> Instead I would urge us, following Michael F. Brown, not to fall "blind...to zones

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *The Antioch Review* 5, no. 2 (1945): 198-211.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008);

of complicity and, for that matter, of sui generis creativity" that mark all cultural productions.<sup>16</sup> This is not to dismiss the very real politics of Williams's performance, which he made explicit time and time again throughout his writings. It is, however, to bring awareness to the fact that Williams's performances (along with those of Walker, Ernest Hogan, and others) were also complicit in the continued circulation of minstrel stereotypes. So too do readings of Williams's masquerade as always already resistant often overlook the humor of Williams's pointed mimicry.

This chapter proceeds in three sections: first, I provide an overview of the performance community within which Williams worked, discussing the various debates over what signified modern musical blackness by such figures as James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, George Walker, Ernest Hogan, Aida Overton Walker, Will Marion Cook, Lester Walton, and Theodore Drury. Here, I draw primarily on the essays and articles written by these individuals for black periodicals (the *New York Age*, *The Colored American Magazine*, and others) as well as archival material found in the Robinson Locke Collection and the Robert Baral Papers held at the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. At the conclusion of this section, I provide a close listening of one of Williams and Walker's early recordings, "I Don't Like That Face You Wear" (1901), in order to discuss how the duo employed this new aesthetic of musical blackness in their stage performance. Next, I discuss in detail Williams's performance philosophy, drawing on his writings regarding his stagecraft as well as analyzing the general characteristics of his performance persona. This section ends with an analysis of his performance in the film *Natural Born Gambler* (1916) that focuses on the

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Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*; Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).  
<sup>16</sup> Michael F. Brown, "On Resisting Resistance," *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 4 (1996): 733. For a similar critique of the idea of agency as it pertains to African American slaves, see Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113-124.

subtlety of his corporeal enactment of the "darker" character, a deliberateness that carried over into his vocal persona. In the third and final section, I discuss in depth his audio recordings. Here, I trace the development of his signature vocal styles chronologically in order to explore how and why Williams ultimately settled on the vocal persona for which he became famous. I also provide a comparative analysis of his recordings alongside those of the white recording artists Billy Murray and Arthur Collins in order to show 1) how Williams's sonic blackness differed from contemporary white portrayals of the "darker" caricature, and 2) how Williams's voice influenced white performers to try to sound more "natural."

### **con Raggioso**

Williams's biography by this point has been well covered: he was born in Nassau in the British West Indies (today, the Bahamas) in 1874 to a Dutch father and biracial mother (described by Williams as "half Spanish and half African").<sup>17</sup> His family moved to the U.S. when Williams was two before returning to the Bahamas and then immigrated permanently in 1885. After completing high school, Williams made plans to attend Stanford University but first joined a minstrel show in order to earn extra money, thus beginning his stage career. He met his long-time partner George Walker in San Francisco in 1893, and by 1896 he and Walker were performing in New York. Billing themselves as "Two Real Coons," Williams and Walker took on the roles of the always down on his luck, slow-witted and slow-footed "darker" character who was forever entranced — and ensnared — by his scheming, stylish "dandy" accomplice. The duo

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, "Comic Side of Trouble," 34. For more on Williams's biography, see Mabel Rowland, ed., *Bert Williams, Son of Laughter; a Symposium of Tribute to the Man and His Work* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Ann Charters, *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); and Eric Ledell Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992).

first received critical attention with their role in *The Gold Bug* (1896), a commercial failure in which Williams and Walker were added during the show's run in hopes of boosting sales. After honing their skills in several more shows, the Williams and Walker company (by this time including Aida Overton Walker) scored their first major success with *In Dahomey* (1903), followed by *Abyssinia* (1906), and *Bandana Land* (1907). Walker retired from the stage due to illness (syphilis) with the closing of *Bandana Land* in 1909 and died two years later, by which time Williams had joined the all-white cast of Florenz Ziegfeld's *Follies*. Contrary to many assertions, Williams did not always perform in blackface while part of the *Follies*: during the 1916 season, Williams appeared, according to a reviewer, in "his natural *café au lait* complexion" during one of the skits.<sup>18</sup> Williams also appeared on stage at least once with white women, performing with the Fairbanks twins in the 1917 *Follies*.<sup>19</sup> Williams stayed with the *Follies* until 1918, when he left claiming that his talents were being underutilized.<sup>20</sup>

Williams was part of a community of black performers at the turn of the century that represented a new generation of cultural producers, born after slavery, who argued for social and cultural uplift through the creation of new musical forms.<sup>21</sup> This new aesthetic was necessary, they argued, to capture the economic and social opportunities made available within the

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<sup>18</sup> Unsourced article, Box 13, Folder 12 "Follies 1917." Robert Baral Papers, \*T-Mss 1983-001, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Hereafter, Robert Baral Papers. For references to Williams always performing in blackface, see Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 3; Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams,* 183, 318.

<sup>19</sup> Review, possibly from *Dramatic Mirror* dated 23 June 1917, Robert Baral Papers, 1983-001/Box 13, Folder 12 "Follies 1917."

<sup>20</sup> Another reason why Williams left the follies is no doubt due to the types of characters he was asked to portray throughout the years: switchboard operator, cabbie, janitor, and so on, as well as the names of his characters, such as "Onyx," from the 1914 season. See Robert Baral Papers, 1983-001/Box 13, Folder 8 "Follies 1914," Robert Baral Papers, 1983-001/Box 13, Folder 14 "Follies 1919," and MWEZ nc 5628 #2.

<sup>21</sup> Allen Woll notes that the 1890 census included nearly 1,500 African Americans who listed their profession as "actor." See Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 2.

burgeoning popular music industry. As Williams stated in 1908, "We've got 350 years of suffering in back of us. There's nothing very inspiring in that. The negro race, you'll notice, has no songs of triumph. We never licked anybody. But we've got simplicity and sorrow and love for one another. That's what colored drama must be made of — if we could only learn to write it."<sup>22</sup> Reading through the pages of *The Colored American Magazine*, *The Negro Music Journal*, and other turn-of-the-century black periodicals, one gets a sense of the excitement that musicians and critics felt over the potential new opportunities available to black musical artists. Reminiscing in 1906 about the months following their arrival in New York, George Walker wrote,

The first move was to hire a flat in Fifty-third street, furnish it, and throw our doors open to all colored men who possessed theatrical and musical ability and ambition. The Williams and Walker flat soon became the headquarters of all the artistic young men of our race who were stage struck. Among those who frequented our home were: Messrs. Will Marion Cook, Harry T. Burleigh, Bob Cole and Billy Johnson, J. A. Shipp, the late Will Accoo, a man of much musical ability, and many others whose names are well known in the professional world. We also entertained the late Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the Negro poet, who wrote lyrics for us.<sup>23</sup>

During the first decade of the twentieth century, members of this community established numerous business ventures that sought to place control of black cultural products in the hands of black cultural producers. These included the Gotham-Attucks Music Company (1905) and The Frogs, a professional organization whose duty was not simply to establish professional standards amongst the growing population of black performers but that would also serve as a social and archival organization for the preservation and promotion of black social life.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "In 'The Regeneration' Notes of Plays and Players," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 15 March 1908, G1.

<sup>23</sup> George Walker, "The Negro on the American Stage," *The Colored American Magazine* 11, no. 4 (2006), 247.

<sup>24</sup> "The Frogs," *New York Age* 6 October 1908, 6. For more on Gotham-Attucks, including a list of publications by the company, see Wayne D. Shirley, "The House of Melody: A List of Publications of the Gotham-Attucks Music Company at the Library of Congress," *The Black Perspective in Music* 15, no. 1 (1987), 79-112.

These performers grounded this new musical aesthetic in the syncopated rhythms of ragtime coming out of the South and Midwest (by way of New York's Tin Pan Alley) that they believed captured more accurately the optimism and vitality of modern, urban black life.<sup>25</sup> As J. Rosamond Johnson, brother of James Weldon Johnson and one of the foremost composers of his generation, explained, "After slavery we find the Negro singing his happy minstrel songs, giving expressions of his joy [those expressions] being the outcome of a happy sense of emotions prompted by the fact of being free men."<sup>26</sup> This music would, as Rosamond Johnson hoped, meld with European music into a unique, national form: "just so soon as this peculiar American syncopation is developed into a classic form will the censors of music find a place for 'ragtime' in the history of music. Perhaps they may call it con 'Raggioso.'"<sup>27</sup> Thus in contrast to calls by Henry Krehbiel and others to base a national classical form on the slave spirituals (following Antonin Dvořák's recommendation from 1893), Rosamond Johnson, Williams, Walker, and the black vaudeville community proposed instead to base a national musical aesthetic on the more energetic strains of ragtime's syncopated rhythms.<sup>28</sup> George Walker, however, realized the limitations of ragtime, noting that its reliance on the market, and thus on white patronage, was partly responsible for the music's slow acceptance as an artistic form: "Ragtime is just part of the

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<sup>25</sup> For readings on ragtime's history, see Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1966); Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); John Edward Hasse, ed., *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985); Jeffrey Magee, "Ragtime and Early Jazz," in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 388-417; David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *That American Rag: The Story of Ragtime from Coast to Coast* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> J. Rosamond Johnson, "Why They Call American Music Ragtime," *The Colored American Magazine* 15, no. 1 (1909), 638.

<sup>27</sup> Rosamond Johnson, "Ragtime," 639.

<sup>28</sup> For more on Dvořák's, slave spirituals, and U.S. national music, see Michael Beckerman, "Henry Krehbiel, Antonín Dvořák, and the Symphony 'From the New World,'" *Notes* 49, no. 2 (1992): 447-473.

chaos out of which real genius will some day be evolved. We shall have great negro masters of music in the generations to come. We shall have great poets, too, for our race is a poetic one. But all these things will take time. Our poets must stick to negro dialect to make themselves heard, or to sell their wares, and our composers must write ragtime for the same reason, until the white man's serious consideration has been earned."<sup>29</sup>

Training in acting, musical composition, and performance for black entertainers was of critical importance if this community was to move away from what Bob Cole, a graduate of Atlanta University and one of the elder statesmen amongst this generation having been born in 1868, called the "severe usages of the Negro as villain, part villain in every instance with but few exceptions."<sup>30</sup> For Cole, the move away from such portrayals began in the 1870s with the performance of "Out of Bondage" by the Hyer Sisters and Sam Lucas, the latter an established composer since the 1870s and perhaps best known for being the first African American to portray Uncle Tom on stage and on film (James Weldon Johnson would later call Lucas the "Grand Old Man of the Negro Stage").<sup>31</sup> Several members of this community were already highly trained musicians: Will Marion Cook had studied at Oberlin as a teenager before training at the Berlin Hochschule fur Musik and later with Dvořák at the National Conservatory of Music, while J. Rosamond Johnson (who would later compose "Lift Every Voice and Sing" with his

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<sup>29</sup> Envelope #2461, unsourced article, Robinson Locke Collection, \*T-Mss 1924-001, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Hereafter, Robinson Locke Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Bob Cole, "The Negro and the Stage," *The Colored American Magazine* 4, no. 3 (1902), 302.

<sup>31</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Arno Press, 1968 [1930]), 90. Lucas would later perform with Cole and James Weldon Johnson in *A Trip to Coontown* (1897). See Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 118.

brother James Weldon Johnson) trained at the New England Conservatory.<sup>32</sup> Walker, in his characteristically defiant fashion, wrote that: "I wish we had such a theatre where we could train negroes to realize that a colored person has parts worthy of serious notice by himself and by others. There is no reason why we should be forced to do these old-time nigger acts. It's all rot, this slap-stick-bandanna handkerchief-bladder in the face act, with which negro acting is associated. It ought to die out and we are trying hard to kill it."<sup>33</sup> Williams made a similar observation in 1907 when discussing the aesthetic differences between earlier performance models and what he and Walker were attempting with their minstrel parodies: "We must admit the progress, achievements and possibilities thus far allotted to the Negro in this work is still in its infancy, but growing very rapidly. For example, let us take the profession a few years back, and we find that most all the 'so-called' Negro performers were engaged in 'cake-walking,' buck dancing, and 'slap-stick' comicalities, together with all manner of absurd antics which might please the non-sympathetic, biased and prejudiced white man."<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, Williams and Walker planned to found a national theater where black actors and singers could be trained in these new, modern embodiments of black social life. Williams and Walker planned such a venture, tentatively named the "Ethiopian Theatre," but the plan never came to fruition.<sup>35</sup>

The theatrical ventures produced by black performers at the turn of the century were a deliberate effort to reshape the debate of blackness in popular culture by addressing explicitly that nineteenth-century monolith of racial performance: blackface minstrelsy. Actors like Lucas

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<sup>32</sup> For a full biography of Cook, see Marva Griffin Carter, *Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Robinson Locke Collection, Envelope #2461, unsourced article.

<sup>34</sup> "The Stage Negro," *Variety* 14 December 1907: 30.

<sup>35</sup> R. C. Murray, "Williams and Walker, Comedians: Being an Appreciation of Their Talent," *The Colored American Magazine* 9(3), 502, and Robinson Locke Collection, Envelope #2593, "Gotham Gossip of Williams and Walker in 'Bandana Land,'" n.d. See also Alex Rogers, "The American Negro Play," *New York Age* 24 December 1908, 1.

and the Hyer Sisters, along with musicians such as James Bland, had made forays into "legitimate" theater beginning in the 1870s in an effort to present productions less indebted to the legacy of minstrelsy. These shows rarely succeeded financially, however, and it was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that black performers were able to gain audiences by presenting a different view of black cultural life on stage.<sup>36</sup> With the staging of several shows during the 1890s — Sam T. Jack's *Creole Show* (1890-1897), Ernest Hogan's *At Jolly Coon-ey Island* (1896-1897), Bob Cole and Weldon Johnson's *A Trip to Coontown* (1897-1901), and Paul Laurence Dunbar and Will Marion Cook's *Clorindy, The Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898), amongst others — black performers began departing from the structure and formulas of minstrelsy, the titles of the shows notwithstanding.<sup>37</sup> Yet it was not until the shows produced in the first decade of the 1900s that black performers began the serious task of staging commentary on this transitional period of black social life, especially with regard to issues of migration and class. Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Jes Lak White F'lks: A One Act Negro*

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<sup>36</sup> For more on Lucas, see Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 217-219. The three decades from 1870-1900 is woefully underrepresented in black musical and theatrical scholarship and, when discussed, is generally treated as little more than a forgettable twenty years during which black cultural productions were waiting for the arrival of Williams, Walker, and the next generation of stage performers. While an exploration of Lucas's work is beyond the scope of my argument here, I caution against treating the work of Williams, et al, as the teleological culmination of these earlier attempts to undermine the blackface mask. Further scholarship on Lucas would certainly prove fruitful, given his extremely long career, in understanding the development of *fin de siècle* black vaudeville and musical theater. For one such rethinking of 1890s plantation-themed productions, see Barbara L. Webb, "Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 1 (2004), 63-82.

<sup>37</sup> Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 36-41. Also see Henry T. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865-1910* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988); John Graziano, "Black Musical Theater and the Harlem Renaissance," in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 87-110; Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*; Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *A Century of Musicals in Black and White: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works By, About, or Involving African Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).

*Operetto* (1900), for example, centered around the themes of white appropriation (and theft) of black wealth while also targeting the black elite for their classist views of rural African Americans.<sup>38</sup>

One strategy black vaudevillians employed for gaining an economic foothold in the popular song marketplace was to claim superior, natural talent for performing music, dance, and other cultural forms based on or drawn from black social life. Working within the confines of a burgeoning popular music industry heavily reliant on the intertwined ideologies of race, market capitalism, and musical performance, Williams, Walker, and their coterie of vaudeville performers attempted to exploit the public's growing demand for black music by trading in and refining the long-standing beliefs in racialist assumptions of blackness and natural musical ability. As David Gilbert has argued, black musicians laboring in New York during the first two decades of the twentieth century "marketed, innovated, and sold new iterations of black musical expression" as well as new ways of inhabiting the black body through music and dance.<sup>39</sup> This was certainly the assertion made by Williams and Walker. Famously naming themselves "The Two Real Coons," Williams and Walker suggested that their performances represented authentic African American music while white performers were mere imitators — a radical statement at a time when whites in blackface were deemed better capable of displaying black life on stage. In Walker's words,

In those days black-faced white comedians were numerous and very popular. They billed themselves 'coons.' Bert and I watched the white 'coons,' and were often much amused at seeing white men with black cork on their faces trying to imitate black folks. Nothing

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<sup>38</sup> Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*, 55-66.

<sup>39</sup> David Gilbert, "The Product of Our Souls": Ragtime, Race, and the Marketplace in James Reese Europe's New York, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011), 5. Also see Gilbert, "Clef Club Inc.: James Reese Europe and New York's Musical Marketplace," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 4 (2012), 430-456.

about these white men's actions was natural, and therefore nothing was as interesting as if black performers had been dancing and singing their own songs in their own way.<sup>40</sup>

This focus on the real, as David Krasner has noted, simultaneously tapped into white audiences interest in realism at the turn of the century while attempting to reclaim the representation of black social life by black peoples.<sup>41</sup> This "realness" provided by black theatrical productions, however, also traded in similar forms of "ethnological show business" as found in the exhibition of "real" African peoples at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and the Dahomean villages of the California Midwinter International Exposition in 1894, the latter of which served as inspiration for a young Williams and Walker.<sup>42</sup>

The performance practices of black song, and of black music more generally, were a particular point of contention within the vaudeville and musical theater community. One major point of contention was the place of the spirituals within this new vocal style. Foreshadowing in some ways the debates over the spirituals that would take place amongst the New Negroes of the 1920s, *fin de siècle* black performers worried over the place for these black folk sounds within a black modernity quickly being defined by its urbanity.<sup>43</sup> If for writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois

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<sup>40</sup> George W. Walker, "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," *The Theatre Illustrated Magazine of Dramatic and Musical Art* 6, no. 66 (1906), n.p.

<sup>41</sup> David Krasner, "The Real Thing," in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 99-123.

<sup>42</sup> See Bernth Lindfors, "Ethnological Show Business: Footlighting the Dark Continent," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 207-218 (New York: New York University Press, 1996), and the essays in Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Africans On Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> For a thorough discussion of the spirituals within New Negro thought, see Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). Here, Anderson points out how the spirituals provided for black elites like Alain Locke an antidote to modernity's supposed soullessness and the nation's overcivilization. Locke, especially, wished to transform the spirituals from folk expressions to

the spirituals represented the wellspring of African American musical genius, for others these "weird old songs," to quote Du Bois's famous description from *The Souls of Black Folk*, represented little more than the lamentations slavery's legacy.<sup>44</sup> Robert W. Carter, for example, in a review of the Theodore Drury Opera Company's performance of *Aida* in 1903, wrote, "Once the Negro sang only of sorrow, inspired thereto by gloomy surroundings and pitiful conditions. Those days have passed into oblivion, and the brighter day he then hoped for, and which his song voiced[,] is now realized by the present generation of Afro-Americans."<sup>45</sup> While Carter clearly overstated the passing of the spirituals while also dismissing their libratory potential, his assessment of the spirituals highlighted the sentiments felt by many members of this younger generation. While most authors claimed the spirituals as the roots of black music genealogy, their interests indicated that the branches of that tradition ought to broaden to include an array of musical offshoots. For Carter and many other writers, racial progress would best be accomplished through the cultivation of black musical practices within the framework of Western traditions, represented by singers such as Drury, Sissieretta Jones, and others working in the field of what Carter labeled "legitimate work."<sup>46</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that the vaudeville community wished to dismiss the centrality of the slave spirituals to black musical history; indeed, James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson would later publish their famous harmonized edition of the spirituals, *The*

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forms of high art defined by the Western Europe elite canon, championing Roland Hayes's concert-inspired interpretations over those by Paul Robeson.

<sup>44</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> Robert W. Carter, "The Drury Opera Company in Verdi's 'Aida.'" *The Colored American Magazine* 6, no. 8 (1903), 598.

<sup>46</sup> Carter, "Drury Opera Company," 595.

*Book of Negro Spirituals*, in 1925.<sup>47</sup> Rather, as Williams and Walker intended with their Glee Club formed from the *In Dahomey* company, the point was "to give not merely the plantation and folk songs in which the race is especially expert, but also music of a classic order."<sup>48</sup> Ernest Hogan, born Reuben Crowdus and several years older than Williams and Walker, also led a choir with similar repertoire and at one point planned "a two-act musical...going back to the old campmeeting and jubilee melodies for many of his ideas."<sup>49</sup> Yet these new songs needed to be artistic, not simply a reiteration of old stereotypes. Arguing for the creation of new vocal styles, Joseph W. Reed, writing in *The Colored American Magazine*, wrote, "Time was when all that was necessary for the Negro to be classed as a comedian was a loud voice, a knowledge of a few coon songs (no idea necessary as to how they should be rendered) a few stale and time worn jokes, an inexhaustible supply of slang phrases and vulgar language to be constantly brought into use when off the stage, and an old guitar fit only for his own purpose."<sup>50</sup> Rosamond Johnson, for example, was lauded by black music critics and performers as displaying talents in both popular

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<sup>47</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938 [1925]).

<sup>48</sup> Charles Alexander, "Washington, Williams and Walker," *The New York Age* 3 August 1905: np. The article describes a performance at the home of Booker T. Washington and notes that the songs performed included mostly those from the company's musicals, including "Why Adam Sinned" and "Nobody."

<sup>49</sup> On Hogan's choir, see "Ernest Hogan: The Link Between the Old and the New," *The Colored American Magazine* 9, no. 4 (1905), 589. For the reference to Hogan's campmeeting musical, see K.G.M., "The Week with the Player Folk" [newspaper clipping], Robinson Locke Collection, Envelope #717. By 1906, Hogan appears to have begun a move away from ragtime and coon songs, as noted in a review of his musical "Rufus Rastus." See "The Bijou" [newspaper clipping, dated 16 October 1906] and "American--Rufus Rastus" [newspaper clipping, dated 10 February 1906], Robinson Locke Collection, Envelope #717.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph W. Reed, "A Tribute to the Black Thespian," *The Colored American Magazine* 10, no. 1 (1906), 754.

and classical forms; Theodore Drury described Johnson as possessing a "fine barytone" voice in an article on black musicians working within the Western elite tradition.<sup>51</sup>

For black vaudevillians, the songs of the black folk represented a foundation upon which to build a modern, urban music that combined the rhythmic energy of ragtime with the melodic strains of the spirituals. This they could then sell to a public already fascinated by the ragtime and "coon song" phenomenon driving what historian David Suisman has called "the commercial revolution in American music."<sup>52</sup> While coon songs were based on often grotesque, racist caricatures of black life, black vaudevillians attempted to re-invent this genre by either toning down or omitting the racist aspects or, as with the use of stereotyped southern black dialect and syncopated rhythms, claiming the elements of these songs as an organic extension of African American culture. As one writer described the music of black vaudeville in *The Colored American Magazine* in 1905, these were "not 'coon songs' in the common acceptance of that term; they are interpretations of the *soul music* of the Negro people."<sup>53</sup>

#### *Parody and Play in the Music of Williams and Walker*

Black performers at this time took every opportunity to parody the racial masquerades of blackface minstrelsy practices. One early example is the song "I Don't Like That Face You Wear," composed by Ernest Hogan in 1898 and recorded twice by Williams and Walker on 11

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<sup>51</sup> Theodore Drury, "The Negro in Classic Music; or, Leading Opera, Oratorio and Concert Singers," *The Colored American Magazine* 5, no. 5 (1902), 328.

<sup>52</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sounds The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9-10.

<sup>53</sup> "America's Leading Musicians: Johnson, Cole and Johnson," *The Colored American Magazine* 8, no. 4 (1905), 194, emphasis mine. The writer goes on to describe the music of Johnson, Cole and Johnson as "a new thing [made] out of Negro music" (195). See also Robinson Locke Collection, Envelope #2593, "Gotham Gossip of Williams and Walker in 'Bandana Land,'" n.d. for another reference to the "soul" of black music. Many thanks to David Gilbert for our frequent talks regarding these ideas.

Oct 1901.<sup>54</sup> The song's narrative relates the attempt of a man — here voiced by Walker — to impress a woman who is repulsed by his looks, even though he has gone to great lengths to alter his appearance. After promising to straighten his hair and "calimine [his] dusky face," his love interest (voiced by Williams) responds in the refrain:

I don't like that face you wear  
 With your big broad nose and your kinky hair.  
 Said my clothes was alright, but my face was a holy fright  
 And she didn't think I was there, there, there, there.

She likes the man with the curly hair,  
 A railroad porter with his skin so fair,  
 And that's the reason why that you got to brush by with that face you wear.<sup>55</sup>

On the surface, we might read this as yet another example of parody aimed at the supposed pretensions of the African American elite and middle-class, the audience to whom so many skin-bleaching and hair-straightening products were advertised in contemporary black periodicals. As Noliwe M. Rooks points out, turn-of-the-century advertisements for hair-straightening products and skin bleaches regularly equated darker skin tones and curly hair with antebellum enslavement, and products for addressing these physical attributes were sold as cures for black socio-economic ills.<sup>56</sup> And certainly the lyrics lend themselves to such a reading, with the song's

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<sup>54</sup> Bert Williams and George Walker, "I Don't Like that Face You Wear," *Bert Williams: The Early Years, 1901-1909*, Archeophone Records, ARCH 5004. Hogan had performed the song during his time with the Black Patti Troubadours. Hogan's copyright for the composition was dated June 21, 1898 with Howley, Haviland, & co. in New York. See *Catalogue of Title Entries of Books and Other Articles*, Vol. 16, No. 1 Third Quarter 1898 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 356. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks*, 163, 165. Howley, Haviland & Company was one of the biggest publishers of coon songs at the turn of the century, including many by Paul Dresser who became a partner with the firm in 1900. See David Sanjek, "Howley, Haviland & Company," in *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World: Media, Industry and Society*, Volume 1, eds. John Shepherd, et al. (London: Continuum, 2003), 587.

<sup>55</sup> Lyrics transcribed by author.

<sup>56</sup> See Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), especially 26-40. Rooks notes a shift in advertising techniques around 1906, driven by the entrance of black-owned cosmetic businesses,

protagonist offering to make these cosmetic changes. Hogan composed the song just two years after he authored "All Coons Look Alike to Me" (1896), a song the narrative of which focused on a woman who is more interested in the economic and social status of suitors than in their supposedly similar looks. At first hearing the lyrics to "I Don't Like That Face You Wear," with their focus on physiognomy, seem to offer little more than an update to his earlier hit, with the love interest preferring the light-skinned and employed railroad porter. Yet towards the end of the song, the protagonist is warned by an acquaintance — performed here by Williams — that his whitewashed face is nothing more than an ornamental gesture, and his 'real' face would be revealed once he started sweating: "'Cause [with] the perspiration on your face, it might commence to crack." Thus the effort and labor — the new clothes, the whitened face, the straightened hair — that the protagonist exerts in order to win over his love interest turns out to be his undoing.<sup>57</sup>

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that moved away from such stereotypical discourses on black hair to one that emphasized "kinship and acceptance" (42). For more on the politics of black hair in particular, see Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Williams and Walker, as well as Aida Overton Walker, were well aware of the politics of hair and skin, especially as presented onstage, and the troupe made sure to challenge the conventions of straightening and lightening so prevalent in black theater at this time. Writing a review of *In Dahomey* for the *Freeman* in 1904, Sylvester Russell noted that "The women, with but few exceptions of vanity...all succeeded in showing their true color...The appearance of some darker women in the chorus also added to the genuine sentiment of true Negro comedy and completely destroyed the prejudice which formerly existed in the peanut gallery." See Sylvester Russell, "A Word Endowed Prominent Stage Factors and Renown: Williams And Walker's Return - New York Sees a New Dahomey," *Indianapolis Freeman* 1 October 1904, 2. The politics of black hair would again become a point of contention during the run of *Bandanna Land* (1908), when a white critic for the *Dramatic Mirror* lamented the fact that many of the actors straightened their hair. As Lester Walton noted, "he viewed with alarm the women wearing their hair done up in all of the latest styles and some having the effrontery to appear in marcel waves...and he concluded that Williams and Walker had permitted their people to depart from their true and natural type — kinky hair — and wear wigs." See Lester A. Walton, "Negro Stage Types," *New York Age* 20 February 1908, 6.

However, we might also read these lyrics, or at least Williams and Walker's performance of the song, as a parody of masking itself. In such a hearing, it is not the mask worn by the protagonist that offends his love interest's sensibilities so much as the wearing of any mask that causes concern. In an oft-quoted passage from his article, "The Negro on the American Stage," Walker wrote of the absurdity of blacks portraying themselves through the minstrel mask: "The one fatal result of this to the colored performers was that they imitated the white performers in their make-up as 'darkies.' Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself."<sup>58</sup> Such a reading is supported by the opening scene of *In Dahomey*, where Dr. Straight advertises his bottles of "Oblicuticus" that is not merely a skin-bleaching tonic but is also capable of "[c]hanging black to white and vice versa."<sup>59</sup> The love interest in "I Don't Like That Face You Wear" appears happy neither with the protagonist's actual face nor with his attempts to hide his "dusky" complexion. What she appears to long for is the porter with his "curly hair" and "skin so fair": i.e., still light-skinned, but otherwise unaltered. The porter's features stand out — are amplified, we might say — by the various ways in which the protagonist attempts to mask himself. Such a hearing hinges on the many ways that Williams, Walker, and their fellow performers blurred the lines between authentic and performance, of how they presented themselves onstage and off, and how their masquerades challenged any singular reading of modern blackness. For with Williams and Walker, the symbolism of the blackface mask, and of blackness itself, was always under scrutiny.

Musically, Williams and Walker's recording of "I Don't Like That Face You Wear" trades in the same vocal practices as the other extant recordings of coon songs by contemporary white

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<sup>58</sup> George Walker, "The Negro on the American Stage," 248.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Riis, ed., *The Music and Scripts of In Dahomey*, Recent Researches in American Music 25, Music of the United States of America, 5 (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 1996), xlix.

artists, including Arthur Collins, Billy Murray, and May Irwin, and it makes heavy use of the rhythmic cakewalk figure (think of the melody for "Hello, Ma Baby!") throughout the entire composition.<sup>60</sup> Any comparison of recordings from this period, as well as any generalizations made from performance styles, must necessarily be speculative. Far from capturing and reproducing anything resembling clear fidelity, these early recordings were fragile media that relied on a hand-cranked spring in order to rotate the disc or cylinder.<sup>61</sup> Though recording companies were by the early 1900s capable of producing recordings with steady speeds, thus limiting pitch variability, artifacts of the technology are clearly audible. Perhaps the most distorting artifact is the audible quaver — what sounds like a very tight vibrato — on some notes.<sup>62</sup> Though Williams's Columbia releases produced later in the decade were exclusively disc recordings rather than cylinders, the physical process of carving sound into wax discs using a horn or speaking tube would have produced similar artifacts.

With those limitations in mind, we can draw some tentative generalizations about the "black voice" as it was performed at the turn of the century. While both performers share many traits common to music-hall and concert-stage singers (particularly in terms of volume and

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<sup>60</sup> Magee, "Ragtime and Early Jazz," 391. Williams, Walker, along with their partners and wives Lottie Williams and Aida Overton Walker, are generally credited with popularizing the cakewalk amongst the white elite. For a discussion of Irwin's vocal sound, see Pamela Brown Lavitt, "First of the Red Hot Mamas: 'Coon Shouting' and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl," *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (1999), 253-290.

<sup>61</sup> You can see a 1901 Columbia Top Wind Model AJ Graphophone being played here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS0unTMFJ9Y> (accessed 4 February 2014).

<sup>62</sup> A YouTube video posted on 25 December 2013 by user grafhohenegg showing the recording process using a 1903 Edison Phonograph provides an excellent example of how the technology altered the sound by adding a distinct quaver to his voice, especially during his prolonged interjections (i.e., whenever he says "um" or "uh"). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp3IK1cGj5o> (accessed 10 January 2014). One interesting note: in another video posted on 1 February 2014, the uploader uses a speaking tube rather than a horn to record his recitation. Here, the wobble is nearly inaudible. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iC7110uz2EM> (accessed 4 February 2014).

range), Williams and Walker each present heavily contrasting ideas of black singing: Walker, who sings out of tune throughout the recording, presents a deep, open voice with little or no vibrato.<sup>63</sup> His accent is broad and based on the minstrelsy-influenced elongated vowels and exaggerated diphthongs; "hair," for example, sounds more like "hear," which was commonly written in minstrelsy dialect as "hyeah," thus resulting in the pronunciation "ha-yeah." Typically performing as the dandy character of the duo, Walker's interpretation of black orality makes sense: his expansive baritone would have served well when delivering the schemes and machinations for which his stage characters were known. His is an authoritative voice (one that stems, however, from a specific, racially determined field of African America) suggesting, on the one hand, the sound of the black preacher that had for at least a century transfixed white and black audiences.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, baritone voices typically dominated the role of interlocutor in minstrel shows, the character, typically not in blackface, responsible for announcing acts and possessing the air of what Eric Lott has termed a "codfish aristocrat."<sup>65</sup> Having a strong baritone voice served this role well, as the interlocutor's "big, booming voice," according to Carl Wittke, was thus capable of being heard over the audience's laughter.<sup>66</sup>

Williams, meanwhile, sings and interjects in a call-and-response pattern with Walker throughout the recording employing a pinched, mid- to high-range tenor voice with very little

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<sup>63</sup> For a brief discussion of turn-of-the-century singing styles, see Paula Lockheart, "A History of Early Microphone Singing, 1925-1939: American Mainstream Popular Singing at the Advent of Electronic Microphone Amplification," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 3 (2003), 367-385.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Radano notes that black orality in antebellum U.S. had long produced contrasting hearings of black spiritual song by both "opening up an expansive interpretive range" and as "a way of passing through the categories of race in order to transcend them" during the antebellum period. See Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 121-134 (quote is from 134).

<sup>65</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930), 139.

vibrato at times, such as when portraying the love interest. Williams is barely recognizable, however, when compared to his later recordings. When using vibrato, for instance, the pulse tended to be slightly wider than that which he used on recordings from "Nobody" (1906) until his death. Williams uses the same broad enunciations as Walker, and both singers mumble words to the point of incomprehension. What is most striking about this and his other early recordings, especially after hearing the carefully rehearsed vocal sounds of the Jonah character for which he was famous, is how animated and jocular Williams sounds. Williams is clearly drawing on the endman tradition of minstrelsy; Walker's earnest offering that he changes his clothes "most every day" is met immediately by Williams's clipped retort, "how many suits you got?" Such moments of levity provide a great example of the rapport that Williams and Walker must have displayed on stage. Another example of the duo's repartee can be heard on "All Going Out and Nothin' Coming In" from 1901. Though Walker is not listed as performing on a recording, we can hear him responding to Williams's performance with vocal interjections in the background and rhythmically with hand claps.<sup>67</sup>

We may think of Williams's voice on these early recordings as a type of *ludic voice*: one that plays with the codes of minstrel orality — its timbres, accents, dialects, pitch, and so on — in order to challenge that voice's traditional codes and re-produce it as a property of black

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<sup>67</sup> Williams, *The Early Years*, 29. Michael Garber makes the argument that by 1910, several years after the publication of "I Don't Like That Face You Wear," Tin Pan Alley songs were "not exclusively written, oral, live, or mediated, but a fascinating combination of all three [that had] adaptability incorporated into their structure" (175). These songs, in other words, were meant to be altered to fit a variety of performance styles and situations. Listening to the recordings of Williams and Walker would seem to suggest that this attitude toward printed music was somewhat older than Garber estimates. See Michael Garber, "'Some of These Days' and the Study of the Great American Songbook," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4, no. 2 (2010): 175-214.

culture.<sup>68</sup> Listening again to "I Don't Like that Face You Wear," we hear Williams almost immediately utilize this ludic voice. At the end of the first line ("I been stuck on this yaller gal all these many moons/And she's just as handsome as can be"), Williams echoes Walker's "be" for seemingly no particular reason: his repeating of "be" serves no semantic purpose, nor does it align with the call-and-response moments that Williams performs elsewhere in the song. This is also the only time in the entire recording that Williams simply echoes a single word in such a manner. How, then, should we interpret this? I would argue that Williams here is simply playing with the materiality of his vocal persona. The sound of Williams's "be" is striking: though part of the background, the sound easily cuts through both Walker's rich baritone as well as the piano accompaniment. On its own — as when Williams sings the chorus or on his solo recordings from this period — the sound of Williams's voice is humorous enough for the way it transforms the lyrical content of the love interest into a nasal-driven, superior-sounding retort. When heard against Walker's performance, however, the effect is amplified as the vocal soundworlds of blackness performed by the duo riff off one another. On stage, the effect was certainly more comical, with Williams towering over the shorter Walker while performing in a comparably diminutive voice.

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<sup>68</sup> Play, of course, has a long history within anthropological and theater studies, where its social utility was initially dependent upon its separation from everyday life and thus, in Johan Huizinga's terms, "not serious." See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 13. For Victor Turner, meanwhile, play was crucial to the liminal stage of ritual, during which initiates are stripped of their former identities and thus able to take on a new social role. For Turner, then, play is free but rule governed; in his words, "play is in earnest, and has to be within bounds." See Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology," *The Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974), 64. I employ the notion of vocal play here in a carefully delineated way to mean the exploration of vocal materiality in order to test the limits of the voice's affective and semantic capabilities.

## The Crafting of Bert Williams

Bert Williams was careful to distinguish throughout his career his stage persona from his everyday life. While publicity photographs regularly featured Williams in his blackface masquerade, the images accompanying the majority of articles by or about him presented a fashionable and clearly well-enumerated performer. Walker, in fact, was particularly well-known for his wardrobe. As Camille Forbes has noted, Walker's wardrobe served both economic and cultural objectives; quoted in 1907, Walker noted of his attire that, "The general public expects



**Figure 4.1. Williams and Walker, in and out of costume.<sup>69</sup>**

to see me as a flashy sort of darky and I do not disappoint them as far as appearance goes."<sup>70</sup>

Williams's studio portraits provided audiences with a clear distinction between the man Bert Williams and the character "Bert Williams" that they observed onstage wearing ill-fitting clothes,

<sup>69</sup> The first image is from <http://www.musicals101.com/news/dahomeyduo.jpg> [accessed 10 February 2014], and the second from <http://jasobrecht.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Williams-Walker-opener.jpg> [accessed 10 February 2014].

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams*, 148. See also Lester Walton, "Bandanna Land," *New York Age Supplement* 6 February 1908, 10, for more on Walker's fashionable attire.

ragged shoes, and burnt cork. Indeed, his entire demeanor changed when performing his stage persona: while photographs of Williams offstage show him standing perfectly erect, he regularly affected a slouched comportment when portraying his "Nobody" character.

Perhaps the most striking dissonance between Williams's personal life and his stage persona, however, was his voice. Contrary to assertions by Chude-Sokei and others that Williams sounded "West African" (Chude-Sokei suggests Marcus Garvey as an example), Williams's accent was probably closer to that of an educated British elite. In an interview titled, "Mr. Williams has English Accent," Williams described his dialect as "a literal English."<sup>71</sup> Apparently unbeknownst to Chude-Sokei and other scholars, Williams introduced himself on his recording of "I'm Tired of Eating in the Restaurants" (1906) using an elite British accent. Of course, whether or not this was his "native accent" we cannot know; the orality Williams displayed here may simply be yet another performance. As Chude-Sokei has noted, drawing on the archival work of Ann Charters, Williams used a "West Indian" accent onstage only once, performing as a switchboard attendant in the *Follies* of 1915.<sup>72</sup> If he did in fact perform with a "West Indian" accent, as Charters and Chude-Sokei insist, then that accent was *also* a masquerade, playing perhaps on the open secret of Williams's place of birth, but an accent that was still not his own. Yet I would suggest that Williams's biography provides evidence of my assertion here: Williams's grandfather had been the Danish and Spanish Consul for the Bahamas, and Williams as a consequence was extremely well educated, having planned to attend Stanford University after completing high school before turning to a life on stage.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Thyra Samter, "Mr. Williams has English Accent," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 10 September 1911.

<sup>72</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 44. Charters, *Nobody*, 128.

<sup>73</sup> Booker T. Washington, "Interesting People: Bert Williams," *American Magazine* 70, No. 5 (1910): 600.

In fact, considering the number of different ways that he sings on these early recordings, we might speak of Williams's vocal personae. Other recording artists, especially white performers like Billy Murray and Arthur Collins, regularly employed different accents for recorded performances, but they tended to treat each individual persona as a distinct, stable entity; Murray's performance of a black voice, for example, was always performed in the same manner. Though recorded evidence of black minstrelsy orality from before 1900 is scarce, the few examples that exist indicate that the approach to singing had not changed significantly from roughly 1890 until the time of Williams and Walker's first recordings. When listening, for example, to George Johnson's 1891 recording of "The Whistling Coon," one is struck by how remarkably similar Johnson's interpretation of a black minstrelsy voice sounds to the one employed by Collins and Murray a decade later.<sup>74</sup> Contrary to Laurie Stras who characterizes minstrelsy singing as including "tonal variety...tessitura [here, singing in a comfortable, medium range], and regional accent," Collins's and Murray's performances are marked by a straightforward tonal interpretation and what was by 1900 a rather standardized dialect defined by a heavily-stereotyped dialect and broad pronunciations of words similar to Walker's performance on "I Don't Like That Face You Wear."<sup>75</sup> Williams, at least until his recording of "Nobody," altered his vocal performance nearly every time he recorded, and as noted, utilized more than voice on his recording of "I Don't Like That Face You Wear."

When singing on later recordings, Williams's voice tended towards a slightly high tenor sound with a distinct nasal timbre. By the time Williams recorded "Nobody" in 1906, he had settled on the singing voice that he would use with little alteration throughout the remainder of

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<sup>74</sup> See George Johnson, "The Whistling Coon," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVYHSIEssYY>, accessed 16 February 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Laurie Stras, "White Face, Black Voice: Race, Gender, and Region in the Music of the Boswell Sisters," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 2 (2007), 225.

his career: pitched between a tenor and baritone, Williams sang with a slight hint of nasal timbre and used little vibrato except on held notes, where he employed a tight, fast vibrato characteristic of contemporary singing during the 1910s. The rich fullness of his speaking voice (heard on the recordings of "Nobody" and "He's a Cousin of Mine" where he also introduced himself) was replaced by a thinner, almost hesitant sound when singing.<sup>76</sup> Overall, his singing voice sounded at once more ludic by way of its timbre and sincere in its slow, methodical approach to melody. Rarely, however, did Williams perform in a full singing voice; most often he employed a sing-song style, though he would often drop back into speech during a song's verse. His use of a sing-song style allowed him, or the composer writing for him, to fit more words into each line and thus more stories into each song. As Williams noted of the songs he wrote and of those written specially for him, "A really good song must be fairly packed with ideas. There should be at least two in every stanza and two more in the refrain... Every line carries an amusing picture, and each verse is built up so that it leads to a fresh laugh in the refrain."<sup>77</sup>

How was Williams voice heard by his audiences? While reviews of Williams and Walker productions were published frequently, few critics specifically referenced their singing. Those that did noted the carefulness with which he approached his performances. As with his onstage demeanor, reviewers extolled the subtlety of Williams's craft. A review of *Bandana Land* from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted for instance that Williams

is an artist in his work, for there is never a moment when he does too much, never a moment when he does too little. His performance is perfectly balanced, perfectly proportioned, and an effect never is undertaken without being carried through to complete success. His portrayal of a 'fool nigger' seems nature itself—it does not seem possible when watching him that he ever can walk steadily and briskly, that he ever speaks clear, 'straight' English, or that he ever dresses in properly fitting clothes.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Williams, *The Early Years*.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," 34.

<sup>78</sup> "News of the Theaters. *Bandana Land*," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 11 Nov 1907, 8.

The reviewer here captured the contradictions for which Williams has become known, namely, that through his practice and craft Williams embodied "natural" blackness, thus blurring the lines between the performance of and the inheritance of race. Another reviewer noted how Williams used his voice to create a semblance of intimacy between himself and the audience:

One of Mr. Williams' biggest assets is his voice. Low, soft a joy to the ear, yet not losing a bit of its masculinity or firmness. When he talks to you it is as if he has a secret to confide that concerns just you two.

His eyes are no less attractive than his voice, for he uses them to emphasize what he is saying. In them is a commingling of pathos, humor and 'dead-earnestness' that charms you and holds your gaze until he is ready to release your interest. There is something inexplicably fascinating about such a humanly sympathetic personality, some quality that is irresistible.<sup>79</sup>

On his recordings, Williams generally used the "low, soft" voice observed by the second reviewer when speaking. This is the voice, for example, that can be heard on selections such as "How? Fried" (1913) and on his Elder Eatmore recordings, where he takes on the character of a black preacher.<sup>80</sup> These recordings generally featured Williams in story-telling mode with Williams employing reported speech, that is, as a phonographic performance wherein Williams (re)produced a tale as first told by someone else. Performing in a low, soft baritone while onstage in a cavernous theater would have filled the room easily while simultaneously producing the feeling of intimacy noted by the reviewer.

For Williams, the speech and song of southern African Americans represented more genuinely black social life in the United States. Drawing on popular racial mythologies of natural black musical ability, Williams noted in an interview with the music critic Lester Walton that for "[t]he American Negro ... there is not much necessity for schools of voice culture to tamper with

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<sup>79</sup> "Bert Williams: Boy-Gentleman-Comedian," *Chicago Record-Herald* 25 September 1910, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Bert Williams, "How? Fried," *Bert Williams: The Middle Years, 1910-1918*, Archeophone Records, ARCH 5003.

a natural voice. There is soul in the negro music; there is simplicity and an entire lack of artificiality."<sup>81</sup> His hearing of southern black song as 'simple' and 'lacking in artificiality' yet expressing 'soul' aligns with contemporary impressions of black musicality — particularly with regard to the slave spirituals as expressed by Du Bois — based on the Herderian notion of organic genius arising spontaneously from the folk.<sup>82</sup> To bolster his claims of being better able to represent black U.S. life, Williams claimed that he and Walker "spent nearly a year, studying the colored people...to gain the knowledge of portraying [sic] the Southern darky with the true and natural effect."<sup>83</sup> Specifically, Williams referenced the Georgia dialect as being his primary inspiration, noting as usual the effort required for him to (re)create this "foreign" tongue.<sup>84</sup> His reference to Georgia here is interesting for two reasons: first, numerous minstrel troupes throughout the nineteenth century drew upon Georgia as their location of origin, especially troupes comprised of African Americans, including Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels, Sam Hague's Slave Troupe of Georgia, Charles Hicks's Georgia Slave Brothers and Georgia Slave Troupe Minstrels, and Callender's Original Georgia Minstrels.<sup>85</sup> Callender's troupe included perhaps the best known African American minstrel, Billy Kersands, whose portrayal of Southern black life would certainly have been an inspiration for Williams.

Second, Williams's Georgia dialect placed him within a genealogy of black orality that included, among others, the Gullah language of the Sea Islands, located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. In tracing the representations of Gullah in nineteenth-century literature,

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<sup>81</sup> Lester A. Walton, "The Secret of Williams and Walker's Success," *New York Age* 27 Feb 1908, 6.

<sup>82</sup> See Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 170; Anderson *Deep River*, 22-25.

<sup>83</sup> Walton, "The Secret of Williams and Walker's Success."

<sup>84</sup> For Williams's reference to Georgia dialect, see "Two Noted Negroes Meet," *Kansas City Times* 20 September 1905, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Toll, *Blackening Up*, 195-213; Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 119.

Gavin Jones reminded us that Edgar Allen Poe chose Gullah for the character Jupiter in his 1843 short story, "The Gold Bug," the same title given to the Victor Herbert operetta that generated Williams and Walker's first break (Herbert's operetta bore no relation to Poe's story, however).<sup>86</sup> The Gullah dialect did not become widely known to white audiences until after the Civil War. Gullah first came to wide popular attention with the publication of William Francis Allen's *Slave Songs of the United States*, where for Allen the dialect served as proof of the slave songs' essential difference to white musical practices.<sup>87</sup> Gullah would also later serve as the dialect of choice for Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus stories. As Jones has noted, Gullah's alterity "implied that black speech had its own rhetorical techniques, perhaps based on African languages, that rendered it partially unintelligible to whites."<sup>88</sup> Such an understanding would certainly have appealed to Williams, as his songs and routines spoke certainly signified differently to his white and black audiences.

Williams's allusion to Georgian accents speaks directly to the careful attention to detail he paid in all aspects of his stage persona, a characteristic highlighted by Jessie Fauset's article, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," published in W. E. B. Du Bois's periodical *The Crisis* shortly after the comedian's death.<sup>89</sup> As Chude-Sokei has noted, Fauset's article "allows a contemporary reading [of Williams's masquerade] to imagine a modernist discourse of racial authenticity that is explicitly performative but simultaneously rooted in the collective

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<sup>86</sup> Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 108-109; Peterson, Jr., *A Century of Musicals*, 149.

<sup>87</sup> William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds. *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995 [1867]).

<sup>88</sup> Jones, *Strange Talk*, 99.

<sup>89</sup> Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," 12-15.

assumptions and fears of a given community and its linguistic and cultural practices."<sup>90</sup> Fauset's reading of Williams's performances is stunning for its insight: she noted, for example, how Williams "affected... a shambling, shuffling gait which at intervals in his act would change into a grotesque sliding and gliding — the essence of awkward naturalness."<sup>91</sup> This metaphor, William's "awkward naturalness," captured perfectly the comedian's embodiment of his minstrel masquerade: by claiming both a natural affinity as well as a critical distance to African American cultural practices, Williams positioned himself "awkwardly" within a complex matrix of black modernity that sought a balance between, on the one hand, a racial authenticity based on essential racial types and, on the other hand, a blackness increasingly aware of its performative, doubled nature.

Thankfully, we have visual evidence of Williams performing that shows how he carefully managed his every gesture and that relate directly to my understanding of his vocal performance. In 1916, Williams directed and starred in two films for the Biograph Company: *Fish* and *A Natural Born Gambler*, the latter being the sole surviving visual footage of Williams's performance style.<sup>92</sup> I offer here a close reading of Williams's performance in the film in order to highlight two crucial points regarding his performance style: first, as Thomas Cripps notes, Williams's performance in these films presents one of the first depictions of blackness on screen

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<sup>90</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 52.

<sup>91</sup> Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," 13.

<sup>92</sup> Williams also starred in *Darktown Jubilee* in 1914, but the film apparently has not survived. There, Williams appeared without blackface make up, which may have led to the film's demise as white audience members at the initial screening nearly rioted during the viewing. *Darktown Jubilee* is also the first film to feature an all-black cast. Though hailed now as early attempts at breaking the celluloid color-barrier, early efforts like *Darktown Jubilee*, and *A Natural Born Gambler* were far from successful and did little to entice black performers to work in film; vaudeville continued to be far more lucrative. See Mel Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life & Times of Lincoln Perry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 27-28. The Biograph Company is perhaps best known today for employing D.W. Griffith earlier in the century, who would later direct *Birth of a Nation* (1915) through his own motion picture company.

that strayed from the older, minstrelsy-inspired stereotypes by showing life "deep within Negro circles unseen by whites."<sup>93</sup> As I noted above, Williams's singing would certainly have signified differently to black and white audiences, a difference that would have been amplified by his visual portrayal of black social life. Second, observing Williams's "unusual economy of motion," as he put it, allows us to appreciate more fully how he drew attention to the subtle features of his performative style.

The plot of *A Natural Born Gambler* features "The Hon. Bert Williams, walking delegate" in blackface, the only character portrayed as such, as a member of a local black fraternity, the Independent Order of Calcimine Artists of America. Thus before we see any actors on screen, Williams was already poking fun at the African American elite by equating such organizations with pretensions to whiteness (this could also be read as self-parody considering Williams had been a Mason since 1904).<sup>94</sup> Soon after entering the meeting, shuffling awkwardly towards a seat front-and-center, Williams is reminded that he is "in arrears for dues." Williams, turning to the fraternal order's treasurer, proceeds to pay his three-dollar debt over the course of nearly thirty seconds by slowly uncrumpling each bill, then handing over each hard-earned dollar one-by-one, pausing between each exchange to glance from the bill to the ceiling to his debtors before grudgingly handing over the payment. After the meeting, Williams suggests a card game with the other members, in hopes of winning back his dues. After being chased out by the Order's leader, Williams attempts to swindle a younger member freshly back "from the North

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 134. A review of the film in *The Moving Picture World* highlighted the film's cast of "all colored persons of the male sex," and noted that "[t]he celebrated poker game which Bert Williams has so often played in pantomime on the spoken stage...shows up well on screen." The cast, however, was not entirely African American, as the police and judge were played by white men. See "Comments on the Films," *The Moving Picture World* 29(7), 1103.

<sup>94</sup> Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams*, 126.

after a clean-up" out of his substantial money roll. The card game commences, with Williams and another member trading cards back-and-forth under the table — phalantically no less — until the game is broken up by the local police force, leading to Williams's being literally carried off to jail. The first part of the feature ends with Williams being sentenced to ten days in jail.

The second part of the film is of more interest for my purposes here. The card-game pantomime that Williams performs at the end of the film was one of his most famous routines, which he had performed regularly since introducing it in *Bandana Land* in 1908.<sup>95</sup> In the routine, Williams commands the stage alone, miming a poker game (five-card draw) consisting of five players, including himself as the dealer, that he narrates almost entirely through facial expressions. He ultimately loses to the player seated directly to his right at whom he glares throughout the entire performance since the player requests no cards after the initial deal (Fig. 4.2). Williams slowly builds the scene's tension by considering whether to match what is clearly a sizeable bet — reviewing his hand, counting and restacking his chips — before attempting to bluff by wagering his entire purse. Naturally, Williams loses. But it is neither the humor of his physiognomy nor the symbolism of the always-out-of-luck Jonah that interest me here, though both are certainly worthy of further reflection.

What I find critical for exploring Williams's performance is how methodically he paces his movements. Williams's affinity for slow-paced comedy had been praised at least since his performance as Shylock Homestead in *In Dahomey* (1903), with one reviewer noting at the time, "He holds a face for minutes at a time, seemingly, and when he alters it, bring[s] a laugh by the least movement."<sup>96</sup> While "minutes" is an exaggeration, Williams could linger on a facial gesture

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 121.

<sup>96</sup> "Dahomey on Broadway," *New York Times* 19 February 1903, 9.

for quite some time in order to exaggerate the emotional effect of his physiognomy. As I will discuss in the next section, Williams employed similar tactics in his vocal delivery in order to highlight a song's affective qualities. The two images in Figure 4.3 show Williams's gradual descent from confidence to despair as his bet of a single chip is met by his nemesis with a much larger wager. While only five seconds elapse between the two moments shown, Williams exploits that time by depicting the gradual realization of his upcoming misfortune, allowing gravity to slowly weigh down his optimism. Such deliberate pacing allowed his audience, I would suggest, the opportunity to sympathize with Williams's recognition of his poor gambling skills, a tactic he employed throughout his musical performances.



**Figure 4.2. Williams glares at his competitor in *A Natural Born Gambler*.**



**Figure 4.3. From confidence to despair in *A Natural Born Gambler*, 10:32-10:37.**

## **NOBODY**

With his recording of "Nobody" in 1906 that I discuss in this final section, Williams introduced the vocal persona that he would use, with little variance, throughout the rest of his career. Written in AA'B form, with the A sections in 6/8 time and the chorus in 4/4, the song is remarkably devoid of syncopation considering the emphasis placed on ragtime's importance by Williams in his written statements.<sup>97</sup> "Nobody" was composed by Williams and Alex Rogers for the show *Abyssinia* and quickly became Williams's most popular number — so much so that he would perform it throughout the rest of his career. The lyrics were crafted specifically for Williams's Jonah man persona:

### Verse 1

When life seems full of clouds an' rain  
 and I am filled with naught but pain,  
 who soothes my thumpin' bumpin' brain ?  
 Nobody

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<sup>97</sup> Bert Williams, "Nobody," *The Early Years*.

### Chorus

I ain't never done nothin' to nobody,  
 I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time!  
 And until I get somethin' from somebody, sometime,  
 I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time!

The composed melody lends itself to a sing-song style performance in the verses and a more song-like, melodic flow in the chorus. In his first recording of the song (Williams would make another in 1913), Williams followed this patten while making little use of vibrato, and generally singing with a more subtle use of dialect than his earlier recordings. The only major change Williams makes in his approach to singing is in the second verse when making use of reported speech ("Here's twenty-five cents, go ahead and eat, go on why don't ya, hm?"); here, Williams slightly alters his vocal timbre and use of dialect to deliver this rapid-fire line, a vocal tactic he exploited regularly as a way to depict various characters during a single performance.

In the chorus of "Nobody," Williams performs in full-voiced song, beginning with a vocal mimicking of the trombone and again using very little vibrato. Singing the chorus would have, of course, served an economic purpose in that the chorus of the tune in vaudeville practice was often repeated multiple times in order to drill the tune into the audience's, i.e., the consumer's, memory. His use of dialect is slightly more exaggerated here, and you can hear the elongation of vowels, especially on the opening "I" while mimicking the trombone but also on the first syllable of "nobody," where he adds an inflection to the first syllable in order to emphasize the syncopation of the vocal line. Close listening also reveals heavy use of vibrato on this note. While such heavy vibrato can be heard on various recordings of coon songs during this period as well as being characteristic of operatic singing styles from the turn of the century, it is

also highly reminiscent of recordings made by the Fisk Jubilee singers during this era, such as their performance of "Go Down Moses" by the Tuskegee Institute Singers (1914).<sup>98</sup>

I propose that we can hear Williams's use of such polyvocality, the movement in and out of dialect and the transition from a sing-song style to a full singing style, as representing the multiple voices of the black community that were beginning to emerge at the turn of the century. As Henry Louis Gates has argued with regard to dialect writing by black authors at this time, "how the black writer represented, and what he or she represented, [became] indissolubly linked in black aesthetic theory."<sup>99</sup> For Williams, the varying use of dialect represents an aesthetic choice, grounded in black vernacular theory, that signaled at once his immersion in and distance from African American culture. It would also have resonated with African Americans from the South who were just beginning to move North in search of work as the Jim Crow laws increasingly foreclosed on the promises of Reconstruction. His singing also portrays the transition in styles that black vaudeville was attempting to navigate: the vocal glissando that mimics the trombone hearkens back to the black quartet and jubilee singers of the nineteenth century, while the rhythmic propulsion of the song's chorus sounds a response to modern black life.

One characteristic of Williams's performance stands out as a particularly rich aural signifier of modern blackness: laughter. Writing in 1918, Williams noted that it was his decision to perform in blackface that ultimately allowed him to explore the depths of (black) humor and laughter; he wrote, "It was not until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of

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<sup>98</sup> Tuskegee Institute Singers, "Go Down Moses" Victor 17688-A, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueSULIAKSkU>, accessed 16 February 2014.

<sup>99</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 177.

humor developed."<sup>100</sup> Mike Chasar has argued persuasively that black laughter has signified differently throughout history as it "challenged the acoustics of white power and served as a weapon in the struggle for political and social justice."<sup>101</sup> As Chasar notes, we can trace the origin of a "new 'arrogant and bold' black laugh" to the Emancipation Proclamation as African Americans celebrated their new-found freedom with the sounds of joyous merriment that penetrated the orderly sounds preferred by the Southern aristocracy.<sup>102</sup> In this sense, Williams's laugh echoes the sounds of African American emancipation and renders audible the optimism felt by his fellow vaudeville performers just beginning to find success in major theaters throughout the nation.

But Williams's laughter signifies in several other ways. First, he and the black audiences for whom he performed clearly found humorous the portrayal of Southern blackness he performed onstage and through the mask. In some ways, Williams's entire persona was built around just such a characterization: the down-and-out Southern African American who appears completely out of his element in the urban North. As such, we might hear Williams as laughing along with his audience, their economic successes allowing them to laugh at an all-too recent past. But, of course, Williams's performance of this character is never so clear cut, and the personae he embodied onstage always proved more knowing than his shuffling gait would seem to indicate. Take, for example, the following exchange from the opening scene of *In Dahomey* between Shylock Homestead (Williams) and Rareback Pinkerton (Walker). Homestead and Pinkerton have just come on stage, with Homestead dressed in his Salvation Army uniform

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<sup>100</sup> Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," 33.

<sup>101</sup> Mike Chasar, "The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes," *American Literature* 80, no. 1 (2008), 58.

<sup>102</sup> Chasar, "Sounds of Black Laughter," 58. For more on sound and white Southern aristocracy, see Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 19-20.

furiously beating an enormous bass drum. After some quasi-friendly ribbing about his uniform, Rareback offers a half-hearted apology, to which Shylock responds with a brief rumination on black laughter:

Rareback: You ain't mad, sure enough, are you, Shy?

...

Shylock: No, I ain't mad. I've been laughin' ever since we got off that boat we come up on from down south. Ha, ha, ha! (*sarcastically*) I'm laughing 'cause I worked all the winter and then got worked for every cent I made while I was on that boat coming up here. I'm laughing 'cause three days after I git in town after workin' all the winter, I've got to blow the bass drum in the Salvation Army to keep from starving to death.<sup>103</sup>

Williams's laughter pointedly illustrates the humor he embodied through his Nobody persona: a laughing-to-keep-from-crying stance towards his ever-unchanging misfortunes that followed him, as it would so many African Americans in the follow decades, from the South to the North. Finally, we can hear Williams's laughter as a form of parody; that is, as part of his cross-cultural masquerade, we could also hear Williams's laughter as a mocking, aggressive laugh aimed squarely at the farce of his performance and thus serving as his own way of distancing himself from his stage persona.

## Conclusion

Williams may have doubted his vocal prowess, but one recording made late in his life suggests that perhaps his concerns were, at least, partially unfounded. In 1920, Williams recorded the composition, "I Want to Know Where Totsi Went (When He Said Goodbye)" for Columbia, a song he performed for the *Broadway Brevities of 1920* (which featured his partner

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<sup>103</sup> Riis, *Scripts of In Dahomey*, lii.

from his Ziegfeld days, Eddie Cantor).<sup>104</sup> The song, based on *Good-bye* by Francesco Paolo Totsi, lacks the narrative flow of Williams's earlier numbers and amounts to little more than Williams flaunting his skills at memory and knowledge during the verses. The chorus continues this theme:

I can solve most any kind of mystery  
 But there's one thing that's been puzzling me  
 I want to know where Totsi went when he said  
 Goodbye, forever, goodbye, forever,  
 I want to know where Totsi when, when he said goodbye!<sup>105</sup>

While Williams performed the majority of the song in his standard sing-song style, he broke into a full singing voice for the last two lines of the chorus, imitating precisely the melody of Totsi's composition. And here, towards the end of his career, we finally hear Williams's rich baritone, touched slightly by hoarseness, possibly due to his age or perhaps by exceeding the volume at which the phonograph could record clearly.

By the end of Williams's career, blues and jazz vocalists had thoroughly incorporated the sounds of black vocality that Williams and his colleagues had introduced in the preceding decades. The vocalizations established by Williams and his fellow musicians have been too often overlooked and, as I hope to have shown, provide a wellspring of musical ingenuity that sings of the centrality of race in understanding the power of song in American popular music. In developing new vocal styles, Williams and his generation produced new conceptions of black music that gave voice to a modern formulation of blackness and black music. Through his performances, Williams exposed the U.S. as an increasingly polyvocal society wherein sound

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<sup>104</sup> "Broadway Brevities of 1920," in *Broadway Plays and Musicals: Descriptions and Essential Facts of More Than 14,000 Shows through 2007*, ed. Thomas S. Hirschak (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 58. For the recording, see Bert Williams, *Bert Williams: His Final Releases, 1919-1922*, Archeophone Records, ARCH 5002.

<sup>105</sup> Transcribed by author.

played a crucial role in the marking of difference while providing avenues for exchange and shared sympathies.

## Chapter Five

### The Vocal Economy of Vernon Dalhart

'Learn it?,' he said. 'I never had to learn it. When you are born and brought up in the South your only trouble is to talk any other way. All through my childhood that was almost the only talk I ever heard — because you know the sure 'nough Southerner talks almost like a negro, even when he's white. I've broken myself of the habit more or less in ordinary conversation, but it still comes out pretty easy.'<sup>1</sup>

— Vernon Dalhart (1918)

In this final chapter, I want to explore how Vernon Dalhart, the classically-trained, southern singer of black-, country-, and opera-music fame, navigated the vocal economy of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Born and raised in Texas but rising to fame after moving to New York City, Dalhart joined the growing throngs of migrant laborers moving from the rural South to the nation's urban centers. After achieving moderate success on the operatic and musical theater stage, Dalhart transitioned to a recording career where he quickly made a name for himself as an interpreter of both light classics and black dialect songs. He is remembered best today, however, for recording country music's first million-selling record, "The Prisoner's Song,"

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jack Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart: First Star of Country Music* (Denver, CO: Mainspring Press, 2005), 47, and partially quoted in Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14. The original quote can be found in "VERNON DALHART AND THE NEGRO DIALECT," *Amberola Graphic*, December 1918.

for Victor in 1924, securing his place as one of the new genre's most popular artists.<sup>2</sup> Dalhart's performing career, spanning roughly from 1911 to 1939 (only part of which I discuss in this chapter), took place during a time when the music industry was, as Karl Hagstrom Miller puts it, "segregating sound" into the racialized genres of blues and country music. As such, Dalhart's career provides a unique opportunity to listen for how a white, southern performer participated in a racialized market economy trading in commodities of popular music.<sup>3</sup>

Dalhart was primarily a recording artist from the late 1910s until his retirement in the late 1930s. Though he recorded for dozens of record labels during his career, it was his affiliation with Edison Records during the late 1910s that propelled him to a national audience. As an Edison artist, Dalhart traveled the nation as part of the Tone Tests recitals promoting the company's phonographs and recordings. These concerts were meant to showcase Edison's superior audio technology by staging duets between singers and phonographs, with audiences asked to listen for how his machines authentically re-created the sound of the performer. Targeted to middle-class consumers and occurring against the rapid expansion of phonograph and recording sales, Edison's marketing techniques pledged to place "a phonograph in every home," as the advertisements proclaimed.<sup>4</sup> As such, we need to listen to Dalhart's voice as it circulated through a music industry increasingly reliant on the production, marketing, and consumption of audio recordings. Dalhart, I argue, was one of the first artists to embrace fully the potential of music recordings, and by affiliating himself with Edison, strove to place his voice and his interpretations of operatic, black, and country music in every home throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music U.S.A.*, Third Revised Edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 62. "The Prisoner's Song" was released as the B-side to "Wreck of the Old 97" on Victor 19427. See Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 353.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, "Advertisement," *Popular Mechanics* 7(10), 1088.

nation. His classically-trained voice matched perfectly Edison's sales philosophy of targeting a rising middle-class clientele, while Edison's focus on perfecting audio fidelity wrapped Dalhart's voice in an ideology of superior, authentic, and respectable entertainment.

Partly due to how he carefully managed his recording career but largely because of what Bill Malone has called his "urbane musical tastes," Dalhart's legacy within country music historiography has been decidedly mixed and critical consideration of his *oeuvre* limited to a few references, Karl Hagstrom Miller's work notwithstanding.<sup>5</sup> Music collector and Dalhart aficionado Jack Palmer published in 2005 the most extensive treatment of Dalhart's career, and I am greatly indebted to his thoroughly-researched biography, *Vernon Dalhart: First Star of Country Music*, as well as the included discography by Robert Olson.<sup>6</sup> I intend to use Dalhart's career to discuss how a white, southern entertainer navigated the economic, social, cultural, regional, and racial ideologies of the early twentieth-century music industry. This chapter focuses primarily on the recorded output of Vernon Dalhart in order to listen to how an early twentieth-century popular recording artist navigated a musical marketplace quickly being transformed by the emergence of genres based on the racialized bodies of performers. I supplement these close listenings with analysis of advertisements featuring Dalhart, contemporary texts on the Tone Test recitals, the contemporary texts written about Dalhart (such as Bob Dumm's 1927 profile of Dalhart and Robison, "Two Men Who Sell New Songs for Old"),

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<sup>5</sup> Malone and Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> For other biographical statements of Dalhart, see Jim Walsh, "Vernon Dalhart," pts. 1-7, *Hobbies: The Magazine for Collectors* (May 1960): 33-35, 45; (June 1960): 34-36, 60; (July 1960): 34-37, 55; (August 1960): 33-35, 60; (September 1960): 34-36, 45, 49; (October 1960): 34-36, 44; (November 1960): 33-35; 44-45; (December 1960): 32-34; and Walter Darrell Haden, "Vernon Dalhart, His Rural Roots and the Beginnings of Commercial Country Music," *Journal of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1970-1971), 19-32.

and comparisons to other contemporary artists who were, and are, considered better exemplars of their respective musical styles.

Dalhart's career is unusual in that he successfully situated himself within several distinct musical styles over the course of his career, something became increasingly difficult for performers as the industry coalesced around the burgeoning color-based genres of race and hillbilly recordings, as they were then known. While white entertainers performing in blackface and singing in the minstrelsy tradition of stereotyped black dialect were still common within the music industry, their ability to sell themselves as authentic purveyors of this music was beginning to wane. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Bert Williams and the community of black entertainers working in the first two decades of the twentieth century, had begun asserting ownership of black orality and black musical expression by claiming that these cultural products were performed best by black entertainers. The new vocal styles introduced by black singers precipitated a seismic shift with regard to how blackness sounded and who was able to perform it, a transition that would culminate with the rise of blues and race records in the early 1920s. In order to claim an ability to perform this music, white artists such as Dalhart drew upon their southern heritage in order to affirm the close affinities between white, rural southern and black oral traditions. In so doing, and as Miller has noted, Dalhart's claim to modes of black orality revealed the "long history of exchange and intermingling across the southern color line."<sup>7</sup> Yet this privilege did not cut both ways, and it was Dalhart's whiteness, I would argue, that provided him the opportunities to successfully perform in multiple musical styles.

As I will discuss in this chapter, Dalhart's performances relied neither on the new sounds of blackness heard in the music of Bert Williams or the early blues singers, nor on the sounds of

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<sup>7</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 142.

the southern white folk just beginning to infiltrate the music industry. In fact, a close listening to Dalhart's recorded output from 1916 until 1924 reveals a surprisingly consistent vocal style employed across genre boundaries. The question, then, is how did a classically-trained singer continue to claim that his performances of black and rural southern music were authentic interpretations of these genres when his actual performances did little to imitate the actual sounds of these musics? I identify three reasons why Dalhart was able to make this claim: first, as a white, classically-trained artist, Dalhart drew upon the same racial logic espoused by voice culturists: that white singers could alter their voices due to their supposed racial superiority. As a white Southerner, Dalhart claimed he could switch between "white" and "black" modes of speech and song whenever it suited him. Second, being thoroughly versed in the strategies of the music industry, Dalhart could market himself as a professional singer capable of portraying accurately a range of vocal styles. His southern, black voice might have been, as Miller claims, a "bid for authenticity," but it was also a sound that he could access, exploit, and suspend whenever it suited him. Third, by acknowledging how he had "broken [himself] of the habit, more or less" of speaking and singing with a southern accent, Dalhart positioned himself in opposition to the rube character quickly coming to dominate the imagery of early country music. Though he emphasized his rural, frontier roots — afterall, he took his stage name from two towns in western Texas located in (Dalhart) or near (Vernon) the panhandle — Dalhart presented himself onstage and in interviews as a professional musician of elite training and talent. Finally, the segregation of the recording industry into race and hillbilly records presented economic opportunities that Dalhart, by way of his training and background, was able to exploit. His performative maneuvering in the commercial music industry identified a veritable vocal economy of popular style.

What I want to propose is that Dalhart's singing represents the struggles over the South's emerging modernity by sounding, literally, southern accents through northern, elite vocal styles. Dalhart's singing style, which drew prominently on the tradition of sentimental balladry of the late nineteenth century, presented a sonic representation of the nostalgia for rural life that many believed was slipping away in the face of industrial advancement. Dalhart's career took place against the backdrop of the rapid industrialization of the South that witnessed thousands of southern workers moving from rural regions to the urban centers of the South and North or, just as commonly, taking part in the establishment of company towns that developed around the timber and coal industries.<sup>8</sup> As such, listening to Vernon Dalhart's voice reveals the economic and cultural transformations taking place within the popular music industry through the emergence of a national consumer culture. As a white, southern, operatically-trained performer, Dalhart was thus able to navigate this shifting marketplace by positioning himself within the music industry's machinations while simultaneously marketing himself as an outsider to the industry.

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Vernon Dalhart was born Marion Try Slaughter II on 6 April 1881 or 1883 in Jefferson, Texas.<sup>9</sup> By his teenage years, Dalhart was known in Jefferson as possessing an exceptional voice, and he performed regularly for local events. According to Dalhart, while still in his teens

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this history, see Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), and Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). As Eller notes, the urban population of the Appalachian South actually increased nearly four hundred percent between 1900 and 1930. See Eller, *Miners*, xx.

<sup>9</sup> As Palmer notes, 1883 was the generally accepted date of Dalhart's birth, but he is listed as 19 years old in the 1900 census, suggesting he was actually born in 1881. Palmer, 1, 7.

and living in Jefferson, he was offered an opportunity to perform and study in Dallas.<sup>10</sup> He and his family moved there around 1900, and soon after Dalhart began formal instruction in music and singing at the Dallas Conservatory of Music.<sup>11</sup> By 1907, Dalhart and his family were living in the Bronx, New York, with Dalhart working at the Steinway Piano Company while pursuing his singing career. After working in local churches and with the Aborn English Grand Opera Company (in 1910), Dalhart landed his first major opera engagement in 1911 when he began touring as part of Henry Savage's English-language production of Puccini's *The Girl of the Golden West*. By this time, Dalhart was performing under his stage name; the cast list for a performance in Trenton, New Jersey, in November 1911 lists Vernon Dalhart as playing Nick, the bartender.<sup>12</sup> By the end of 1912, Dalhart had starred as De Jailidon, the lead tenor role in *The Merry Widow*, and as Lt. Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly*, and was quickly gaining a reputation as "one of America's leading lyric tenors."<sup>13</sup> In July 1913 he was hired as the principal tenor for the Century Opera Company, with whom he performed in numerous operas including *Tosca*, *Lucia Di Lammermoor*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Aida*.<sup>14</sup> Dalhart's best-known role came with his casting as Ralph Rackstraw in a revival of Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore* in April 1914, which featured Dalhart performing "The Nightingale's Song," one of his first recording successes, and

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<sup>10</sup> Bob Dumm, "Two Men Who Sell New Songs for Old," *Farm and Fireside Magazine*, May 1927: 19. Also in Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> "English Grand Opera Tonight at New Broad Street Theatre," *Trenton Evening Times*, 21 November 1911, 12. Also see "'Girl of the Golden West'. Puccini's Grand Opera, a Realistic and Colorful Production," *Montgomery Advertiser* (Alabama), 3 December 1911, 11, and "'The Girl of the Golden West' Which Henry W. Savage will Present in this City," *Augusta Chronicle* (Georgia), 6 December 1911, 9, among others.

<sup>13</sup> See *Patriot* (Harrisburg, PA), 29 November 1912, 3, "Amusements," *Charlotte Observer*, 9 January 1913, 6, and "The Merry Widow," *Macon Telegraph*, 14 January 1913, 12. On Dalhart as Pinkerton, see Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 25, and Haden, "Vernon Dalhart," 68.

<sup>14</sup> "Century Opera Company," Advertisement, *New York Times*, 7 Sept 1913, X6, and "New York Public Welcomes Grand Opera in English with Enthusiasm," *Oregonian* (Portland), 28 September 1913, 3.

"Maiden Fair to See" from "high up in the rigging of a ship."<sup>15</sup> Dalhart continued to perform in *Pinafore* through 1915 and later appeared in a Gilbert and Sullivan revue.

On 29 September 1911, Dalhart (listed in the Edison catalog as Marion Slaughter) made his first voice trial for Edison, which was not accepted for production.<sup>16</sup> He made his second attempt at a voice trial with Edison on 17 September 1914 but was again rejected due to hoarseness and because Edison was not fond of the singer's legato.<sup>17</sup> Dalhart would make two more attempts with Edison in January 1915 and another with Columbia in February before successfully recording his first song, "Just a Word of Sympathy," with Columbia on 13 September 1916. Though Dalhart was listed as a feature performer in the Edison Diamond Disc catalog for 1915, he did not release his first Edison recording until June 1917 when his black dialect song, "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline?" (hereafter, simply "Caroline") was released on Edison's Blue Amberol Cylinder 3185.<sup>18</sup> He signed an exclusive contract with Edison in April 1917 and soon after began representing the company throughout the nation in the Tone Test recitals.<sup>19</sup> Through 1924, the year in which he made his first country recordings, Dalhart would record over 350 light vocal classics, dialect songs, and country music recordings for over fifty labels under at least twenty different pseudonyms. His dialect recordings proved his most popular during these early years; two of Dalhart's songs, "I Want My Mammy" and "Weep No

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<sup>15</sup> For reference to Dalhart singing from the rigging, see "The Theatre in Gotham," *Aberdeen Daily News* (South Dakota), 25 April 1914, 9. Also see "'H.M.S. Pinafore' a la Hippodrome" *New York Times*, 10 April 1914, 13; "Great Opera House to Show Moving Pictures," *Oregonian*, 12 April 1914, 4; and William S. Brewer, "New York Dramatic Letter," *Miami Herald*, 16 April 1914, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Palmer, 304. Dalhart referenced making several attempts with Edison in Dumm, "New Songs for Old," 19.

<sup>17</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 30-31.

<sup>18</sup> Haden, "Vernon Dalhart," 69.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 44, 60.

More (My Mammy)," the latter backed with Al Jolson's "April Showers," were among the best-selling records for Columbia in 1921.<sup>20</sup>

Dalhart's voice was thus well-known by the time he cut his first country music recordings in 1924. Country music, or hillbilly music as it was first known, had only entered the industry two years earlier after Alexander Campbell "Eck" Robertson and Henry Gilliland walked into the Victor offices in New York in June 1922 and recorded the first four country sides, "Sally Gooden," "Arkansas Traveler," "Turkey in the Straw," and "Ragtime Annie," all of which were released in June 1923.<sup>21</sup> Dalhart quickly addressed the growing demand for country music, recording 169 selections for thirteen companies in 1924, nearly all of which were country and old-fashioned songs.<sup>22</sup> Dalhart, along with his recording and songwriting partner guitarist Carson Robison and joined later by soprano and violinist Adelyne Hood (with whom Dalhart had performed as part of the Edison Tone Test tours), would produce over 200 country music recordings (both traditional and newly penned by Dalhart and Robison) over the next four years.<sup>23</sup> By the late 1920s, however, Dalhart's recording career began to wane as competition from other southern musicians — including Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, and Uncle Dave Macon — rose in popularity. By 1930 his career was ostensibly over, though he continued to record throughout the 1930s while making occasional radio appearances.

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<sup>20</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Malone and Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> On the number of recordings Dalhart produced in 1924, see Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Carson Robison, see Hugh Leamy, "Now Come All You Good People," *Collier's* 2 November 1929: 20, 58-59; R. Coltman, "Carson Robison: First of the Rural Professionals," *Old Time Music* 29 (1978): 5-14; and W.W. Daniel, "Carson J. Robison: Granddaddy of the Hillbillies," *Journal of Country Music* 23 (2004), 28-37. For more on Hood, see Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, "Adelyne Hood: The Amalgamation of Vaudeville and Folk Traditions in Early Country Music," *JEMF Quarterly* 18, nos. 67-68 (1982): 116-130. Hood, who came up through vaudeville and studied at Juilliard, would in 1945 star on radio as "Aunt Caroline," a "black mammy" personality and, like Dalhart, according to Burwack and Oermann, "made much of her Southern upbringing and familiarity with black ways" (116).

Though Dalhart's catalog was diverse, one trend stands out that may help us understand how he was able to navigate increasingly racially-defined genres of the music industry: the performance of sentimental ballads. Many of the songs he cut during the early stages of his career narrated tales of family drama, romantic courtship, and later with his country recordings, death and disaster. Ballads and parlor songs of the late nineteenth century employed a more realistic voice, in terms of both storyline and lyrical content, that expressed a growing sense of nostalgia amongst everyday folk.<sup>24</sup> Dalhart recorded several nineteenth-century ballads, including "The Little Rosewood Casket" (composed in 1870), "When the Robins Nest Again" (composed in 1883) and "In the Baggage Coach Ahead" (composed in 1896), all of which suited perfectly the vocal sound he was crafting and the nostalgic, voice-of-the-people persona he was marketing. In an interview for *Edison Amberola Monthly* in 1921, Dalhart spoke of the importance of giving voice for rural communities:

My ambition in life is to sing always the songs that please the great masses of the people, to bring into the many dark corners of life just a little more sunshine and happiness. I was educated for grand opera, but really feel that I can bring more happiness to the many with the singing of what we popularly call the heart-songs, the ballad type, with their little strains of love — love of family, home, country and dear ones. There should be music in all our lives, it would take away much of the grimness and sorrow, and to those of us who have been gifted with that greatest of all gifts, the singing voice, comes the great duty of giving what joy our voices may bring to those less fortunate.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting to note that Dalhart's remarks here were made several years before the first country music recordings with their focus on "family, home, country, and dear ones" entered the popular imagination through the recording industry. His remarks thus suggest that a market for old-fashioned songs with nostalgic themes of domestic life already existed within the industry,

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<sup>24</sup> See Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), and Jon W. Finson, *The Voices That Are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 43.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 86.

and certainly the continued popularity of songs like "Little Rosewood Casket," which would become a country- and folk-music standard, provides evidence of just such an untapped market and places early country within a broader economy of U.S. songwriting.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, an article from 1921 advertising an upcoming Edison Tone Test recital by Dalhart noted how this "splendid singer...of...American birth and training" was one of the "few singers of either sex who can sing the charming old southern melodies."<sup>27</sup> Dalhart developed his vocal style, I would argue, as a means to exploit the growing nostalgia for such themes, especially amongst the "masses" as Dalhart noted.

In the next section, I discuss Dalhart's affiliation with the Edison Company in order to examine how Dalhart navigated the economic structures of the recording industry. Edison marketed his phonographs as capable of reproducing the sound of live performance, and his Tone Tests recitals attempted to prove the superior technology of his playback machines by staging this claim in cities and towns throughout the nation. He also sold his equipment as staples of middle-class social life, thus attempting to secure their role as respectable entertainment. By participating in the Tone Tests, Dalhart was able to market his vocal sound to audiences throughout the nation as more than just entertainment; his voice provided a burgeoning middle-class society (especially in the nation's rural regions) with the sound of social and economic mobility. I end with a discussion of "The Nightingale's Song" from *Pinafore*, one of Dalhart's most popular early recordings, in order to show how he developed a vocal style meant for mass, middle-class consumption.

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the connections between sentimental ballads and early country, see Norm Cohen, *Folk Music: A Regional Exploration* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 28-31.

<sup>27</sup> "Vernon Dalhart," *Jonesboro Daily Tribune* (Arkansas), 22 March 1921, 1. See also "Vernon Dalhart," *Jonesboro Daily Tribune*, 28 March 1921: 2.

### Vernon Dalhart and the Edison Tone Tests

Dalhart's recording career accompanied the maturation of the music recording business that had, by the late 1910s, nearly completed the transition from companies selling phonographs, discs, and cylinders as something of a curiosity to a major industry effecting transformational changes to how the public consumed and listened to music. Driven by the dance craze of the mid-1910s and improving economic conditions during the pre-war years, the music recording industry grew from a value of roughly \$27 million in 1914 to \$158 million in 1918.<sup>28</sup> The number of recording companies, likewise, increased dramatically from eighteen in 1914 to 166 in 1918.<sup>29</sup> The growing competition for consumers' ears and wallets meant recording companies had to develop strategies to differentiate their products, leading to the development of higher-end devices, marketing strategies focus on sound fidelity, and the pursuit of exclusive recording contracts. As Colin Symes, Kyle S. Barnett, and others have shown, companies now competed for customers not only by securing the most famous singers and musicians but also by manufacturing products that were considered an integral part of the middle-class home.<sup>30</sup> Recordings and phonographs were, thus, not simply a medium for entertainment; they were quickly becoming a symbol of wealth and respectability. Indeed, as Symes notes, advertisements for opera recordings stressed how this emerging middle-class could appropriate the trappings of

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<sup>28</sup> Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>29</sup> Millard, *America on Record*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Colin Symes, *Setting the Record Straight: A Material History of Classical Recording* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), Kyle S. Barnett, "Furniture Music: The Phonograph as Furniture, 1900-1930," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18, no. 3 (2006), 301-324. See also Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877-1977* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977) and David J. Steffen, *From Edison to Marconi: The First Thirty Years of Recorded Music* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2005).

elite culture in the comfort of their own homes.<sup>31</sup> These advertisements, increasingly targeted at women, thus rendered the consumption and experience of music — and of musical audition — as a domesticated practice fit for the parlor and safe for social engagement.<sup>32</sup>

Dalhart's classically-trained voice matched perfectly this growing demographic of middle- and upper-class consumers, and his recordings were clearly marketed to a *bourgeois* audience. Both his black dialect songs as well as his early recordings of country music were typically listed under "Light Vocal Selections" or simply "Concert Songs and Instrumentals," designations he shared with stars of similar styles, including Henry Burr and Billy Murray both of whom were also known for their dialect performances.<sup>33</sup> Dalhart's participation in the Tone Tests placed him within the nationalizing of consumer culture taking place in the first decades of the twentieth century. As T. J. Jackson Lears, Karen Cox, and others have argued, the consumer culture of the early twentieth century focused not just on the selling of goods but on producing consumer desire for goods through the marketing of cultural values.<sup>34</sup> As Lears has noted, advertisers "addressed nonrational yearnings by suggesting the ways [their] client's product

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<sup>31</sup> Symes, *Setting the Record Straight*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy D. Taylor, Mark Katz, and Tony Grajeda, eds., *Music, Sound, and Technology in America: A Documentary History of Early Phonograph, Cinema, and Radio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, "Advertisement," *Charlotte Observer* (North Carolina), 29 April 1922, 3, and "Advertisement," *New York Times*, 29 May 1925, 9.

<sup>34</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, 1-38 (New York: Pantheon, 1983); Karen L. Cox, "Branding Dixie: The Selling of the American South, 1890-1930," in *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South*, ed. Anthony J. Stanonis, 50-68 (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008); Monica Brasted, "The Reframing of Traditional Cultural Values: Consumption and World War I," *Advertising & Society Review* 5, no. 4 (2004), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asr/v005/5.4brasted.html>; and Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1990).

would transform the buyer's life."<sup>35</sup> While advertising strategies at times differed by region, particularly in the South as Cox has shown, advertisements for phonographs and musical recordings tended to emphasize class status over that of geography. Thus the circulation of Dalhart's voice alongside images of high-end, expensive phonographs cut across regional differences by focusing instead on consumers' class status.

So how, then, was Dalhart able to market himself as an authentic purveyor of this material? I would argue that Dalhart's affiliation with the Edison Tone Tests intimately linked his voice to notions of authenticity while circulating his performance styles and songs to a broad audience. As Jonathan Sterne has stated with regard to the Tone Tests and sonic fidelity, one of the most important messages of these recitals was showing that "live musical performance and recording [could] be understood as two species of the same practice."<sup>36</sup> Marketed by Edison as essential products for the middle-class home, recordings could thus afford the same cultural capital as attending a live operatic performance. Edison believed his audio technology's superior fidelity provided his customers with the closest available approximation to live performance; as his advertisements reminded listeners, Edison discs and cylinders did reproduce sound — they re-created sound. To showcase his technology's superior sound quality, Edison required performers of extraordinary talent and regularly used singers from the Metropolitan Opera, including sopranos Anna Case and Marie Rappold, during the performances. These performers could not only be counted on to perform consistently — a necessity when trying to emulate precisely the sound and timing of a recording; they also represented some of the most prestigious

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<sup>35</sup> Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," 18.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 262. For more on the Tone Tests, see Emily Thompson, "Machines, Music, and the Quest for Fidelity: Marketing the Edison Phonograph in America, 1877-1925," *Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (1995), 131-171.

voices currently singing in the nation's elite venues. Dalhart was, in many ways, a perfect choice for Edison: having one of "America's leading tenors," as Dalhart was often advertised, provided Edison's company with a U.S.-trained artist capable of performing popular and light-classic repertoire while also displaying the diversity of the Edison Records catalog.<sup>37</sup> For Dalhart, meanwhile, his voice came packaged as a musical commodity wrapped in the language of authenticity. The relationship between Dalhart and the Edison Company was thus one of mutual benefit. Working with Edison provided Dalhart with a steady source of income through both his recording contract as well as through the Tone Test tours. As the market for audio recordings transitioned to racialized genres based on musicians' ethnicity, Dalhart's affiliation with Edison provided the singer with both legitimacy and a wide audience by circulating his 'authentic' voice throughout the nation.

That Edison's phonographs were targeted specifically to middle- and upper-class patrons is evidenced by the company's sales philosophy, which promoted music consumption as social endeavor and, at least at first, specifically targeted upper-class customers. The first Edison Shop, located at 589 Main Street in East Orange, New Jersey, was decorated in such a way as to make customers feel as comfortable as possible: as William Maxwell, an executive with Thomas Alva Edison, Inc., wrote in *The Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, a short book detailing the launch of Edison's mid-1910s sales philosophy, shop owners were to "strive to give the place, what, for want of a better name, may be called a *smart* atmosphere; endeavor to make it a social

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<sup>37</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 42. Jonathan Sterne makes the argument that Edison's use of "relatively unknown [singers]...was an advantage...as auditors would not have had a prior memory of his performances or recordings to judge against the Tone Tests" (262). However, Edison's marketing of Dalhart and the various articles referring to his well-known status would suggest that audiences familiar with a singer's voice would be more impressed with Edison's technology, having heard the performer's voice numerous times and therefore being much more familiar with its contours.

rendezvous; and, particularly at the start, try to attract the most fashionable people of the town so that the store will be talked about by every one as a place where the nicest people of the town are accustomed to congregate."<sup>38</sup> Upon entering the store, customers were greeted by a large showroom with grey-tapestry covered walls (concealing several rows of recordings) lined with Edison's latest models. A table and chair were placed in the middle of the room so that customers could sit while listening to recordings. Located at the end of the room on either side of a doorway were two soundproof listening booths for more careful listening sessions. Walking through the doorway took customers into the recital room, containing more seating, a kitchenette along the left wall for serving tea, and plenty of space for dancing. A small alcove was located at the end of the room for staging the "demonstrating instrument," but this setup was later abandoned due to poor acoustics.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the inviting ambiance offered by the store, invitations to attend social gatherings scheduled twice a week were sent to potential female customers on engraved cards made to look like wedding invitations as, according to Edison's marketing staff, "[i]nvestigation revealed that if you place a half dozen sealed letters before the average woman, and one is contained in a heavy wedding invitation style of envelope, addressed carefully in a fashionable hand, it almost invariably is the first to be opened."<sup>40</sup> The first recital was advertised to only two hundred citizens of East Orange, with seventy-four customers arriving for tea, demonstrations of

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<sup>38</sup> William Maxwell, *The Edison Retail Sales Laboratory* (Orange, NJ: Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1915), 6. See also Greg Milner, *Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2010), 41-43.

<sup>39</sup> Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 6. Edison had used similar setups since at least 1913. See "Two Beautiful Establishments," *Edison Amberola Monthly*, June 1913, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 7.

the Edison Diamond Disc, and dancing exhibitions.<sup>41</sup> After first targeting the city's most fashionable people, invitations were next sent to potential customers living within the same neighborhood in hopes of attracting residents "from practically the same station in life as regards standards of living."<sup>42</sup> The store owners followed the recitals with targeted mailings to those who had attended, with offers to stage a demonstration in their homes for their family and friends and thus to provide customers with an idea of the social functions that purchasing an Edison phonograph would make possible.<sup>43</sup>

A central component of the recitals held in Edison shops were the Tone Tests. Beginning in 1915 Edison staged a series of concerts, held first in New York and then followed by tours throughout the nation, to prove the superior fidelity of his Diamond Disc technology.<sup>44</sup> These concerts/sales pitches staged a duet between a singer or musician and an Edison Diamond Disc recording. Singers would perform along with recordings of themselves, while instrumentalists were more often accompanied by a recording of the same composition recorded by a different musician. At a certain point during the performance, the house lights would be turned off and the musician would leave the stage, allowing the recording to continue.<sup>45</sup> The house lights were then turned back on so that audiences could witness the phonograph's ability to "recreate" the sound

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<sup>41</sup> The invitations were numbered so that when surrendered upon arrival, the store owners had the names and address of people they knew were already interested in Edison products. See Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> According to Maxwell, the first Tone Test occurred by happenstance sometime in 1914. Anna Case, a soprano with the Metropolitan Opera, was in Des Moines, Iowa, during a national tour when she stopped into the store of a local Edison dealer. Asked to perform by the customers, she accompanied herself with a recent recording, and the customers claimed they could not tell the difference. See Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 18-19. Walter Welch and Leah Bent, meanwhile, write this test actually took place in Edison's laboratory in West Orange under the careful scrutiny of Edison himself. See *From Tinfoil to Stereo: The Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry, 1877-1929* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 146.

<sup>45</sup> Welch and Bent, *From Tinfoil to Stereo*, 147.

of live performance. In the case of instrumentalists, audiences were asked to listen carefully to the minute details of the instruments' sound; for example, Tone Tests featuring violinists showcased how Edison's phonographs could produce a sound so clear that one could distinguish between a Stradivarius and a Guarnerius violin.<sup>46</sup> After the first successful concerts in New York, recitals were held in local stores and theaters throughout the nation. As the *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory* stressed, promoters and emcees were to treat these concerts as social occasions for demonstrating Edison's technology; the word "sales" was never to be used. The Edison Company provided promoters with scripts for introducing the concerts, a suggested program of music to be performed, and advice on how to follow up with attendees.<sup>47</sup>

Dalhart performed in Edison's Tone Tests from 1917 until 1925. In one of his earliest performances, he sang "The Nightingale Song," one of his best-selling early recordings, from *Pinafore* dressed as Ralph Rackstraw.<sup>48</sup> By July 1919, Dalhart was largely in control of his own Tone Tests performances: he was responsible for booking engagements and often chose his own repertoire, which by 1920 included the dialect song "There's a Lump of Sugar Down in Dixie" (1918) and the light classics "Night, My Love and I" (1918) and "Waters of Venice" (1919), a duet with soprano and vaudeville artist Gladys Rice (a vaudeville and performing artist). While "There's a Lump of Sugar Down in Dixie" featured Dalhart performing his characteristic take on black dialect, all three highlight Dalhart's vocal strengths: set in a high tenor range, Dalhart sang in a strong operatic voice, complete with broad vibrato, smooth phrasing, and liberal use of *messa di voce*. His recording of "The Nightingale's Song" provided the best display of his performing style from this period and served as the perfect vehicle for showcasing Dalhart's

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<sup>46</sup> Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Maxwell, *Edison Retail Sales Laboratory*, 20-29.

<sup>48</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 60.

clarion tenor. Accompanied by chorus and orchestra, Dalhart employed what Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has noted as the hallmarks of early twentieth-century elite singing: he emphasized the emotional content of the lyric through careful use of *portamento* and *messa di voce*, he rolled every *r* throughout the piece, and smoothly managed the break between chest and head voice.<sup>49</sup>

Whether because of Dalhart's popularity or due to interest in Edison's technology, Tone Tests performed by Dalhart drew large crowds: during week-long engagements in September and October 1919, he sang for audiences of fifty thousand and seventy-five thousand in Kansas City.<sup>50</sup> By 1921, Dalhart earned an average of over \$500 per week for his Tone Test performances alone.<sup>51</sup> Edison or a local jobber would generally place advertisements for the Tone Tests recitals in local newspapers roughly a week before the concert was scheduled. In an advertisement for Dalhart's Kansas City engagement in September 1919, we see Dalhart dressed in formal evening attire standing beside what appears to be the Chippendale model, named after British furniture designer Thomas Chippendale, featuring a French Gothic design in mahogany (See Figure 5.1).<sup>52</sup> Below the image of Dalhart, prospective buyers were asked to come hear Dalhart "living" and "re-created." The concerts would be followed by advertisements in the next day's paper proclaiming, "Last night's audience mystified/Tries vainly to detect difference between voice of famous tenor and RE-CREATION by Edison's new phonograph," then a brief

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<sup>49</sup> Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "Recording and Histories of Performance Style," in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 252.

<sup>50</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 66-67. See "Advertisement," *Kansas City Star*, 31 August 1919, 15, and "Advertisement," *Kansas City Star*, 1 September 1919, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 73.

<sup>52</sup> For an example and definition of the Chippendale model, see *Edison and Music* (Orange, NJ: Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1919), 10, 26. The base price for this model was \$285. For the Tone Test advertisement, see "Advertisement," *Kansas City Star*, 1 September 1919. Other ads feature a headshot of Dalhart, with only the lapels and tie of his tuxedo visible. See "Advertisement," *Aberdeen Daily News* (South Dakota), 14 October 1920: 6; "Advertisement," *Jonesboro Evening Sun*, 21 March 1921: 3; among others.

write up detailing how Dalhart "made comparison after comparison" to the delight of the crowd.<sup>53</sup> An article from the *Tulsa World* extolling the new technology was typical of the press that Edison's recitals received:

One of the most interesting novelties in this evening of unique experiences, was when Mr. Dalhart sang a duet with his own voice. It was as though two artists with voices of exactly the same tone-quality, the same expression, the same timbre, were singing together. The effect was somehow unreal and weird, as though one artist had been bewitched into two by some magician's art.<sup>54</sup>

With his classically-trained voice and well-dressed appearance, Dalhart cut a dashing figure while sounding the new-found respectability of the phonograph machine. But more importantly, the Tone Test tours placed Dalhart's name and voice in the minds of listeners, and potential consumers, throughout the nation and provided a material connection between the urban centers of the East and the supposedly isolated towns populating the nation's rural regions. By traveling the nation as part of Edison's Tone Tests and drawing on the company's marketing strategies, Vernon Dalhart's voice circulated throughout the nation as a commodity deeply enmeshed in the language of authenticity.

### **Caroline? and Vernon Dalhart's Antebellum Longings**

While "The Nightingale's Song" helped propel Dalhart to a successful recording career, he quickly became known as an interpreter of what I am calling *dialect ballads*. As Karl Miller (who uses the phrase "dialect love songs" to describe such compositions) has argued, black composers and lyricist working in the first decades of the twentieth century attempted to break

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<sup>53</sup> "Advertisement," *Miami District Daily News*, 10 March 1920. See also "Advertisement," *Tulsa Daily World*, 28 March 1920, 14; "Advertisement," *Aberdeen Daily News* (South Dakota), 20 October 1920, 2; "Advertisement," *Jonesboro Evening Sun* (Arkansas), 29 March 1921, 3.

<sup>54</sup> "Phonograph is Perfect in a Tone-Test Recital," *Tulsa World*, 20 March 1920, 5.

from the "coon song" phenomenon by writing songs that "emphasized human concerns common across the color line and [that] insisted that black characters could do more than pine for the plantation or play with razors."<sup>55</sup> Many of these songs, as Miller noted, presented a topic rarely seen or heard on the musical stage —romantic relationships between African Americans. I prefer

*Hear*  
**Vernon Dalhart**  
this week at the  
**Newman Theater**

<p><b>DALHART</b> <i>Living--</i> He will sing a song in his own natural voice.</p>	<p><b>DALHART</b> <i>Re-Created--</i> Then he will sing a duet with his Re- Created voice.</p>
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**Edison Made This Possible**  
***Put Your Faith  
in Edison!***

**Special Offer**  
It's easy to own the New Edison now. Come in and let us tell you how you can secure Mr. Edison's Phonograph on moderate terms.

**The Edison Shop**  
1012 Grand Ave.

**Figure 5.1.** Advertisement for a Dalhart Tone Test in the *Kansas City Star* (1919).

<sup>55</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 132-133.

the term *dialect ballad* to describe such compositions for two reasons: first, thinking of these compositions as ballads highlights their narrative-driven form, which often focused on an emotive yearning for a mythical, antebellum South. A song like "Ain't You Coming Back to Dixieland?," recorded by Dalhart in 1917 and discussed below, while eschewing the topics of violence, gambling, and laziness common to coon songs, retains the longing for antebellum plantation life as told through the story of estranged lovers. Second, thinking of these performances as ballads helps place them within the tradition of Tin Pan Alley sentimental songs, such as "After the Ball" or "The Little Rosewood Casket," (both recorded by Dalhart) that traded in tales of romantic longing as well as tragedy, migration, and nostalgia. Through his operatic training, Dalhart was able to perform compositions such as these in a manner that heightened the emotional affect of the lyrics in a style seemingly tailor-made for the audiences he was targeting. In this section, I discuss Dalhart's performance of dialect ballads, including "Ain't You Coming Back to Dixieland" and his first recording, "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline?" in order to understand how and why Dalhart's anachronistic presentations of black voices relied on nostalgia for an exotic, preindustrial South, and how his vocal performance paradoxically sounded a white, southern modernity.

Dalhart's performance of dialect ballads would have served well in sounding the growing nostalgia for antebellum southern life just beginning to impact popular culture.<sup>56</sup> As Karen Cox has noted in her study of advertisements drawing on southern iconography, while sales strategies in the South tended to draw on images of southern military heritage (Confederate soldiers, the battle flag, and so forth), northern advertisements focused instead on the simplicity and bucolic

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<sup>56</sup> See W. K. McNeil, ed., *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).

mythos of southern existence.<sup>57</sup> Song lyrics, and their attendant sheet music covers, narrating tales of the antebellum South regularly employed the imagery of a preindustrialized, agrarian culture. For example, the sheet music cover for "Ain't You Coming Back to Dixieland," written by Raymond Egan and Richard A. Whiting in 1917 and recorded by Dalhart for Edison in the same year, featured a plantation scene at sunset, with smoke drifting from the chimney of a log cabin in the background while three African American slaves worked the fields in the foreground.<sup>58</sup> Such images, as Cox argues, depicted "the leisurely pace of life in the South as the antithesis of modernity," and, I would add, served as a nostalgic longing for antebellum life that provided a sense of escape from the increasing ethnic diversity of urban life.<sup>59</sup>

Dalhart's rendering of songs like "Ain't You Coming Back to Dixieland" suited perfectly the iconography and narratives presented by the music. Set in an upbeat tempo and drawing on the syncopated — albeit toned-down — rhythms of ragtime, "Ain't You Coming Back to Dixieland" presented a tale of migration and longing, with the song's narrator's relating the story of receiving a letter from his estranged family imploring him to return to his home down south:

*Verse*

I had a letter from my Mammy  
 Down in sunny Tennessee  
 And tho' it may sound queer to folks up here  
 'deed it sounds might good to me.  
 It says, "They're lonesome down in Dixie,"  
 And there's a tear in ev'ry line  
 For they're calling me to Tennessee  
 It starts out "Honey chile of mine.

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<sup>57</sup> Cox, "Branding Dixie."

<sup>58</sup> Raymond Egan and Richard A. Whiting, "Ain't You Coming Back to Dixieland," (New York: Jerome H. Remick & Co., 1917). You can see a scan of the sheet music at <http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/utsmc/main.php?bid=1275>, accessed 14 January 2014. A recording is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow4zP3aorb8>, accessed 14 Jan 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Cox, "Branding Dixie," 64.

*Chorus*

Ain't you comin' back to Dixieland  
 Where the sweet magnolias grow?  
 Don't you ever yearn just to return  
 to the land of Old Black Joe?  
 All the little pickaninnies seem to miss you  
 Lawdy how I'm longing just to kiss you.  
 Darlin' your Mammy's growin' old.  
 'Deed I am Honey lamb.  
 Don't you want to see the cotton fields  
 And the sugar cane once more  
 And the pretty flowers growing round  
 the old folks cabin door?  
 Dixie looks like Heaven all the while.  
 You sho' don't have to die to go there honey chile  
 Ain't you comin' back to dear old Dixieland?

Performed as a duet between Dalhart and soprano Gladys Rice, the song's upbeat tempo, ragtime rhythms, and chromatic melody belied the narrative's sentimental tone. Yet Dalhart and Rice's emotive performance managed to express the yearning captured in the letter. Dalhart's *ritardando* leading into the chorus, starting with "For they're calling me to Tennessee," for example, allows him to pause briefly on this plea to return thus emphasizing the letter's emotional weight, while the images of "pretty flowers" and "magnolias" were meant to pull at the heartstrings of someone recently uprooted from their childhood surroundings and finding themselves alone in unfamiliar, urban environments.

In considering the epigraph with which I began this chapter where Dalhart references his southern heritage in order to claim access to black orality, Karl Hagstrom Miller rightly observed how Dalhart's statement "signaled a momentous shift" in the entertainment industry as black artists increasingly controlled the representations of black cultural products and of the social life upon which those products were based.<sup>60</sup> I take issue, however, with the idea, suggested by

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<sup>60</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 142.

Miller, that Dalhart's performances were widely understood as "genuine" or "authentic" portrayals of black orality. Dalhart's dialect ballads were certainly marketed as such: in the listing for "Caroline?" found in the Edison catalogue *Edison Supplemental Records*, the company describes the recording as "quite different from the usual 'coon song.' It is a really artistic, old fashioned darky love song. Vernon Dalhart sings it with tremendous effect. He gets the real darky whine. This is probably the best rendition of its kind ever recorded."<sup>61</sup> Dalhart, meanwhile, eschewed any pretense to "artistic" singing when relating in 1927 the story of his first successful recording, emphasizing again the natural affinities between the speech of black and white southerners: "[O]ne day I forgot all my high-falutin [sic] ideas of singing and, going back to my Southern accent, sang 'Can't Yo' Hear Me Callin', Caroline?' into [Edison's] trumpet. I've been making Edison records ever since."<sup>62</sup> Yet these were promotional materials and, as such, must be regarded carefully. While Dalhart and Edison made appeals to an authentic sound of black orality, we do not know how these songs were heard and consumed by southern auditors.<sup>63</sup> Instead, I would argue that while Dalhart certainly made claims to his southern roots as a means to access black orality, his recorded output revealed a white performer exploiting market demand for sentimental, nostalgic yearnings for a supposedly premodern rural South.

Close listening to Dalhart's dialect ballads reveals few connections either to forms of black orality based on the minstrelsy tradition or to the new forms of black orality being performed by jazz and blues singers. For Miller, Dalhart's performance on "Caroline?" represented the hallmarks of black orality in the late 1910s and early 1920s: "he smoothly bent

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 42, and Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 141.

<sup>62</sup> Dumm, "New Songs for Old," 19.

<sup>63</sup> Palmer mentions that Dalhart received fan mail after he started recording country music, but does not mention whether the singer received letters before this. Examining the fan mail of singers from this period would provide an incredible insight into how audiences were hearing and making use of these songs.

notes in legato phrases, increased his volume over sustained notes, and retarded rhythms of key phrases in a manner that had come to signify 'Negro dialect.'"<sup>64</sup> My issue with Miller's description is that none of the characteristics specifically signify black orality at this time. As I discussed in Chapter Three, black composers and singers were moving away from heavy use of minstrelsy dialect, made liberal use of a tight, fast vibrato, and often used a sing-song style rather than a full singing voice in their new formulations of black singing. The characteristics that Miller lists were more a hallmark of 1910s ballad and light classical singing, such as that employed by Dalhart on "The Nightingale's Song."

Indeed, comparing "Caroline" to "The Nighingale's Song" reveals a number of similarities. "Caroline" was composed by Caro Roma with lyrics by William H. Gardner and published by M. Witmark & Sons in 1914.<sup>65</sup> Like many dialect ballads, the lyrics portrayed a pastoral scene filled with the sounds and sights of a pristine nature

I miss yo' in de monin' when ole Bob-White gives his call,  
 Caroline, Caroline,  
 I miss yo' at de sunset when de evenin' shadows fall,  
 Caroline, Caroline.  
 I miss yo' when de moonbeams out on the ribber shine,  
 Oh can't yo' heah me callin' for you, Caroline.

Dalhart's recording of "Caroline" began with a brief orchestral accompaniment (consisting of oboe, flute, violin, and harp) that introduced the verses' melodic material. The pastoral setting for the song was established immediately, with the flute providing birdcalls to accompany the song's

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<sup>64</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> See "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin' Caroline," <http://www.thehackley.org/gsd/cgi-bin/library?e=d-000-00---0dplhacsm--00-0-0-0prompt-10---4---Document---0-11--1-en-50---20-about---001-011-1-OutfZz-8-0&a=d&cl=CL6.19&d=HASH01364919ea10deaed69386c9>, accessed 13 December 2013. Caro Roma was the stage and pen name of Carrie Northey, an operatic soprano and composer who also spent considerable time in vaudeville. See Sally Merrill. "Roma, Caro." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2093474>.

first line, "I miss yo' in de mornin' when ole Bob-White gives his call," and strummed chords on the harp lent the arrangement a dreamy, wistful quality. Throughout the recording, Dalhart mixed minstrelsy dialect with operatic flourishes; for example, in the line "I miss yo' when de moonbeams out on the ribber shine," Dalhart sang the minstrelsy-dialect word "ribber" while performing an exaggerated rolled *r*, a technique heard frequently on his light classical recordings. Indeed, Dalhart employed rolled *r*'s throughout the entire recording, even with words such as "praying" when the *r* is not normally emphasized in operatic singing. While primarily singing in minstrelsy dialect, Dalhart employed perfect enunciation so that each word, even when altered by dialect, was clearly audible. Dalhart also used a wide vibrato and a slight use of *messa di voce*, clearly audible on the final note where Dalhart ended on a high G, just at the limit of his upper range but still performed in an open, strong voice.

A much better candidate for a white musician who thoroughly embraced black vocal characteristics is Wendell Hall.<sup>66</sup> Known as the "Red-Headed Music Maker," Hall was born in Kansas but raised in Chicago and first made a name for himself as a song plugger and ukulele player on station KYW, where he earned \$25 per week working at times twelve hours a day from 3p.m. until 3a.m.<sup>67</sup> In 1923, Hall became the first U.S. artist to make a tour of radio stations throughout the nation, followed by tours of Canada (July 1924), Europe (October 1925), and a world tour including performances in Hawai'i, Cuba, England, Scotland, Ireland, and France

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<sup>66</sup> To give an idea of how interconnected the early country music industry was, Hall had performed with Dalhart's partner Carson Robison during the late 1910s in Kansas City and later in New York. See Bob Olson, "Carson Robison," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury, 451-452 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> ASCAP pamphlet, no date, box 1, folder 1, Wendell Hall papers, U.S. Mss 50AF, Wisconsin Historical Society, Archives Department (hereafter cited as Hall Papers). See also Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 64-68.

(ending in December 1926).<sup>68</sup> Before making the transition to radio and the ukulele, Hall began his career in the late 1910s as a xylophone player in vaudeville, where he performed popular hits and coon songs, the latter of which provided him with training in the stereotyped codes of black orality.<sup>69</sup> As Michele Hilmes has noted, Hall's ability to perform the characteristics of black orality — however stereotyped his performance was — on the faceless medium of radio led some listeners to question his racial heritage.<sup>70</sup>

Hall's employment of black orality can be heard on his most successful composition and recording, "It Ain't Gonna Rain No Mo," recorded for Victor on 12 October 1923.<sup>71</sup> Throughout the recording, Hall employed many of the characteristics of black orality that had been defined through the blues and songster tradition heard on race records including the use of a southern dialect, sudden jumps in pitch on interjections ("Oh!"), call-and-response (with Hall performing both), scatting, and cry breaks (i.e., when a singer's voice seems to crack briefly during performance). Hall's use of black orality was perhaps most apparent during the refrain, a simple four-line phrase based on the song's title:

It ain't gonna rain no more, no more,  
It ain't gonna rain no more.  
How in the world can the old folks tell  
It ain't gonna rain no more?

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<sup>68</sup> ASCAP pamphlet, no date, box 1, folder 1, Hall Papers.

<sup>69</sup> See list of Hall performing "A Discontented Coon" in Pamphlet for Irving Park Chapter No. 707, O.E.S. Vaudeville, 28 October 1916, box 2, folder 5, Hall Papers.

<sup>70</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 67. Hall received large quantities of fan mail starting early in his career from throughout the U.S. and as far away as Havana, Cuba. See Correspondence, 1923, Jan. - 1924, March, box 1, folder 2, Hall Papers.

<sup>71</sup> "Victor Discography: Wendell W. Hall (vocalist: baritone vocal)," <http://victor.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/talent/detail/29077/>, accessed 14 December 2013. Released as Victor 19171. A recording is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tB2yxuUuVS0>, accessed 1 March 2014. Hall would ultimately sell over five million copies of the sheet music. See "'Radio Invented For Him,' They Wrote," *Press Register* (Mobile, AL), box 1, folder 1, Hall Papers.

Hall varied his performance of the refrain's first two lines with each performance, repeating the words "no more" numerous times in the second refrain, then eliding the second line altogether in subsequent repetitions and performing various scating techniques (buzzing, humming, melismatic cry breaks, and so forth), instead. On the word "world," which Hall bent into "wuuurld," as well as on other held notes, Hall employed a tight, fast vibrato reminiscent of the gospel-style singing heard on pre-blues recordings by Bert Williams and other black performers.

The nostalgia of Dalhart's singing becomes readily apparent when compared to a singer like Hall: Dalhart's use of *messa di voce*, his legato phrasing, and liberal employment of *ritardando* that Miller identifies as the characteristics of late-1910s black singing, all lend his voice a quality of longing and emotional that captures perfectly the pathos — and mythos — of the music's lyrics. Dalhart's singing does not resemble the new sound of rhythmically-energetic ragtime and jazz nor does it suggest the acute longing emerging from the blues tradition. Instead, Dalhart's voice sounds a stereotyped sonic blackness — a holdover from earlier forms of white racial cross-voicing — sung through the techniques of the urban, elite North. His recordings, however, were good enough to be taken as authentic, as a reissue of "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline?" was released on Black Swan records under the name Harry A. Moore.<sup>72</sup> In fact, an advertisement from the Chicago Defender listed "Moore's" recording of "Caroline" under the headline "Don't Be Deceived! Black Swan Records Are the Only Exclusive Colored Records and Are Made by a Colored Company."<sup>73</sup> Though marketed as the authentic sound of rural southern blackness, I would argue instead that Dalhart's voice sounded for contemporary auditors a

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<sup>72</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 82-83.

<sup>73</sup> "Advertisement," *The Chicago Defender*, 9 September 1922, 6. As David Suisman notes, nearly one third of Black Swan's catalog were reissues of white singers and musicians performing under pseudonyms. See David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 233-235.

mixture of regional oralities: the stereotyped dialect performed in operatic fashion lent his performance the air of artistry, as Edison's advertisements argued, while revealing the nostalgia produced by Northern and southern longings for an antebellum past.

### **The Prisoner's Song and Vernon Dalhart's New, Old-Fashioned Voice**

In this final section, I turn to an analysis of Dalhart's first country music recording, "The Prisoner's Song" recorded for Victor in August 1924. Here, I want to consider Dalhart's voice as representing the emergence of southern modernity. As Miller, Malone, and others have noted, a market for country music had been established through radio performances, fiddling contests, and performers' careful marketing of themselves as professional musicians by the time Dalhart made his first recordings. Country music, thus, was already "contaminated and compromised" by commercial interests, to borrow Aaron Fox's phrase, before the notion of authenticity came to define its originary narrative.<sup>74</sup> Dalhart's voice — his performance of southern orality through the urban, and urbane, sound of a northern elite — captured perfectly the music's rise out of a national marketplace selling the supposedly primitive music of an assumed isolated folk. Through his mixing of urban and rural singing styles, Dalhart thus vocalized both the antimodernist mythology of country as the pure expression of the folk arising from the wellspring of the agrarian South as well as the music's reliance on urban modes of marketing, audio recording, and vocal practices.

Throughout his country-music career, Dalhart presented a professional image of the country music singer at a time when many southern performers were typically understood in terms of the rube, mountaineer, or hillbilly. Certainly numerous country music artists

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<sup>74</sup> Aaron A. Fox, "The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music," *Popular Music* 11, no. 1 (1992): 53.

appropriated this stereotype as part of their performance: Fiddlin' John Carson, who often performed during his early career in ragged clothes, quickly comes to mind. Yet, as Anthony Harkins has argued, the rube character, like the blackface minstrel, "served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the 'mainstream,' or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society."<sup>75</sup> Pamela Fox, meanwhile, has shown productively how "poor southern white[s] posing as a rube may utilize the artifice of the act to deflect, rather than reconstitute, his own sense of being an 'un'-natural primitive."<sup>76</sup> While Caron's performance clearly adhered to such a reading, Dalhart, instead, showcased a trained, learned musician thoroughly situated within the modern music industry. His performance of rural southernness thus never traded in the types of primitivisms found in the careers of Carson, Rodgers, Poole, or other early country music stars.

Even so, Dalhart, because of his recordings and the mythology of the southern folk, was equated with the idea of the backwards and backwoods southerner. A review of the hillbilly music phenomenon by Abel Green in *Variety* from 1926 singled out Dalhart's music as exemplary of the new genre:

This particular branch of pop-song music is worthy of treatment on its own, being peculiar unto itself. The 'hill-billy' is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the chautauqua and the phonograph.

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<sup>75</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>76</sup> Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 25.

The talking machine's relation to the show business interests most. The mountaineer is of 'poor white trash' genera. The great majority, probably 95 per cent, can neither read nor write English. Theirs is a community all unto themselves.

Illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons, the singsong, nasal-twangling vocalizing of a Vernon Dalhart or a Carson Robison on the disks, reciting the banal lyrics of a 'Prisoner's Song' or 'The Death of Floyd Collins' (biggest hill-billy song-hit to date), intrigues their interest.

For the local dealer the hill-billy craze spells a bonanza. The ignoramuses buy as many as 15 records at one time of a single number. Should the dealer ask them why 'The Death of Floyd Collins' so interests them as a 'song' (actual episode), the usual answer is that, if one record wears out from overplaying, they will always have another on hand.

It's a vast market.<sup>77</sup>

Green's invective dismissal of country music audiences, while clearly indebted to the stereotypes of a premodern South that had been circulating within popular culture for years, suggested (however unwittingly) that southern audiences were by the early 1920s fully assimilated into the national market economies.

By turning to country music, Vernon Dalhart did, however, take part in the romanticization of the Jim Crow South that early country music recordings attempted to render audible through their scratchy violins, raspy-voiced singers, and stripped-down arrangements. The sound of the recordings was of particular importance for selling their supposedly premodern authenticity. For example, an early Victor advertisement from October 1924 for "The Prisoner's Song" and "The Wreck of the Old 97" described the ballads as "[g]enuine songs of the southern mountaineers, given with all their original lyric crudeness and the vigorous quaint melody. The fiddle, the guitar, and the mouth-organ figure in accompaniment."<sup>78</sup> Two years later, a *Variety*

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<sup>77</sup> "'Hill-Billy' Music," *Variety*, 29 December 1926, 1, 22. Green had written for *Variety* since 1919 and would become the magazine's editor in 1933. For a brief biography of Green, see "Abel Green," in *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, ed. Anthony Slide, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 212-213.

<sup>78</sup> "Advertisement," *New York Times*, 3 October 1924, 14.

article discussing the provenance of "The Prisoner's Song" noted that the composition "became a hit with little or no effort by anybody, being a 'natural' and really starting the hilly-billy [sic] and old-fashioned song vogue."<sup>79</sup> One of the few contemporary interviews with Dalhart, Bob Dumm's "Two Men Who Sell New Songs for Old" from 1927, presented Dalhart and Carson Robison as professional musicians taking "simple, homely melodies built upon themes as old as the hills" and updating them for the "new wave of public demand for old songs."<sup>80</sup>

The songwriting team of Dalhart and Robison (joined later by Hood on violin) employed the sounds of old-time southern music throughout their recordings by presenting simple arrangements of voice, guitar, and violin, though they still retained a clearly polished and professional sound. These musical practices suggested a South stranded in a premodern, agrarian past, left behind by the rapidly urbanization of the North. Yet, as Edward P. Comentale, among others, have argued, "country music nostalgia signals its own modernity [by] translat[ing] the anxiety of its moment into sonic form and thus creates an alternative presence and consistency for listeners confronting their own implacable modernity."<sup>81</sup> That southern musicians took part in an industrialized, modern musical marketplace is by now well established. What I find intriguing in Comentale's analysis, however, is how his focus on the sound and formal structures of country music reveals how musicians dealt with and commented upon their place within the commercial music industry through sound. Comentale focuses on Fiddlin' John Carson's recording of "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane," a song that had circulated amongst rural musicians since at least 1871. Recorded by Carson in 1923, "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" served at once as the first major-selling recording for the burgeoning country music industry and, for Carson, as

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<sup>79</sup> "Inside Stuff: On Music — About 'The Prisoner's Song,'" *Variety*, 17 February 1926, 47.

<sup>80</sup> Dumm, "Two Men," 19.

<sup>81</sup> Edward P. Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 73.

the culmination of a career that had started on the streets of Atlanta before moving on to fiddle contests and, in 1922, local radio. The song's lyrics presented a straight-forward presentation of nostalgia for an old South slowly decaying in the wake of modern industry told through the collapse of rural domestic space: "The chimney's falling down, and the roof's all caved in." Such lyrics seemed to yearn for a melody of lament. Yet Comentale's close listening to Carson's performance suggests a far different reading; instead of pathos, Carson sang "the maudlin lyrics" with ironic detachment. Quoting Comentale, "[Carson] delivers the song's title line with a knowing smirk, while he resists the excessive pathos of the verses with sets of knowingly drawn vowels and a mocking flourish at the end of each line."<sup>82</sup> Nearly shouting the entire performance, Carson appears to substitute scorn for nostalgia, laughing either at himself or at the image of himself that he had been selling on stages for nearly four decades.<sup>83</sup>

If, for Comentale, Carson's music performed an ironic take on the South's emergence into modernity, Dalhart's performance (at least in his early recordings) sounded instead the emergence of country music not out of the South but rather out of the circulation of southern imagery, peoples, and music that gave rise to the country music industry itself. With his conservatory-trained voice enunciating clearly his broad Texas accent, Dalhart performed a vocal style that was of two seemingly disparate soundworlds. As a southerner, he could and did claim country music as his personal heritage; as a northerner and by now established recording artist, Dalhart was able to position himself within the music industry and draw upon the name recognition he had gained through his recording and touring career. Dalhart's knowledge of the music industry thus provided him with economic and musical advantages, especially when it came to understanding which songs sold well and how to market those songs to a wide audience.

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<sup>82</sup> Comentale, *Sweet Airs*, 81.

<sup>83</sup> Malone and Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 37.

As a professional musician working within the framework of Tin Pan Alley, Dalhart was intimately familiar with popular and success songwriting formulas, which he carried over into his country music career. Carson Robison, Dalhart's recording partner for many of his early recordings, spoke directly to the formula of country music that helped make them famous. In an interview from 1929, Robison noted that

These folks for whom we write and sing are finicky... They know the formula they like and they want no changes or improvements. The phonograph and revival meetings are their religion. The radio means little to them, the movies nothing. Take the story of *The Wreck of the 1256*, which has sold half a million and is still going strong. There's a simple story and a simple tune. There are only sixteen bars of music to the whole thing, repeated over and over.

First, I read all of the newspaper stories of, say, a disaster... Then I get to work on the old typewriter. There's a formula, of course. You start by painting everything in gay colors — "the folks were all happy and gay" stuff. That's sure fire. Then you ring in the tragedy — make it as morbid and gruesome as you can. Then you wind up with a moral.<sup>84</sup>

Robison's statement is revealing in several ways. First, he relied heavily on the mythology of an anti-modern South in arguing for the relative unimportance of radio to southern listening habits. As we know, southerners regularly listened to the radio, and numerous early stars of country music got their start by performing on local stations. Second, Robison's suggestion that his audience expected a "formula" revealed just how reliant country music was on the compositional techniques of Tin Pan Alley. "The Wreck of the 1256" (released in 1925 by Columbia and Edison), for example, was a simple AA' form of eight measures repeated once to complete each verse.<sup>85</sup> Lyrically, the song adhered closely to the structure detailed by Robison, beginning with a mention of how the engineers' "spirits were running high" before their "story was ended" as the

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<sup>84</sup> Leamy, "Now Come All You Good People," 58.

<sup>85</sup> Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 294, 308. The Edison recording of "The Wreck of the 1256" is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0HjQ0IXns4>, last accessed 4 February 2014.

train sped off the tracks and into the James River of western Virginia.<sup>86</sup> Finally, his acknowledgement of audience's tastes suggests that country music fans wanted to hear music similar to the songs they already knew. This familiarity with the sounds and stories of local events (or, at least, events that audiences could imagine to have occurred locally), has long defined the role of country music for rural audiences. As Aaron Fox has noted, country music has long sounded "the intimate linkage between voice, character, and identity" for rural and working-class cultures, and it was this ethos that Dalhart and Robison sought to capture in their new, old-fashioned songs.<sup>87</sup>

"The Prisoner's Song," written by Dalhart, Robison, and Dalhart's cousin Guy Massey, related the sad tale of a prisoner longing for his beloved, a theme that had circulated within U.S. folk music since at least the late nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> The lyrics read:

Oh I wish I had someone to love me  
 Someone to call me their own.  
 Oh I wish I had someone to live with  
 Cause I'm tired of living alone.

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<sup>86</sup> See Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 240-242.

<sup>87</sup> Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 301.

<sup>88</sup> In his 1910 collection *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Company, 1910), John A. Lomax included "A Prisoner for Life," a song that shared with "The Prisoner's Song" the expected themes of loss, love, and freedom:

What would I give  
 such freedom to share  
 to roam at my ease  
 and breathe the fresh air;  
 I would roam through the cities  
 through the village and dell  
 but I never would return  
 to my cold prison cell.

Now if I had wings like an angel  
over these prison walls I would fly,  
and I'd fly to the arms of my poor darling  
and there I'd be willing to die.

Throughout the recording, Dalhart mimicked the violin sound, both in the slight roughness of his vocal timbre as well as in the short melodic turns that he performed. Overall, Dalhart's voice took on a plaintive quality through its straightforward performance of the song's melancholy lyrics. In so doing, he vocalized the sense that this music spoke of and to rural communities. The arrangement, too, was sparse, containing only the strummed chords of Robison's guitar and Lou Raderman's violin, which simply stated the melody during the opening eight measures and in instrumental breaks between verses. While he employed slight hints of *messa di voce* and vibrato, his performance here was greatly toned down when compared to his earlier light classic and dialect recordings. His broad vibrato and open tone, however, were highly reminiscent of his earlier classical and dialect recordings and clearly marked his recording as that of a trained singer.

Dalhart's accent here was most striking: while he and other singers emphasized the vocal similarities between black and white southern orality, the accent he employed on "The Prisoner's Song" bore little resemblance to the one he used on "Caroline." Here, Dalhart's accent sounded more like a southern drawl than the highly stylized minstrelsy dialect he had used on his dialect ballads. At other moments, especially when singing short vowel sounds, his voice took on a pinched, nasal quality, though this was not consistent throughout the recording. The word *I*, for example, was sung with an open, full tone, while *wish* was performed with a distinct twang. While Dalhart would eventually settle on a more consistent approach to country music performance on later recordings, this early performance, I would argue, presented a musician still

working out his approach to a new genre. That Dalhart's recordings proved so popular suggested, as well, that the sound of the southern folk remained very much at stake.

### **Conclusion**

Dalhart's renditions of old-fashioned songs were by the late 1920s being driven out of the marketplace by singers more explicitly performing the voice and visual symbols of southern rustic life. But during his brief country-music career, Dalhart's singing, however compromised it may sound to modern ears, represented a burgeoning market of southern audiences wanting to hear their music and their voices in the musical marketplace. For his audience, his voice represented the sound of a white, rural folk that was just beginning to be heard through the mass media of recorded sound and radio. His vocal refinement and performance practices based in a pre-modern nostalgia, meanwhile, rendered his voice both familiar and accessible. Listening to Vernon Dalhart's voice thus reveals the economic and cultural transformations taking place within the popular music industry. As a white, southern, operatically-trained performer, Dalhart was able to navigate this shifting marketplace by drawing on his southern heritage and urban training in order to give voice, literally, to an emerging southern modernity.

## Epilogue

In the summer of 2012, North Carolina State University graduate student Joshua Katz published a set of maps to represent visually the various dialects spoken throughout the United States. Katz's maps, based on the 2003 Harvard Dialect Study conducted by Bert Vaux and Scott Golder, revealed the rich diversity of accents and dialects employed by everyday speakers throughout the nation. Katz's maps soon became a viral hit, leading to his being hired by *The New York Times Sunday Review* as an intern where he created an online test for readers to take and consequently discover where on the map their orality lay.<sup>1</sup> *The Atlantic*, meanwhile, produced an online video that provided sonic evidence of Katz's cartographic representation of U.S. voices; their video consisted of recorded telephone calls made by *The Atlantic* employees to people located throughout the United States and asking them questions from Vaux's original study.<sup>2</sup> An even more extensive dialect map can be found on Rick Aschmann's website, "North American English Dialects, Based on Pronunciation Patterns."<sup>3</sup> Referring to himself as a "professional linguist" for whom the mapping of English dialects is merely "a hobby," Aschmann included on his site 890 (as of 12 February 2014) recordings of English-speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Josh Katz and Wilson Andrews, "How Y'all, Youse and You Guys Talk," *NYTimes.com*, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/12/20/sunday-review/dialect-quiz-map.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/12/20/sunday-review/dialect-quiz-map.html?_r=0) [accessed 10 January 2014].

<sup>2</sup> "Soda vs. Pop vs. Coke: Mapping How Americans Talk," *The Atlantic*, last accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2013/11/soda-vs-pop-vs-coke-mapping-how-americans-talk/281808/>.

<sup>3</sup> "North American English Dialects, Based on Pronunciation Patterns," <http://aschmann.net/AmEng/> [accessed 12 February 2014]. I discovered Aschmann's site in "American Accents: What Americans Sound Like," *The Economist*, 1 January 2011, accessed 10 January 2014, [www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2011/01/american\\_accents](http://www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2011/01/american_accents).

individuals from the United States and Canada, all of which can be accessed by clicking on the cities displayed on the map. Part of what makes Aschmann's site so compelling, beyond the large data set, is the inclusion of well-known personalities (President Bill Clinton, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Loretta Lynn, Jimmie Rodgers, and so on) as well as regular folks, the latter whose voices are either uploaded to the site by themselves or culled from local news reports and other audio sources. These vocal cartographies — by which I mean simply a spatial mapping of vocal sound — are fascinating both for how they portray the diverse pronunciations heard throughout the country as well as for showing how geographically-diverse communities use similar phrases or pronunciations. For example, *The Atlantic's* video shows that the term "online" is used in Colorado and in parts of the Northeast to refer to the act of waiting in line.

Yet there are several issues with both Katz's and Aschmann's maps and the ensuing fascination that developed from their publication. First, both data sets are limited to English-language speakers, thus rendering silent the voices of millions of U.S. citizens, permanent residents, temporary workers, and others for whom English is not their first or chosen language. Second, Aschmann's site originally excluded African American speakers; he now includes black voices, but only those who speak African American Vernacular English and are from the Lowland South — a region that stretches roughly from eastern Texas to northern Virginia. Thus audio of Gavin Veris, a former professional football player for the New England Patriots, was rejected because "He looks African American, but speaks General American, with no hint of AAVE." Finally, both sites are predicated on the notion of finding the purest expression (with minimal variation) of local dialect; thus we find statements such as "More than one contributor has said that Ross Powers [identified on the site as an Olympic snowboarder] does not have a real Vermont accent" sprinkled throughout Aschmann's site. Nowhere to be found in either

cartography is a discussion of migration, of how regional accents change and shift over time, of how families influence our speech, nor of how various media (national news, radio, music, and so forth) disseminate the sounds of different voices to all parts of the nation. Indeed, these sites joined a growing number of articles, films, and discussions worrying over the supposed "loss" of local accents, including the Southern accent,<sup>4</sup> New York accents,<sup>5</sup> and those of New Hampshire and Vermont, among others.<sup>6</sup>

There is something nostalgic about these projects, as though they are attempting to capture a sonic realness that brings to life local voices and to preserve them for future auditors. More than that, however, these articles reveal popular understandings of the links between orality and what it means to be and to sound "American." It should come as no surprise, then, that in recent years an individual's speech would be linked to his or her political leanings. As linguist Julie Sedivy has noted, in an article discussing William Labov's book series *Principles of Linguistic Change*, speakers regularly "buy-in" to local oralities "depending on how much social affinity [they] feel" for other speakers in their region.<sup>7</sup> What Sedivy and Labov suggest is that we

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Madison, "Is the Southern Accent Dying? How New Research Shows Upper and Middle Classes are Losing Their Drawl," *Mail Online*, 20 May 2011, accessed 13 February 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1389264/Is-Southern-accent-dying-How-new-research-shows-upper-middle-classes-losing-drawl.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ginia Bellafante, "Do They Really Tawk Like That? Not Now," *New York Times*, 11 May 2013, accessed 13 February 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/nyregion/do-they-really-tawk-like-that-not-now.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/nyregion/do-they-really-tawk-like-that-not-now.html?_r=0).

<sup>6</sup> Dave Eisenberg, "New Hampshire and Vermont Think They're So Cool Dropping Their Boston Accents," *BostInno* 15 August 2012, accessed 13 February 2014, <http://bostinno.streetwise.co/2012/08/15/new-england-accent-disappearing-in-new-hampshire-and-vermont/>, and Allan Metcalf, "Hello, New New England," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 13 August 2012, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2012/08/13/hello-new-new-england/>.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Sedivy, "Votes and Vowels: A Changing Accent Shows How Language Parallels Politics," *Discover Magazine*, 28 March 2012, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/crux/2012/03/28/votes-and-vowels-a-changing-accent-shows-how-language-parallels-politics/#.Uwj9f1dXng>.

may be witnessing an era when accents are not just expressive of racial, class, regional, gender, or sexual subject positions but are actively employed and adopted by national leaders in an effort to coalesce geographically-diverse communities around specific political ideologies. As Sedivy points out, both our previous and current presidents speak with oralities that diverge widely from their "native" accents thus signaling, as she puts it, that "these politicians may be flying their partisan flags every time they speak."<sup>8</sup>

Anxiety over the relationships between orality and ideologies of nation, politics, and race are, of course, nothing new, and such worries tend to accompany moments when questions regarding national belonging are particularly acute. This dissertation has attempted to explain the various ways that the voice signified in the United States at the turn of the century. Throughout, I have focused on the voice's materiality in order to listen carefully to how vocal sounds came to stand for ideological formations of race, nation, region, and class. As I argued in the Introduction, voices have histories, and if we are to understand how and why they signify, we need, as Gary Tomlinson famously wrote, to "resolutely historicize musical utterance."<sup>9</sup> For my work here, this has meant listening to how singers responded in song to the technological, economic, and socio-political upheavals that defined the first two decades of the twentieth century. The emergence and widespread circulation of sound recordings provided a medium through which performers could disseminate new vocal sounds to a national audience; so too did it create models of performance practice that would serve as archetypes for future singers. While the market through which these sounds circulated produced opportunities for singers long shut

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<sup>8</sup> Sedivy, "Votes and Vowels."

<sup>9</sup> Gary Tomlinson, "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993), 22.

out or marginalized within popular entertainment, performers still contended with the assumptions of how race, region, and class informed, if not defined, vocal practices.

Perhaps most influential on issues of vocal performance and audition during this period was the mass movement of people into and within the United States. Through this circulation of people, myriad voices began to claim the right to sing to, for, and of the nation. For singers working in the elite traditions of Western Europe, the new oralities heard throughout the nation's urban centers prompted an effort to develop an ideal sound that would serve as the model voice for the nation-state. The performance of this music would, in turn, shape singers' bodies into a corporeal embodiment of an idealized national culture. Black singers, meanwhile, emboldened by the new economic opportunities made available by the birth and rapid expansion of the popular music industry, attempted to reclaim and reform black orality as the sole province and natural expression of the black folk. For a singer like Bert Williams, this meant incorporating the traditional sounds of black America with the energetic sounds of urban black life. Similarly, the voices and music of the white, rural, working-class masses found an audience eager to hear representations of themselves on records and on radio. Singers like Vernon Dalhart gave voice to these communities' emergence into a national, economic modernity by sounding, contradictorily, a pre-modern musical sensibility through which the rural folk could identify.

Yet singing does not simply represent discursive formations; singing reflects the material bodies from which it emerges. Singing is thoroughly embedded in corporeal practices that shape and are shaped by the social worlds we inhabit. Singing can thus reveal not only our musical influences but can also divulge through our accents and timbres our personal histories.

Throughout this dissertation, I have worked to show how particular singers and singing styles represented in sound the local histories from which they emerged. Singing, in this way, provides

a "feelingful," as Aaron Fox would put it, expression of identity that allows us to combine an affective presentation of our position in the world with a historically-situated understanding of music's role in society. The voice's ability to represent the socialized, historical body is perhaps most clearly seen in my discussion of the voice culture movement, where vocal pedagogues mobilized performance styles in order to shape and mold singers' bodies into forms representing an idealized citizenry. So too did Bert Williams's "awkward naturalness" provide a sonic expression of the "darky" character he portrayed on stage.<sup>10</sup> Whenever we speak of vocal signification, then, we must understand the ways in which ideological formations are made body and how those ideologies issue forth through our voices.

As a product of our bodies, we have at least some control over how our voices sound and, through careful practice and training, we can alter our voices in subtle but meaningful ways. In so doing, we may align ourselves with socio-political positions in order to present ourselves as part of or in opposition to communities. As the singers discussed in this dissertation show, voices can be and are altered in order to express myriad understandings of social life. It is not enough, then, to simply listen closely to vocal materiality; we need to understand too how and why vocal material is formed and for what uses it is being employed. What are the histories of the timbres and accents that we hear? How do they resonate locally, regionally, nationally, and globally? This dissertation has attempted to address these questions through a careful exegesis of vocal sound in order to show the social power embodied in song and the critical importance of listening carefully to our songful expressions.

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<sup>10</sup> Jessie Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," *The Crisis* 24(1), 12-15.

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